



C H A P T E R  

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O N E

AT EXACTLY 3:07 in the afternoon, John Doyle concluded that this was the worst day of his career. He could barely feel his feet hitting the floor as he retreated to his office, which now felt like a hundred grueling miles from Human Resources. As he made his way back through the bustling office building, the HR manager's words repeated in his head until they lost all form and meaning. From her first words, he knew what she was going to say. He could see it in her face as she rattled off the obligatory pleasantries. It felt like an eternity before she got around to the point, and it was all he could do not to walk out in the middle of it. Yet somehow he sat there, on the edge of his seat, praying he was wrong.

Finally, her face took on a tortured look he was sure she had practiced in the mirror beforehand. "I'm sorry, John. You were not selected for promotion at this time." The words that followed may as well have been in Swahili. They bounced off him and littered the floor. Her weak offers of

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constructive feedback were drowned out by the tornado raging in John's head—thoughts of panic, embarrassment, exhaustion, and anger swirled with ferocious intensity.

Now he was walking through the crowded bullpen of the sales department, his face burning, his limbs tingling. Did they know? Were they staring? The infamous grapevine of Starr Industries was quite clear on the matter. Although not an official policy, John knew that there was a three-strikes rule in the company: get passed over for promotion three times, and you might as well start looking for another job. You were damaged goods as far as senior management was concerned. John had just sat through his second strike. If he could bring himself to look around, he was sure he'd recognize the looks on his coworkers' faces. They were watching a man whose career was racing toward a brick wall.

"How did it go?" The mere sound of Cassie's voice made John nauseous.

Without even a glance at his sales assistant, he passed her desk and closed himself in his office. He hated that Cassie knew his schedule. Granted, it was her job to know, but now he just wanted to be anonymous—and anywhere but here. He wanted today to have been a bad dream. He was anxious to wake up, wipe the sweat from his brow, and turn over.

But he was very much awake. His visit to HR was only the most recent gut punch in a day full of them. John

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collapsed in his chair and stared at the wall. It wasn't lost on him that a promotion to regional sales manager would surely have meant an office with a window. For now, he had a wall. For light, he had the cheap fluorescent tubes humming above him. He hated mediocrity and now felt bathed in it — confined by it in his poorly lit, windowless office — all of it seeming to pour salt on his wounds.

He had always been proud of his life's trajectory, his steady rise through the ranks. Working constantly and driving hard for results had been his standard approach since college, and up until recently, it seemed to be working. No one had ever questioned John's commitment to the job or even his ability to deliver results, but now that didn't seem to be enough. Somewhere along the way, he'd been derailed. He just couldn't seem to break through this last barrier — he didn't even know what it was — that was preventing him from moving up. What was he doing wrong?

As the clock closed in on four, he thought of his family. How could he face them? In a few hours, he would have no choice. It was J.J.'s first home game that night, and Nancy would have made sure that everyone would be taken care of. The home of Saint Nancy — as he jokingly called her — was a warm sanctuary where no child or husband was without proper nutrition and clean socks. He knew she would take the bad news with cheery, uplifting words of support, but it made him no more eager to admit his failure. Being late to the game? This is what made John most nervous. He





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was sickened by the irony that his drive for success at Starr Industries had taken an obvious toll on his family. And he knew Nancy well enough to know that Saint Nancy could quickly become Mt. Saint Helens when John fell short as an active participant in the family.

Looking down at the papers on his desk, he was jolted out of his thoughts. Round one of the day's lopsided boxing bout had begun with a sucker-punch the second he entered his office. A single piece of paper lay neatly on his keyboard—a faxed copy of Holly Styles's letter of resignation. John had felt the wind knocked out of him after reading only half a sentence.

Holly was John's top-performing sales representative for three years running and an informal leader of the team. John prayed that Holly had found a job in an unrelated industry, but he immediately began to worry that she had been lured away by a competitor. He began to calculate just how many customers might follow Holly to her new company and how hard it would be to find another salesperson with Holly's skill and ability to build relationships with clients. More than anything else, John worried about how her departure would look in the eyes of senior management—especially since this was the second superstar John had lost in as many months.

John checked his desk phone. The voice mail indicator remained dark. Why hadn't Holly returned his calls? Throughout the day, he had left messages on her cell phone,

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but so far he was met with only silence. He wracked his brain, trying to recall any warning signs he might have missed. He had no idea she was unhappy, let alone that she had intended to leave. She was making great money and had a number of large deals in the sales pipeline. Nothing made sense. Had he been too hard on her? Pushed her too much?

Round two—the 9:00 A.M. teleconference with his team—had been notably awkward. Several people asked why Holly was not on the call, and John felt a bit guilty playing dumb about it. He hadn't felt prepared to share the bad news yet. He knew there were rumors floating around about other team members shopping their résumés, and he worried that Holly's abrupt departure might fuel the flames of discontent. He would need to approach that announcement carefully. Then again, maybe they all knew. Maybe that's why everyone was so quiet on the call. Did they know their boss was lying?

Round three began around 10:30 A.M., as John finally mustered the courage to call his manager, Gail, to tell her that he had lost yet another top performer. Gail was not the shouting type. John could hear her disappointment in the stilted gaps of silence. He couldn't help feeling like a schoolboy in the principal's office as she began a piercing inquisition about what had happened: What signs of Holly's resignation should he have seen? How was he going to position this with the rest of the team? What was

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he doing about Holly's top five accounts? None of his answers seemed good enough for Gail, and the twenty-minute conversation felt more like two hours.

It was round four with the HR manager that most left him reeling. His career aspirations were slipping through his fingers. Everything he had been working so hard for all these years and the toll it had taken on his family and his friendships now seemed wasted.

He found himself pacing his office when the bell rang for round five. It was the alert chime from his e-mail. He prayed it was spam. On a day like today, black market pharmaceuticals and shady investment advice would be a welcome change of pace. John clicked on the e-mail icon on his computer and discovered several new messages. One subject line caught his eye: EXIT INTERVIEW RESULTS.

Opening the message, he could see the report was for Andy Ward, the sales rep he had lost about six weeks ago. His HR representative was required to pass along feedback received during Andy's exit interview. John felt ill as he read the results: "I liked the company, and I liked the work, but I didn't like working for John. He didn't make me feel like I was part of a team. It always felt like a competition. I hate to say this, but John Doyle was the main reason I started looking for another job."

John burned with feelings of betrayal. Andy had fabricated some excuse about wanting to start his own business,

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and the whole departure had been very upbeat and civilized. John had even offered to serve as a reference for him. Now he knew the truth, and he wasn't the only one. Surely this report was contributing to John's ever-diminishing career prospects. The pounding of John's heart seemed to shake his whole body.

There was a timid knock on his door that he knew to be Cassie's. John closed out of his e-mail program and tried to compose himself. "What?"

Cassie poked her head in. "May I?"

John waved an arm, motioning her in.

"Sorry to bug you. It's just—I didn't know if you wanted me to do anything," said Cassie.

"About what?" John had been assaulted from so many fronts; he couldn't imagine what she was talking about.

"About Holly," she said. "A few clients have called. I'm not quite sure what I should be telling them."

Something inside John snapped into place. A surge of adrenaline seemed to seize him, dragging his body from the dark caverns of his mind. It was time for action. If he was going to survive this day, he'd have to step up and start swinging.

"Route her calls to me," he said. "In the meantime, I need you to print me a list of her clients with contact information and annual sales."

He grabbed the phone and began to dial.



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“Year-to-date?” she asked as she made her way to the door. But he had already turned away. With a roll of her eyes, Cassie left him alone.

“Hi. Walter Freeman, please,” he said into the phone. “Yes, John Doyle.”

John’s knee began to bounce rapidly, as he was put on hold. Walter Freeman was John’s oldest customer and his biggest. John had landed the account as a hungry, naive young kid, right out of college. Walter had relented to John’s persistence, mostly because he was entertained by him — impressed by what he called John’s “gumption.” In the years that followed, Walter had become something of a mentor and friend. John was a frequent guest at business parties, and Walter had even invited Nancy and him to join him for an overnight cruise on his yacht. But that was years ago. John’s rise to sales manager left little time for account management, so he placed Walter’s business in the capable hands of his brightest salesman. But six weeks earlier, John had been forced to explain to Walter why Andy would no longer be representing his account. And as luck would have it, Holly had been Andy’s replacement. It was time for major damage control.

The other line was answered by Walter’s assistant. “Walter Freeman’s office.”

“Hi, Florence. It’s John Doyle. Can I speak to Walter?”

“I’m afraid not. He’s in a meeting.”

“Do you know when he’ll be out?”

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“Four thirty, but he won’t be able to call you back. He’s jumping straight into a taxi to make a six thirty to Chicago.”

John placed the receiver to his forehead, squinting in frustration.

“I can leave him a message,” she offered apologetically.

John looked at his watch and hung up the phone without leaving a message. He haphazardly tossed the array of papers from his desk into his briefcase and launched from his chair.

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John drummed the steering wheel of his aging BMW. There was no music, only the endless monologue of his thoughts, drowning out the muffled noise of the city streets surrounding his parked car. The downtown headquarters of Freeman-Davis Group occupied a building that stretched well above John’s line of sight. In his parking spot near the main entrance, he began to wonder if this was what a stalker felt like — an uneasy fusion of adrenaline and boredom.

He debated how Walter might interpret his unannounced appearance. In the end, though, John figured it was this kind of assertiveness that cemented their personal and professional relationship in the first place. And the fact was that John couldn’t afford to lose Walter’s business.

Finally, he saw the old man push through the front doors. Walter had to be seventy years old by now, but he still exuded that special something that made people look



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his way and ask, "Who's that guy?" John often wondered whether this aura came as a result of Walter's success or whether it was the reason for his success. Either way, it was impressive to behold.

John got out of his car just as Walter's taxi pulled up to the curb.

"Mr. Freeman!" John shouted. The street noise was louder than he had realized. He began to jog. "Walter!"

The taxi driver was taking the suitcase before Walter noticed John approaching.

"My God, Johnny. Is that you?"

"How are you, sir?" John asked as Walter offered a hug.

"Fine. Just fine," he replied. "What are you doing on this side of town?"

"I was hoping to talk to you."

"No can do, son. Got a plane to catch."

"Let me drive you," John replied.

The taxi driver was about to close the lid of the trunk. He shot dagger eyes at John. "Naw, naw, naw. No way, man."

John shoved two twenty-dollar bills into the driver's shirt pocket and yanked Walter's suitcase from the trunk.

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John eased his car onto the clogged freeway and cursed under his breath. John could feel Walter watching him. He glanced over and saw the calm grin of a man who expected everything to go his way and was rarely proved wrong.



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“Sir?”

“Why are you really here?” Walter asked, studying John’s face.

“I just felt really terrible about —”

Walter interrupted. “Yeah, yeah. Holly flew the coop. You feel like a schmuck. I heard you the first time.” Walter had a way of being brutally honest that somehow made you feel completely safe yet completely exposed. “What went wrong with Holly?”

“I honestly don’t know,” John admitted, his tone a little too defensive for his own taste. “She was making a boatload of money. Topped all the sales contests I told her every day she was a superstar. Hell, that’s why I wanted her on your account.”

“Is she you?”

“Excuse me?”

“You just listed all the reasons she should have been happy with her job,” Walter explained, “but those are your reasons. What were her reasons? What were the other kid’s reasons?”

“Andy?”

“Was he you?”

“No,” John exclaimed, frustrated. “It’s sales, Walter. It’s goal, target, lock ‘n’ load.”

“To you.”

“Well, that’s the most effective way.”

Walter smiled and watched the lane of cars next to him ease slowly by.



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John hated the riddles. Why couldn't people just say what they meant? Walter made you work for everything. John imagined that he made panhandlers answer questions before dropping a dollar bill in their cup. Now Walter's silence was killing him. "Well, isn't it?" John asked.

"All I know is you're quickly running out of soldiers, Lieutenant."

The rest of the trip was silent. John wasn't angry, but he was again deep in his own head, orchestrating a flurry of thoughts and internal debates. As they pulled up to the curb next to the terminal, Walter pulled a business card from his suit pocket, flipped it over, and began to write.

"You want to know the secret to success, son?"

"A creative CPA?" John joked.

Walter finished writing and clicked his pen. "Strategy, diplomas, business plans, loopholes in the federal tax code—all great. Important stuff. But the lifeblood of any organization is people. Our lives in general are all about people. You got conflict in your life? You're choking off your blood supply. Your success is going to turn blue and fall off. By the looks of it, I'd say it's already looking a bit periwinkle."

Walter handed John the card and climbed out of the car. On the back Walter had written a phone number followed by the words: *Have a Nice Conflict*. John groaned at the sight of another damn riddle. Walter pulled his suitcase out of the back seat.





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“What’s this supposed to be?” John asked through the open door.

“Tell them I sent you.”

“Tell who?”

“Thanks for the ride, Johnny,” he said, wearing a wry grin. “Enjoy yours.”

With a tap of the roof, Walter turned and disappeared into the crowd.

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