

Making Amends

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Jamie Feldon woke up one cool Monday morning in April and decided to change his life.

The night before, he'd fallen asleep on the couch, thinking about a sitcom he'd just watched. It was great, really kick-ass. Most TV comedies were just plain stupid: twenty-five-year-olds tossing out one-liners, then mugging for the camera while the Laugh sign goosed the audience to make noise.

No, this show was different. The hero was a guy who'd had an Oh-Jesus moment or something and was making amends for everything bad that he'd done in his life. Each episode, he'd track down somebody he'd screwed over or hurt and apologize and make it up to them.

Pretty damn sharp.

Jamie'd lain on the couch, mesmerized by the show, laughing and once or twice even crying, which was something he never did.

You can believe it, real tears.

He'd thought about that show for hours until, still dressed, he'd fallen asleep.

Now, at seven-thirty A.M., the forty-two-year-old rolled over and rubbed his face, feeling the creases left by the corduroy slipcover. He squinted hard and studied what sat beside him on the coffee table: half a bottle of Wild Turkey

bourbon, an overflowing ashtray, and a bag of popcorn with a bunch of unpoped old maids inside; the micro-wave was on its way out.

Swinging his feet to the floor, Jamie pulled the remote control out from under him, the smell of sweat and unwashed clothes wafting around him. He wrinkled his nose, then wiped it on the sleeve of his pale-blue dress shirt. The TV set was still on but quiet; he'd hit the mute button in his sleep. On the screen, an early morning talk-show host was silently moving his lips. He seemed real sincere. A picture flashed on—two Asian kids holding bowls of rice. They were happy. Back to the host. He now looked happy too.

Jamie shut the set off. It crackled as the screen went black.

He stretched and felt his belly pressing his waistband. He figured the Big Macs-for-lunch, pizza-for-dinner diet he'd been on lately was finally catching up. His head throbbed with the drumbeat of a marching band.

He happened to glance at the mail, dumped on the floor the other day. He hadn't looked at it then. He now saw that the letter on top was from the family court. What now? he wondered sourly. He'd had a problem—wasn't his fault—and had missed picking up his son last month. The ex'd made a big stink about it. Maybe she was trying to modify visitation. What a bitch. Or maybe it was something else. Was he late with the maintenance or the child-support check? He couldn't remember. He didn't know what the hell she had to complain about, though, even if he was a little late. Christ, she got fifty-six percent of his salary. (Though that wasn't exactly a gold mine; as a claims agent for a small insurance agency, Jamie made squat.)

He eased forward and cradled his aching head, crowned with an unruly fringe of thinning red hair, lost in his depression, the relentless troubles. The words that popped into his mind were „the bottom.”

That's where I am. I've hit bottom...

And just like the night before, watching that TV sitcom, tears welled in his eyes.

Sitting here, in his shabby two-bedroom apartment, the graying walls decorated with stains and scuff marks, some of them dating back to when he moved in four years ago, Jamie couldn't get that show out of his thoughts: the guy making amends for all the bad things in his past.

Then he began considering the offenses in his own life: fellow workers, his brother, ex-bosses, girlfriends, students at his community college, his ex-wife, his mother, even kids in his grade school.

Pettiness, cheating, insults, and—just like the hero of the TV show—even a few crimes.

His initial reaction was to offer excuses.

It wasn't so bad, it was an accident, everybody acts that way, everybody cheats from time to time...

But then he stopped cold.

Furious with himself. Excuses, excuses, excuses.

No more!

Instinctively he reached for the whisky.

Then, as if he was watching himself from a distance—viewing himself on a TV screen—he saw his arm slow.

Then it stopped.

No, my friend, that's not the way it's going to be this time.

He was going to change. Just like that guy on TV, he'd look back over his life, he'd make a list of all the bad things. And he'd set them right.

Making amends...

Jamie rose unsteadily, picked up the liquor, and poured it down the kitchen sink. He returned to the living room and eyed his cigarettes. Well, he knew he couldn't give them up, not completely. But he was going to limit himself to ten a day... Wait, no, five. And he'd never smoke before noon. That was reasonable. That was mature.

He staggered into the bathroom and took a fiercely hot shower, then a freezing one. He toweled off and walked into his kitchenette, had half a bagel with no butter, and coffee without cream.

It was a very different Jamie Feldon who stepped from his apartment into the bright New England morning twenty minutes later, virtually sauntering to the parking lot. He dropped into the seat of his battered Toyota, started the engine, and headed for Route 128, which would take him to his office, twenty miles north of Boston. Normally the congestion drove him crazy. But today, he hardly noticed it. He was thinking about the possibility of a future real different from the disaster his life had been. He could actually foresee being content, being happy.

Making amends...

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And yet, Jamie realized sitting at his desk later that day, it might be easy to work up the determination to stick to your moral convictions, but there were practical issues to consider, logistical problems.

In the TV show, for instance, the hero had spent a half-hour or so coming up with a list of people he'd offended or hurt.

But that was fiction. In real life, coming up with a list of offenses would take a lot of work. So at quitting time, he went to his boss and asked for the rest of the week off.

The chunky, disheveled manager swung back and forth slowly in his old office chair. He clearly wasn't happy with the idea. But Jamie was determined to stick to his plan, so he added, „I'm talking without pay, Mr. Logan.”

„Without...” The boss was working to get his head around this idea.

„Unpaid leave.”

The words were sinking in, but Logan still seemed uncertain, maybe wondering if Jamie was scheming-hoping the boss would say, Naw, it's okay, I'll pay you anyway.

Jamie said sincerely, „I mean it, Mr. Logan, really. Something personal's come up and I really need the time.”

„You sick?”

„No. But there're a few people need my help.”

„Yeah, you doing good deeds?” Logan laughed.

„Something like that.”

„Well, you find somebody to cover for you, yeah, then I guess it's all right.”

„Thanks, Mr. Logan. I appreciate it. I really do.”

As he left he glanced back and noticed his boss studying him with a perplexed smile—as if he was looking at a brand-new Jamie Feldon.

Returning home that night, Jamie called around until he found a temp worker who was familiar with the company. He arranged for the man to start the next morning as a replacement.

On Tuesday, Jamie woke early, showered, dressed, and ate a bowl of cereal with low-fat milk. Then he cleaned his kitchen table off and went to work. A pad of yellow paper in front of him, he began the list. It wasn't easy, compiling all the bad things in your life. Some were hard to deal with—he felt so much shame about them. Some, he wasn't sure if they'd actually occurred. Were they figments of his imagination, dreams, a result of the booze?

He also realized that he had to decide which offenses to include. Some were serious, some seemed laughably minor. He told himself at first not to worry about the small things.

But something stiffened within him when he thought that.

No, he thought angrily. Either you do this right or you don't do it at all. He'd include the smallest infractions, as well as the most serious.

He worked for two days straight and finally came up with a list of forty-three incidents. Then he spent another day identifying the people involved and finding out their most recent addresses. Some he knew, others required detective work. Using the phone book, directory assistance, and his computer, as well as actually pounding the pavement, he managed to get at least a lead to nearly everybody.

By Thursday night, Jamie was finished with the list and he celebrated with a tall glass of Arizona iced tea, mint-flavored, and a cigarette. Before he headed off to bed, though, he considered another question: Should he start with the older offenses, or the newest?

Jamie debated this for some time and decided that he'd start with the most recent. He was worried that he'd get bogged down finding people from decades ago, and he was eager to get his new life underway.

So, the most recent.

Who was first?

A glance at the list. The name on the top was Charles Vaughn, Lincoln.

* * * * *

The man awoke on Friday morning with the Memory.

This had happened nearly every day since the incident a month and a half ago.

The Memory was there when he awoke, and it was there when he fell asleep. And it popped up all by itself a couple of times during the day, too.

It was one of those things you try to forget, but the harder you try the more you relive it.

Then your gut twists, your palms grow clammy, and a chill pall of dread fills you. Anger too.

You hope that time will take care of it. And probably that'll happen eventually, but like when you're wracked with the flu, you just can't imagine you'll ever feel better.

Charles Vaughn had a good life. He was a senior sales manager for a large Internet software company. He'd gotten his MBA at New York University and had played with the big boys in the Wall Street finance world for a long time, then moved to Bean Town to join a startup. A year ago he jumped to his present company. He was tough, he played hardball (but never screwing around with the heavy-hitters, the IRS or the SEC), and he did well. Now, at forty-nine, he knew what the real world was about: doing a good job, being invaluable to your customers—and, just as important, if not more, to your boss—and paying

attention to details. Looking over your shoulder, too—making millions and making enemies go hand in hand.

He'd moved up through the ranks of the company fast and had a shot at being president in the next few years.

The businessman had a beautiful home in Lincoln, a wife who was a successful realtor, and two kids headed for good colleges in the next couple of years. He had his health.

Everything about his life seemed perfect.

And it would have been, except for the goddamn Memory. It just wouldn't leave him alone.

What happened was this: Vaughn and his wife and daughter made the mistake of spending St. Patrick's Day at that tourist trap of stores and restaurants in Boston, Faneuil Hall, along with, of course, about a billion other people. Just as they were about to head home, his daughter remembered she needed to get a birthday present for her friend.

„We're out of time on the meter," Vaughn pointed out.

„Dad, it's, like, what? A quarter?"

They'd been shopping for two hours, and only now she remembered the present? Vaughn sighed. „I'll be in the car."

„We'll just be a minute." His daughter and wife disappeared back inside. Vaughn pumped another quarter into the meter and climbed into the car. He started the engine and cranked up the heater to cut through the infamous Boston spring chill.

Of course, it wasn't „a minute" at all. In fact, twenty of them rolled by without the two ladies surfacing. Vaughn sat back and was thinking about a man at work, a rival salesman who was making a move on some accounts that were up for grabs and that Vaughn really wanted. The rival wasn't as good a salesman, but he knew the tech side of the product better than any other employee, except the programmers themselves. Vaughn'd have to come up with some plan to stop him. He was considering what he could do when he heard a honk. He glanced into the street and saw a driver in a car pausing next to him. The man had a pudgy face and was about Vaughn's age, maybe a little younger.

He said something.

Vaughn shook his head and opened his passenger window. „What's that?"

„You leaving?" Gesturing at the parking space.

„Not just yet," Vaughn replied with a smile. „Waiting for the wife."

Which any man would understand was humorous shorthand for: It could be five minutes, could be an hour.

But the guy in the battered car didn't smile. „Just pull out and wait for her up there. Double-park."

Vaughn blinked at the man's bluntness. „Rather not. She and my daughter are expecting me here."

„I'm not saying drive to the Cape. Just pull up a car or two. You're leaving anyway."

„I'm not sure how long they'll be."

„It can't be that long. Your engine's running, isn't it?"

Vaughn's face grew red; he was angry and uneasy. „Think I'd rather wait here." He shut the engine off.

„Oh, that was cute," the man snapped. He seemed drunk.

St. Patrick's Day... piss-poor excuse for a holiday.

Vaughn turned away and rolled up the window. He glanced at the shops, hoping he'd see his wife and daughter.

The other driver shouted something else, which Vaughn couldn't hear. He stared at the control panel of his Acura, thinking that if he ignored the guy he'd go away.

Come on, he thought to his family, growing angry at them for putting him in this position.

It was then that he glanced toward his right, into the street, and saw that the door on the battered car was open. Where—

A rush of motion from the sidewalk. Vaughn's car door was jerked open before he could reach the door-lock button.

The driver was leaning down, directly in Vaughn's face. With a steam of drunken, smoky breath between them, the man said, „Listen up, asshole. I don't need anybody to dis me like that. The hell you think you are?”

Vaughn fixed his eyes on the scruffy man. Not in great shape, but big. Both scared and angry, Vaughn said, „I'm not leaving until my family's here. Live with it.”

„Live with it? I'll give you something to live with.” He flicked away a cigarette and ran his key along the side of the Acura, scraping off a line of paint.

„That's it!” Vaughn pulled his cell phone from his pocket, hit 9-1-1.

A police dispatcher came on immediately. „This is nine-one-one. What's the nature of your emergency?”

„I'm being attacked. Please send somebody—“

„You prick,” the assailant muttered and reached for him, but Vaughn leaned back into the car.

„Your name, sir?” the dispatcher asked. „What's your address?”

„Charles Vaughn... I live in Lincoln but I'm in my car at Faneuil Hall, near Williams-Sonoma. He's drunk, he's attacking me. I—“

The big man lunged forward, snatched the phone away, and flung it to the sidewalk, where it shattered. Bystanders jumped back, though most stayed close-to watch whatever was going to happen next. A couple of drunk teenagers laughed and started chanting, „Fight, fight, fight.”

The man gripped Vaughn's jacket and tried to pull him out of the car.

„Get off me!” Vaughn gripped the wheel and the men played tug of war until a siren sounded nearby, getting closer.

Thank God...

The assailant, his face red with rage, let go and stood frozen for a moment, as if he was wondering what else he could do to Vaughn. He settled for repeating, „You prick,” and ran back to his car. He spun the wheels in reverse, disappearing around the corner. Vaughn strained his neck looking back but he couldn't see the license plate.

Hands shaking, breath ticking with the fright, Vaughn felt weak with fear and dread.

The police arrived and took a statement, made a note of the incident and the damage to the car. Vaughn was giving them what information he could remember when another thought occurred to him. His voice faded.

„What, sir?” an officer asked, noticing the businessman's troubled face.

„He heard me give nine-one-one my name. And where I lived. The town, I mean. Do you think he'll try to find me to get even?”

The police didn't seem concerned. „Road rage, or parking rage, whatever, it never lasts very long. I don't think you're in any danger.”

„Besides,” one officer added, nodding at the damage to the paint, „looks like he already did get even.”

The police talked to passersby—with less enthusiasm than Vaughn would have liked—but nobody had gotten the man's tag number-or was willing to admit it if they had. Then another call came in on their radio-another fight in progress.

„St. Paddy's Day,” one of the officers spat out, shaking his head. They hurried off.

„You okay?” one of the bystanders asked.

„Yeah, thanks,” Vaughn said, not feeling the least bit okay. He ran his hand across the long scratch in the paint. He kept replaying the incident. Had it been his fault? Should he have given the guy the space? Of course not. But how had he sounded? Was he abrupt, insulting? He hadn't thought so, certainly hadn't meant to be.

Finally his wife and daughter returned from the hall, toting several small bags. They noticed the damage to the car and the pieces of Vaughn's cell phone sitting in the backseat.

„What happened, honey?”

He explained to them.

„Oh, Dad, no! Are you all right?”

„Fine. Just get in.”

He locked the doors and drove away fast. On the turnpike Vaughn checked the rearview mirror every few seconds. But he saw no sign of the attacker's car. His wife and daughter chatted away as if nothing had happened. Vaughn was quiet, upset about the incident. And the anger—at them and at himself—wasn't going away.

When they were a few miles from home Judy asked, „Something wrong, honey? You're not still bothered by that crazy man, are you?”

„No,” he said. „I'm just a little tired.”

„Don't worry,” she said. „It's just paint. They can fix it up like new.”

Sometimes women just didn't get it at all.

„Oh, Dad,” his daughter said urgently, „can we stop at Beth's? I want to give her the necklace.”

„No.”

„But it's right up there.”

„I said no.”

„But—“

„No,” he snapped. „You'll see her at school tomorrow.”

The girl wasn't happy—the friend's house was, after all, on the way home—but Vaughn wouldn't change his mind.

When they arrived at home he pulled his wife aside and told her his big concern—that the man had heard Vaughn mention his name and the town they lived in.

„Oh.” Now Judy seemed miffed. His impression was that she was upset he'd gotten into the fight in the first place and hadn't just given the guy the parking space, then double-parked to wait for them. As if it was male ego that'd caused the problem.

He came a millisecond away from reminding her that their last-minute shopping spree was the ultimate cause of the whole thing, but self-preservation kicked in and he managed to restrain himself. He said, „The police don't think it's anything to worry about. But just keep an eye out.” He described the man.

„Keep an eye out,” she muttered, and walked off silently to make dinner.

Vaughn didn't eat much that night (his excuse was that his stomach was upset from the fast food they'd had for lunch, which his wife had ordered—a fact he managed to work into his explanation, with some petty satisfaction).

After his family went to bed that night, Vaughn climbed the stairs to the study above the garage and stayed awake for a long time, keeping a vigil, staring out at the street, looking for any sign of the assailant.

At three A.M. or so he fell asleep with the Memory prominently sitting in his thoughts.

And the next morning he awoke with it.

Vaughn forced himself to relax and, even though he was groggy from lack of sleep, he made breakfast for the family, spent a cheerful half-hour with them, and then headed off to work.

But the good mood didn't last. The Memory kept coming back. He replayed the incident a hundred times that day. He regretted not fighting back, not grabbing the man and wrestling him to the ground, pinning him there until the cops arrived. He felt he was a coward, a failure.

He was so distracted he missed the lunch he'd set up to woo the big client that his rival was after.

Over the next six weeks things grew worse. Several times on the way to work he spotted cars that might have been the assailant's, and skidded off the highway, desperate to escape. Two weeks ago he'd nearly slammed into a woman's SUV in a grocery store parking lot while staring at a car behind him. And another time, leaving a local bar, he'd seen a man in sunglasses across the street; Vaughn believed he looked like the assailant. Panicked, the businessman leapt back inside the bar, knocking into several people and spilling drinks. He nearly tripped down the back stairs of the bar as he fled.

All of these incidents turned out to be false alarms—the men he'd seen were not the attacker—but he couldn't shake the fear that consumed him.

Finally, he couldn't take it anymore. One morning Vaughn canceled a meeting at work and drove to a building outside of town, a place he'd found in the Yellow Pages, a gun shop and shooting range. There he bought a 9mm semiautomatic Glock pistol and enrolled in the course that would give him a Class A firearm permit, allowing him to carry a concealed weapon.

Today, at lunch, he was going to complete the course and get the license. From now on he could carry the gun wherever he wanted to.

* * * * *

Jamie Feldon woke up at nine on Friday, well rested and ready to get started on his new life.

Unlike the typical evening from his past, last night he'd slept in his bed, under clean sheets, wearing clean pajamas, and, even though he'd had a beer with dinner, he'd gone to sleep sober. He'd also stuck to his rule of only two cigarettes for the entire evening. He brushed his teeth for a full minute.

Now, eating a modest breakfast, he looked over the notes he'd taken about Charles Vaughn. The businessman lived in Lincoln. But Jamie wanted to see him without his family around, so he'd Googled the name and found him

mentioned on some computer industry websites. He learned where the man worked, an Internet company about ten miles away.

Jamie decided to take something along with him, and after some thinking he had a brainstorm: Champagne. Vaughn, he recalled, was a man who dressed well and would probably have good taste.

After washing his breakfast dishes, Jamie jumped in his car and headed off to the nearest wine store, figuring he'd spend some serious money on the bottle. You can't scrimp when you're working on a new life.

* * * * *

„Good shooting,” the man said.

He was a well-toned fifty-year-old with cropped gray hair. Tendons and muscles were prominent in his arms and neck. His name was Larry Bolling, and he was the senior instructor at Patriot Guns and Shooting Range, where Charles Vaughn had been taking his lessons.

Vaughn pulled his ear protectors off. „What?”

„Good shooting, I said.”

„Thanks.” Vaughn put the black semiautomatic pistol down on the bench in front of him as the instructor reeled the target back in. The eight shots were grouped tight in the silhouette's chest.

The shooting wasn't competition-level but he was satisfied.

The idea that Charles Vaughn would be spending any time at all thinking about grain weight of bullets and the advantages of a SIG-Sauer safety (a thumb lever) versus a Glock (a second trigger) was hilarious. Here was a man who made his living with credit reports and product-spec sheets, and yet he was spending his lunch hour shooting at images of Bin Laden and John Q. Thug.

But even more ironic was that Charles Vaughn had turned into a pretty damn good shot.

At first he'd held the gun stiffly, in a way that seemed to mimic what he'd seen actors do in the movies.

„Now, sir,” Larry Bolling had explained at the first lesson, „you might not want to do that.”

„What's that?”

„Hold your weapon that way.”

„Okay. Sure. Why not?”

„Because when you pull the trigger, the slide—See that part there—is gonna fly back at, oh, about a thousand miles an hour, and it'll take a portion of your thumb with it. What you do is just rest one hand on the other. Sorta like this.”

„This?”

„That's right. Now let's go put some holes in a target.”

Well, at first he hadn't put a lot of holes in anything but the bullet trap at the back of the range. But today he'd been rewarded for his skill.

Good shooting...

After the lunch-hour lesson today, Vaughn dismantled the gun, then cleaned, reassembled, and reloaded it.

He found Bolling in the front office, hunched over some papers. He motioned Vaughn to take a chair.

„So, I get my ticket?” the businessman asked.

„Not quite yet, sir.”

Vaughn frowned. He'd passed all the tests with perfect scores. He'd also passed the background checks. He'd attended all of the video and live-instruction sessions, had done all his homework.

„I thought that was it.”

„Nope,” Bolling explained. „There's one more thing that I include in my classes.”

„Okay, what's that?”

„You need to answer a question.”

„Go ahead.”

„Why do you want a carry permit? You never told me.”

„I'm a wealthy businessman. I'm concerned about my family. There's a lot of crime in Boston.”

„That's all true—at least I can attest to the last one of those, and the other two are no doubt right, as well. But why don't you tell me the real reason?”

Vaughn could only laugh. He shook his head and explained about the attack on St. Patrick's Day.

„Okay, sir, I understand that was upsetting. But that's not a good reason to carry a weapon.”

„But he was dangerous.”

„Let me ask: That was six weeks ago, give or take; you seen hide or hair of that man since then?”

„I don't think so,” Vaughn said defensively.

A nod toward the pistol on the businessman's hip. „You've done good in the course. You know safety and you've got every legal right to carry that. My advice to you is to take it home, put it in a lockbox, and leave it there until the next time you come here to have some fun. Then take it home again and put it back in the box. You get my drift?”

„But—“

„Listen to me.”

Vaughn looked up into the man's steely eyes. He nodded.

„Most people, in their entire lives, there's a one in a million chance that there'd be a good reason to draw their weapon on the street, and even less of a chance they ought to use it. The absolute best possible thing you can do in a confrontation is turn and run like a rabbit, calling for help at the top of your lungs. I'll tell you from my heart that that's exactly what I'd do.”

„Run.”

„As fast as your feet can carry you. And if you're with your grandmother, or your child, you sling 'em over your shoulder and carry 'em with you... A gun's for that one time in your life when you're trapped, there's no help around, and your assailant intends to kill you. That situation in Boston, naturally it upset you, and no doubt that man was a solid-gold son of a bitch. And you're thinking you were a coward. But I'm telling you, it's braver to live with a feeling like that than to go looking for trouble.”

„Well, duly noted,” Vaughn said. „I appreciate your comments.”

„There, I've said my piece.” Bolling produced a temporary permit. „Good luck to you, sir.”

Leaving the gun shop and range, returning to his car, Charles Vaughn was thinking about Bolling's words. But they didn't stay with him long. He was aware of a curious feeling. It was as if something fundamental in his life had changed. He thought back to the incident in Boston and found, to his surprise,

his gut didn't twist, his heart didn't pound quite so fast. The anger—at the attacker, and at himself for his cowardice—was almost gone.

Charles Vaughn walked to his car and headed back to work, buoyed by a confidence that he hadn't felt for months. Maybe even years.

* * * * *

At five P.M. that evening Jamie Feldon sat in the front seat of his Toyota, listening to the radio and watching people leave the office of NES Computer Products.

He didn't know if Charles Vaughn was a workaholic—a lot of times those Internet guys really put in the hours—but Jamie would stay as long as he needed to in order to see the guy. Beside him was a grilled chicken sandwich from McDonald's, an iced tea, and a bottle of Champagne whose name he couldn't pronounce, which meant that it had to be good.

He ate his dinner, listened to the radio, and thought about the other people on his list.

Then, at seven P.M., Jamie saw Charles Vaughn leave by the front door, look around, and then head toward the parking garage.

Jamie took a deep breath.

Making amends.

A new life.

He grabbed the Champagne, stepped out of the car, and started up the sidewalk to the garage.

* * * * *

Approaching his car, Charles Vaughn examined the paint job. The body shop had completely erased the damage from when the psycho had keyed his car outside Faneuil Hall.

Just like the gun on his hip had erased the psychic scarring.

He no longer felt defenseless, no longer felt scared. In fact, despite the gun instructor's advice (which Vaughn thought was a bit hypocritical, considering his job), he was hoping the man would make his move.

I'm ready for you.

It was then that he heard a snap—or some sound—not far away. He froze and looked around. The garage was deserted here; after his lesson at the gun shop he'd returned to find parking only on the fifth floor. His was the only car here now. He shifted his briefcase to his left hand. His pistol was only a few inches away from his right.

But, he told himself, how would the punk know where he worked? He might've been staking out Lincoln, but here? Impossible.

Though if the guy was really determined, it wouldn't be impossible to find out his company. Vaughn squinted, scanning the floor behind him. Was that the shadow of someone on the far stairwell? He couldn't tell.

His heart beating quickly, he remembered the man's face, remembered the anger in his eyes, the smell of liquor, the uncontrolled hands as they gripped Vaughn's lapels.

A chill tickled his spine. But it wasn't fear; it was exhilaration.

Keeping his right hand free, Vaughn set his briefcase down and fished for his car keys, while he scanned the garage in the direction he believed the sound had come from.

The sound again.

He hit the unlock button on the key. But still didn't get inside. He tapped the gun with his right palm.

Vaughn tensed as the sound of tires squealing filled his ears. He laughed to himself, watching the pickup truck squeal down the exit ramp from the top floor, where maintenance workers and contractors were supposed to park. That was the noise he'd heard, the men loading up the truck.

It was then that a man's voice behind him said, „Excuse me, Mr. Vaughn? You probably don't remember me...”

Vaughn gasped, dropping the car keys. He stared at the figure approaching him, carrying something large in his right hand. It looked like a club, a bowling pin.

Jesus, it's him, it's the attacker!

Instinctively, Vaughn dropped into a combat shooting pose, drew his gun, and aimed directly at the man's chest. He started to pull the trigger.

* * * * *

Jamie Feldon gasped, holding up a hand as if it could ward off the bullet that was about to end his life. „No! Please!”

Neither Jamie nor Vaughn moved.

Time was frozen.

Jamie heard nothing, he felt nothing.

It was so quiet... Had the gun actually gone off? Maybe it had and he was dead.

But then he felt wind on his cheek and heard a truck shifting gears nearby. A horn honked in the distance. His heart, too... he could actually hear it.

„Please,” he whispered. „Please don't...”

Vaughn was squinting at Jamie. “Could you... I'm sorry, could you step into the light there?”

Jamie did.

Vaughn studied his face, then the Champagne. He slumped. „My God, my God, my God...” The gun lowered and the businessman leaned against his car. „I thought... I'm sorry, I thought you were somebody else.”

Feeling his hands quiver madly, Jamie gave a breathless laugh. „Who?”

Vaughn said, „This guy I had a run-in with in Boston. On St. Patrick's Day... I'm so sorry. I couldn't see you clearly.” His shoulders slumped. „Or maybe I was just so paranoid.” He glanced down at the gun with wide eyes and quickly put it in the holster on his hip. „Are you... are you all right?”

Jamie laughed. „Well, I've gotta say I'm a lot better now that you put that thing away. Thought I'd pee my pants for a minute there.”

„Who are you?”

„My name's Jamie Feldon.”

Vaughn shook his head. „Do I know you?”

„Not really, but we've met.”

„What can I do for you?”

Jamie said brightly, „I've come to see you about making amends.” He nodded at the Champagne.

„Amends?” Vaughn asked, frowning. „What did you do to me?”

„Oh,” Jamie said, „it's not what I did to you. It's what you did to me.”

„To you? What—?” Vaughn asked. But before he could continue, Jamie lunged forward and swung the bottle into the side of the businessman's head.

The businessman went down like a rock.

* * * * *

Five minutes later Charles Vaughn came to.

Jamie was standing over him, aiming the man's pistol at his chest, the grip of the gun wrapped in a napkin he'd found in a nearby trash bin.

„What,” Vaughn gasped, „what's this all about?” He squinted.

„Amends,” he said. „Like I said.”

„But I don't even know you... What'd I do?”

„You really don't remember, do you?”

„No. I swear.”

„Well, take a good look.”

„I'm sorry. Really. Please put down the gun. We can talk about it.”

„Think back,” Jamie said in a smooth voice. „Think back to late March. You were in the Lincoln Brew Pub.”

„I go there all the time.”

„I know. But this particular day you should remember. You started to walk out the door, but all of a sudden you jumped back, like you saw a goddamn ghost. You spilled my Bloody Mary all over me. And then you just run out the back door.” Jamie gave a cold laugh. „Do you say you're sorry? Do you offer to pay for the dry cleaning? No.”

„Wait...” Vaughn was shaking his head. „I remember that. But... Wait, how did you find me?”

„Just asked the bartender at the Lincoln Pub what your name was. Then I Googled you and found where you lived and worked. Had to see you alone, of course. Didn't want your family around.”

„You have to understand—at the bar back then in March? That guy I was telling you about, the attacker? I thought he was outside. I was afraid.”

Jamie shrugged. „I was supposed to pick up my kid for visitation but I had that drink all over me. Couldn't pick him up looking like that, could I? I had to go home and change. I was late and his mother'd taken him someplace with her by the time I got there. Made a big deal about it with the court, too.”

„I'm sorry, but—“

„Sorry, but,” Jamie mocked. „See, I've been putting up with crap like that all my life. People've insulted me, cheated me, made fun of me, bumped into me ever since I was a kid. And I've never had the guts to fight back. I just swallowed it all... I get walked over and I never have the balls to do anything. But a week ago I decided I'm not going to put up with it anymore. People're going to make amends to me for what they've done. And you're the first on my list.”

„Make amends?” Vaughn gasped. „But I just spilled something on you. What do you want? You want money?”

„No, I want you to die,” Jamie said matter-of-factly and shoved the gun against Vaughn's head, then pulled the trigger.

After he cleaned the blood off his own face and hands Jamie wrapped the dead man's fingers around the gun and quickly left the garage. He looked around. Nobody seemed to have heard the shot. He walked slowly down the stairs and out to the lot where he was parked, carrying the Champagne. Jamie'd taken the bottle to use as a weapon; it was something that nobody would be suspicious of. He'd planned to either beat Vaughn to death with it, or, if it broke, use the jagged neck to slash the man's carotid artery.

But Vaughn had actually been carrying a gun! If the businessman was really so jittery about whatever'd happened on St. Patrick's Day, the cops might get the idea he'd gone over the edge and killed himself. Or maybe they'd think that guy who'd attacked him had finally tracked him down.

Jamie climbed in his car and drove slowly out of the parking lot. He kept hearing Vaughn's words in his mind.

At the bar back then in March? That guy I was telling you about, the attacker? I thought he was outside. I was afraid.

Excuses, Jamie reflected in disgust. There were always excuses.

And he wasn't going to accept them anymore.

Jamie was going to be true to his resolution. The TV show he'd seen had changed him forever. People had to make amends for their transgressions, and he was going to be the angel of justice to make sure they did.

Who next? He glanced down at the list and noticed his wife's name, but she was at the bottom. He'd have to handle that one carefully since he'd be a prime suspect in her death.

But there were plenty of scores to settle before her.

He saw the name below Vaughn's.

Carole, in Scituate. She was a thirty-five-year-old bank manager he'd taken out on a date in February. They'd gone to the Red Lobster, All You Can Eat... and she sure had.

But afterwards, a double insult: She'd refused to sleep with him and then she'd never called, like she'd promised.

It was seven-thirty. Did he have time to take care of Carole tonight?

Sure he did, Jamie decided. Tomorrow was Saturday; he could sleep in. Besides, there were a lot of names on his list; it'd feel good to mark another one off.

He lit a cigarette, only his fourth of the day, and headed for the turnpike.
