



# The Weekly Man

## Episode 57: Monday - Jack

He spent most of the morning doodling with charcoal pencils, filling sheet after sheet with half-finished drawings of the Unseen, the treehouse, the Tyranny and possible story locations such as dumps, marshes, dark city streets, waterfronts and city outskirts with towering power lines. Once he started an Unseen episode, the characters and storyline took off by themselves and Jack was never certain how each chapter would unfold when he started drawing. But he needed a basic idea for the storyline, some grand view of where the story would be set or what the Tyranny might be up to this time. Doodling and free form drawing was how he formed that big idea.

But it wasn't working today. His doodles kept coming back to the same thing: Tyranny thugs, blank-eyed, confused, their memories erased. There was something about their fate in the last episode that struck deep into Jack's psyche. He found himself touching his head where the bump had and he felt a connection between the bump and the fate of the Tyranny. It was almost like he'd been a target of some kind of Fourth Prerogative himself. The memory lapses. The feeling that he was never alone, that there was someone or something always present in the shadows and crevasses of his life.

*I'm not Crosby. I've never been Crosby. Why would I want him to be proud of me? Why was I always asking myself what he would do? What the hell were you thinking?*

He stood up and walked to the window. It was warm enough that he had both windows open a few inches. The leaves that still clung to branches in the park flickered in the wind like matchstick sparks under the noon sun while the heavy bed of fallen leaves on the ground reminded Jack of a bed of glowing coals.

*What the hell.*

He walked to the door, put on his shoes and fall jacket and walked out to the park.

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It suddenly occurred to him that this was the first time he'd been in the park in the daytime. In the past, he'd been hunched over and peering into the shadows of bushes and benches, trees and statues, looking for the glow of sinister eyes or the dark movement of an overcoat or sneakers worn by some elite force sent to spirit him away. He'd crept, slunk or stole through the park. He'd never just walked and enjoyed the view, the freshness of the air and the sense of motion from runners and strollers. It amazed him that so many people used the park at all hours of the day and night. There were no high rises in the neighborhood or in the surrounding areas but the population from the buildings around the park was enough to fill it around the clock.

He didn't feel threatened. He didn't check potential hiding places or look suspiciously at the people around him. Just a short time ago, he would have steered clear of the woman with the baby carriage heading toward him. He felt a deeply satisfying sense of freedom.

He was relaxed. This was something he rarely, if ever, felt. There had always been that sense of threat from waking till the time. Always second guessing, suspecting, examining, waiting for the sky to fall or the floor to open and swallow him. An unfamiliar calmness settled over his mind and body as he walked through the park. He felt taller than normal. His thoughts wandered away from concerns about his memory and the sense of some phantom presence and he let himself be distracted by the color of the park's bed of leaves and the fall flowers blooming against the profusion of small green leaves in the bushes. He wondered why those leaves hadn't turned and fallen as they did in the trees. He saw tiny blue flowers in grassy areas and it occurred to him that all the Fall flowers he'd ever seen were small blossoms and he wondered why that was.

"Hello!"

He was standing still, staring at a wall of bushes with a swatch of green grass in front of it. He turned his head toward the voice and saw a young woman with brown hair in a ponytail. She came up beside him, lightly running on the spot "Maybe you don't remember me. We talked about your photos at the mall a few months ago." She laughed.

Jack looked at her, mildly confused, but still feeling relaxed. "I beg your pardon?"

She laughed again. "It was a few months ago. I guess you don't remember."

Jack was confused. "I have no idea what you're talking about and I'm pretty sure I've never met you before. You're mistaking me for someone else."

The woman's eyes widened and she shrugged. "OK. Whatever you say." And she continued running without looking back.

*What the hell?*

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"It seemed so weird. I mean, she was so certain I was some photographer from a mall." Jack sipped from a big yellow coffee cup with a fake crack painted from the top to its base. Valerie cocked her head to the side and narrowed her eyes.

*Uh oh.*

The Broken Cup Café was the third place that he'd run out on a date with her. He told her that he'd been spooked by her having taken her cell phone from her purse, looking at it and putting it back in her purse. He just turned and left. She remembered that as one of the first times he'd missed a date with her because of a death in the family. The smell of paint and plastic suggested that the place had recently been renovated but it looked exactly the same as the first time she'd

been there: red and white walls and booths with huge square photographs of broken coffee cups, their cracks cemented with gold.

"What...?" he said, tentatively, staring intently into her eyes. "You seem to know something about that?"

*Careful, Valerie. Careful.*

She smiled and leaned forward. "No, but it does seem strange. Maybe she's some kind of nutcase?"

"Or maybe something's going on."

"And what would that be?"

"I don't know, Valerie." He set his cup down. "All my life, I've felt threatened, as though there's someone or something out to get me. I could sense their presence but never really focus on them enough to figure out what it was I was feeling." He rested his elbows on the table, hands clenched tightly into a white-knuckled ball. "It's like I told you about the last episode of the Unseen and the bump on my head. It must have been painful. It must have been pretty damn traumatic." He turned back to face her. "But I don't remember a thing about it. Not a thing."

They stared into each other's eyes for a moment. Valerie thought back to her meeting with Natalie, who was beginning to worry as well. She felt the possibility, the threat, of losing all seven of her children. They'd talked for a while but all they could really do at this point was watch and hope for the best. The kids, now adults, were finding their way into things that had always been a puzzle they'd worked around. But not now.

"Well, I have some good news." She smiled and reached her hand over the table to cover Jack's hands. "It seems the anomaly with your birthday was exactly what I thought it was...the hospital had a date that was one day out and public records showed you born the next day. It's that kind of mistake they make all the time. And it drives the agency crazy because it raises flags that we have to check out. In fact, I'd say that ninety percent of our work leads nowhere but into bureaucratic errors. And a lot of the rest crashes right into brick walls."

What she'd really found, though, were seven different dates, starting on Monday and ending on Sunday, for the same mother. She wondered about Manzer Doyle's influence and power, even in retirement, to call in the favors to get that done.

*And why is he looking so stressed?*

"What's wrong, Jack? You look...stressed."

"OK, I realize that it's possible to make mistakes in records, especially as you say, when they're passed around government departments. But, doesn't that seem to add just one more thing to the weirdness?" He shook his head and sighed. "Or maybe I'm just going crazy or something. Maybe I need to get out more, like for walks in the park. Take a break from the comic strip. Spend more time with you." He opened his hands and circled them around Valerie's hands and smiled. "I like spending time with you."

Valerie smiled. "And I like spending time with you. So much better than saying everything in emails." She leaned over the table and kissed him on the cheek. His smile widened and he blushed.

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Seven different birth dates, day after day, from one mother. Valerie had unflagged Jack. The investigation was closed. Just another bureaucratic error. Nothing to see here. She'd confirmed just the one birthdate and buried the others.

But none of this was over. In fact, she was sure that things were going to get very interesting over the next few weeks.