You Can Call Me Karma: (CHAPTER 1 - "Patches of Green")

By : Subject 005

Set in the heart of Manchester, England. He is waiting for something, someone, but who? And why? What will he do when he finds what he's after? And this is just the tip of the iceberg. (This is only the first chapter so far, basically an introduction)

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CHAPTER 1 - PATCHES OF GREEN

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The mid-January day was mild for the time of year, but it was a cold wind circulating from the Atlantic (or so the weather forecast said) that left shivers down the spine, roses on cheeks and runny noses. The rain clouds spread across the midday sky didn't have even the smallest break in its perfect sheet of deep grey, but only threatened a downpour. Typical weather for Manchester; it didn't rain as much as its reputation suggested, but sunshine seemed an irregular occurrence even in the Summer months. Being it during the lunching hours of the Wednesday workers, hoards of people littered the city centre; the town rich with all different ethnicities who moved as one down towards the 'Arndale' in search of food and a warm drink to keep them satisfied. A yellow topped, white tram heading past the people and shops began to screech to a halt at its second to last destination, 'Piccadilly Gardens', with a fresh crowd exiting its doors and entering the Gardens itself. It boasted a rather central spot in the middle of the busy town, and a large statue of Queen Victoria amidst the fountains, civilians and patches of green.ï¿½

After finishing rolling the thin cigarette he placed it between his dry lips, watching from his seat on the platform the third tram he'd seen that day rock slowly up until it came to a stop in front of him, blocking his view of the Gardens. Folding the pouch of fresh tobacco with thin, bony fingers, he slid it back into the right hand pocket of his dark green Barber jacket, which hadn't seen a new coating of wax in a good few years at least. This left it with a rather musty smell and rugged look, which added age to the young man's pale complexion; his face lightly dotted in brown stubble which hadn't yet matured properly, and thick brown brows to match his thick head of hair, suitably short on the back and sides and swept towards and past his crown on the left side.ï¿½

Reaching into the pocket of his skinny denim jeans, he revealed a blue, plastic lighter which showed a large picture of an ancient fleet ship printed on its side, glorious white sails held aloft by a proud mast, the ship gliding across a relatively calm blue sea on a clear day. Yet this added no class to the cheap lighter itself which was now held to his mouth with one hand, guarded by the other, and with a single click a flame emerged and engulfed the tip of the cigarette until it could hold its own against the wind now stinging his lightly crafted cheek bones. His gaze seemed held by the fountain in the centre of the gardens, but in actual fact he was staring at nothing; his vision blurred out of focus by his forever tired looking greyish blue eyes, with his mind in deep thought about the target of today's outing, coupled with everyday thoughts that troubled him but of which he had gotten used to. By the expressionless face he generally showcased, anyone would have thought he had no concerns, but it seemed a formality to him to fake the emotions he couldn't feel. His emotional range was only caught between nothingness and deep depression, which enclosed a whole host of mental issues he kept to himself and his therapist. Trouble seemed to meet him and he seemed to seek it in kind, the former of the two beginning the never ending cycle of disaster and drama.ï¿½

But it was what he was here for, the 'mission' he had set himself for the day that was at the forefront of his

mind. And here it was, pulling itself along the tracks just like the rest of the trams he had seen that day, but this one caught his eye particularly. He was always punctual; never late for anything and despised those who made him wait. His leg twitched due to the cold wind seeping through the denim onto the skin of his legs, but it was also a habit he had picked up to calm his nerves, his only tell. He watched discreetly, casually, as the tram reeled itself slowly towards the platform, the forth he had seen while he waited and most importantly the one he had been waiting for. Across the front and back of its bold frame it read 'Piccadilly' in orange text, which was the last stop it would meet on its journey from Altrincham only to turn and do it all again in reverse. The impatient passengers were already stood and pressed against the doors, those still sat were either going on further or showing their experience of tram travel, not needing to stand until the doors had opened.ï¿½

He spied him out of the corner of his eye. The man he was after, sat with his face just revealing from 'The Metro' newspaper and beginning to exit with the rest of the crowd. He wore a black coat draped over a neat, light grey suit and smartly polished black shoes. Nothing gave him away from any other well dressed, modestly built middle-aged man that regularly scurried around the great town apart from a noticeably large mole that looked out of place resting above his upper lip; the kind that had a few black hairs sprouting from its core and stuck out so much it seemed almost to be trying to escape his aged face. His black hair highlighted white wisps in most places, and was short, which didn't help hiding his hairline which was receding quicker than a tide before a disastrous tsunami. Bags sagged firmly under his deep set, green eyes which hung over his large, pointed nose, the rest of his face had few flaws other than the odd wrinkled crevice and roughened skin which was cleanly shaved, generally looking rather well for a man of his age.

The young man made it his first priority to not give anything away as his target strolled leisurely past him. He'd finish his cigarette first, it only had a few drags left in it which would give him a good distance to follow without letting on; after all, he didn't know how long he would need to follow him for, it was most likely going to be a good few hours. He knew who the man was, and had been following him since Monday, but knew that he would be nothing more than a funny sensation of dï¿½jï¿½ vu to him. Even in his tender age he had almost perfected his art.ï¿½

His cigarette finished, he flicked it away on to the tracks and began to exit the platform, turning to his left. His target still in sight, he set his pace, his eyes fixated on the man who was just crossing the tracks a fair distance ahead of him, heading towards the busy street that led up to the Arndale food court. he had to be smart from here, keeping close through the crowds but not being obvious about it-just two people on their way for some lunch, no different from everyone else. But this wasn't even the tricky part, this was merely collecting information before the night's conclusion to the day's outing; the calm before the storm.ï¿½

They entered the crowds, the best thing about Manchester was that no one rushed, even in the peak hours it was all very relaxed, nonchalant. There was no pushing, no aggression in the masses; the worst you had to worry of was a dozy shopper, and that only required an adjustment in your stride. He thought of nothing but his target now, his gaze firmly locked on the man; he was a fair bit smaller than his target, maybe a few inches. Smoking from an early age had stunted his growth but he had settled at a proud five-foot nine-inches, just under the national average height for an adult male. Insomnia had prematurely aged his face and mind, suffering for three years of the eighteen he had existed (each night generally spared him scraps of sleep, usually around three hours).

He was so focused on his target, he didn't even notice the ragged homeless man busking next to one of the many benches that had been bolted down the centre of the road. He played his acoustic guitar and sang a Bob Dylan song rather huskily; the few coins that had been flung into his case didn't reflect the quality of his performance, but not many were interested, the city was musically gifted enough. Another street performer a little way further along had gathered more of a crowd, including the target, who had stopped to watch the man juggle four pins at once. He couldn't be obvious-he had to stop short of the juggler as to not arouse suspicion.

The young man stopped and leant against a shop in front of the display window, the intricate plucking of the old acoustic guitar hit his ears, as too did the worn voice. 'Don't Think Twice, It's All Right', he thought, recognising the Bob Dylan song when he had taken time to stop and notice it. But his eyes were still fixated on his target, yet his ears were momentarily lost to the sweet music, and it took him back to the first time he heard it and a wave of depression quivered his lip, but his lack of emotion quickly straightened it.

He almost didn't notice the man exit the crowd, a smirk now slapped across his face through enjoyment of the juggling act.ï¿½
"Good stuff pal," he said to the homeless man in a croaky voice, slipping a five pound note from out of his back pocket and discarding it into the guitar case, his eyes still on the target. The old man didn't stop playing, but gave him a nod in appreciation of his recognition and generosity, his eyes slightly welling up but his act no worse. It wasn't long before the middle-aged man had cut short his journey down the road, turning into a small coffee shop. It wasn't a chain shop like the Starbucks and Cafe Nero that they had passed nearer the Gardens, but a nice little haven; a family-owned shop that had a homely feel to it, an escape from the busy centre almost. The young man waited a few moments outside the shop, which was fairly busy, making sure his entrance wasn't much noticed-he didn't want to draw attention. Above the shop door read 'Hot Drinks', 'Cold Drinks', 'Sandwiches', 'Snacks', and in bolder letters the shop name 'Tea-Hive' with a picture of a bee drinking a cup of tea. He cringed a little at the annoyingly obvious play on words, before opening the door. A little bell sounded as he entered, but it wasn't taken any notice of as the rest of the customers were either reading or engaged I conversation, and the two people serving at the counter were preoccupied.

The middle-aged man was already sat by a small table opposite an empty chair, sipping at his fresh coffee every once in a while in-between reading his newspaper. The radio sounded quietly, some Chart music was playing and the young man made a disapproving face as he approached the counter. A young woman greeted him with a half-hearted smile, her dyed red hair that showed streaks of natural brown tied back into a pony tail (as was policy in the shop) revealing the full beauty of her healthy complexion. He stared into her eyes and was lost for a moment in their blue; it was almost as if they expressed the radiant sky that lay behind the rain clouds of the Winter's day.ï¿½
"Hi, what can I get you?" she asked, routinely. As he watched her full rosy lips, painted neatly with rouge lipstick, it struck him that she must have said the exact same thing to a thousand other people.
"Tea," he replied. He wasn't much for words unless he had something profound to say, and she had quite intimidated him. Her appealing uniqueness, her pale skin that hadn't a blemish upon it, only a small beauty spot that sat comfortably upon her right cheek. "Please," he added, remembering common courtesy. He'd never seen it himself, but he didn't want a worker taking a disliking to him, his drink tainted with their saliva and mixed in so that he never knew. He hated the stuff; wouldn't share drinks or food, and dismissed people who spat while they talked. But he almost wouldn't mind if she did, in a way that he recognised to be weird and a little creepy - he hadn't the charm nor the looks, or so he thought. It was the closest he would get to being with her.

"Are you sitting in or having it to go?" she questioned, but he was so taken now by her perfect physique (or what he could see of it) that the simple question wasn't quite processing. He paused for a short while, trying to remember what she had said. 'Her sweet voice' he thought, in attempt to recall from his mind what it had uttered, cursing his hormones as he searched.ï¿½
"To go. But I'll sit in," the young man said, turning to check that the man was still there. He followed, "one sugar, drop o' milk." Turning back towards the counter, he found the young woman staring at him. His heart skipped, and all the reasons why their blue eyes momentarily met in silence raced through his mind until the crushing truth of reality met him in disappointment.
"You're a million miles away," she said, confusing him.
"Pardon?"
"I said 'two pounds please'," she laughed, holding out her hand, waiting for the change. He rooted around in his back pocket again and pulled out a handful of change, quickly picked out two pound coins from it, and

placed them gently in her outstretched hand. "Thanks," she laughed again, lightly, "it'll just be a minute. If you find a place I'll bring it to you." She smiled, this time seeming more genuine, and he returned the favour with the best smile he could muster, his mouth just upturned slightly in the left corner.ï¿½

He hadn't even seen him come in but his target had company, and had filled the empty seat that previously sat quietly opposite. The young man had taken a small table against the wall, yet stuck within ear shot of the middle-aged man, who had now laid his newspaper down onto the varnished wood to engage fully in conversation. His tea had yet to arrive, but that wasn't the reason he had entered the cafe; he was here on business, the hot drink was just a cover. A spare paper had been left on the table, presumably by a customer before himself, which would add further camouflage amidst the chatty customers. He hadn't bothered to remove his jacket, and sat with his left leg crossed over the other; his right arm rested on a polished wooden partition that divided his table from the few behind him, his other hand now grasping 'The Mirror' newspaper as he casually pretended to read. Focusing his ears, he deciphered the conversation of interest among the buzz of the rest of the customers, or rather, the rest of the bees chatting away in the 'Tea-Hive'.ï¿½
"You got to come, Pete," the man said to the target, "It's Jimmy's birthday, he won't forgive ya' if ya' didn't." his hands were pressed firmly on the table as he leant forward, his podgy, hairy belly poking out from his navy sports jacket and slightly hanging over the brown belt fastened to his light denim jeans. Pete laughed slightly, lifting his hand from the comfort of his knee and showing a wedding ring, pointing at it with the other hand.
"The Mrs, mate. She'll never let me, not tonight anyway," he joked, taking another sip from his coffee cup. The man lifted a pleading hand from the table, leaving a sweaty hand print where it lay.
"Don't be a prick, man. It's just a fuckin' drink," he replied, attempting to convince his friend. The young man listened intently, his eyes still on the newspaper, the headline reading '"I KILLED TWO COPPERS": man confesses to murder'.ï¿½

"Alright alright, calm down Bill, I'll fuckin' go then," Pete gave in, the young man trying to refrain from grimacing. He'd only been there an hour and a half that day, but his objective was close to completion. He only needed to find out where they were going and he was done.ï¿½
"Good stuff, knew ya' weren't gonna let me down," Bill said in disguised elation, "meet us at 'The Ram's Head' at about nine-ish, yeah?" The young man knew exactly where the pub was - not that far from their current location, around a ten minute walk towards the outskirts of the centre, and it would be fairly quiet.ï¿½
Pete's head turned down slightly, knowing he was about to get a further pestering from his companion, "Yeah, that's fine. I'll have t' leave 'bout twelve though, got work tomorro' ya'know."ï¿½
"Fuck, when'd you 'come such a pussy?" he teased, "Suppose that'll have t' do then. Sure we can get a few down ya'."ï¿½
'The trap's set,' the young man thought, 'this is going to be easy enough'. He coughed a little as the consequence of the cigarette from earlier unsettled from his throat, and he wondered why his drink hadn't arrived yet. Checking the counter, he noticed the young woman beginning to approach with his tea; her light grey jeans clinging to perfect legs and large hips, only slightly covered by her apron tied around her waist that had the same picture and name from the front of the shop.
"I'll be off then," Bill said, forcing his chair back upon standing.
"Let me just finish this," Pete engulfed the remaining coffee and stood, placing the mug back down on to the table, "I'll walk out with ya.'" Both men walked from the table, squeezing through tables and customers. Pete lifted his hand and smiled in thanks to the other worker who remained serving at the counter, and they exited the shop. The young man didn't need to follow, he was done until tonight - and what a night it promised to be.

"Sorry for your wait," the young lady apologised, a smile on her face. He looked up and accepted the tea enclosed in a brown plastic cup with a white lid ensuring its contents were safe, and a cardboard sleeve around it's base so his hand wasn't burnt.ï¿½
"No worries," he searched for some additional courage, "Sit?"ï¿½
She looked at him, her face expressing a little disappointment in herself, "I would, but I'm dying for a cig."ï¿½

He smiled, his response hitting him immediately, "Lucky I got this to go then," he said, his joke lying in the assumption she wanted him to join her. She laughed a little, taking an immediate comfort in his facade of confidence.ï¿½

"You smoke?" she asked with equal confidence, yet her heart beat as fast as his did at that moment. He answered with a nod, and quickly rolled a cigarette at the table before standing.ï¿½

"You got a name then?" he looked at her, his face returning to its regular, blank expression.

"Julie," she replied with an air of scepticism, "And what can I call you?"

He gave a faint smile - he hadn't smiled so much in a long time, even if it was purely a disguise to appear normal. "Jack," he said, the bell above the door ringing as they exited the shop.

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