

1

Alan Sackett was a rising star in the business world for eight years and his future was secure if Lamberts did not fire him. He was a young man equipped with an acute business instinct and a portfolio of assets matched only by swelling personal debt. Brian was almost a full lap behind him as he crept up the fifty-ninth floor track overlooking the Los Angeles basin. " I tell you, Bri, I'm in line for the VP sales job. I'm the guy."

Brian kept pace. " A.B., the rumors are all around. I tell ya, it could be any of us or all of us that get axed."

Alan tilted back his head and laughed as he trotted along the view of Santa Monica around the beach rim to Malibu. " No way. You don't *can* somebody with a twenty percent sales gain, buddy."

" You're lucky Melinda has a secure position with that financial group."

Alan stopped, breathing quickly as his friend caught up. " Brian, you're starting to get under my skin. I'm being promoted and will have an office in Miami running all the East Coast divisions. Eight hundred and fifty Lamberts stores under my thumb." His cell phone, Velcroed to his upper arm, buzzed.

" Sackett."

" A.B."

" Melinda. Where are you?"

Her voiced was always analytical. " Still in Denver. The city is having us run a full audit of the Wellfleet Fund. The mayor wants to avoid any pitfalls down the line. After all, we're talking about renovating an entire city block."

" Absolutely."

" So, I won't be arriving back in the city until Sunday afternoon. That cuts out the Palm Springs junket. Unless you want to head out there early, A.B."

" Take a puddle jumper over Sunday if you can't make it direct. Or limo from LAX."

" I'll leave you an e-mail as to my plans."

The brightening ocean hurt his eyes. " Will do. You can reach me on the third cell phone. Hey, I enjoyed the video conference last night."

" At least we had dinner together, even if it was electronically." Melinda paused as someone shouted in the background. " I'm wanted back in the conference room. Anything on the promotion?"

" Still waiting."

" You upload any announcement by Lamberts into my personal mail."

" You bet. Keep in touch."

" See ya, A.B."

Alan attached the phone into the Velcro slot on his arm and resumed jogging. Brian tightened his lips. " You didn't tell her, did you?"

" Tell her what?"

" A.B., this company has to cut. They've acquired three other major companies in the past two and a half years. There's too much fat."

Alan rolled his eyes and grinned. He rustled his friend's dark hair.

" Doubt is not a pleasant mental state but certainty is a ridiculous one... Voltaire."

" There he goes with the quotes again."

" Don't worry, Bri, I'll take you with me to Miami." His phone buzzed again and he removed it as he kept jogging. " Let me guess, they canceled the audit?"

An older but clear voice came into his earpiece. " Excuse me?"

" Who the hell is this?" asked Alan, picking up his pace. He gazed across the gray smog layer tapering to the San Gabriel Mountains near San Bernadino.

" Am I speaking with Alan Sackett?"

" Am I on the air? What is this?"

His voice was far away. " Mr. Sackett, my name is Charley McGowen, I'm an attorney representing the estate your late aunt."

" I spent a summer in Barkley twenty-five years ago. Aunt Amanda..."

" You sound out of breath, is this an inopportune time? "

" No, no..."

McGowen chuckled and shuffled some papers. " I don't think you understand. This could take a little time to explain."

" Well, my workout ends after the next lap, Mr. McGowen, after which I shower, put together next week's projections for the senior vice president of my company. Then I get in my car and leave town."

" I can see I'll have to call you back."

" Sure. Talk to you later."

" Bye now."

He ended the call, stared at the phone and stopped running. Brian turned and finished the lap as Alan opened the stairwell door. He felt good as his body wound down. He stretched his muscles all the way to the elevator doors and then he pushed the button.

He had not thought about Barkley, Idaho for a long time. When the letter arrived last week, stating his great aunt had died of natural causes, his emotions stirred back to the one summer he spent in Barkley when he was ten years old. Aunt Amanda owned a little red general store with Uncle Ned. Alan smiled as he remembered opening the wood screen door. A metal plated advertisement for Moonbeam Bread crisscrossed the frame. Back then he walked down the dirt lane with Soonie. She had a great smile. He would buy baseball cards, three series ahead of

everybody back home in Pasadena. His grin widened as he thought of Soonie's straight bangs and little rabbit teeth. He wondered what ever happened to his friend from that innocent summer.

" Hello! Hello, A.B." Brian swished his open hand in front of Alan's eyes. " Thinking about that blonde in marketing."

" No... Actually, I was a million miles away, Brian. I really was."

" Well, you'd better get your head back here for your presentation to Archer. Get you projections together." Brian's grinding his teeth annoyed Alan. " A.B., I just don't think you realize how precarious it is right now."

* * *

Alan slid the mouse across the pad. The red and blue graphics, broken down in pie wedges as well as bar graphs, appeared on the side monitor. Numbers did not lie. It had stacked up as another great week. Only two stores dipped, but the losses were insignificant. Archer would congratulate him once he read the report. Alan clicked on the printer and sat back in the smooth vinyl chair. He took his cell phone off the table and tapped into Melinda's voice mail.

" Hey... Figures, last week. Fifty-seven percent. Market share: up half a percentage point for the year... Total hours worked by yours truly: Eight-one. Hope I made your day."

The printer shook and the colorful charts nudged out the top. One of his secretaries rushed through the open glass door. " Mr. Sackett, there is a revision on the Sacramento south store."

Alan turned from the printer. " Up or down?"

She turned up her rose lips. " Up of course. Shall I include it in the presentation?"

" Loraine, don't sweat the small stuff."

" We may need it."

Alan stood and opened his mouth for a few seconds before he spoke.

" What is this, rumor city here? Listen, we probably will downsize, but that's the way it is. Loraine, they're not going to take off the good tire."

" Sir?" she asked and set two steaming coffee cups on the table.

" We're all doing a good job here. Don't worry." He walked over and tapped her shoulder. " The company will shift some things around, but that's it. Like moving one set of your loans or credit card balances. It's all amounts to prudent paperwork."

Loraine turned down her mouth and looked half convinced. " Maybe you're right, Mr. Sackett."

" I know I'm right. I'll see you when I get done with Archer."

She nodded and scooted around the corner. Alan went back to the printer and collated the pages himself. It would be a short and simple representation just the way Nate Archer liked it. He looked at the graphs again and smiled. Archer might offer him the VP position on the spot.

Alan clamped the corners and slid the report down the long wood table. Then he walked to the window and half closed the blind slats. Archer did not like a bright room. For a moment, he debated if he should have printed the hard copy. A monitor display would impress Archer. He shook his head. All Archer wanted was numbers.

" A.B., I have two minutes." Archer, suit coat off, tightened his red suspenders and set his briefcase on the table. With his sleeves rolled up, his boss was in the middle of some other pressing project. He would look at the numbers, the projections and listen to the assessment; take it all in two minutes.

" Fifty-seven percent?" He raised his brows. " Fits into the overall game plan perfectly, A.B. Good job. Why are we up?"

" Bad weather. Too much rain. Last year everybody was outside having a good time. I have a breakdown on the disk."

Archer shook his bald head. He looked older since he let the sides go gray. " Not necessary. Market share up half a percentage point for the year. That I like and Wal Mart and K Mart won't like it. It has to come out of somebody's pocket and better when it's not mine."

" I second that philosophy." Alan knew even a year ago he would not have said anything after Archer made a statement. But now he had the track record and the confidence."

Archer tossed the report on the table and searched his briefcase.

" Excuse me one moment."

Alan nodded and slid the multi-line phone across the table as Archer headed back outside. He took a huge warm swig of coffee and punched in his codes. Sitting back in his chair with his eyes closed, he placed his fingers over the memorized buttons, and jettisoned the unimportant calls or transferred the messages into a file for future reference. The next message was received only a few minutes before.

" Mr. Sackett, this is Attorney Charles McGowen. I spoke with you on your cell phone."

Alan flipped open his eyes. " How'd he get my numbers?"

" I would at your convenience like to discuss disposition of your aunt's estate. I know you're an important person down there in L.A. and this estate is not what you would call lucrative. I just need to close it off my books. Give me a call."

Alan jotted down a home and office number up in Barkley, Idaho into his notebook. The office door opened and Archer carried a thin piece of green paper.

" Sorry.

Alan ended his voice mail session and closed his notebook.

" No problem, Nate."

" Loraine!"

" Yes, Mr. Archer," she called, en route to his office

" No calls for the next seven minutes."

" Yes, sir."

Alan smiled. The skies above LAX buzzed with aircraft and knew he would be airborne within an hour and a half. He thought about attending a couple of night club shows in Palm Springs even though Melinda would not arrive until Sunday afternoon.

" I think we can easily bring a few of these guys up to snuff. The numbers look good, but I want to see things in the field. Then I can give you a better read."

Archer gripped the green paper and tightened his bulldog face. " You won't be going out in the field, A.B."

" Okay. Change in plans?"

" Yes, there are changes I am forced by Mr. Lambert to implement."

" Shoot."

Archer placed his hands on the table edge and squinted.

" Alan, your position has been eliminated."

Alan formed a perplexed smile and assumed an identical stance as Archer at the far end of the long table. " So, are you sliding me up, down, around?"

" Well, it is a complicated situation. As you know, Lamberts has absorbed three major companies over the past five quarters. In

a nutshell, we have grown too fast. In order to remain viable, we have to minimize our expenditures and extend our profits."

" And?"

" We will take care of you, A.B."

Alan now understood he was being phased out of the company and not shuffled around within it. His stomach fluttered.

" What do you mean?"

" The severance package is standard."

" What? I had a twenty percent increase."

Archer checked his watch and lifted his coffee cup to his lips.

" Yes, you've done a great job. It's just that as a company we need to be in another position. It has nothing to do with you."

" It has everything to do with me. You're firing me, Mr. Archer!"

" A.B., don't take it personally. It's just a downsizing move. You'll find something out there. I know you."

" Sure. " Alan stood upright, slowly closed and locked his briefcase. Archer was right. He would find something soon, but he remained confused why, if he had done such a good job, he was now fired.

" I'll clear things off the computer and voice mail." Archer stared with his lower teeth jutting out. " Should be completed in about half an hour, A.B. Listen, relax, take some downtime." Archer released his grip on the table and marched over to Alan. "

A reference letter will be prepared and I will of course accept any inquiries from potential employers."

" But why, Mr. Archer?"

" Mechanics of the corporate world, A.B." He raised his brows as he sighed. " Like anything else, you just roll with it."

Alan peered into his crusty blue eyes. " I don't want to roll with it. Has the world gone crazy? Things used to be simple. You did a good job you got promoted. Now you do a good job and you get fired?"

Archer nodded and shook his hand. He checked his watch again as Alan carried his briefcase from the office. Loraine looked up inconspicuously from her desk. She probably did not know he was let go. " What's the matter, A.B.?"

Alan clamped his jaw and continued through her office. He crossed the outer area, filled with young workaholics. At the elevator he smiled. Maybe being fired was not all that bad. He would get some downtime, slide into a new job, and collect the severance. The doors opened and he entered the stuffy car. Loraine stood in her office. Alan did not see Archer. Slowly, the doors closed, ending an eight year segment of his life.

2

Alan followed the bellhop past the lush trees and plants of the small arboretum. During the plane flight to Palm Springs he wanted to do business as usual, utilizing his laptop or making a few cell calls. He contemplated buzzing Melinda but could not admit failure. The conversation with Archer bounced through his mind. Was he really fired? He understood about corporate buy-outs and too many people on the pay roll, but why him?

Being fired also required a legal opinion. From the plane he placed a call to Nick Conte and left a message. Nick had done extensive legal work on behalf of corporations. Maybe he could pressure a settlement with Lamberts.

The bellboy unlocked the suite and lugged the bags inside. Alan spotted a ten dollar tip and the kid nodded as he left. The empty room exaggerated his failure. He took off his coat and fell back on the wide bed. The chilled air raced from the central air ducts as he faced the white popcorn ceiling. Like a computer on an endless search, he tracked everything he did at Lamberts during the past six months. He knew the mistakes, but nothing approached grounds for firing.

He saw a Federal Express box on the breakfast table. For a few seconds he sprawled out, but sprang from the bed. He pulled the tab and slid out a reflective red package. A blue card with Melinda's handwriting was tucked under the green bow. He ran his index finger under the glued flap and opened the envelope.

A.B.:

Great job! Upgraded memory will boost your productivity! See you Sunday after-

Melinda

Alan pulled back the ribbon and ripped the red metallic paper. Inside was an upgraded laptop.

" All dressed up and nowhere to go."

He headed for the window and pushed the drape button. The straight green fairway was overshadowed by a jagged Mount San Jacinto peaking toward the clouds. None of the last hours made sense. He stared outside, livid at Archer. Although he never said the firing was his decision, Archer had treated him with no more dignity than numbers on a report. Addition and subtraction of profits resulted in Alan Sackett being caught in the middle.

" I'm not a digit or a line on a spreadsheet, Nate. Human beings have emotions. Unless they work for you and then you're

supposed to jump just like the numbers pumped into a calculator. Even when you're terminated!"

The phone ran back on the dresser, but Alan stared from the mountain top to the rocky talus sweep below. He deliberately strutted across the thick blue rug. " This is Alan Sackett."

" Alan, this is Nick."

Alan smiled and could feel the adrenaline surging. " Nick, I was fired unjustly this morning."

" Then I'm upping my rate."

" You can double your rate, I don't care. What happened was to me was unfair."

" What happened?"

" You know I've done a superb job and have a twenty percent increase over last year. They said I was downsized."

" Were you?"

" I guess I was, but they can't do that?"

" How old are you, Alan?"

" I'm thirty-five."

" No class action age discrimination... Did you say anything to precipitate this termination?"

" Nothing. I was brought in to do a report. Listen, I want what's due me!"

" Severance?"

" Yeah, six weeks."

" Did you accept it?" asked Nick, moving some papers around.

" Not yet."

" If you do, you will negate any further legal action on your behalf."

Alan gestured as he spoke and looked at his matted blonde hair in the mirror. He wanted a shower or a swim in the pool. " Look, I need that money. I have a tremendous debt ceiling."

" Then, take it."

" Yeah, but they can't just fire me."

" Sure they can."

" That makes no sense. You fire people for doing a good job?"

" Doesn't matter. It's their company."

" Is this the United States of America? Maybe I'm having some bad dream. I was always brought up to think when you did a good job you got rewarded not fired."

" Not the way it works. It's how you fit into corporate strategy."

He pinched the bridge of his nose. " Listen, let me type something up and fax it to you, Nick."

Nick cleared his throat and said something to someone in his office or on another line. " If you want to Alan send over some stuff, but I'll be damned if I'm that optimistic about legal action."

" Maybe, if I spell it out."

" Sure."

" I may need you to keep track of my... I've run up the tab on a lot of things. I just worried about monthly payments, but I never thought I would get fired."

" Have your debts consolidated again."

" I think I'm beyond that now," said Alan, shaking his head.

" Ask Melinda."

" I don't even want to tell Melinda. Listen, you'll have a statement within an hour. See what you can do."

" Send me the financial thing, too. How much you owe and to whom."

" Wish me luck..."

Alan set down the phone, trotted over to the table and dragged his old laptop toward him. The only way to prove himself to Archer and his co-workers back at Lamberts was to get another job right away. Dozens of discount chains would be after him. It was only a matter of retrieving his resume and faxing it out. By the time Melinda arrived, he might have already consummated a deal.

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Alan watched the next fax leave the screen and head out to a fifteen store chain in the Midwest. He had procured forty-one fax numbers of various corporations around the country and had sent

out sixteen faxes by ten-thirty. But he had not eaten nor changed his wrinkled clothes. His head buzzed and his eyes ached. The fax went through as the phone line rang. " Alan Sackett."

" A.B., this is Brian. I've been trying to get through since six o'clock."

Alan closed his eyes and let receiver dangle near his ear. " I've been using this line to fax out resumes."

" I'm sorry, A.B. I am. Everyone's been calling me. You have a whole office full of people that are upset."

" I'm gone, Bri." He opened his eyes to a pasty face and flattened hair.

" You're doing the right thing. Get the resume out there quick. Strike fast and start up again before you even get your severance."

" That's the game plan."

" Melinda know?"

" No way. I want another job in hand before I tell her anything. I just feel like I've lost all respect."

Brian never reassured him nor even expressed an opinion about Archer's decision. His friend talked about the company; the last thing Alan wanted to hear. Alan cut the conversation short and said he would see Brian once he got back to the city.

He walked down to the hot tub and started the water. Back at the laptop, he faxed out another resume, and was determined to regain everyone's respect. Then he stripped down and slid into the hot tub, placing his cell phone on the tiles. He felt the warm water

surround his body and his thoughts moved back eight years. Only months out of Northwestern he was hired as an assistant buyer at Lamberts metro L.A. division. He had never worked anywhere else and had put all his energies into his career. Even the relationship with Melinda was subjugated to the job. She respected that course and did the same.

He wondered how she would react to his being fired. Neither one of them had ever suffered a corporate loss. They both saw consecutive promotions advancing their careers. Brian knew her socially when she was with an investment house. Impressed with her devotion to her career, he insisted Alan meet her. Alan was never not successful in her eyes.

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Alan left the hot tub, dressed and had a late dinner across town. He chatted later at the bar with a few doctors from Riverside, skillfully avoiding his firing. He bought their drinks, but when he later watched the bartender swipe his card through the scanner, he realized for the first time in years he might have to watch his expenses.

He returned to his room and dragged out the laptop to work on the financial statement for Nick. The stock shares were deceiving. Melinda had warned him about the risk he took in

buying certain entities. The software stocks had plummeted and so did the older smoke stack industries. Oil had risen, yet he never bought more than a few hundred shares. Even more dismal were the mutual and growth funds. All his Lamberts stocks were traded into other areas. Alan had made the mistake of trying to run his own portfolio with no experience. He checked the overview on the blue and red spreadsheet.

He sunk his head, and with clenched fists lodged next to his temple, exhaled loudly. Next he double-checked the loan status on the BMW, the off road vehicle and the boat docked at Marina Del Ray. The bank had already reshuffled everything into a new equity loan. Now he was almost three hundred thousand in the hole.

" How did I let myself get in this?" He had listened to those barroom yuppies at Sallingers who told him to live on other people's money and just keep rolling over the loans. His only concern was monthly payments. Interest, accumulated debt, and debt ceilings were something he never considered.

As he grabbed a wine cooler from the refrigerator, he knew the credit card debt would sink him. The chill slither down his throat and then gulped it. After flipping on CNN at the top of the hour, he turned to the laptop and sat at the table. He brought up eight major credit cards and six store cards. Those combined debits exceeded a hundred thousand. He needed money or another job fast.

Nobody every questioned what he had done because his annual salary with bonuses was near three hundred grand. No one cared as long as the monthly payments were met, especially if interest was added on top of the total. These companies loved a guy like him. He had the computer provide him with an estimated three-month's severance. Even if he was able to procure the hundred and fifteen thousand, he would still owe nearly his year's salary.

CNN brought the news up at the top of the hour at one a.m. Sunday morning. He activated his resume up on the screen again and found another fax number. With his eyes closed Alan Sackett sent his long years of service with Lamberts into a data signal across country to North Carolina. With any luck, if the law of averages and numbers prevailed, he would land something quick and face the problem of eliminating his debt.

3

Because Alan needed money he would have to brief Melinda about leaving Lamberts. He was well rested, awaked near noon and spent the next few hours cranking out his resume. On Monday he would make the follow-up calls and his contacts within the industry would get him working. He would use that spin when he spoke to Melinda, but he would not impart the severity of his debts. Paying down some of the credit card balances would free up extra credit.

Melinda, still in dark business attire, walked briskly from the black limo. As she approached the hotel She held her thin leather briefcase close to her svelte body. Alan hunkered behind the lobby doors and tried to mimic her supreme confidence and perfect appearance. Her brown hair, permed and short, accentuated her tiny cheekbones and penetrating blue eyes. She maintained a calm posture, backed by an extensive portfolio, and a persuasive demeanor. They were always considered a matched set, but now Alan stood powerless as she burst through the outside door.

" A.B., A.B."

" Melinda." They exchanged a quick embrace, pecks on the cheek and held hands for ten paces. Her potent perfume provided a tantalizing scent.

" And how did things go in Denver?"

" Excellent. We've wrapped it up. Bonuses are in order."

" Congrats."

" Thank you." She gazed around the lobby. " Good to be back here, A.B. The break will give me time to plan my Texas trip. We face a challenge in Houston mid week, but I can get into that later. By the way, let me congratulate you live on your monthly performance."

" Month was good." Alan's stomach tightened. He was convinced she might not understand the circumstances of his downsizing. " It's good to see you in person. Video conferencing only goes so far."

As they stepped up to the front desk, she squeezed his hand, but only for a second, as if it were part of her routine. " I would say some time in the hot tub would be a prescribed activity, what do you think?"

" Sounds good."

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Alan hoped relaxing in the room's hot tub would provide an adequate buffer before informing Melinda he was no longer with Lamberts, but she decided a brief encounter under the sheets was an appropriate prelude to a long soak in the warm water. Alan complied and then found himself immersed in bubbling, steamy water, and listened to her business forecasts. With so much on his mind, he closed his eyes a few times. She did everything by the book. It never bothered him until now. Maybe her agenda was now irrelevant to his present predicament.

Melinda answered a few beeper pages, checked her voice mail and tied up the line with her laptop. She dressed into a more informal white dress for dinner and he donned a dark suit. He wanted to tell her. The phone rang. He watched her smooth brow furrow. She tilted her head and squinted.

" Who the hell is this message for? I don't understand why such a message would... Yes, specifically for Alan Sackett?" She held out the phone and Alan crossed the room, still looping his blue silk tie.

" This is Alan Sackett."

" Mr. Sackett. I have a message from Graybar International. They have received your resume and would like to talk to you. A Mr. Paulson will speak to you at nine a.m. Monday morning. The number-"

" I have the number. Thank you."

"What's that all about?" she asked, adjusting her pearl earrings in the dresser mirror.

Alan set the receiver back on the hook and looked up precariously.

"Changes are coming."

"Oh, you are so clever," she said, standing. "You didn't even hint you were thinking of making a collateral move."

"Well, it isn't exactly a collateral move. Melinda."

"You going right to the top, A.B.?"

Alan left his bottom teeth exposed. "I left Lamberts."

"Why?"

He shifted his weight and bit his upper lip. "God, I don't know how to tell you this."

"What happened?"

"I was... was. My position was eliminated."

Melinda's mouth opened slowly like a drawbridge rising. Her eyes assumed a constricted presence and she seemed to be weighing things in her mind. "That's absurd. Numbers don't lie. So, you're out of work?"

"Temporarily."

"This is not good."

"Hey, listen. No one is more upset about this than me."

"Bad image. The first thing out of any CEO's mouth will be a question about your being let go. They won't understand anything but the facts and the facts make you look bad, A.B."

Her straight, cold logic and lack of empathy cut an angry surge into his gut. " I would have wanted to hear some support."

She moved back to the mirror and began applying her eye shadow.

" You'll find something."

Alan stared at her and was stunned at her indifference. " Listen, during the transition, I need some movement in my cash flow."

" That makes sense."

" I mean I need some help."

She set down the mascara and pinched a pencil for her brows. Meticulously, she formed a neat thin line, and without moving her lips or looking at Alan, she spoke in an analytical tone. " I'm sure one of the banks will consolidate for you."

" No, I need some cash until I spin my assets around. I have a severe flow problem."

She peered at him in the mirror and spoke in a huffy voice.

" Are you asking me for money?"

" Yeah."

" I see. Well... Interesting request." She turned and stood again. " You know, A.B. I can't believe Nate Archer would approve a plan to eliminate your job if everything was on par."

" What's that supposed to mean?"

" It means something else is going on. You don't get canned without good reason."

" Yes, you do," said Alan. He moved closer. " Listen, this isn't my fault."

Her upper teeth formed a sharp rim over her lower lip. Then she shook her head. " I thought you primarily had more business prowess. Secondly, you don't even have the balls to admit you may have messed up."

He grabbed her arm. " I didn't mess up."

" Get your hand off me." Alan released his grip, but his teeth were clamped as he spoke.

" I guess I can see what happens when things get a little tough."

" Who's fault is that?" she asked, picking up her white purse.

" What kind of a transparent relationship is this anyway?"

She raised her left brow and clutched the small purse. With a transient smile she shook her head. " Somebody once said we see ourselves best against the river. I guess-

" It is this backward motion against the source. Against the stream, that we most see ourselves in... Robert Frost, West-Running Brook."

" You've lost your cool, A.B. A tower of jelly." Then she laughed, strutted by him, but paused at the door. " I'll be dining alone."

* * *

Alan held an untouched straight whiskey poolside as the upper lights popped off. The bartender gave him a passing wave as he, too, left the darkened bar. Amidst the cluster of empty tables, Alan's mind was stuck within a myriad of conflicting thoughts. His anger at Melinda had not abated as he fixated on the iridescent blue pool water. More than not helping him with his cash flow, her attitude ate away at his self-confidence. He always believed he would have her emotional support. Her contingent love seemed more like Nate Archer's assessment of sales figures. The praises flowed as long as last year's figures were squashed.

The pool lights went out and Alan set down the drink on a dew laden glass table. A bright starry sky beckoned above the desert as he wandered along the patio slabs. Going back to the room was not something he wanted to do. He crossed his arms over his chest and attempted to find the constellations he knew as a boy one summer back in Idaho.

Light pollution dimmed his viewing and he walked the grounds. Tomorrow morning he would take the return flight back to the city. His first priority involved calling the banks and selectively concealing his present conundrum. Brian had a raft of connections and could help him or direct him to the proper sources. Alan would also work the phone and secure an interview for a new

position. He could turn his problems around rapidly when all his energies were directed into the job effort.

4

The skies over LAX were as hazy as his future. She had acted swiftly and decisively as she always did, freeing herself from any unwise financial entanglement. Alan thought back to early this morning when he returned to the room. Melinda's clothes were gone from the closet, laptop missing from the table, and her bags removed from the room. A quick check at the front desk confirmed her departure to parts unknown. He called her voice mail and left a scathing message, regretting it later as he lay awake sweating all night in the hotel room bed.

As the plane dipped for descent, the congested freeway traffic snarled below. A few weeks away might help him forget about the shallowness of his relationship with Melinda once he secured the Graybar job. She had not answered any voice mail messages nor did he think she would. Melinda was the least of his problems.

* * *

Brian agreed to meet him for lunch and had some possibilities for improving cash flow. Alan wore a sharp cut blue

suit, new tie and shirt, had his shoes shined in his condo lobby and acted as if he were still employed. He ordered drinks and thought about his efforts that morning. Lamberts personnel assured him they would cut a severance check as soon as he signed the hard copy of a release agreement, stating he would not take any legal action against the company. He could begin the debt reduction once they transferred the severance money. Other major companies had also responded positively to his resumes, boosting his spirits.

" Bri!" Brian buttoned his suit jacket, glanced at the table, but he studied Alan as he crossed the room. " Come on over, Brian, sit down. Relax."

" You get another job?" he asked as he sat. A perplexed look lingered on his face. " Or did Melinda call you back?"

" The answer to both questions is no."

" Did you find a bank to consolidate your debts?"

Alan's smile dropped. " Not good. Word is out. They all know I've been fired."

" That's odd."

" You said you might have some suggestions," said Alan, fiddling with his glass.

" I do."

The waitress appeared, Brian smiled and lifted the leather bound menu. He ordered a turkey sandwich quickly and tomato soup. Alan asked for a salad and as the waitress left, leaned

forward and folded his hands. " You have another bank or source."

" Not exactly. Alan, I know certain *questionable* people. Listen, you have considerable debt and it meant nothing as long as the check kept coming in."

" We don't need to rehash whatever mistakes I made. What do I do?"

Brian flipped his business card and handed it to Alan. A single local number was scrawled in green ink. " You call this number and you'll get a La Mirada connection. Ask for Roscoe."

" Okay."

" Roscoe can take care of the situation and reduce everything to a long term commitment."

" Heavy interest?"

" From you've showed me, A.B., you don't have much choice."

Alan closed his eyes briefly. The money would soon flow again once another job materialized and he could then settle with Roscoe. " Is this guy reputable?"

Brian sipped his drink, smiled and produced a full laugh.

" A.B., you don't make payments and they'll do what they have to do."

" Hopefully, I won't need this guy."

" You'd better hope you don't need him. He'll solve your short term problem, but he'll be lurking out there. You'll still owe every cent... and more."

* * *

Back at his condo Alan accelerated his pace, following up on each resume faxed from Palm Springs, and he sent out additional transmissions to other firms. Graybar and a company called Sebol International hinted at pending interviews. As he worked the telephone, Alan heard the oft-repeated line about how someone in personal would file his resume.

He answered his third line as he worked his PC. " Yes."

" Is this Alan B. Sackett?"

" Yes, it is."

" Mr. Sackett, this is Andrea Bledsoe. I work for Cell Force, USA."

" What can I do for you, Miss Bledsoe?" he asked, typing in another potential lead into the computer.

" Well, we are showing an overdue balance on your account. Maybe your payment is in the mail-"

" My payment is going to be late."

" I'm afraid if we will have to suspend service if we don't receive a payment by next Monday."

Alan pinched the bridge of his nose. " Look, I'm experiencing some cash flow problems that should be resolved very soon."

" I don't make the rules, Mr. Sackett."

" And I don't have the cash, *Ms. Bledsoe.*" He ground the receiver back in place, stormed across the kitchen and kicked the chair. Earlier in the morning he had received a similar call from one of his credit card companies. He grabbed a cooler from the refrigerator and walked outside onto the balcony.

The developing pattern was not good and would only worsen until he received the severance paycheck. Yet, he still needed the faxed document, releasing Lamberts of any obligation from a lawsuit. He leaned on the balcony railing. The San Gabriel Mountains poked like floating rock chunks above the morning haze. He shook his head, swished the wine in the glass and chided himself for not paying more attention to his debts.

He rushed back inside when the kitchen line sounded, but hesitated.

" Alan Sackett."

" Nick."

" Did you get my fax?" He let the liquid trickle down his throat.

" Yeah, that's why I'm calling. There was a part of your original contract that, well, could be construed liberally. You technically are in charge until the end of the year."

" Not any more."

" We could attempt to make a case and guarantee you more money and maybe damages. "

" All right!" Alan paced the kitchen, dragging the wall phone's cord behind.

" Don't get too excited. They won't pay any severance until the suit is settled. But instead of a hundred plus, you could be looking at half a million or if we lose: nothing."

" And legal bills."

" Yes. I don't expect an answer right now, but I'm sure they are pressuring you to sign your termination agreement."

" They want it locked up."

" Let's do this: I will plan to hear from you by the end of the week. Make your decision and we'll go with it."

" Agreed. Thanks, Nick. I have to consider the entire picture here. I'll have answer for you."

" Good. I'll hear from you."

Alan hung up the phone and returned to the balcony. The humming birds darted between bright flowers below. All his problems would end suddenly if he leaped onto the concrete. He finished the wine cooler and set the bottle on the table.

His wanted to peruse the lawsuit, but that would freeze up any credit and virtually shut him down unless he moved into another position immediately. Finding another job might take some time. He pulled out Brian's business card and glanced at Roscoe's

number. Calling Roscoe, no matter what the interest rate, would eliminate the debts and winning the lawsuit would payoff Roscoe.

Without hesitation he retreated inside and dialed Roscoe's number. Not surprisingly, he connected to an answering machine and a gruff, crude voice, told callers no one was home. Alan mentioned no names, explained he was in deep debt and needed prompt consideration on a loan. He blurted out his second cell phone number, hung up the phone, but held the receiver for a long time.

He grabbed his second cell phone, walked outside and fell back onto the lounge. The sun warmed his face and his eyelids glowed red. He never would have called Roscoe if there was no chance of the lawsuit. With the severance he might reduce some the debt, and with a new job whittle everything down, but with no severance presently, he had to turn to Roscoe.

* * *

Alan heard the distant sound of the cell phone. He opened his eyes and the ringer blasted in his ear. " All right. All right."

He reached for the phone, knocking it off the side table and finally scooped it off the artificial turf. " Hello, Mr. Sackett. This is McGowen calling from Barkley, Idaho again."

" Attorney McGowen, you're either the biggest pain in the neck or a very persistent man."

" You're batting a thousand. Is this a good time?"

Alan gripped the phone tighter, stood and strolled away from the hot sun. " As good a time as any other. I received a letter from somebody in town, Mrs. Hennesey, I think it was, telling me Aunt Amanda had died. I haven't seen her since I was up there one summer when I was a kid. "

McGowen cleared his throat. " Amanda was a saint of a lady and so was your Uncle Ned. Ned was a practical joker. Got me a number of times... Amanda died with accounts open on that store. Forgave all the debts on her deathbed. God rest her soul."

Alan opened the refrigerator and took out a wine cooler again. He poured himself a larger glass. " So, now the little store is all that's left. I got all my baseball cards there."

" I'm afraid the store is not in the best of shape, Mr. Sackett."

" Please, call me, Alan."

" Good, you can call me, Mr. McGowen," he said, producing a deep belly laugh. " No, seriously, call me Charley. We're not talking about a large real estate transaction here, Alan. More of a pain in the butt to drag yourself away from your job and up to Idaho."

Alan gulped the wine cooler. " How... how much are we talking, Charley?"

" With the land, it is near the railroad, but the railroad doesn't stop any more, I don't know, maybe sixty if you're lucky. I'd have to check with Hershey Edwards, the real estate man Amanda wanted handling this. But she left the store to you. Hold on." Alan finished the cooler. The sun had drained his stamina. McGowen read a note from Alan's aunt. " Says, Alan, I want you to have my store and maybe some of memories from that summer so long ago will forever be in your heart.. She also made it clear that if you sold the store, she wanted Hershey to get the commission."

Alan's eyes moistened for a moment. " Sure, I have no objection to that... Listen, I have some free time here. Let me fly up there for a few days and see what the store looks like. I'll need a place to stay."

" I'm sure Mrs. Pillsbury has a spare cubbyhole at her rooming house. I'll call Hershey and have him begin the process, put the sign out there, etcetera."

" Is there any stock in the store?"

" Mrs. Hennesey has done a complete inventory. A ton of old stuff spanning fifty years. Again, this is a small general store, Alan."

" Can you fax it to me?"

" The store?" Again the deep laughed rumbled through the transmission.

Alan grinned. " The inventory."

" I can't, but I might be able to have the drug store do it, but Ernie won't be back until Monday. Maybe one of the girls might know how to operate the machine."

Alan remembered Ernie, a gawky guy with pushed back black hair, behind the counter of a wood framed drug store with a soda fountain and spinning fans along the high ornate paneled ceiling. He thought about how he spent afternoons slurping down ice cream sodas with his friends and then crossed Main Street at the fork as he cut past the huge brick town hall to watch the summer league baseball games.

" Hey, Charley. Nix the fax. I'll make the arrangements on my end to get up there. I remember how rural... I'll call you. I won't even ask you for a cell number."

" Good, you won't get one."

" That's funny. It was nice chatting with you, Charley. You know, I had forgotten about that summer..."

" I'll be looking forward to your call and to meeting you, Alan. Bye now."

Alan clicked the cell phone and stared at the TV monitor, still on CNN. But his mind was back twenty-five years ago and with a baseball glove hanging on a bat balanced on his shoulder. He was with Soonie walking down a dirt road leading to the general store. Soonie, hair pushing out of a Giants hat, raced him under the trees near the railroad tracks. She usually won and was inside at the counter ordering Popsicles from Aunt Amanda by the time Alan

arrived. Things were so quiet back then. In twenty-five years the place was probably laced with strip developments.

He dialed Melinda's voice mail from his kitchen phone. As the phone line connected, he soon discovered the entire number sequence was altered. He was listening to a computerized voice telling him to contact the originator of the mailbox. So, he complied and called Melinda's condo in Brea.

He watched the sports segment on the news as her line rang. He ripped the receiver away as a disjointed signal blared in his ear.

" So now the condo number is changed. I don't believe this. Four years down the drain because I lose my job, Melinda? "

He set down the phone and went back to the computer, activating his e-mail. Without prior thought he typed in a concise message stating he wanted to speak with her before she walked out of his life. He called her an insensitive drone. Then he sent it without regret. The cell phone rang.

" Alan Sackett."

The voice grated through the earpiece. " Sackett, this is Roscoe. I understand you need some help."

" Big time. To tide me over until the next job comes through."

" How much you in the hock?"

" You wouldn't believe it," said Alan with a wispy laugh.

" I've seen it all, Sackett. How much you need?"

" Two hundred and eighty-nine thousand."

" You shitting me?"

" It's not that bad, I've got severance coming." Alan's heart raced for the first time since he was in Archer's office.

" You gut another job, you gut a car, condo?"

" I do, but those assets are in consolidation loans."

" You probably owe the friggin' bank six times over. They don't mean shit in liquid capital, but in my hands. Listen, you're buddy Brian spelled everything out. You're a real high roller, Sackett. We'll foot you two-fifty."

" Two fifty, I thought you guys have money."

" We do, you don't..."

" Look, just bring it up to three, add more interest on if I-"

" You don't understand, you don't miss deadlines with us."

Alan sat back in the kitchen chair. " What about interest?"

" What about it? You pay me six grand a month unless you resolve this early. We get a minimum twenty-five regardless."

" I've got a law suit pending. I'm good for it, Roscoe."

" I told you we already checked you out, Sackett, don't go blowin' your own horn. I already knew about your cars, the Mammoth Lake condo and the boat at Marina Del Rey. Meet me Thursday morning. Two forty-five a.m... Maggie's Place. "

" Where is-"

" North Hollywood. Right on the Boulevard, you'll find it."

" That's a pretty seedy area."

" This is a pretty seedy deal. Two forty-five, Sackett. I usually wait only fifteen minutes. You can buy the coffee. We'll get the bastards off your back, you pay us back and everybody's happy. Capish?"

" Capish."