

OUT OF TIME

A man in silhouette stands in a doorway, looking down. The scene is dramatically lit with a strong red glow from behind him, creating a silhouette effect. The background shows a hallway with a tiled floor and a door frame.

ROHAN ELLIOTT

The lock shattered as Detective James Emmerson kicked the door open. The rusted hinges broke and the door crashed to the floor. His trench coat flapped with the breeze as he stepped through the doorway, gun raised in front of him. He kept the gun steady as he looked around the room. Puddles of murky water covered the floor and the walls were damp and covered in clusters of blue-green mould. Chains hung from the ceiling and brushed against the top of Emmerson's head. Reaching the centre of the room, his foot splashed water up from a puddle and soaked his pants leg. He froze. Looking down, a section of the floor was lower than the rest of the floor.

'What the hell?' he said. As he cast around the room to see if anything had changed, he heard a soft whir like a blender just starting to warm up... *Shit!*

Emmerson dived to his left as a minigun hidden by the chains on the ceiling shredded the spot where he had been standing. The barrage only lasted seconds before the minigun fell silent. Emmerson rolled onto his back, gun aimed at the ceiling. His heart thundered in his chest as he waited for the minigun to whir to life again. The silence grew until speakers hidden amongst the chains burst to life with a short burst of static.

Ah, Detective. Here we are once again. If you've followed my instructions it will be just you and me. If you haven't... well, let's just say I'm long gone. I do hope you've come alone, Detective. You were always my favourite.

A hatch at the far end of the room creaked open. Emmerson made his way over and leant over the opening. He couldn't see the bottom, only endless darkness. The only way down was a rusted ladder welded to the inside of the hole.

Well, come on in. I've been busy all day setting up my little performance for you... I would very much like you to see it...

The voice trailed off, leaving Emmerson in silence. He hated everything about this. He had no plan, no idea of whatever was waiting for him down that hole. He had to play this sick game if he wanted to succeed where three detectives before him had failed. He took off his soaked trench coat and threw it behind him. His pants and shirt had also been soaked from the puddle he had landed in. He sighed. Dry-cleaning was going to cost him a fortune. He couldn't keep the grim smile off his face as he descended into the unknown.

Emmerson noticed the smell first. It had a sickly-sweet quality that assaulted his nose the moment he reached the ground. The room was bathed in a soft pink light from above, making the scene in front of him even more unsettling. Eight pairs of bodies lay together. Some were leaning against the wall holding hands, others were frozen forever in loving embraces. Each of them had hearts carved into their chests. Emmerson bent down and touched the nearest corpse, pulling back as his hand was coated in a sticky substance.

Honey. They were covered in honey.

'Well, that explains the smell.' He said to himself. They had been preserved, making it hard to tell how long they had been down here. Emmerson wiped his hand on his pants leg as the voice returned.

I hope you appreciate your surroundings, detective. This is the place where I can truly be myself. Life up there is exhausting. Every day you smile at people who don't care about you one way or another. Down here I get to live. Down here I get to be myself. Down here... I can express myself.

Emmerson knew exactly what he meant by expressing himself. The psycho had kidnapped and murdered couples on Valentine's Day for the past fourteen years. He'd evaded the combined effort of three separate detective agencies and federal agencies, taunting them all the while. Emmerson was the closest anyone had ever been to tracking the 'Cupid Killer' down. It had taken him years to find this little shop of horrors. He had lost years of his life tracking down leads, combing through piles of evidence and now it was almost over.

Emmerson started towards the door only to find his shoes were also stuck to the floor.

More honey, fucking great.

He struggled to the far end of the room and pulled open the heavy-set iron door. Stepping through the door, he felt his left foot catch on something. As he looked down he saw a thin wire coming loose from the wall. A small pin fell to the ground next to his foot.

Emmerson dove through the threshold, slamming the door behind him as the incendiary grenade on the other side of the door exploded. Using the door's porthole Emmerson watched as the honey around the room was ignited by the grenade. The flames engulfed the room, the lights giving the room a blood-red tinge.

Welcome to hell, Detective... We've been waiting for you.

'Guess I'm not going back that way' Emmerson muttered. He turned around stopped in his tracks. There were three more bodies here. Their fate was much worse than the ones behind him. They were hung upside down and their limbs had been hacked off and nailed to the wall. They hadn't been preserved like the others and were in various states of decay.

I didn't want to hurt them, Detective. I didn't want to hurt them, but they hurt me first. Once I had them down here, I knew they didn't mean those things they said, Detective. But that doesn't matter anymore.

Emmerson moved closer to the nearest corpse, studying his face. He knew who that was, or rather had been. It was Detective Winthrow, the third detective that disappeared while investigating the case. He looked at the other corpses. They were Detective Hansen and Farnell, other detectives that had disappeared and suffered a similar fate.

I am excited about our meeting, detective. I only ever wanted someone to know me. Those other detectives never understood me, didn't want to understand me. But you're different.

Someone screamed in the background.

I can't think of anyone who knows me as well as you do. We are drawn to each other, you and I.

Another scream came through the speakers.

I'm so glad I can share this with you, Detective.

Emmerson drew his gun and crashed through the door to the next room. It was empty. No bodies, no traps, nothing. The scream sounded once again, louder this time. As he ran to the next door, he could hear sounds of a struggle through the door. He slammed his shoulder against the door. The door wouldn't budge. He tried again, with no luck.

Fuck It.

He raised his gun and fired, blasting the lock to pieces and crashed through the door.

'Hands where I can see...' the sound died in his throat. The killer sat in the chair facing him, a tape recorder and microphone in his lap. A pistol lay at his feet. Emmerson knelt, examining the scene. He noticed two spent shell casings had rolled under the chair. As he stood up, Emmerson scrutinised a dark red stain on the ceiling above the killer's head.

Must have blown his brains out, he thought. That's one of the shells but what about the second one?

As Emmerson turned around, he realised who the second casing was for.

A woman's body lay a few feet away from him. The back of her head was split open as dried blood and brain matter was crusted in her hair. Emmerson rolled her onto her back and found himself looking down at his wife's pale face. Tears brimmed in his eyes as he held her in his arms. He began to weep and drew her close to his chest.

He only noticed it when he lay her back on the ground.

His wife had a note on her chest that simply stated '*play*'. Looking back at the tape recorder, he noticed the stop button was pushed in. He grabbed the tape recorder and pushed the play button. Without warning, metal shutters locked into position over the door and trapped him in. Emmerson ran to the shutters and began banging on them, shouting. He stopped as the recorder started up.

Hello again, detective. If you have found this, then you found my final two victims. Surprise! Your wife was a beautiful specimen. Please know I never wanted to hurt her, but you made me, you made me hurt you. Now it is just you and me, and we have all the time in the world together.

The tape recorder fell silent once more, leaving Emmerson staring at the gun at his feet.

THE END