

THE CHOICE MAN



O. H. Reads

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by O. H. Reads

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Lisa's Choice

He was a nondescript man of about middle age. Dressed in dark blue pants, a light blue dress shirt, and black loafers, he could have been just about anyone in the downtown area going to or from his place of work. He carried a black briefcase that looked like it could have come right off the screen of a spy movie. It was a dull black, but the silver latches with combination locks fairly sparkled when the sun's rays caught them just right. If he had been wearing a tie, anyone would have taken him for an attorney. Then again, maybe not. He walked almost aimlessly down the sidewalk, allowing his eyes to drift here and there, taking in each person, car, or building as if they hadn't been there just a moment before...or that they might not be there a minute from now.

He made his way to Broadway and then turned left, heading toward the center of downtown. If there had seemed no purpose to his walking before, it was there now as he began moving with purpose toward the courthouse complex that determined the immediate fate of hundreds of men and women each day. Outside the courthouse complex, at the clean, white stairs, the man stopped. A line had formed out front of people waiting for security screening to go in. The man stepped to the side of the line. At the edge of the steps was a marble planter area that was about three feet high at the bottom of the stairs and level with the sidewalk at the top. He sat down on the wall, placing his briefcase on the ground next to him. His eyes wandered over the people in line. Some were obviously attorneys, dressed in business suits, skirts, pants, hundred-dollar shirts, and carrying leather attaché cases as they checked their smartphones. Others appeared to be curious observers, reporters, jurors, potential jurors, and those who were coming to be judged.

It wasn't too long before one of the guards standing outside the doors noticed him. With his hands on his weapons belt he walked over.

"No loitering here, buddy," the large man, both in height and girth, said in his gruff, authoritarian voice.

The man looked up at the guard. Beneath his neatly combed dark hair, his blue eyes seemed to sparkle.

"I'm waiting for someone," he replied, his voice a soothing tenor.

"Who?" the guard demanded.

"Two people actually," the man answered back in his soft voice. "One of them is an attorney. The other is not."

"Let's have some ID," the guard said sternly.

The man's blue eyes seemed to flash dangerously in the morning sun even though his facial expression never wavered.

"Have you ever considered," the man said even more softly, "how our lives can be forever altered by one tiny decision? A woman chooses one college over another and as a result meets the man who will help her achieve all her life's goals. A man decides not to have one more drink at a bar, instead choosing to go home. His car stalls on a railroad track and in the time he didn't spend at the bar he's able to find someone to help him push it off the tracks before a freight train comes along and kills him. A teenager wants to take the perfect selfie on a cliff's edge. He slips and his friends try to save him. He's saved, but one of his friends falls and dies. He has to live the rest of his life with guilt. One moment, one choice. Or a security guard tries to hassle a man waiting patiently for someone to come along. What's his future going to be? The possibilities can boggle the mind," the man finished, and though his voice never grew loud, the menace in it was clear and loud.

"Are you threatening me?" the guard said, taking a step forward. "You want to spend the next 12 hours in a holding cell for being an asshole? You think I can't make it happen?"

"What I think doesn't really matter. What is your decision? The choice is yours."

The guard stared at the man. There was a moment when it looked like he was going to reach for his handcuffs, then another thought seemed to go through his mind.

"Don't let me see you here in an hour," the guard mumbled, stalking back to his place outside the courthouse entrance.

The man didn't respond. He simply turned his attention back to the line of people waiting to enter.

About an hour later the man suddenly stood up and walked toward the front of the line. He stopped next to a woman dressed in a navy blue skirt and blazer with a cream-colored blouse. She was holding a brown, soft-sided briefcase.

"Lisa Daniels," the man said as he came up to her.

It wasn't a question.

The woman, Lisa Daniels, turned suddenly, taken aback by the sudden appearance of the man.

"Yes," she said hesitatingly. "Who are you?"

"You may call me Leonard. I am here to offer you two choices."

Lisa looked at this man who called himself Leonard. He was perhaps six feet tall, closer to thin than muscular, and about average in every other way. Except for his eyes. They were an electric shade of blue.

"Who are you with?" she asked.

"This is your first choice. As such I can offer it to you with a little more information than usual," he said, the look on his face somewhat earnest. "You can come with me and hear my offer for your second choice, or you can continue on your way to Court 17. I must warn you, however, that if you attempt to go to Court 17, you will not return. That choice will lead to your death."

"What? How? What's going to happen?"

"I am not at liberty to divulge that answer to you. And I only have approximately 10 more seconds to offer you the choice or let you go on your way. Will you come with me?"

"This is my first solo case," she said. "I can't just leave."

Leonard said nothing. He turned as if to go.

"Wait! Are you certain?"

Leonard turned back around.

"I am always certain," he answered simply.

Lisa looked at the courthouse complex. She was next in line to enter. She looked back at Leonard who was turning to go again.

"Damn," she muttered as she stepped out of the line.

"This way, quickly," Leonard said, hurriedly stepping down the stairs.

Lisa walked quickly to keep up. He turned up Broadway, not turning back to look at her.

"What's the hurry?" she said, walking as quickly as she could to keep up. "Where are we going?"

He didn't answer and continued walking. At the end of the block he stepped out into the crosswalk even though the 'Don't Walk' sign was lit. A car honked at him as the driver slammed on his brakes to avoid him. Leonard didn't even flinch or look. Lisa waved an apologetic hand at the car and ran in front of it. A moment later a loud explosion came from the direction they had come. Lisa turned back in shock. There was smoke coming from the front of the courthouse building and several people were lying on the ground in various positions as if they had been thrown there haphazardly. Other people were screaming and running. Lisa turned back around and nearly ran into Leonard who had stopped and was also looking back.

"Did you do that?" she asked.

"No."

"Then you knew. You knew there was a bomb and you didn't do anything to save those people's lives."

"Yes, I knew," he answered, looking over her head. "That was not my decision to make today." He looked down at her, his eyes fairly alight with an inner fire. "My decision today was saving your life. Are you displeased?"

"Well, no. But I mean, those people. You could have saved them too."

"Not today. Yesterday maybe. Or the day before that."

She looked at him quizzically as if trying to determine what he truly meant. A police car, lights flashing and siren wailing, sped past them. A growing cacophony of sounds indicated many others were coming as well.

"Please, follow me," he said, turning to walk again.

He kept a slower pace this time, stopping about two blocks later at a small cafe. Sirens continued to fill the air around them, but he moved as if he no longer heard them. He walked up to the cashier and casually ordered two coffees and a banana nut muffin.

"Did you just come from the court?" the young man at the register asked.

"Yes," Leonard said as if the man had asked if the sun was shining.

"What happened? Was it a bomb?"

"Yes," Leonard answered in the same tone. "Many people's lives were changed."

The cashier was speechless, then robotically prepared the drinks. Lisa was also looking at Leonard like he had suddenly grown a second head. For his part, Leonard acted as if he did not notice and, when the coffee and muffin were presented, gave a five-dollar tip and walked to a table with Lisa, dumbfounded, following.

"I believe you like banana nut muffins?" he asked as he placed the muffin in front of her at the table.

"Yes. How did you know? Wait, who are you?"

"You may call me Leonard."

"You said that. Who are you really? How'd you know about that bomb?"

"I have given you all the answers you will get regarding me and what I know," he said a little tersely. "I am not here for myself. Comfort yourself in the knowledge that you are alive now and would otherwise have been dead. It is of no comfort to those back there, but it should be to you."

"It's not much comfort to me," Lisa muttered. "I get to live while they died?"

"The proximity of a tragedy makes it no more or less tragic except in your mind. Had you been in your office today you would not care so much nor feel that you cheated death."

"In a really sadistic sort of way I suppose you're right."

"In a realistic sort of way," he corrected. "I can only deal in what is. Except, today, for you. Today, Lisa Daniels, you get to deal with a single 'what if.'"

"As in, what if I hadn't come with you?"

"Please, drink your coffee before it gets cold," he said by way of non-answer.

Lisa reached out for her cup and saw her hand shaking. She opted instead for the muffin and broke a piece off. After she had chewed and swallowed it, she was able to pick up her coffee and take a sip. Leonard drank his while looking around as if nothing out of the ordinary could possibly be happening. Surprisingly, Lisa found herself reassured by his casual attitude.

"Okay," she said after the muffin was gone and the coffee nearly so. "What if what?"

He put down his coffee and faced her. He stared at her so hard that it was almost like a physical blow and she found herself struggling for a moment to take a breath.

"I deal in choices," he said in a soft, clear, serious voice. "We all do really. What to wear today, where to eat, when to answer an email, and so on. Most of those decisions are inconsequential. There are some, however, that change the course of our lives."

Lisa swallowed hard. His words echoed in her head.

"Most of the time," he continued, "we don't know which choice it was that made a difference. You push snooze one too many times and leave the house late. Because you're late, you miss someone who was driving erratically and would have caused an accident with your car, leaving you paralyzed. Or you hand someone some spare change without thinking about it. That little ray of hope causes them not to give up. Years later, they have a good job and a family. One of their children grows up to be a research scientist who discovers a vaccine for a rare disease. Or you refuse to lend someone a helping hand one day because you're 'too busy' or it's 'not my problem.' That person, lacking hope, becomes a drug addict, gets arrested for breaking into someone's home to get some money for their next high, and ends up in prison. Years later, on release, that person murders someone."

A voice in Lisa's head -- was it her conscience? -- was whispering that these were hypothetical situations. She wanted to believe that voice, but she found herself thinking back on recent events and seeing if any of them were familiar.

"Sometimes," Leonard continued, "we *know*. Sometimes we look back and know that a decision we made at that one moment changed everything for us. And we regret it. We spend minutes, hours, days, wondering if we had gone left instead of right, zigged instead of zagged, what would our life be like today. Today, Lisa Daniels, I am going to offer you a choice that most people never get. I'm going to give you a chance to change your life."

"How?" she asked skeptically. "No one can change the past. And no one knows the future."

He smiled, but it had no warmth to it.

He reached down and picked up his briefcase. He spun the combination locks and then pressed the buttons to release the latches. He opened it just enough to reach inside.

He pulled out a manila file folder and closed the briefcase, pushing down the latches and moving the combination locks. He handed her the folder as he placed the briefcase back on the ground.

"Do I open this?" Lisa asked, her hands trembling once more. "What is it?"

"Inside there are three sheets of paper," Leonard said. "One of them is blank. That is the choice for you to simply stand up and walk away. The other two describe an event in your life at a specific date and time where you made a life-altering decision. If you choose, simply tell me which one you would like to change."

"You're kidding, right? This can't be real. You're telling me I can choose to change something in my past? That's not possible," she finished with a guffaw.

He neither smiled nor spoke. Lisa's disbelieving smile faded. Her hands were shaking so much that it took her three tries to open the folder. When she finally did, two of the pages fell to the ground. She picked them up.

"Oh my god," she said as she read one of them.

The date was a day in her sophomore year of high school. Two friends of hers had talked about joining the cheerleading squad. They had talked about it all day, alternately making fun of cheerleaders and then being envious of them. In the end, Lisa had decided not to join. Her two friends had gone along with her decision, though she had always felt they regretted it and had held it against her.

The second date was from her freshman year in college. She'd been invited to rush for a sorority. There was a welcome party that night for potential rushes. She had gone. At the party she had drunk too much and gotten sick. She had vomited three times on her way back to her dorm room. When she had finally made it to her bed, she had slept through her morning classes. It had caused her to miss a key midterm and she had ended up having to drop that class to avoid a failing grade. She'd then had to take the class over during the summer so she could graduate in four years.

"These changed my life?" she asked after reading them. "These are the most important moments in my past?"

"This is what lies before you," he began, and again his eyes bored into her with inhuman intensity. "Place two of the sheets back into the folder, leaving out the one you are choosing."

"And then what? Poof! I go back to live my life all over again from this?"

He didn't answer.

"This is some sort of joke, right? I mean, no one can do what you're saying."

"Failure to make a decision will result in a decision being made for you," he said gravely. "I can offer you this one warning and this one piece of advice. Whatever you choose, there is no going back and you will never see me again. You will have no memory of this moment or of the life you have lived to this point. You will only have the experience of the life you chose with whatever occurs in it. The good moments, bad moments, and everything in between. Now, you must make your decision."

"What if I don't choose? What if I just sit here?"

"That is a choice," he answered, pointing at the blank page.

She looked back at the two papers. The voice started speaking in her head again. She was fine with the person she was. Her experiences had made her the person she was today. To change the experiences would change the person she was. She had often thought about what life would have been like had she been a cheerleader. She would have been more popular. She would have had special privileges within school. And what if she hadn't had to take that class during the summer? She had missed out on a trip that some of her friends had taken to Europe that summer. How could that hurt her to have had that experience? Wouldn't she be better off for it? And yet...

"This one," she answered.

Leonard reached over and placed the two other sheets of paper in the folder.

"Goodbye, Lisa Daniels," he said, standing up. "We will not meet again."

Lisa was about to say something when suddenly she vanished. The sheet of paper began to move in a breeze, but a female hand slapped it down on the table. The

woman who was there now picked it up and looked at it. She was tall with medium brown skin and black curly hair.

"This is not a comfortable life for her," the woman said in a deep, rich voice.

As if to illustrate her point, she opened the briefcase -- without bothering with the combination locks -- and pulled from it a thin piece of paper that looked like a yarn sample display. Hanging from the paper were perhaps a couple dozen thick threads of various colors. Some of them were tangled in complicated loops and knots while a few hung limp and undisturbed. Some of them were shorter and some longer.

Leonard reached up and carefully took the strands from her, placing them back in the briefcase and spinning the locks.

"Nothing is certain," Leonard said crisply.

The woman gave a small, wry smile.

"Is it worth it, Leonard?"

"What would you do to save more than a dozen lives?" he asked back, indicating the courthouse complex down the street where bodies were strewn on the sidewalk and emergency vehicles crowded the streets.

"The greater good? That's callous."

"I don't believe in the greater good, Makesha. You know that."

"There were other ways."

"No, not for what I want," he answered with a glint in his eyes.

David's Choice

"You have a visitor. Get up."

David Villanueva opened his eyes and looked at the guard standing outside his cell.

The guard, a burly man whose very presence was intimidating, looked at David with disgust. David knew if there was a way for the guard to get away with it, he would beat him to within an inch of his life, if not all the way. Were he an uninterested third party he would have found it ironic that the guard for a drunk driver in a cell was the brother of the woman who now lay in a hospital bed fighting for her life after being hit by that same drunk driver. That was why David was in a single cell. It wasn't unusual for prisoners to curry favor with guards by doing what the guards could not.

David slowly made his way to his feet and shuffled to the door. The guard called into his microphone and a moment later the buzzer sounded. The guard yanked the door open and grabbed David by the front of his jumper, pulling him out so hard that he practically flew across the hall and slammed into the opposite wall. David groaned but didn't fight back. He'd done that once before and still had bruises from it. He was sure he had at least two broken ribs as well. But he found no sympathy with this guard or any of the others.

"Move," the guard commanded, shoving David down the hall.

Stumbling but catching himself before he fell, David shuffled quickly toward the private conference room. At the door he stopped and waited for the guard to open it. The guard refrained from hitting David as he passed him, but the shove was unnecessary. The door slammed shut behind him.

David looked at the man sitting at the table. He was about middle age and more or less normal and average in every way. He was wearing a light gray suit with a pale blue shirt. He wasn't wearing a tie. On the table was the only remarkable thing in the room, a dull black briefcase with silver combination locks.

"Who are you?" David asked.

"You may call me Leonard," the man answered. "Please, sit down. This won't take long."

David pulled out the other chair and sat down.

"Are you my new attorney? The other guy said he didn't want my appeal."

"I am not here about your case, David. You were out with friends, you had too much to drink, shrugged off the idea of getting a ride home, then subsequently drove your vehicle through a red light and struck a beautiful young woman one week before her wedding. She is likely to die from her injuries. I am not offering you any plea deals or reduced sentences."

David put his face in his hands. Even through his alcohol-impaired memory of the night he could clearly see the side of the car just before he hit it. He hated himself. And for a moment he wondered what would happen if he attacked the guard standing outside the room. The guy would probably kill him. It seemed like a fitting ending.

"If you're not here to help me, what do you want from me?" he asked with an air of defeat. "Is there a civil suit against me?"

When David heard nothing, he removed his hands from his face and looked up. Leonard was looking at him. No, not looking. He was glaring at him in a way that made the guard look friendly. David shuddered.

"I deal in choices," Leonard began in a soft, clear, serious voice. "In fact, we all do. Are we getting out of bed now or in 10 minutes? Do we call in sick to work or take an aspirin and hope it goes away? Do we drink too much and get behind the wheel of a car?"

David cringed at the last question. It left an empty feeling in his stomach to hear his life put in a form that left no doubt as to why he was where he was.

"Most of the time," Leonard continued, "we only get to deal in what is. Today, David, you get an opportunity most people never do. Today, you get to choose a 'what if.'"

"What do you mean? What is that?"

"What if you had the chance to go back in time and change one decision you made? What if your present reality," and Leonard made a sweeping gesture with his arms toward the prison area, "could be altered?"

David sat stupefied. There was nothing about what he was being told that even vaguely resembled reality, and yet he found himself clinging to it as a drowning man would cling to a life preserver. If only it were a real possibility.

"How?" David asked, desperate despite himself.

Leonard turned the briefcase just a bit toward himself so that he could spin the combination locks. He then pushed the latches and the catches on the briefcase snapped open. He opened the briefcase just enough to reach in and pull out a manila file folder. Without a word, he closed the briefcase and spun the locks again.

"David Villanueva," he began in a voice that was as chilling as it was soft, "today I am offering you a choice. You will not be offered this choice again." He placed the file folder on the table and slid it toward David. "Inside there are three sheets of paper. One of them is blank. That is the choice for you to simply stand up and walk away. The other two describe an event in your life at a specific date and time where you made a life-altering decision. If you choose, simply tell me which one you would like to change."

David tentatively put out a hand and touched the folder. He didn't open it. He looked at Leonard.

"Are you serious?" he asked. "I can change my past?"

Leonard did not answer. He sat there staring at David without blinking. David looked down at the folder. He went to open it and noticed that his hands were shaking. His first attempt to open the folder resulted in a crease that ran from the top left all the way down to the bottom right.

"Sorry," he said, his voice also shaking.

Leonard did not respond.

David opened the bent folder and spread the three sheets of paper in front of him, not trusting himself to pick them up. The first one he had put on the far left was blank. He gave that one almost no consideration. The middle sheet showed a date and time that made David shudder. It was the night he had caused the accident but at a time about ten minutes before the accident had occurred, the moment when the bartender had asked him if he wanted another. The one on the right perplexed him for a long moment. Then it came to him. About four years ago he had been at work when the phone had rung. It was his brother asking him for a loan. It had been for a few hundred dollars, an amount he could afford, but he and his brother hadn't been on good terms for years and he had hung up the phone on him. He hadn't heard from his brother since.

"How do you know about all this?" David asked, not looking up.

"That is none of your concern," Leonard answered icily.

David looked up...and wished he hadn't. There was something about the man sitting across from him that made him believe the choices he was being offered weren't necessarily in his best interest. And yet he couldn't help but look back at the papers in front of him.

"Take the two you do not want and place them back in the folder," Leonard said, his voice almost friendly.

"And then what?" David asked, looking up again. "Then what happens?"

"Your life changes. Or not."

"Do I get any hints?" David asked after a minute. "Can you tell me what happens after I choose?"

"Your life goes on," Leonard answered, his voice again turning to ice.

"And if I don't choose one of these?"

"That in itself is a choice."

David looked at the sheets of paper. He picked up the blank one and slid that into the folder. He hesitated only a few seconds more before he picked up the middle one and placed that in the folder as well.

"That one," he said, pointing to the one where his brother called. "I choose that one."

Leonard nodded. David was about to ask how it all happened when he disappeared from the conference room. Leonard picked up the folder and stood up. As the door to the conference room slid open, instead of the guard, there stood Makesha.

"I know what you're doing," she said, her tone almost angry. "That is not our purpose, Leonard."

"You don't know what I'm doing," he answered back evenly.

"I'm fairly certain I do."

"Supposing you do, is there anything wrong in it?"

"Right and wrong are subjective."

"Then why are you opposing me?"

"I'm warning you, Leonard. The penalty for violating our purpose isn't pretty."

Leonard looked at her defiantly. She folded her arms and glared back. She stood about an inch taller than he did in her bare feet, but with the two-inch heels and her hair down in its loose curls she seemed much taller than that. Her light brown eyes, which at times could be incredibly warm, were almost flinty. Leonard let out a long sigh.

"Trust me, Makesha," he said softly, almost begging. "Trust me."

Connie's Choice

She sat on the street corner, her creased and faded cardboard sign on the ground in front of her. She'd been standing all day, walking back and forth among the cars as they stopped at the light. Most drivers pretended she wasn't there at all, looking straight ahead or occupying themselves with their smartphones until the light turned green.

From time to time one would roll down a window as they passed. Some gave her a dollar or two, some just spare change. She was tired now. And hungry. Always hungry. And cold. The jeans she wore were thin, too thin, and the rips in them weren't fashion statements. Her shirt had short sleeves. The bundle of cast-off jackets she wore kept her from freezing in the hour before sunset, but they were covered in fleas, mites, and other small vermin that crawled over her while she slept. For not the first time she considered running in front of a car.

She never saw the man until he was standing in front of her. He was wearing dark blue slacks, a matching suit jacket, and a pale blue shirt. In his right hand was a black briefcase with shiny combination locks. Nothing about him really stood out. He was a good height but not too tall, a bit on the skinny side, and while his face wasn't unattractive, he wasn't noticeably handsome under his neatly combed hair. Only his eyes stood out. They were a shade of blue she'd never seen before. They were so intense that her first instinct to ask him for spare change was snuffed out before she could voice it.

"Constance Wilson," the man said softly.

It wasn't a question.

"Yes," she answered anyway.

He looked at her for a long moment in complete silence. She felt like he was sizing her up, trying to see something in her. She had never considered herself a beauty, but there had been a time she'd been called pretty. It was hard to see that now. The few times she'd seen herself in a mirror or puddle she hadn't recognized the face looking back at her. The hair was short, scraggly, and full of tangles. The face was hardened and weather-beaten. Her skin was dry on the best of days. Her stomach had grown too much. The food she was forced to eat was not healthy, and it showed. Sometimes she thought of herself as a hot air balloon on stilts with a head. And yet, for that moment, she could almost believe that this strange man was seeing her as she once was.

"I will offer you two choices this day," he said at last, and there was a tone in his voice that was almost sad. "The first is to come with me. Or not."

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