A TIME TO DIE

By Ryan J. Bruner

He retreats into the shadow of an alleyway, distorted reflections of street lamps on the wet pavement, the sweet scent of fresh rain cleansing his mind. He washes the blood from his hands in a puddle as another Model A sputters past.

The adrenaline rush subsides, and he is calm. In an hour, he will return home, his almost insatiable desire quenched enough to continue with his other life—a life in another time.

His stomach gurgles. Tommy pulls a wallet from his victim's overcoat and thumbs through the bills. Not much, but enough to cover dinner. Stuffing the money into his pants pocket, he tosses the empty billfold onto the lump tucked into a corner. Tommy knows the body won't be discovered until morning. With one last inspection of his hands, he steps onto the sidewalk, sloshing his way to the diner across the brick roadway.

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"You look like hell, Tom."

Garrett Franklin stood just inside the doorway to Tom's office holding a stack of folders. Tom flashed him a half-smile, then sipped his coffee.

"Give this stuff a few minutes," he said, raising his cup, "and I'll be okay."

"A few more unsolved cases for you, here. One of these goes way back. 1880's, I think it was."

"Add 'em to the pile."

Garrett plopped the folders onto the corner of Tom's desk."Oh, and it seems someone took machine six for a joy-ride again."

"Terrific. What is that? The third time this month?" Tom tried to keep calm. As he flipped through the paperwork, he shook his head. "This will put me behind schedule."

"Hey, you're the one who wanted the position." Garrett nodded at the office door with the words stenciled onto the glass. *Tom Wells, Time Historian, Unsolved Division.* "Anyhow, that's not all. Hank wants to put a time lock on all of the machines starting tonight. He suspects it's an inside job."

Tom sighed. "I guess I'll need another mocha latte, then."

Once Garrett shut the door, Tom read each file.

John Doe found stabbed to death.

Man killed. No suspects.

Football hopeful murdered.

Time locks would complicate things. He would have to be more careful. Plan ahead. Cover his tracks. Tom took in a deep breath and held it for several seconds before blowing it out

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again, but the soothing technique didn't help. He had to stop this. He had to get control over himself. This time he could handle it—the temptation. But then he re-read the headlines, and then read them again. Maybe just once more. Yes. Once more, and then he would quit.

* * *

Tommy stares at his knife blade, a quarter moon reflecting back. His hands shake, his heart pulsing loudly in his ears. Dust stings his eyes. Music peals from the piano in the saloon, mingling with raucous laughter. Horses whicker, tied up next to a watering trough. A steady wind blows the stench of drunken men to his hiding place. A man staggers out through the swinging doors, heading for the outhouse.

Tommy slides the blade out from its sheath and waits for the outhouse door to slam closed. He emerges from the brush behind the bleached wooden shack. Wrinkling his nose, he pulls a handkerchief over his face. The stink of sewage forces him to breathe through his mouth, but it does little to help. The man inside grunts and sighs, the sound of chewing tobacco splattering into a pot. Tommy yanks open the door and stares at the scraggy, filthy face.

"What'n hell?" the man says, sitting with his pants down around his ankles.

A sudden surge of excitement flutters in Tommy's gut and he grins. The man reaches for something. A gun, perhaps. Or maybe just his pants. But he takes too long. Tommy flashes the knife, slashing at the man's throat to cut short any cry for help.Blood erupts from the man's neck, so thick that Tommy can almost taste it. Over and over he rams the blade through the man's chest, into his heart, his lungs, red spreading through the man's shirt and dripping down through the hole in the board. Tommy inhales the intoxicating scent of blood, his body shivering with

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excitement. He closes his eyes, calming pleasure descending from his head to his feet like those moments following an orgasm. The man is dead.

* * *

Tom checked off another box on his clipboard. “Machine three set and ready in three, two, one.”

A huge tangle of wires and electronics dangled between the beams of a steel cage. The machine shimmered briefly, then vanished. Still four more machines left to time lock. He wiggled a cable into the control port of machine four and pecked at the keyboard. Sixteen hours —when the new shift of time historians came in.

Garrett downloaded the logs from machine five for the daily audit. Any unauthorized time-travel would show up. Tom eyed Garrett as he worked.

“This one's clean,” Garrett shouted across the warehouse. Partitioned into eight sections, the room housed a machine in seven of the sections, glassed-in offices taking up the eighth. The rest of the staff had gone for the day.

Tom typed in the sixteen-hour time offset, yanked out the cord, then stepped back. The red digits of a clock counted down to zero, then the machine vanished in the same understated shimmer.

“Hey, Gare,” Tom said. “You want me to finish up here?”

Garrett glanced at his watch, then gathered up his computer and moved to the next station. “Nah. Almost done. I don't mind.” He pushed the cable into machine six. Tom held his breath.

Time stood still until Garrett finally spoke. “Hmm. Weird.”

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Plugging into machine five, Tom avoided eye contact. “What's weird?”

“This log. It has an entry for two days ago, only it didn't show up on yesterday's audit.”

“That can't be right. You sure it isn't a glitch?”

“Probably. I'll have Hank check it out tomorrow. It may be a coding problem. But it’s getting late, so for now, we'll call it clean.”

As Garrett moved on to the last machine, Tom started his work on machine six. He set the time lock offset for negative twenty hours. Yesterday—exactly when Tommy needed it. Tom swallowed hard, hoping that Garrett didn't notice the change.

* * *

Tommy stares at the newspaper photo, then at the boy coming up the school steps. Electric shocks of pleasure ease through his head. Never one so young, he thinks. He is tempted to do it now, the urge so strong that he must turn his eyes away and force himself to calm down. Not yet.

“Football Hopeful Murdered” the headline reads, a picture of the boy kneeling on one knee, helmet under his arm. Tommy folds the paper and tucks it under his arm as the boy disappears around the corner. It’s late. He follows behind the boy at a safe distance, careful to keep the door to the locker room from slamming. Inside, he hears the running water of showers, voices echoing. The stagnant scent of musk hangs in the air.

Tommy hides in an equipment closet. Dripping faucets, more talking, lockers open and close. He risks peeking out.

“You're out late,” some jock says to the football hopeful.

“Yeah. Gonna work the weight room.”

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There are three, but two walk out with backpacks hoisted over their shoulders.

The smell of sweat and deodorant fills Tommy's nostrils as he steps out and peers around a row of lockers at the boy, now alone. He must be nineteen at best. A life cut short, Tommy thinks as he clutches at the knife's handle before spinning it slowly in his fist. The boy strips off his street shirt, then sits on the bench.

A door squeaks and thuds against the doorframe. Tommy pulls back, ducking behind a towel bin. Another man enters, taller and bulkier than the boy.

“You got the cash?”

“No,” the boy says. “Listen. I need a few more days. Just until—”

“If it were up to me, I might cut you a break. But you've been saying that now for weeks, and...well...” The man nods, dropping his backpack to the bench. He reaches in and pulls out a knife.

“What the—”

The blade plunges into the boy's abdomen, twists, and the boy collapses to the floor. The man drops the knife into the backpack and leaves.

Tommy feels his chest constricting. The man stole his prey.

* * *

“I thought you quit,” Garrett said to Tom on his way into the building.

Tom's hands twitched at the cigarette as he pulled it from his lips and blew smoke from his nose. “I thought so, too.”

Looking Tom in the eyes, Garrett pursed his lips. “You feeling okay?”

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“Yeah. I'm fine. Having trouble sleeping.” Tom tossed the butt onto the sidewalk and stomped on it.

“Hank couldn't find anything in the code.”

They strode side-by-side through the hallway. Tom didn't respond for several seconds. “No? Maybe there's a loose wire or something.”

“Hank doesn't seem to think so.”

Swallowing hard, Tom stared into Garrett's gaze. “What else could it be?”

“Don't know,” Garrett said with a shrug. “But it could be someone's found a way around the time lock.”

“That doesn't seem possible. You and I set the time locks ourselves.”

Garrett took in a deep breath. “You set the locks. I just check the logs.”

“What's that supposed to mean?”

“Listen. I know you well enough...but when Hank asked me about the time locks, I had to admit you've been handling that yourself.”

“That's crazy.”

“Just wanted you to know. In case Hank approaches you.”

“I think I need another smoke.”

* * *

Tommy checks his watch as machine six winks into existence. He steps into the machine, clamps down his feet, then pulls the straps over his shoulders. With a few punches at the keypad, he sets the countdown. Ten seconds.

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Machine seven appears. A door swings open. Tommy turns his head to see Garrett rush in, then everything flashes away. Forty years pass in an instant, and the past slams into view. Three hours. He just needs three hours. He sets the time lock. The machine shimmers away.

“Hello, Tom.”

Tommy turns around. Garrett stares at him through unwavering eyes, machine seven just beyond.

“How did you—”

“You lied to me, Tom. Right to my face.”

“No. Listen. You shouldn't be here. Not now.”

Garrett pulls his lips taut. “Why didn't you just say something? You know you could have access. You're a licensed time historian. I don't understand why you went to such lengths to keep this a secret.”

Tommy's eyeballs burn. “No one would understand. I’m not even sure I understand.”

“Try me.”

“Please, Garrett. Just go back.”

Garrett stands rooted to the ground. “It's a felony, Tom, unauthorized time jumps.”

“I know better than to try to change the past.”

“Then why are you here? Are you that intent on solving those cases that it can’t wait?”

The blade on Tommy's thigh tugs at his thoughts. It has been too many days, now—too long without the smell of blood. He inches his fingers along his pant leg until they rest on the leather handle. Please don't interfere, he pleads with Garrett in his mind, but Garrett doesn't listen. “I'm saving lives.”

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“Lives? Whose lives?”

The leather feels cool against Tommy's palm, but in the darkness, Garrett must not notice it. Tommy closes his eyes, forcing back the addiction that rises within him.

“The lives from our time, our present. But the past—that’s over and done with. They have no future.”

Garrett takes a step back, his eyes shrinking in confusion. “What are you saying? Who has no future?”

The blade slides from its sheath, though still hidden behind Tommy's leg. “The victims. They’re already dead. Just go, Garrett. Please. You shouldn't be here.”

“The unsolved murders. You know who did it, don't you? You know because—”

Tommy lunges toward Garrett, blade jutting out from his hand. Garrett dives to the right, the knife slicing his shoulder. He gasps, and the familiar acrid scent unleashes Tommy's fury. With a quick twist of his upper body, Tommy swings the blade at Garrett, narrowly missing his chest.

“Tom! No!”

But Tommy can't stop himself. He wants to. He wants to so much. He went to such great lengths to keep this from happening. He never wanted to hurt his friends. Another slice, and the blade’s tip rips into Garrett's forearm. Blood spurts, and Garrett falls to his knees clutching at the wound. His eyes plead with Tommy to stop. They beg for mercy, yet Tommy has none to offer. It isn't supposed to happen this way, Tommy thinks as he rams the blade downward, piercing Garrett's head, shattering through his skull, silencing his brain.

Garrett's body thuds to the ground.

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Tommy feverishly wipes the blood from his hands with his own shirt, then pulls out a newspaper clipping. No picture, small words. But now the final headline makes sense. “John Doe found stabbed to death.” John Doe. Garrett isn't even born yet.

* * *

Tom sat in machine six, blood soaked into his clothes, smeared over the controls. The other five machines were still time locked—except Garrett’s. Garrett’s would never return. At least not with Garrett.

The room felt cold and empty. It would be eleven more hours before the time historians showed up. Unbuckling himself from the machine, Tom stepped out, then dropped the bloody knife that still clung to his grip. At the keypad, he set eleven hours five minutes. Machine six disappeared. All he could do now was wait. What good would it do to run?

Tom didn't move for the next eleven hours. The death of his coworker—no…his friend—replayed in his mind over and over, images flashing as though from a distant dream, another life. Someone else’s life. There was little comfort, now, in knowing that his murders were committed in the past. The past affects the present. And the present would affect the future. His future.

The door to the building clunked open. A new shift. Machine six shimmered before Tom, fresh, unspoiled yet by death.

“What happened here?” Hank asked, staring at Tom’s bloody clothes. “Where's Garrett?”

“I tried to stop myself, but I couldn't.” Tom didn’t look at Hank. He wouldn’t let tears soften the hardness in his soul. Not now. It was too late. He punched in negative twelve hours and watched machine six disappear. Now the events were complete. Machine six would be there for him when...he needed to kill. “I can't control it.”

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Hank motioned to some of the others to call for help. But Tom was beyond that now. “Okay, Tom. It's okay. Just tell me what you can't control.”

“Myself. I tried to find a way. I tried. I thought I could, but…”

Slowly, Tom moved into the void where machine six had been.

“Listen to me, Tom.”

“They say your past catches up to you. But they’re wrong. It’s the present that catches up to you. You can’t avoid it. It's over, Hank. I'm sorry. It's time.”

A light flashed, the red timer above Tom counted down. Five. Four. Three.

“No! Tom, wait!”

Two. One. Tom's body merged with the cables and steel and electronics as the machine blinked back into existence. Time to die.

THE END

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