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A GHOST OF A CHANCE

WRITTEN BY JAKE BARTON

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ISBN 978-1-942109-66-2

Hello. Can you hear me? I know there are quite a few of you here today, but it's important for me to be heard. I have something to say, and I need you to listen. It's important. So listen—even if it's just one of you.

Are you still listening?

Are *any* of you still listening?

My name and age and address aren't important. All of that information will be known, if you're listening. This really isn't about me anymore. It's about him. And I'm sorry, but I don't know his real name. He told me his name was Monty, but now I'm not so sure he was telling the truth. I need you to tell the authorities about him. So, *please*, pay attention.

I moved here about five months ago. My parents were borderline schizophrenics and were known to be physically abusive when not on their meds. I can't tell you how many times me or my older brother had to go to the hospital for broken bones or 'accidental' cuts. I've had a job of some sort or another since I was old enough to ride a bike, so I'm used to taking care of myself. When I realized things were never going to get better at home, I decided to leave—the farther away the better. My brother had left a few years ago. Once he left, I never heard from him again. The place where I work has franchises all over the country, so why not move so far away from home they'd never find me. I chose here. I didn't have any friends here. In fact, I didn't know a soul, but I never had trouble making friends at home. Several of my friends back home even began as acquaintances I met online. I'm not crazy. My parents might be, but I'm not. I've always made sure I chatted with my online friends for several months before I ever agreed to meet any of them. I think after that length of time, you can pretty much tell if there are any inconsistencies with what they've told you. I've actually ended up with two or three really good friends after originally meeting them online. If it worked at home, I figured it would work here, too. What can I say? I moved out here, started

working for the same company, got myself an efficiency apartment, and then started chatting in the local chat rooms.

Like I've said, I'm not 100% sure whether or not Monty is this guy's real name, but his screen name was Monty Python something or other. That's at least one part of the missing puzzle I need you to remember. Okay?

You know, computers will be the downfall of all us someday.

I'm so mad at myself right now. I wish I could remember Monty's full screen name, but you know how computers are these days. You start typing the first few letters of someone's screen name, and *bam*—there it is. I had probably chatted with Monty on the Internet easily over a hundred times. Keep in mind—this was a young adult chat room. The room was filled with mostly the late-teens/early-twenties crowd. No one really knew anyone's age. I guess it was just sort of assumed you fit the M.O. Listen to me. I sound like I'm on one of those *CSI* shows.

Monty and I never had extremely long chats, but they were always fun. From the beginning, I had told Monty I was new in town. He finally suggested it was time someone bought me dinner, welcoming me to the city. Monty seemed nice enough. He even suggested we meet at a coffee shop half-way between our apartments. Monty said that way, if either of us felt uncomfortable, we could just leave. I thought about it, and I decided he was probably just as nervous about meeting me as I was him—so why not enjoy some face-to-face company for a change. Besides, who was I to turn down a free meal?

We agreed to meet at this 24-hour coffee shop, and he had told me over the phone what he would be wearing. This is important, so please, pay attention. He was wearing a plaid shirt. It was predominantly a deep red, maybe even maroon. I remember the other color was a creamy-tan. It definitely wasn't white, unless it was just old or stained. He wore a dark t-shirt underneath his