

**FIVE DAYS**

A NOVEL

*Matt Micros*

For my parents.

Wishing they were still here  
and looking forward to a reunion someday so I can ask  
my mom why  
she owned so many vacuums.

And for Katy.

Who unquestionably made my parents  
more comfortable knowing they were leaving me in good  
hands.

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ISBN-10: 0692206841

ISBN-13: 978-0692206843

*Also by Matt Micros*

*~The Knights of Redemption~*

*~The Chameleon~*

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## **FIVE DAYS**

*“Is it a vision, or a waking dream? Fled is that  
music. Do I wake? Or Sleep?”*

**John Keats**

This book is a work of fiction.

No part of the contents relate to any real person or persons living or dead. No events depicted actually happened or are implied to have happened.

## I

*~the end of the beginning~*

The warmth and sun-drenched days of late summer, had been replaced by the cold, darkness of November, where the crisp chill served as a precursor to a winter that would long overstay its' welcome once the holidays had past. Students that were eager to learn something new and different back in August, had been replaced by unmotivated, and occasionally cruel creatures that were recognizable as human beings only by their DNA.

When the bell sounded, signaling the end of another particularly draining day, it was difficult to determine who was happier—the students, or the teachers. Mike Postman flipped the Algebra textbook he had been teaching from closed, waved as the students poured from the room, and sat at his desk, for the obligatory 20 minutes mandated by the teachers' contract.

Mike looked like he was in his early 30's, but was actually nearly 40, with the sort of generic good looks

that enabled him to pass as either the clean-cut boy next door, or a Hollywood character actor. He pulled into the driveway of his modest two-story cottage across the street from one of the oldest beaches in Southwestern Connecticut. On this day, he didn't even go inside, but instead, immediately crossed to where the multi-million dollar homes stood. It wasn't much of a stretch to say that his home could have passed as a guest house for any one of them.

Walking on the path that ran along the Connecticut shoreline, Mike bit down his lower lip, the way he frequently did anytime he was thinking. Autumn always had a certain smell to it, he thought; even back when he was a kid. Not a strong one, mind you, but rather a soft, subtle smell, not unlike the gentle scent of a woman's perfume as she walked past. The interesting thing was that autumn smelled differently depending on where you were. In Florence, Italy, autumn was damp and musty, clinging to your senses like a memory you would never forget. In Chicago, autumn smelled like burning leaves. In New York City, it smelled like roasted chestnuts and Italian sausage. And in Woodmont-on-the-Sound, Connecticut, the smell of autumn was crisp and clean, like a freshly laundered shirt.

Gone were the roller bladers and sunbathers of summer. Weather wise, this day was symbolic of his

mood; colder than it looked, with clouds battling the blue sky for prominence. As a profession, teaching was simultaneously rewarding and frustrating. On more than one occasion, he had thought about trying something different, but he didn't know what else he was suited to do. Besides, the highs of teaching were generally higher than anything else he could imagine doing. There was nothing quite like seeing the smile of a struggling teenager after you had managed to give them some measure of hope. And yet, for every time he felt as though he was making a difference, something would happen as if to not so gently remind him that just maybe he was wrong about that.

He heard the faint shout of a little boy as he came around the bend. Barely audible at first, he was so entrenched in thought, he didn't even notice it at first. But it grew louder with each successive shout, as a boy of about ten approached him frantically.

"Mister! Mister! My friend just fell in off the pier and he can't swim! I'm not good enough to pull him out! Please help!"

Mike didn't hesitate, throwing his jacket onto the ground and kicking off his shoes as he ran to the end of the pier and dove in headfirst. It was abundantly clear that he wasn't a strong swimmer himself, but after a few awkward strokes, he managed to reach the boy.

Holding him around his neck with his right hand gripping the boy's shirt collar, he dragged him along, struggling to keep himself above water in the process. With the other boy lying prone on the pier with an outstretched arm, Mike swung around and tried throwing the boy toward the arm. Once he saw that the boy's friend had grabbed him and helped lift him onto the pier, Mike relaxed, and then suddenly, and yet almost peacefully, plunged beneath the surface of the water. For the briefest of moments, he felt himself taking in water--through his nose, mouth, and ears. His eyes were burning from the salt water. His lungs felt as though they were about to explode. And then he felt *nothing* at all.

When he came to, he found himself lying amongst a bevy of soft, white, puffy, cumulus clouds. He staggered to his feet just in time to see a tram, not unlike one you might find at Disney World, approaching in the far off distance. It seemed to make up several miles in a few moments, before it eased to a stop directly in front of him.

"Let's go, Mike. Get on," the driver said impatiently.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"You'll know when you get there," was the response.

How did he know him? Where was he? And why

was he the youngest one on board by at least 25 years?

The tram tunneled through the clouds, emerging at the front gate of what appeared to be Caesar's Palace. Not the one from ancient Rome, but rather the one that had been modeled after it on the Las Vegas strip.

"This is your stop," the driver said, matter-of-factly, a nod of his head indicating he was supposed to get off.

When no one else moved toward the exit, Mike realized the man was talking to him, and he stepped off the tram.

"How did I end up in Vegas?" he asked no one in particular.

The response came from a voice behind him.

"You didn't," the voice said.

It was a deep, James Earl Jones-like voice.

"I didn't?"

"No. But we had to do something. We were getting too many complaints that our accommodations weren't as nice as those down below. His home looks like Graceland."

The man was African-American, wearing a white, flowing gown that was a cross between a priest's robe and a Roman toga.

"Elvis lives downstairs?" Mike asked in a perpetual state of disbelief and confusion.

"Of course not," the man laughed. "Elvis is a music

teacher in Wisconsin.”

Mike nodded as if this somehow made sense. “Then who’s down below?” he asked.

“Beelzebub. Satan. You probably know him more readily as the devil.”

“So if he’s downstairs, then that must mean I’m in—“

The man nodded. “Gabriel--at your service.”

“How did I end up here, Gabriel?”

“You died saving that little boy’s life. Or should I say—you *let* yourself die.”

“I don’t really recall that much about it,” Mike responded, “And I don’t mean that in a Bill Clintonesque sort of way.”

“Your memory will come back a little at a time as you need it,” Gabriel assured him.

Mike glanced around him and nodded at an elderly couple that walked past. They didn’t even acknowledge him.

“If this is heaven, Gabriel, how come no one’s very friendly?”

“Oh, they’re not going to be friendly to you, Mike.”

“Why not?” he asked, offended.

Gabriel stopped walking—took on a more serious tone now. “Because you took your own life, while most of these people has theirs taken away from them.”

He decided not to waste too much time thinking

about it. He simply had too many questions that needed to be answered.

“Then why am I here, if I’m such a bad guy?”

“Did I say you were a bad guy?”

“You implied as much.”

“Don’t read too much into things,” Gabriel answered, his tone much more cordial once again. “And you’re here because you’re visiting.”

“I’m visiting?”

Mike didn’t much care for the sound of that.

“Is this some sort of a tryout?” he followed up with.

Mike had always hated tryouts. It didn’t matter whether it was an athletic team, the school play, or a job interview. He wanted to be wanted. He didn’t want to have to convince someone he was good enough.

“Of course not.”

“So after I visit, then what?”

“Then you go back.”

“Then I go back,” Mike repeated.

“Do you always repeat everything people say to you?” Gabriel asked.

“Only when I think they’re full of—“

He stopped himself just short of finishing his sentence. He thought better of it, considering his surroundings, and also how tenuous his tenure there appeared to be.

“So I get to go back where?” he continued.

“To where you came from. To any year you like actually. You’ve been given a great gift, Mike. You’ve been given the opportunity to go back and relive any five days from your life of your own choosing.”

“And why exactly do I get to do that?”

“Have you ever wished you had the chance to do something over? To go back knowing then what you know now?”

“Of course. Doesn’t everyone?”

“Well, you have the opportunity to do that.”

“Does everyone get to go back?”

“Not everyone,” Gabriel answered cryptically.

“Then why me?”

“It will all be explained to you in time. But we really need to get going.”

With that, Gabriel smiled a knowing smile and held the casino door open for him to enter. Mike bit down on his lower lip as they walked past the cavalcade of high-end shops just inside the entrance, while the distant chiming of slot machines and occasional screams of joy echoed down the corridor.

“So, Gabriel,” Mike said with a wink, “do they have any ten dollar craps tables at this time of day?”

“We don’t use money to gamble up here.”

“Then what do you use? Cars? Clothes? Women?”

He winked again, and made a clicking sound with his tongue.

“People gamble for the thrill of beating the system,” he answered simply.

“Don’t you think it would add an additional thrill if a cool grand was riding on one toss of the dice?”

“It wouldn’t matter. People have no use for money here. Everything is already provided for them. Food, clothing, shelter, entertainment, transportation...”

“Sounds like a communist block nation. Well, if they don’t need money, what would be the incentive to work?”

“Most people don’t. Most people have worked their entire lives and are glad not to have to any longer.”

“But then how does anything get done?”

He rethought his question as soon as the words left his mouth. After all, it was heaven.

“Some people choose to work anyway.”

“Why would anyone *choose* to work?” Mike asked. It was a concept he had a difficult time wrapping his arms around. Most days, he had come home so exhausted both mentally and physically, that he wasn’t sure he would be able to do it again 12 hours later. Of course he always had, but if anyone had given him a choice, he would have gladly chosen to follow the Mets around the country instead.

“You yourself once said that if you won the lottery, you would still work, only without having to worry about money, you’d take a job where you really felt as though you could make a difference.”

“How do you know I said that?” Mike asked. It was true. He had said it. But he was trying to impress a girl at the time and thought it sounded better than drinking beer, following the Mets and playing Xbox.

“I know everything there is to know about you, Mike. Except for one thing.”

“And what’s that?”

“All in good time, my friend,” Gabriel said as they continued down the narrowing corridor.