

5

And then what happened?" Ma asked, tearing a piece of flesh off her signature well-done-but-really-almost-burnt-to-a-crisp burger and cracking it in her mouth.

Mr. Rawlings, Soraya, and Jason were over, likely wishing Ma had ordered out. As far as anyone was concerned, our home was their home, and in some ways, the family you choose can be stronger than the one you're given or, in my case, missing.

"Then the other guy, Rhett, walked in and slapped me on the back so hard he knocked the wind outta me. He sat down at the head of the table, and the white boy, Clyde, sat across from me. Rhett asked how much money I was makin'. I told him about \$9 an hour. Around \$19,000 a year. He looked at Clyde, then back at me, and asked how the hell I was survivin' in New York City.

"He ran his hand through his silky hair, like some movie star, you know, and said he wasn' a stranger to the woes of minimum wage. Then he told me they'd pay me \$40,000 a year with at least \$25,000 on top of that if I hit my goals."

"What? \$65,000 a year! You 'bout to be richer than that cracker kid in *Home Alone*, boy!" Mr. Rawlings shouted, banging his rosewood cane on the floor and spitting charred hamburger all over the table.

“That’s more than I make, baby,” Ma said, grabbing my hand with tears in her eyes. “And I’ve been workin’ at the Clorox Company for over two decades.”

I knew she was happy for me, but I can’t lie, something felt strange about making \$65,000 a year for sitting in a room and talking on the phone while Ma, a chemical process operator, stood on her feet all day breathing in God knows what.

“I’m proud of you, D,” Soraya said, rubbing my dick under the table. I spit bits of charred burger all over.

Ma brought out a cheap bottle of champagne and poured everyone a glass. “You want one, Dar?”

“No thanks, Ma.”

“Ah, c’mon, boy,” Mr. Rawlings pressed. “Nothin’ wrong with a li’l bubbly every once in a while. It’s not like you ’bout to go lose your damn head and gamble your life savin’s away.”

That’s oddly specific.

Everyone raised their glasses. I toasted with a cup of Mountain Dew. “To my baby, Dar,” Ma said. “Thank the Lord for puttin’ his hands on him and settin’ him on the path of success, like we all knew he was destined for. Cheers.”

“Cheers,” everyone echoed. Except Jason.

“So what is it you gon’ be doin’ anyway?” Mr. Rawlings asked, topping his glass off.

“Well, I don’ really know,” I said, realizing I still had no idea what Sumwun did.

Mr. Rawlings hit me with the stank eye. “You *don*’ know? How you gon’ be up in there making \$65,000 a year without knowin’, boy? Is this one of those Wall Street scams where we gon’ find you on TV one day, reporters sayin’ you played old folks for their pensions?”

The table shook with laughter. “Nah, I don’ think so, Mr. Rawlings. After I signed some papers, they said I was gonna get unlimited vacation, health benefits, one thousan’ stock options, and a 401(k),

though. There's also a gym, you can bring pets, and they play a lot of music. I'm sure I'll find out more on Monday."

"Things have changed," Ma said. "Back in my day, no one was gettin' unlimited vacation or had gyms inside of offices. I'm sure it's gonna be quite the place to work, Dar."

"Who the hell needs a gym in a damn office?" Mr. Rawlings asked, twisting his head around. "And animals runnin' all up in there like it's a damn farm? Sounds funny to me." He stuffed his face with potato chips, washing them down with more champagne.

"Aye," I said, turning to Jason. "You sorta quiet, bro. You good?"

He grabbed a second rock-hard patty and took a brave bite. "Yeah, bro. Jus' don' forget *those* people ain' *your* people. It's easy to get it twisted. Damn, Auntie, these burgers are type delicious."

"Eat as many as you like, baby," Ma said, as she walked into the living room. "And since we're all talkin' news, I got somethin' interesting in the mail today." She returned with an envelope.

NEXT CHANCE MANAGEMENT was typed on the front. "What's this?" I asked, removing the letter.

Ma smiled. "Read it."

Dear Mrs. Vender,

I hope this letter finds you well.

My name is Richard Lawson and I'm writing to you on behalf of Next Chance Management, a real estate firm specializing in high-value properties throughout New York City, including Bedford-Stuyvesant. We've worked with folks like yourself for years, helping them sell their properties in order to move somewhere more comfortable.

If you should ever want to discuss selling your property, especially in today's climate, where folks want to live in up-and-coming neighborhoods such as your own, please give me a call at 212.781.9258 or email me at r.lawson@nextchancemanagement.com.

To be frank, the market won't stay like this forever. As time goes on, your property taxes will rise, making remaining in the neighborhood more financially difficult than it has been to date. We're currently in conversations with a few of your neighbors, Mr. Jones, Mrs. Williams, and others, and would be happy to run you through some numbers.

Again, feel free to reach out at your earliest convenience, but we'll also be in touch should we not hear from you.

Sincerely,

Richard Lawson

Next Chance Management

"Frederick and Maisal are sellin' their houses?" Mr. Rawlings shouted. "Have they lost their goddamn minds?"

"Ma, you're not gonna reply to this, are you?"

"Of course not, Dar. But it's good to know we have options in case it ever comes to it."

My heart beat faster than when I was with Clyde. I couldn't imagine Ma selling the house; the house I grew up in; the house Pa repaired from top to bottom with his two hands. "If it ever comes to what?"

"I'm jus' sayin', if we ever needed the money, it's good to know we'd be able to get it."

I grabbed her hand harder than I wanted to. "Ma, we will *never* need to sell the house. With my new job, I promise that. Promise me you won't contact that man. Promise me."

She patted my hand. "I promise, Dar. There's nothin' to worry about. It was jus' a letter."

. . .

After dinner, Soraya and I made love, and I never felt like I needed it more. Her curly hair, the curves of her body, the way she touched

me, all of it. The day was more eventful than any other I'd had in years, and she seemed to sense this, doing all she could to help me release my tension and stress through loving her.

"I'm goin' back to school," she announced. She curled her fingers around mine like ivy.

"School?" I sat up. "You already did four years at Hunter. What do you want more school for?"

"To be a nurse, D. You know I've always wanted to be one."

"Then why'd you get a business degree? Sounds like a waste of money."

"Because I thought it'd be more practical, so I could help my dad with his shops. And now that that's goin' well, it's time to follow my own dreams."

I raised her chin and looked into her eyes to see what was going on beneath the surface. "Have you thought about her lately?"

She rested her head on my chest, hugging me tighter. "She would've been eighteen last week, D."

"You were nine, Soraya. You can't keep beatin' yourself up over that," I said.

When they were kids, Soraya's younger sister died from a horrible disease that ate her organs from the inside out. I remember Soraya being out of school for long stretches at a time back then, and when she was in school, she'd randomly burst into loud sobs that seemed to never end. Her ESL teacher would send her to the nurse, then the nurse would send her home. It was a pattern that went on for what felt like forever. Her mom, unable to process, moved to Harlem and started a new life, leaving Soraya and Mr. Aziz to fend for themselves.

Years later, Soraya told me that the only happy memories she had from that time were hanging out with Jason and me at the playground, playing pranks on Mr. Rawlings, or Ma giving her a hug and a snack.

"I know," she whispered. "I'm tryin'. But becomin' a nurse will help, I know it."

"So what's the plan? Am I gonna have to make you ramen, force you to take study breaks, and bring you jugs of black crack again for another four years? Because . . ." I paused and she looked up at me, upset. "Because you know I will," I said, smiling at her.

She laughed and ran her hand over my chest hair, which she claimed felt like grass. "Well, you'd only have to do it for eighteen months this time. I'd go to the accelerated program at NYU. Then I could get a job at Woodhull and still live at home with my dad, so he wouldn't get lonely."

I kissed the back of her hand. "Whatever makes you happy makes me happy, *habibti*. Same team, same dream, you know that."

She grabbed my raw dick, slowly rubbing it up and down, making me hard again. "You know I can't resist you when you speak your broken Arabic to me."

I winked. "Why you think I'm speakin' it?"

"Jus' promise me one thing," she said, flipping herself on top of me, inserting me inside her.

"What?"

I already knew my answer would be yes. It was hard to negotiate with a girl when you were inside her. I mean, Soraya was my one and only, but I imagined it was the same whenever anyone had sex.

"Don't change when you become a big shot, okay?"

I laughed, scrunching my face up. *What's she talking about? Me? Big shot?*

She leaned in closer, no longer smiling, as if one of us were about to disappear.

"Promise me."

I gripped her ass and filled my lungs with her sweet smell. "I'm not gonna become a big shot, Soraya. You have nothin' to worry about."

"Yes," she said. "You will. And if you don't promise me, we might as well break up right now."

“Damn. Okay. I promise. Happy?”

Reader: Believing that you can somehow prevent change is the surest way to fail. Whether in life or sales, nothing ever stays the same.

“We’ll see,” she said, as she thrust her hips into mine. Soon, I no longer knew where her body began and mine ended.

6

My alarm went off at 5:30 a.m. I slapped my clock, hopped out of bed, and jumped into the shower. It was Monday, my first day of work. And I couldn't be late.

Before leaving the office on Friday, Clyde told me that I had to be in at 7 a.m. *sharp*. "Is it cool if I'm a minute or two late?" I asked, hedging the fact that I couldn't control subway delays or Greenpeace workers who just wanted "one minute" of my time.

"Of course, no problem," he'd replied. Given how intense the place was, I was relieved they weren't *too* militant.

I walked into the empty kitchen, grabbing a banana and a bowl of cereal. It was only 6 a.m., but I wanted to arrive early and make a good impression. So I scarfed down my Cap'n Crunch like a rabid beast and tossed the empty bowl into the sink.

Ma walked in sporting her pink terry-cloth robe, tight multicolored head wrap, and white slippers, a finger scratching the top of her head.

"You're up early, Dar. Ready for your first day of work?"

"You know it, Ma. Can't be late."

She looked me up and down, and shook her head, laughing.

"What's so funny?"

She swept her hand in front of me. “You look like a Mormon, son.”

I looked at my white short-sleeved button-up with two pens in the front pocket, black slacks with a black belt, and black leather shoes to match. *Shit.*

“But it was you who bought me these clothes last year!” I said, panicking. I couldn’t go to that office looking like a Mormon. They’d laugh me out the moment I walked in, probably telling me that I showed up for the wrong sales job, that church would be in session at eleven.

“Go get one of your plaid button-ups, denim jeans, and throw some clean runnin’ shoes on,” she ordered, as she turned the coffee maker on.

“Ma, I don’t think that’d look right.”

“Dar, from what I’ve read, it’s better to dress casually at these startups. If you come in lookin’ stiff, they’ll think you’re uptight. Trust me.”

I thought back to my visit on Friday and remembered seeing people rocking everything from holey hoodies and sneakers to starched slacks and sweaters. She was right, so I changed as quickly as I could.

“Thanks, Ma.” I kissed her forehead.

“Dar?”

“Yeah, Ma?”

“I’m proud of you, son. And I’m happy you’ve finally found something that makes you want more outta life. You have so much to give, and now’s the chance to show the world. I know your father would be happy too.”

Pressure. That’s all I felt. Not happiness from making Ma happy. Not a rush of excitement about my first day. *What if it didn’t work out? What if I wasn’t who people thought I was? Who did people even think I was?*

“Thanks, Ma. I’ll do my best,” I said, running out of the house.

6:15 a.m. Forty-five minutes to make it. If everything went right, it

was doable. I jumped down the stairs, jogged down the street, turned right, and saw Mr. Aziz unlocking his store's roll-up gate.

"Morning, Darren! Soraya tells me you're starting a new job today," he said, as I ran past him.

"*Na'am*, Mr. Aziz! Running late!"

"Go get 'em!"

I saw the gargoyles on the corner and figured that even though I was late I could give them a minute total just to say what up. Jason gave me a quick nod before turning away.

"No dap?" I asked, moving closer.

He pulled his hood lower and pushed his hand out.

"You good?"

He nodded, but I got closer. Under his hoodie, his face was swollen, red and glossy like a cheap Halloween mask. I pulled his hood off, exposing a blown-up eye, puffy cheeks, and a split lip. "Yo, J, what happened, man?"

"Get the fuck off me, B!" he yelled, shoving the shit out of me.

I walked back toward him, my hands raised. "C'mon, Batman. It's me, bro. Talk to me."

"Ain' nothin'. Got robbed last night, so out here tryna make it back up for Malcolm."

"Damn, J. I didn' know you were messin' with Malcolm, man. Shit's dangerous."

He hocked a loogie. You could hear it hitting the concrete.

"Why you think I'm out here this early? Gotta push this weight."

"Weight? It used to jus' be bud. Yo, you gotta get outta this shit ASAP. It's only gonna end badly."

"Whatever. The less you know the better, son. And I don' need you out here tellin' me what to do like you're my daddy. Jus' 'cause you gotta new job don' mean shit."

"Aight, man. But what's your plan?"

"What's my plan? I'm out here tryna be a man and get my momma out the projects, nigga. Tha's the plan. Now please get the

fuck up out my face, drawin' all this attention so the jakes scoop me up."

Jason was my best friend, my brother, and we knew each other better than anyone else. But in that moment, it felt like we were worlds apart. He was the type of person to laugh instead of cry—he pierced tension like a needle. As I stared into his broken face, I knew there was an interior world he was hiding, even from me. And to keep it real, it hurt.

"Aight," I said, grabbing his shoulder. Wally Cat waved me over, but he'd have to wait. There was no chance I'd risk being late.

6:25 a.m. The train pulled up and I had thirty-five minutes left. *I can do this.* I hopped on, put my headphones in, and closed my eyes, listening to Nas's "Hate Me Now."

6:35 a.m. I caught the L right before it took off. My heart was working overtime. Everything was happening so fast. Meeting Rhett, the office, Clyde grilling me. *Stop thinking. The minute you slow down, you're gonna get whiplash.*

6:50 a.m. By the grace of God, the 6 train was sitting with its doors open. I jumped the stairs two by two, just making it. Sweat ran down my forehead, and I gripped the cold metal pole so hard, I thought I'd dent it.

"Hey, Darren." I turned around. It was Brian. Wearing his green apron on the train. *There's no hope for this guy.*

"Heard you're not working at Starbucks anymore?"

"Uh, yeah, man. Sorry I wasn't able to give you all a proper good-bye. Everything happened so quickly, and I ended up taking a job with that guy who came in the other day. Rhett Daniels."

"It's okay. I knew you were meant for bigger things. Don't get me wrong, you were the best boss we ever had, but you were sort of too smart to be a shift supervisor. That's like, I dunno, Professor X teaching elementary school."

He was staring at one of those shitty poems on the wall instead of me. I couldn't tell what he was feeling.

“I appreciate that, Brian. Working with everyone was fun, man. I’m gonna miss you all. Is Jared taking over my shifts?”

“Yeah, Nicole was crying when he told us, and Carlos was smiling, like he was proud of you or something. You’ll still stop by though, right?”

I looked down at my phone. 6:56 a.m. and we were at Twenty-Eighth Street. *One more stop. If I run, I’ll make it.*

“Of course,” I said. “Jared’s an asshole, so I’ll see you all around as much as—”

The train jerked to a stop, throwing bodies into one another.

A voice came over the intercom. “Apologies, ladies and gentlemen, but we are experiencing delays due to a sick passenger on the train ahead of us. We hope to be moving shortly.”

Sick on the train ahead of us? Fuck! What they actually mean is someone threw themselves on the tracks. Who would be so selfish to commit suicide on a Monday at 6:57 a.m. and make everyone else late? Kill yourself on your own time!

“Hopefully they didn’t throw up all over the place,” Brian said, still staring at the poem.

The train pulled into Thirty-Third Street at 7:01 a.m. I bolted up the stairs of 3 Park Avenue, through the revolving doors, and into an elevator right before it closed. I hit thirty-six, praying it wouldn’t stop on a lower floor.

As the elevator climbed, all I heard were cables pulling, stretching, and shaking. No music. No mayhem.

I jumped out and looked to the right, but saw no commotion beyond the frosted doors. When I looked left, my heart dropped. The conference room was packed, and everyone inside was staring at something.

Me.

• • •

I stood in the elevator bay without a clue what to do. There I was in the plaid button-up, denim jeans, and Saucony running shoes Ma had picked out for me. I took a breath and opened the doors.

The sharp-featured receptionist smirked and clicked her tongue. “Bad move, Buck.”

Why the hell is she calling me Buck? But I had no time for questions. I was shaking worse than Jack at the end of *Titanic*. And there would be no one to save me either.

I walked toward the heavy wooden door on the left. But before I opened it, Rhett shook his head, pointing to the other side of the room. I walked the length of the glass wall, everyone’s eyes still on me, and opened the other door.

Every single leather-backed chair around the mahogany table had an ass in it. Every inch of the marble counter below the flat-screen TV was occupied. Every heater in front of the windows had someone on it. Some people smiled, others covered their mouths in horror, and a few seemed to be praying for me. And, I shit you not, every single person was white.

I looked across the room at Rhett. Clyde sat next to him, beaming.

“Why are you late?” Rhett asked.

“This is going to be good,” one girl whispered to another.

“Um, the train. Someone got sick on the one in front of me.” I looked around the room to see if it was an acceptable answer.

He closed his eyes and nodded. “Ah. Got it. The train. No worries. Take a seat and we’ll begin.”

I wiped the sweat off my forehead and sat on the floor.

“Get the fuck up!” Rhett yelled, charging toward me.

I shot up and braced for impact. What I knew even then was that this office was not a normal office, that this company was not a normal company, and that these people were not normal people.

“Are you out of your fucking mind? We start at 7 a.m. sharp. Every single Monday of the year. Not thirty seconds late. Not one minute

late. And sure as hell not three minutes late. Where the fuck do you think you are? The first floor?"

My mouth went dry. I couldn't do anything except look at my feet.

"Look at me!" Rhett shouted, red in the face with a vein jumping around his forehead and threatening to explode into an aneurysm.

"If you are ever late to a Monday-morning meeting again, I mean point-two nanoseconds late, every single person in here, all fucking one hundred five of them, will have to do push-ups until their arms are so sore, they won't be able to pick up their phones. And you'll have to watch them until they collapse. And then, after that, I'm going to fire your ass. Understood?"

I nodded so hard that I almost snapped my neck.

"Now," he said, straightening out his shirt and walking back to his chair. "Everyone, this is one of our four new SDRs, Darren Vender."

"Buck," Clyde corrected, smug as hell.

"Why Buck?" a pasty white girl across the room asked.

"Because if he does his job, he'll make us each a million bucks," Clyde replied, winking at me.

"Right," Rhett said, nodding. "This is Buck. Are our other three SDRs here?"

Three people seated on the floor below me, two white guys and a tall blonde girl, raised their hands.

"You see?" Rhett said. "*They* made it on time. Did you three take the subway?"

They all nodded.

"*And* they took the subway! Just like you, Buck. Except they weren't late. You three, stand up and join Buck."

They stood and looked around the room—nervous sheep who'd just seen one of their own slaughtered.

"State your name and one fucking fun fact about you," Rhett commanded.

"I'm—" White Guy Number One's voice cracked, and the room roared with laughter.

“Did your balls just drop, kid?” Rhett asked. The room’s laughter shot up ten decibels, and he got red in the face and started clearing his throat over and over again like he’d swallowed a chicken bone. The laughter became louder and louder.

“Go on, speak,” Rhett said.

White Guy Number One’s shoulders folded, and he leaned over like he was going to puke. But instead of blowing grits all over the floor, he grabbed his bag, pushed me out of the way, and ran into the stairwell.

Rhett laughed. “That’s going to be a long walk down.”

White Guy Number Two, who’d just been promoted to White Guy Number One, puffed his chest out, and said, “I’m Arnold Bagini. I played D1 football at Notre Dame and came in third for two-hundred-twenty-five-pound reps at the NFL Scouting Combine.”

“Third place?” someone shouted. “You suck ass, bro!”

A blonde girl in front of us turned around, and said, “Bagini? Sounds like Bilbo Baggins from *The Lord of the Rings*!” Everyone erupted in laughter again, and someone yelled, “Frodo!” to which the whole room replied by chanting, “FRODO! FRODO! FRODO!”

But Arnold Bagini didn’t sweat. He just closed his eyes and nodded in different directions, like he was listening to music. Eventually, he opened his eyes, and shouted, “My name . . . is Frodo!” The whole room clapped in approval.

“Great, Frodo is here,” Rhett said. “Next.”

“Claire Vanderbilt,” the tall blonde girl sporting a white dress and brown leather belt said, straight-faced, with determination in her eyes. “I’m from Darien, Connecticut. And I’m a Vanderbilt.”

The room fell silent. Then someone shouted, “Dutchy!”

“No,” someone else said. “The Duchess!” Everyone nodded in agreement at Claire’s new name, and she nodded before taking a seat.

“And you, Buck,” Rhett said. “Your name is already Buck, so what’s your fun fact?”

After being screamed at, then witnessing what happened to the

original White Guy Number One, I tried to think of something good but couldn't.

"Um." Seconds stretched into eternity. Someone loudly knocked on the table. *Tap-tap. Tap-tap. Tap-tap. Fuck it.* "I can freestyle."

Everyone's eyes widened. Including Rhett's. "Well, go on," he said. "Give us a demonstration."

"Uh, I can't."

It's not that I couldn't, but I didn't want to start my career, especially as the only Black person in the room, as some wind-up monkey that would bang his cymbals whenever white people wanted him to.

Sensing my hesitation, they all flung a series of boos at me as if they were throwing rotten apples, peanuts, and other circus trash.

"It's the least you can do for being late," Clyde said.

"Yeah," a girl insisted. "C'mon, Buck."

"Buck, Buck, Buck," everyone whispered, raising the volume until they were screaming. "BUCK, BUCK, BUCK!"

Then I heard a *tap. Tap-tap-tap. Tap-tap.* Coming from the table. *Tap. Tap-tap-tap. Tap-tap.* All of them did it in unison.

My mouth went dry again. I couldn't breathe.

"He's going to choke like B-Rabbit in *8 Mile!*" someone shouted.

Fuck. There was no time to weigh the costs of being Flavor Flav versus the benefits of being Jesse Jackson. I'd already made a fool out of myself, and I couldn't let it happen again. Thank God I wasn't dressed like a Mormon. I took a breath and opened my mouth.

"Aight I'm really sorry, for doin' that thing you hate. I'm sayin' comin' in with excuses, jus' a li'l late. Got two hundred and ten eyes on me, and nah, it don't feel great, but it's sure better than that guy who ran out barfin' what he ate. It's true I may be new, but I promise I got potential. Words and verbs coalescing into proverbs comin' straight up at your mental. It's my first day, but if there's one thing I can say, it's that my man Frodo, the Duchess, and me are gon' kill it, like a turkey on Thanksgivin' Day."

Silence. All two hundred and ten eyes stared at me.

“Holy shit,” a girl said. “Buck can actually rap!”

The room thundered with applause, pale hands surrounding me for high fives.

Across the room, Rhett gave me a look that said, *There he is. There’s the guy I hired.*

Reader: If you are a Black man, the key to any white person’s heart is the ability to shuck, jive, or freestyle. But use it wisely and sparingly. Otherwise you’re liable to turn into Steve Harvey.

Rhett raised his hand and slowly curled it into a fist until a dense silence fell. I sat on the floor next to the Duchess, who scooted as far away from me as possible.

“What week is it?” Rhett asked.

“DEALS WEEK!” everyone shouted.

“That’s right. And for the uninitiated, can someone please explain what Deals Week is?”

A blonde girl raised her hand.

“Deals Week is the most important week of the month. It’s when every single member of the team is doing absolutely everything in their power to ensure we hit our MRR goal.”

“And what’s MRR?” Rhett asked.

“Oh,” she said, looking at us new hires. “Monthly recurring revenue. The amount of closed-won cash we assume will repeat every month after. It helps with the financial model and adjusting our CAC, which, of course, impacts the LTV of our customers.”

Everyone in the room nodded, as if she had delivered some prophecy. To me, it just sounded like she was speaking in tongues.

“Thank you, Tiffany. She’s right,” Rhett said, standing. “But she left out a few things. Can anyone tell the new folks why we have a Deals Week to begin with?”

The girl with orange-red hair, the one I’d seen yesterday with the piglet in her arms, stood. She had this far-off look in her eyes, like she was peering into another dimension. “Because it’s a crazy fun time?”

“It is that, Marissa,” Rhett said. “But that’s not *why* we have a Deals Week. Anyone else?”

A stocky kid with a full beard who was sweating through a plaid button-up raised his hand.

“Tell us why, Charlie,” Rhett said, walking the floor.

“Because we’ve achieved twenty-five percent month-over-month growth for the past eleven months, and if we don’t achieve our goals, our growth will suffer.”

“And what happens if our growth suffers?”

Charlie paused, surveying the room. “All this goes away. Everything we have, everything we are. We will no longer be the best.”

“Fuck that!” someone yelled.

“Yeah, fuck that!” another voice echoed.

Rhett stopped in front of me, my eyes level with the backs of his knees; his denim jeans were obviously tailor-made, his suede Chelsea boots unblemished.

“That’s exactly right, Charlie. Thank you. Now,” he said, rounding the back of the room, stepping over people, occasionally resting his hand on someone’s shoulder. “Are we going to let that happen?”

“Hell no,” a few responded.

“No? I thought I heard a few of you,” he said. “But I didn’t hear all of you. I said, Are we going to let that happen?”

“No!” more people shouted; some of them proceeded to beat their white hands on the table until they turned red.

“Not good enough. You call yourself Sumwunners? If you actually

mean what you say, I need to hear it. So again. Are. We. Going. To. Let. That. Happen?”

“NO!” the entire room screamed, banging on every surface they could get their hands on. Someone flung a Moleskine at the glass behind me. I ducked just in time.

“FUCK NO! FUCK NO! FUCK NO!” they chanted. You could see the fire in their faces, the madness mixing like cement behind their eyes.

Dozens of nonsales spectators formed a crowd outside the room, throwing their hands in the air, stomping their feet to a beat only they knew. These people, who I assumed were semi-intelligent and sane, were hooting and hollering like a pack of savages beating their chests as a herd of mastodons approached. I was waiting for them to take out whips branded with Sumwun’s logo for self-flagellation.

“We have Deals Week because being the best means that we *need*”—Rhett thrust his finger into the air—“to crush our goals every month. And I’ll let you in on a little secret, it’s not just selling. It’s not just putting numbers on the board, because if we do our jobs this week, we will make history. Yes, history.

“So let’s be clear about what we’re *not* doing. We’re not fucking selling shitty pieces of cardboard and calling it furniture. This isn’t IKEA! We’re not fucking selling greasy, heart-attack-inducing poop on a stick that kills billions of people every day. This isn’t McDonald’s! And we’re sure as hell not fucking selling overpriced, low-quality pieces of burlap sacks assembled in Bangladeshi sweatshops halfway around the world. This is not fucking American Eagle, Hollister, Aéropostale, or any of those lame-ass fucking brands that are making the world a worse place to exist in.

“We are Sumwun. And what Sumwun does is help people live better. Be better. Coexist better. We give people hope: the hope that tomorrow will be a brighter day, the hope that someone out there understands them, and the hope to continue living with purpose.

‘God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them.’ Hebrews 6:10. Now go stretch and let’s get this Deals Week fucking started. First person who closes a deal gets a thousand dollars. Cash.”

I thought the whole scene was extreme and straight out of *Any Given Sunday*, but I’d be lying if I said my heart wasn’t pounding. No way in hell had I bought into their madness, but the energy in the air crackled like static.

“Stretch time!” Clyde shouted.

We filed out of the room one by one. As I waited in line, I noticed that everyone wore the same straight face with hard eyes and clenched jaws. They didn’t have war paint, AK-47s, or fighter jets, but they were soldiers all the same.

And truth be told, they were ready for war.

I followed the sea of people into the “event space.” Purple couches and wooden tables had been pushed to the side of the room, and the hardwood floors looked as if they’d just been polished. I looked out the floor-to-ceiling windows and took in the unobstructed view of the East River. Then I noticed an orchestra-size gong suspended from the ceiling. *What the hell is that for?*

The smell of French toast, pancakes, sausage, syrup, and fresh fruit filled the air. Two dozen aluminum trays, heavy with food, sat on a large white marble island toward the back wall. Behind the island, against the far wall, were refrigerators, fruit baskets, moneyless vending machines, cereal dispensers, and taps bearing different labels, like Joyride Coffee Cold Brew, Blue Moon, and Health-Ade Kombucha.

The nonsales crowd toasted bagels, mixed oatmeal, and sliced bananas, never laying a finger on the trays, almost as if they didn’t even

see them. The whole thing was like an adult version of Neverland Ranch.

“Circle up,” Clyde said. The salespeople got into formation. “And not a word.”

This is it. The moment of human sacrifice. If I see someone sharpening a knife and licking their lips at me, I’m running. With this decided, I joined the circle a few people away from Clyde.

“To the right,” Clyde commanded. Everyone reached across their chests with their left arms in one swift motion, holding them in place with their right forearms.

“To the left,” Clyde said. Everyone was so used to the motions that his instructions were only a formality; the movements and pace ingrained in them like biological code.

“Smile time,” Clyde said, making the most menacing smile I’d ever seen. His eyes popped out of their sockets, and his mouth stretched so wide I thought he’d tear his lips. But when I surveyed the circle, everyone was smiling like a gang of killer clowns.

“Why aren’t you smiling, Buck?” Clyde asked through clenched teeth.

“Oh, sorry,” I said, exposing my teeth like a feral animal.

Clyde then told us to close our eyes and “breathe it out.” But before I closed my eyes, I noticed that the spectators were watching with increased enthusiasm. Jen from marketing waved at me. Mac from the gym threw up a Black Power fist when our eyes connected. It would’ve been more comforting if Mac was actually Black.

“Keep your eyes closed,” Clyde ordered. “Today is day one of Deals Week, which means we need to do everything humanly possible to hit our goal ASAP.”

The room fell silent.

“We have four hundred and fifty thousand dollars to close this week. I know it sounds like a lot, but we’ve done that with less time before.”

“Damn right we have!” Frodo shouted.

Clyde saluted him. “That’s right, Frodo. But aside from what we need to hit, I want you all to empty your minds and picture yourself a year from now. Where are you? Maybe you’re taking a vacation with your girlfriend in the Caribbean, lying down on the beach, cracking open a fresh lobster. Or you’re hiking Machu Picchu, smelling the ancient Peruvian jungle beneath you as you climb higher, poking your head through dense clouds. What are you wearing?”

To be honest, as he spoke, I couldn’t stop picturing Soraya and me having hot, sweaty sex and ordering pizza afterward. The good thing was that I wouldn’t have to wait a year for that to happen. I’d just need to make it through the day.

The floor creaked as people shifted, all of them prophesying piles of hundred-dollar bills and gold ingots falling from the sky.

“Now come back here, to this building, this floor, and this office. Imagine yourself closing that deal you need, throwing it up on the board to a room of applause. Imagine smashing the crap out of the gong, knowing you didn’t just hit your number, but that you also helped your team hit theirs.”

I wasn’t sure if we were still supposed to have our eyes closed, so I cracked mine open. Every single person in the circle had their eyes shut and heads bowed; they all were nodding and whispering to themselves. I shit you not, some even had tears streaming down their faces. If there was a Church of Sumwun, Monday morning of Deals Week would have been Sunday Mass.

With closed eyes, Clyde extended his arm in front of him and pointed at different parts of the circle, directing his energy. He was a privileged son of a bitch, but he actually *did* believe in what he was saying and what the company stood for. I had to give him that.

“Every time someone tells you no, hangs up on you, or says ‘maybe next month,’ I want you to dig deep and do everything not to be discouraged. I want you to pick up the phone again and make the next call no matter how much rejection you face and how many nos you

hear. Remember, if you are saving them money and time, there should be no reason they don't sign."

Reader: I hope you're taking notes. Clyde was a maniac, but this is Sales 101. Repeat: if you are saving them money and time, there should be no reason they don't sign.

"And if you see someone getting down, pick them up. Hitting this month will mean we've hit our number for a full year, which is unheard of. So I want you to open your eyes, scream as loud as you can, clap your hands, and slam your foot so fucking hard that people on the ground floor think there's an earthquake."

Everyone opened their eyes, bodies tense like sprinters awaiting the starting gun's blast.

"Every day is deals day on three," Clyde shouted. "One."

There was something on their faces.

"Two."

It took me a second to realize what it was.

"Three."

Rage.

"EVERY DAY IS DEALS DAY!" they shouted, clapping their hands and slamming their sneakers, heels, boots, and clogs onto the ground so hard that the floor really did shake.

"Get some food and let's get to work!" Clyde ordered.

They descended on the trays of food like vultures. And then I felt a hand on my shoulder. Clyde.

"Let's go. You and the other two are training with me today. But I'll show you to your seat first."

"Okay."

We arrived at the sales floor, a long rectangular room containing ten rows of desks.

He pointed to two desks facing each other. "The Duchess and Frodo, you'll sit there and there."

“You,” he said, gripping my shoulder, “will sit here.” He slapped the desk closest to the frosted doors, in the same row as the Duchess’s and Frodo’s.

Moments later, everyone poured onto the floor balancing plates and bowls overflowing with food from the breakfast buffet. Most of them hurried to their desks. But a few of them, the ones whose desks were closest to mine, seemed to be taking their sweet time.

“Take a seat,” Clyde said. “And get settled in. Then we’ll begin training.”

When I pulled out my chair, a downpour of paint pummeled me, covering my desk, chair, and body in a white blur. When I looked up, I saw a dripping bucket hanging from the ceiling, apologetically swaying from left to right.

WHAT THE FUCK?

The entire floor burst into laughter. Some people snapped photos; others, whose desks were closer to mine, smirked as they wiped off flecks of white paint before sitting down.

With paint on my clothes, in my hair, and even in my nose, I turned to Clyde. He was smiling.

“Got you, Buck! Ha-ha! I thought the white would help you fit in better,” he said, smacking my back. “Don’t look so shocked. It’s just a little welcome joke. You’re not mad, right?”

Not mad? I couldn’t speak. I wanted to ram my fist through his face, shattering his abnormally straight LEGO castle-looking teeth.

“Well,” he said, waving his hand around the mess. “Clean this up and meet us in Bhagavad Gita. Training starts in ten.”

I should’ve known from the Middle Passage to never trust a white man who says, “Take a seat.” It could be your last.