

METEOR

The door itself wasn't particularly intimidating – just an office door with the company name in a neat, sans-serif typeface: "Exeunt Productions". No, the door wasn't the problem. The problem was *walking through* the door. It came down to this: Turning the handle and stepping three feet forward was an admission of defeat. It meant you lost at the game of life. Dwayne sighed and opened the door.

The reception desk was unoccupied. Dwayne looked for a place to sit. The waiting room's only other occupant was a woman about his age, presumably another candidate. He chose what he hoped was the least-threatening seat, across the room from her but not *directly* across. She appeared to be engrossed in whatever was on her phone but, as he sat down, she looked up briefly and twitched a smile in his general direction. He nodded in return.

Dwayne pretended to examine the various promotional posters on the wall while surreptitiously sizing up his competition. She was thin and pale, brunette with gray roots, dressed in what was probably her best outfit but was, to his eye at least, a few years out of date. Looked like she was once very attractive but, well, no one stays young forever. In short, she was in the same boat as himself. She glanced up and caught his eye. Busted.

"Hi", she said. "Here for an audition?"

"Hi. Yeah", he said, and added, "Dwayne."

"Holly." She pulled a small card from her jacket pocket. "Mine's 'meteor'. What's yours?"

He raised an eyebrow. *Meteor? What were the chances?* "I... I'd rather not say, if that's OK."

She shrugged. "No problem. I understand. Competition."

"Oh, uh, no. It's just... I haven't really told anyone. Kinda private, y'know?" he lied.

Her turn to raise an eyebrow. "If you get the gig, everyone's going to know."

Dwayne sighed. "Yeah, I know but... I've sort of run out of options."

She nodded sympathetically. "Yeah. Same here."

Out of options. Huh, that's putting it mildly. Dwayne was at the wrong age when the world changed, when the Machine of Death was invented. If he'd been in his twenties or even thirties, he could've switched careers and been OK. In his fifties or sixties, he could've retired. But he was in his forties, that dead spot between young enough and old enough where, when the world

changes and you're in the wrong line of work, you're pretty much screwed. And Dwayne was in one of the wrongest careers you could be in when the Machine came out. Oh, there were worse things to be but life insurance salesman was definitely in the top ten.

"I was in insurance," he said, trying to keep the conversation going. She really was quite attractive, in a sad sort of way. He wondered what she looked like when she smiled.

"Oh! Oh dear," she said and gave him a sympathetic look.

"Yeah. What about you?" He needed to keep the dialog open. There had to be an angle here; something he could use to increase his chances of getting this gig.

She looked at him, opened her mouth to speak. Tears welled up. She looked down and shook her head slightly. Hands shaking, she fidgeted with her phone.

"Sorry," he said. "Didn't mean to..." He felt like a complete bastard.

"It's OK," she said, without looking up.

Dammit, he used to be a lot better at this, back when he was in sales.

It wasn't that people didn't still need life insurance; they just didn't *want* it anymore. Something about knowing how you were going to die, even without knowing when, gave people a sense of control over their own fate. And that was bad for the insurance industry which, Dwayne noted, preyed on people's anxieties over death. True, the insurance game wasn't completely dead but it was severely wounded. Every company was hit with cutbacks nearly simultaneously. Massive layoffs. Dwayne was in the second round of cuts. That was six years ago. He hadn't had a decent job since. His savings were long gone; the 401k cashed in too. With options rapidly running out, he found himself here, the last resort of people with no marketable skills: Reality TV.

Exeunt Productions had a near monopoly on death-based reality shows. And they were popular shows. Everyone wanted to watch people die and Exeunt delivered the goods. Yes, it was morbid. Yes, it was ghoulish. And yes, everyone watched. And week after week, Exeunt delivered. Their top-rated show was Improbable Conclusions, featuring bizarre, unlikely and, above all, *interesting* deaths. This was the show Dwayne was auditioning for.

He pulled his card out of his wallet and looked at it. A black-bordered card with "METEOR" printed in ornate Gothic script. It couldn't be a coincidence that he and this Holly woman had the same fate. The first time he got tested, he'd looked up the odds of being killed by a meteor. They were ridiculously small: one death in the past hundred years and only a handful of injuries. Harold, his cube-mate at the time, pointed out that there used to be a car by that name and there might still be a few on the road. He half-jokingly advised Dwayne to avoid vintage auto shows. So either a rock from the sky or an old car. Neither way sounded pleasant, but then what

sort of death *would* be?

He tried again. "So, meteor, huh? Pretty unusual."

Holly looked up; she seemed to have regained her composure. "Yeah, I guess that's why I'm here. If it's really a meteor... you know, a *real* meteor, it'll make for great TV."

"Nothing like going out with a bang," he said.

"You said it!" She chuckled at that, and smiled a bit. Not much of a smile but there was promise there. Dwayne found himself wanting to see more of that.

If he and Holly were up for the same gig and had the same fate, well, he was going to lose out. They'd definitely pick her over him. She had the look they wanted. She really was awfully nice-looking, not that he was all that bad himself. But, jeez, once they got done with her, once they ran her through hair, wardrobe and makeup, she'd be a knockout.

That was part of the deal. You signed up for a gig and you were set for life. Literally set for life. They gave you a stipend, enough to live comfortably and all it cost was your privacy. You had to wear a tracker at all times and there were cameras *everywhere*. Most of them were locked-down, continuous-loop deals that only gave up their secrets after a death. Exeunt worked a delicate balancing act, walking a tightrope between privacy violations and production quality. They'd track you for the rest of your life, gathering as much information as possible. When you died, they'd boil it all down to a one-hour episode, including footage of your death.

Dwayne wondered how many people they had to keep on retainer to deliver a death every week. No, five deaths. One for each show. Hundreds? Thousands? Did they really make that much money off the shows that they could keep that many people on a payroll? They had offices like this all over the country, screening candidates. Their ideal candidate was someone with no next of kin, no one who could sue post-mortem. Someone like Dwayne, for example. And, presumably, someone like Holly.

What was her story anyway? If he could just pry a bit more information out of her, maybe he could get some leverage on this. Right now, the only advantage he had was that he knew her fate and she didn't know his. Not much to work with. Plus she was probably going to get called first; probably had the earlier appointment. Once they got a look at her, well, there probably wasn't much point in even trying after that. But then, why would Exeunt want to interview both of them on the same day? Certainly they knew both their fates were the same. They must. What was their angle? They wouldn't call him in just to laugh him out the door. Maybe he was supposed to be their backup plan, in case she turned out to be a complete wacko.

In that case, he really was screwed. She wasn't a wacko. Oh, there was *something* going on there but it wasn't going to work to his advantage. She had the makings of a tragic heroine

figure. Sad, haunted, compelling and even charming in a weird sort of way. He found himself liking her, this woman he'd just met, barely talked to at all. *Not good*. You were never supposed to like the competition. Get to know them, sure, but never *like* them. You couldn't properly compete against someone you liked. You couldn't do what was necessary to win, whatever that might be. You'd hold back. You'd hesitate. No, he couldn't allow himself to like her. *Too late*. He sighed. Maybe he should just go home now.

The receptionist finally showed up. He looked distracted, overworked and thoroughly disorganized. Dwayne realized he hadn't even checked in yet. He stood up and started to approach the desk but didn't quite make it that far.

The receptionist checked his overstuffed clipboard and addressed Holly, ignoring Dwayne. "Ms Jessup? They're ready for you now. Oh, and you'll need to turn off your phone."

"Oh, OK. Just a sec." Holly fumbled with her phone, collected her things and stood up.

Do something. Do anything. "Um, Holly," he said. *Well, now what?*

"Hmm?" She stopped and turned to him, waiting.

Long, awkward pause. *Say something you idiot!* "Would... would you like to, um, have a coffee or... or something after... this?" *Lame, lame, lame*. He could feel his face growing warm with embarrassment.

And there it was, the smile he'd been hoping for. It lit up her face. It lit up the room. It lit up the whole world. "I'd like that, Dwayne. I'll wait for you after I'm done and we can compare notes." "Great! Ahem. Um. Great. I'll... I'll look for you then." *Lame*. He became acutely aware that he was standing in the middle of the waiting room, grinning like an idiot. He turned to sit back down again when the receptionist interrupted.

"Oh! Are you Dwayne Barlow?" he asked, fumbling through the sheets on his clipboard. Dwayne turned back. "Yep, that's me. I guess I'm n..."

"OK, OK..." More paper flipping. "Ugh, OK. Sorry, I messed up..."

Dwayne felt his stomach flip. Of course. They were supposed to cancel his appointment. That was it. That explained everything. They'd called him in, then found her and forgot to cancel his interview. It all made sense now. He wasn't her competition. He wasn't even a backup plan. He was a mistake. He'd wasted his morning getting ready for a *clerical error*.

"...this is the joint interview. You're supposed to come too," the receptionist finished.

"Whu..." Dwayne stood there, open mouthed.

“Come on, come on. We’re running way behind already,” the receptionist said. “It’s been a hell of a morning! Oh, turn off your phone too, please.”

Dwayne complied, his thoughts swirling. Everything had just turned upside down. Joint interview? What the hell?

And then it all fell into place. Oh, they were *good*. They were so good at this. Exeunt had found two people with the same, ridiculously improbable fate, about the same age. It was just too much of a coincidence, too unlikely for them *not* to be connected, too good to pass up. A double episode? The ratings would be through the roof!

As the receptionist led them down the hallway, Holly nudged Dwayne. “Do you know what’s going on?” she whispered.

He pulled out his card, fumbling a bit as they turned a corner and showed it to her.

Holly gaped. “No way!” she exclaimed, a bit too loud and causing the receptionist ahead of them to flinch. She stared off into the distance for a bit, then looked him up and down. “Well...” she said, smiling. That smile again. Oh, he could get used to that smile. “...might not be such a bad way to go after all.”

Dwayne agreed silently, noting that Holly had fallen into step with him and had moved closer, just a little bit closer, just enough that he’d notice. *Yeah, not such a bad way at all.*