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# **CHANGE IS DEADLY**

ERIK LARSON

## **Part One: Ants**

Alex sat in his office chair, staring out the window chain-smoking cigarettes. After the first two his throat and lungs felt raw, each drag worsened the feeling. But, on some level, he found comfort in the discomfort. At least he felt something, anything. None of these thoughts had reached his conscious mind though. The sight of all the little ants scurrying across the pavement hundreds of feet below held his attention. He watched as little toy cars drove by, sometimes stopping to let someone in or out. He watched as all the little people gathered on corners waiting for the lights to change and thought about how pathetic they all were, every single one of them. A horde of myopic sheep just waiting to be brought to his proverbial slaughterhouse, where, instead of taking the meat off their bones, he would take their money, their homes, anything really, as long as he could make some money off of it. *It serves them right for being too stupid to protect themselves*, he thought as a self-satisfied smile spread across his face.

He wasn't even sure why he still came into work every day, there was nothing for him to do, he had his own little ants to do his work for him these days, which meant he could have just as easily stayed home and watched the numbers in his bank account steadily go up. But something didn't feel right about that. He had spent years working twelve-hour days, seven days a week in this building to get to where he was, and the result was that the office felt more like a home than his house did.

He thought fleetingly about looking over the small pile of lawsuits he always seemed to have

against him, then dismissed the idea. He knew the laws, he hadn't technically broken any of them and his team of lawyers had never failed to defend him against the army of sheep that seemed to constantly be vying for reparations from the wolf. Considering he had nothing else to do, he decided to have a cup of coffee and a bagel to wash down the seven, no eight cigarettes he had smoked in a row, a new record.

As he made his way out of his office, his secretary stopped him. He felt a pang of annoyance; *maybe it's time to replace this one.*

"Sir, your mother left a message. She wants you to call her back."

"What? Why didn't you tell me sooner?"

"But, sir, you told me not to disturb you," the last bit came out as a whimper. She knew not to contradict him.

Alex stared at her, *I do need a new one, this one is getting too old anyways. Maybe I'll get a brunette next.*

A minute later Alex was back in his office dialing his phone, it rang twice before she answered. "Hello," the statement almost sounded like a question, despite himself, the sound of her voice brought a small smile to his face.

"Hello, mother"

"Ah, Alex, I was hoping you would call earlier."

"I would have, if my secretary wasn't completely incompetent."

"Oh, don't be so hard on her, I really liked her when I came to visit, what was her name again?"

"Claire, I think, I don't know. Why does it matter? What do you need mother?"

"I just wanted to see how you're doing, you know you never call." *One of these calls. Great.*

"I know, I'm sorry, I'm just so busy with the bank and everything."

"Of course, but is that any excuse to not call your mother?"

Alex paused for a second, he wanted to say yes, "No, you're right, it's not." *How does she do that?*

"Good, now that we've got that out of the way, how are you?"

"Fine, busy"

The next twenty minutes were agonizing, it *had* been a long time since they last talked. Alex was grilled on just about every aspect of his life he could think of. Who he was seeing (no one), how his friends were (not that he had any), if he was eating right (he wasn't), when he would visit next (expertly evaded) and if he had taken her advice and gotten a dog (he got a fish).

Finally, as the call came to an end, she slipped in an, “I love you.”

Alex blushed, “I love you too mom.”

After she had hung up Alex spent a few seconds looking at his phone, reveling in the warm feeling the sentiment gave him. Then the feeling was over, *time to get back to the real world.*

Making his way out of his office he again barked orders at his secretary, *Claire?* To hold his calls. This time she just nodded as he passed. The building he worked in had no executive elevator, and he worked on the top floor, so he was forced into a cramped space full of other people and had to endure a full five minutes of agonizing torture with these people. Just being around them ruined the happy mood he had been developing. He stared at a paunchy, middle-aged man wearing a shabby, light grey suit. It didn't even look like it had been tailored right. *What type of person with any self-respect would wear that in public? And what is that smell? Honestly, do these people even bathe?* After a torturous five minutes, the elevator finally reached the ground floor and Alex rushed out of the building trying to hold his breath until he reached the door. Exiting the building he gulped in air laden with the smell of exhaust; *at least it's better than the stink of those people.*

The walk to his favorite coffee shop was just a few blocks, the entire affair usually took about twenty minutes, but today seemed to be his lucky day. He hit all the lights at the right time and made it to the shop in only a few minutes. To top it off, there was no line. At the register he ordered the same fifteen-dollar latte he always ordered and a plain bagel with cream cheese. When they called his name, again in almost record time, Alex grabbed the bag and his cup and left the shop with a spring in his step thinking that today might actually be a good day. His happy mood lessened when the first light he came to changed just before he could reach it, he became increasingly annoyed when a pile of rags out of the corner of his eye moved.

It was a homeless person, sitting up against a building and looking even more pathetic than everyone else around them. To compound this, they actually started speaking to him.

“Spare some change, sir?” the pile of rags asked in rough, gravelly tones.

Alex's annoyance turned to anger in a flash. The audacity, this man, or woman (he hadn't cared to look long enough to figure that out), dared ask for free money as they sat wasting their lives where everyone could see. But he checked himself, *it's just an ant, just ignore it.*

Then the person got up and approached him, “Please sir, I don't mean to bother you, but I'm so hungry. I haven't eaten since yesterday.”

Alex's patience snapped, he spun on his heel to face the person, “Then get a fucking job you worthless little shit!” he spat in the face that he soon realized belonged to a woman.

He was taken aback, he hadn't expected the person to be so young and innocent looking. For a moment he felt a pang of guilt in his gut, then the moment passed, *it's still no excuse*. Then, maybe because he desperately wanted to get away from this person, maybe because something deep inside of him actually felt bad for what he had just said, he backed into the street away from her. There was a loud blaring noise and a drawn out screech, before he could even turn to face it, something smacked into him, hard. He felt bones crunch and pain surge through every inch of his body.

Alex was thrown almost twenty feet into the intersection, he felt blood well up in his mouth and his vision blurred. The last thing that he saw was the face of the homeless woman crouching over him with tears in her eyes. For a moment he wondered if she was crying because she had just seen him hit by a car, or because of what he had said to her. He tried to say something, but all that came out was a slight gasp and a dribble of blood. He was dying. He could feel his life flowing out of him as the puddle of blood around him grew and he felt it soaking into his suit, then his vision faded to black as he lost consciousness.

## Part Two: Awakening

*Where am I?* He couldn't see anything, not even his own hand when he waved it in front of his face, or, at least he thought he was waving his hand, the sensation felt strange, oddly detached. It felt like he was floating in emptiness. He couldn't remember how he had gotten here, or which way was up or down. Then, slowly, he began to feel like he was falling. With each passing second he felt like he was falling faster. He couldn't see, but he knew he couldn't fall forever. *I'll hit the ground soon and then this can all be over*. The thought was strangely comforting to him.

Just as he thought he was going to land Alex's eyes snapped open, the world was still nothing but darkness, but the feeling of detachment had ended. He took a gasping breath as he quickly sat up and immediately smacked his head on something metal. Easing back down, he cradled his forehead for a few seconds before realizing that he still had no idea where he was. *At least I'm lying on something solid now*. Then he thought about the last thing that he remembered. He ran his hands over his body, everything seemed to be intact and he didn't even feel sore. *That doesn't seem right, maybe I dreamed the crash*.

Reaching out he felt the metal barrier he had smacked his head on. By feeling around as best he could he realized that he was in a metal box of some sort.

"What the fuck?" he said aloud, the words echoed strangely in the box.

There was an immediate response from outside. Someone let out a scream that hurt Alex's ears, even through the barrier. Then he heard quick footsteps and the sound of a door being thrown open so hard it smashed against the wall beside it.

"Hello?" Alex said. There was no reply this time. *Great.*

Without knowing what to do next, Alex tried to feel around for a way to get out. There seemed to just be smooth metal on all sides and no latch or release to let him out. He spent several minutes trying to maneuver inside the box to check the other end, but he ended up just contorting himself into a very uncomfortable position that he couldn't get out of. *Shit.* Then just as he was about to give up and try calling out for help, he heard a door opening again. This time much more slowly, almost cautiously.

"Is someone alive in there?" a gruff, anxious voice called from outside.

"What the fuck type of question is that? Of course I'm alive, let me out."

There were a few seconds of silence, then two sets of footsteps approached. The box he was in seemed to slide directly backwards. Bright, fluorescent light stung his eyes for a few seconds before two people came into focus. One of them was a small balding man in a white coat. The other was a large, fat man, wearing a police uniform. The policeman was pointing a gun at him, both men stared dumbfounded at Alex as if they had never seen anything like him. It was about this time Alex noticed he was completely naked.

"What? You two never seen another guy's dick before? And what the hell did you do with my clothes? And where am I?"

The men looked at one another, it was clear they were just as confused as Alex. Finally, the small man in the white coat said, "Your clothes are gone. They were ripped and soaked in blood."

Alex paused, "So that wasn't a dream. Why am I not at a hospital? And who the fuck are you two clowns? And would you put down the gun?" The last question was aimed at the fat policeman, who hesitated, then lowered his gun.

"I'm Dr. Feldman, this is Officer Hansen. You aren't at a hospital because there was no point in taking you there. The paramedics declared you dead when they arrived."

"Then someone should be fired. Do I look dead to you?"

"You certainly did when you arrived. I did the examination myself. You had broken most of your ribs and most of your internal organs had ruptured."

Several seconds of silence followed as Alex and the doctor stared at each other.

"So you're saying I was actually dead?"

“Yes, for several hours actually, it’s past midnight.”

The three of them spent the next few seconds in complete silence as they tried to come to terms with what had happened. Then, Officer Hansen, in a surprisingly soft tone said, “So, who wants some coffee?” Both Alex and the doctor gaped at him.

Twenty minutes later, still swishing the cheap vending machine coffee to get the taste of blood out, Alex was standing in front of the mirror in the morgue bathroom surveying his features. Dried blood was still smeared across his face and torso, but underneath that he seemed perfectly fine. In the privacy of the bathroom Alex had been able to go over himself thoroughly, he didn’t have one scratch on him. In fact, he felt better than he had in years. After scrubbing himself as best he could with the water from the sink he put on the clothes Officer Hansen had found for him. None of them fit right and the denim jeans with the Grateful Dead tee shirt did not suit him at all. *I wonder where he found the clothes*, he thought, then decided it was probably best he didn’t know.

When he exited the bathroom he found both Officer Hansen and Dr. Feldman waiting for him in the hallway. “We think it might be best if this stays between us,” said Dr. Feldman.

“What about the legality of bringing me back from the dead?”

“I hadn’t filed a death certificate yet, so that’s not an issue at least. And, honestly, why would we tell anyone? Who would believe us? I could lose my license for even suggesting something like this.”

“So, what? I’m just supposed to go home and get on with my life?”

“Well, yeah, I guess, but you might want to go to a church or two and thank whoever gave you a second chance. I know I’m going back after tonight.”

Alex wasn’t sure how to answer that. He was still coming to terms with the fact that he had died. He hadn’t even given a thought to how he came back.

“Whoever it was, I doubt they were doing me any favors. I haven’t exactly been the most generous person,” he replied after a few seconds. His own answer surprised him, he hadn’t planned on saying the last part.

“Well, you’re right about that.” It was only the second time Officer Hansen had spoken. Again he was surprised at how soft his voice was.

It took a few seconds for what Officer Hansen had said to sink in. “You know who I am then?”

“It’s hard not to know who you are, it was your signature on the foreclosure notice my wife and I got three months ago.”

### Part Three: Penance

The revelation that his bank had taken Officer Hansen's home away, made his offer of a ride home a surprising one. Alex accepted the offer, but he found it difficult to look at the man. He had never really felt guilty about the things he had done before dying, in fact he often felt proud about them. There was always the sense that what he was doing was only natural. *The strong overcoming the weak, wasn't that what natural selection was all about?* But this time was different. He couldn't feel proud about stripping this man and his family of their home.

After he had told Officer Hansen his address they both sat in silence for a few minutes as they drove towards his home. Then Officer Hansen took out a pack of cigarettes and a lighter.

Alex hadn't had a smoke in hours, "Can I have one of those?"

Officer Hansen gave him a sidelong look before silently passing him the pack, "Thanks."

He lit the end and took a drag. The smoke made his lungs feel on fire and he instantly went into a coughing fit like he hadn't had in years. When it subsided Alex stared at the cigarette he was holding. *What the hell?* He took a second drag, again the experience was awful.

"Why ask for one if you don't smoke? Seems like a waste to me."

"I do, well, I guess I did, this is awful," he said as he put it out in the ash tray in the center console.

"I guess my cheap cigarettes just don't live up to your standards then."

"I'm sorry, that's not what I meant. It's just,"

"Don't worry about it."

What followed was several minutes of silence, finally, he couldn't take it anymore, "I'm sorry."

"I said don't worry about it, it's just a smoke."

"Not about that." He paused, "about your house."

Officer Hansen didn't answer.

The awkwardness between them felt palpable. To try and ignore it, Alex tried to think about something else. He was just beginning to reflect on what he had gone through when he got a powerful feeling of unease. He tried to put it aside, he was sure it had something to do with the horrible car ride. But the feeling became more and more present until he was shifting nervously in his seat. When they stopped at a red light, the feeling became so overwhelming that he jumped out of the car.

“What the hell are you doing?” Officer Hansen yelled through the open passenger door.

“I don’t know, I just-” he stopped. He had noticed someone on the opposite side of the intersection walking into the street. Alex could feel it, the uneasy feeling he was getting was radiating from this person. It wasn’t just that either, after noticing them it was as if they began to glow with a deep red light. The longer Alex stared at them, the more uncomfortable he became and the brighter the red light glowed. Without knowing why, Alex began to run towards them. As he neared the person, he noticed a car speeding towards them that showed no signs of slowing down. There was no hesitation, Alex suddenly knew what he was supposed to do. Breaking into an all-out sprint he closed the remaining distance between them and ran headlong into the person, picking them up along the way. His momentum carried them several feet before he lost his footing and they both hit the asphalt hard. Just as they were falling, the car sped by, blaring their horn not even slowing down.

Alex laid flat on the ground for a few seconds. *What the hell did I just do?* His head was throbbing from hitting the street and he felt a warm sensation spreading across his forehead, but he felt a sense of accomplishment nonetheless. Despite the pain in his head he had never felt so good.

He heard footsteps coming from behind him. “Are you insane?” It was Officer Hansen.

“Maybe, how’s the other guy?”

“I’m fine!” came a slurred voice to his side. Both Alex and the other person stood up. He stumbled a little and caught Alex’s shirt.

“Hey thanks, guy, I didn’t even see that car.”

“Don’t mention it.”

“No, I want to thank you, let me buy you a drink.”

“Seriously, don’t mention it. I’ve had a weird enough day already.”

It took several minutes to get the drunk man to leave him alone. He had to have turned down at least six offers for a drink before the man would leave. Finally, after thanking Alex for what must have been the hundredth time in just a few minutes, the man wandered off and left Alex alone with Officer Hansen.

“What the hell was that? I thought you were going crazy when you jumped out of the car. Then you just started running, I thought you were going to attack that guy.”

“I honestly couldn’t tell you. I couldn’t help myself.”

They both stood in silence for a few seconds, not sure what else to say about what had just happened. Then, as if they had agreed to it, both of them walked back to the car. Silently, Officer

Hansen opened the glove box, grabbed a few napkins and handed them to Alex.

“You got some blood on your face.”

“Thanks.” Saying the word felt strange, it had been a long time since he had used it, but using it felt nice in a strange sort of way.

Officer Hansen started driving again and then said, “You know, I’ve never seen anyone run like that before. You could be the next Usain Bolt with your speed.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever run like that before.”

They both sat silently as they neared Alex’s home, each of them pondering the meaning of the events that night. But as they pulled up his driveway, Alex felt that he couldn’t leave without saying something else.

“Officer, stop by my office when you get a chance in the next few days. It’s on the top floor of the bank. I want to talk to you about getting your house back. ” Officer Hansen’s eyes lit up when he said this, but his reply was only a silent nod.

Alex got out of the car and began walking inside as Officer Hansen backed out of the driveway. Then he stopped and turned around to watch him drive away. Alex knew he had been sent back for a reason. It was time to start making up for the wrongs he had done before and he knew exactly where to start. *That girl is going to be horrified when she sees the man she watched die walking towards her.* The first *real* smile in years spread across his face. *This is going to be fun.*