

CORPORATE POLICY

By Robert Gately

123 pgs, double spaced; 12 font 33,420 words)

PREFACE

I retired from AT&T in 1998, but something happened in 1993 that was ugly and made me realize that I had a compelling story to tell if I could only devise a scheme where a man suffered due to being laid off. It's legal to have a downsizing. But it's not legal to do it in a decimating manner. I'm not suggesting that AT&T did this, but it's just that the whole process made me feel dirty.

It made me realize that there were sso many people in my life that helped me develop to the person I am today, and I needed to tell their story. I just needed to find something that would be illegal for a company to lay people off because it's not illegal to downsize.

I remember a VP had a wonderful idea to hire subcontractors to run the business. This way, when times demanded it, and things got tight, the subcontractors were the first to go. Unfortunately, that was what AT&T did not do at that time. Divestiture caused first-line supervisors of AT&T to realize that they had way too many people doing the same job. But how were they gong to get rid of surplus of people? In 1993, they laid people off without consideration of their talents or skills. The executives seemed to not care that the people who they let go were the very ones who were driving the company in its successes. They just did it based on their ratings and rankings in the organization. It was a disaster right from the start, I remember.

Luckily, I survived the cut, but not without some kind of reflection as to what I was doing to other people. Right from the day I retired, I thought about writing this story. I first had a couple of stories to do, but this one nagged at me because of the nature of the hurt that was done to so many people, and also because I was duped into believing that mid-year reviews were

worth something. Had I known the executives were going to change the process at the end of the year to accommodate the layoff process that was going to be implemented the following March, I might've done things differently. Nevertheless, it was excruciating to let so many people go and the experience had led me to write s screenplay and now the novella. I hope you enjoy, and I hope you never have to go through a process of being laid-off.

CHAPTER ONE

Kit was lying in the hospital room fighting for her life. The doctors were taking good care of her at Children's Hospital in Philadelphia. Her parents, Rodney and Maria Hopkins, prayed that she would survive this second bout with leukemia. Her blood platelets were dangerously low because her body was filled with unhealthy blood cells which were crowding out the healthy ones. The bad news was the doctors at the Children's Hospital were having a hard time cleaning her circulatory system. They were trying to get Kit's immune system to stop attacking and destroying the healthy platelets, which grow in the bone marrow. Kit's marrow was so destroyed that she needed a transplant. Her brother, Jacob, was a match, but he was reluctant to give her his marrow because he was under the impression he would have to die first to give her the marrow. At the moment no one knew that except Jacob, so the doctors were looking for alternatives, and the best alternative was getting a match in the registry.

As Kit was lying in the room, her father was trying to cheer her up by making faces at her at the room's window. Rodney threw air kisses and she threw them back.

The nurses were worried that Kit's sickness might cause her disposition to change. Keeping her emotionally 'up' and happy was paramount because, sometimes, children get angry at themselves or at the parents because they think that they caught it, like a cold, and there should be medicine to change the course of the disease. But there was no medicine. No instant cure. Just an overabundance of love, which was crucial in this stage of the disease, or so Rodney and Maria were told by the doctors and nurses.

Kit seemed not to have the strength to even talk. She just stared out the window at her father. It was hard to tell who looked worse, Rodney or Kit. Rodney looked so disheveled. He needed a shave. His shirt tail was hanging out, and his hair looked like he got grooming tips from Albert Einstein. He was a mess.

Maria on the other hand looked spotless. She was a well-groomed mess. Her hair always looked like she just came out of the beauty parlor, and Kit normally took after her mother. But not this day. Not this hour.

Maria noticed that Kit moved very little at this time, and when she did it took a great effort on her part. As Rodney put it, she was very 'groany' and lethargic compared to her first round of chemo. This time around she seemed to be a little worse to both her parents. Kit got tired faster and felt weak all the time; had shortness of breath, and bruised easily. The fevers and infections were hard to treat and she was always in pain, even though she tried to hide it. Her parents could tell she was in pain the way she moved her arms and the way she limped.

A nurse walked into the room and adjusted the chemical bag that fed a three-pronged Hickman line that terminated in Kit's chest. The TV at the Nurse's Station was a bit loud, and the newscaster's soliloquy of what was happening at the Washington DC proceeding distracted Rodney. At the time, the executives of the company where he worked were involved in a government inquest. A committee wanted to find out if N-TEC was involved in illegal activities by using the recent layoff procedures to make money. Everyone knew it wasn't illegal to downsize a company, but N-TEC executives might have gone a little too far, legally. Certain people in the company were being accused of trying to make money by manipulating the stock

market and the government was having the inquest because they wanted to get to the bottom of N-TEC's activities.

The proceedings on the TV enticed Rodney, not that he watched the news normally, because he didn't. He felt 'fake news' dominated what was reported. It was very frustrating to him to listen to lies and innuendos, as if he was on the grocery line looking at the tabloid of the day where the headline about his favorite actor's divorce, or legal problems, led to the fake stories embedded between the pages. So, he walked over to the Nurse's Station and listened to the newscaster talk about how the stock market reacted to the Senate's investigation. One of the correspondents reported on the chaotic scene with the Senate Building was in the background, and the video scanned the Washington Monument, the Lincoln Memorial, and all the other Washington DC monuments that normally added to the suspense of the report. The networks played out the whole he-said-she-said drama that Rodney had actually started.

One reporter said that Senator Almqvist, who was presiding over the commission, drilled the CEOs of both Nebraska Mutual and N-TEC and, at one point, called Joseph Collins a jerk for responding 'I don't recall' to five consecutive questions. Of course that resulted in a shouting match between the two, and nothing got accomplished.

Rodney watched the TV at the Nurse's Station while Maria watched Kit who noticed Rodney was missing, or at least Maria assumed Kit's antsy reaction was due to Rodney's absence since her eyes darted all around the room looking for something. Maria quickly beckoned for Rodney to come back, which he did. He blew a kiss and she tried to flick one back but couldn't. She didn't have the strength to even lift her arms.

CHAPTER TWO

Six months earlier, after her first bout with chemo therapy when she was tested for healthy platelets, Kit was told she was in remission. When she was given a clean bill of health by Doctor Marino, their family doctor, Rodney wanted things to go back to normal, knowing full well the idea of ‘normal’ would be different depending on which doctor you talked to.

For example, Dr. Marino promised Kit she could play outside once she got a clean bill of health, and that’s what they were going to do; but another doctor told Maria it was probably best not to let Kit go out for fear she might catch a cold. Balancing both opinions, Maria handed Kit her jacket.

“If you’re going out,” she said to Kit, “you’ll need this,” and Maria handed her a spring jacket. She turned and whispered to Rodney “Maybe you shouldn’t today go out today.”

But Rodney mentioned what a beautiful day it was, then he picked Kit up and twirled her around the living room as she rubbed his face and complained about him having splinters again.

“I know, Sweetie. Daddy didn’t shave this morning. I will when we come back.”

Rodney handed Kit a baseball, and a glove to Jacob, then gave Maria a peck on the cheek. Rodney took two bats, his glove, another baseball, and off they went to the baseball field, which was within walking distance from where they lived. They all marched commando-style, down the street and across the parkway, to go to the baseball field leaving Maria alone, which was a blessing since she was at last getting some ‘down time’ she so desperately wanted, and needed.

After they left, she went around the living room and picked up all the videos left astray

by Kit. Maria noticed a video that Kit last played was still in the chamber of the TV. Curious about what Kit was watching, she played it. She saw a younger, more carefree self, a time before the births of her children. She was pregnant and she interpreted her own smiles as being happier and more vibrant back then. She fast-forwarded through the scenes of her life, like birthdays and holidays. Years went by in a matter of seconds showing a home where happiness was the routine, not the exception. She saw a contrast between her face today and a carefree face from a much happier time.

In the videos she saw Rodney surprising her with a drafting table in her sewing room. Magazine covers and plaques indicated she was a successful interior designer. Those pictures and awards still decorated her room to this day. Maria almost shed a tear as she watched the video.

Rodney, Jacob and Kit reached Memorial Field in no time flat. Jacob took one of the bats and went to home plate, while Kit went to a dug out. Rodney went to the pitchers mound and scraped it with his foot, like a bull just before charging the matador's cape. Then Jacob stepped up to home plate, and Kit yelled out "No batter... No batter." from the dugout.

Rodney twisted his hands over the baseball as if he were a real pitcher. He turned to the on-deck circle where Jacob was standing and yelled in a gravelly voice yelled out, "Batter-up, Jacob. Let's play ball."

As Jacob came to the plate and dug in, Rodney turned to Kit and winked.

"No batter...No batter." Kit yelled out again from the dugout.

Jacob was annoyed and told her that it was inappropriate to yell that out since they were supposedly both on the same team playing against their father. "You're supposed to yell, 'No

pitcher...No pitcher'," he said.

Kit looked at Rodney who kiddingly puckered his lips as if to say his feelings would be hurt if she said this. Kit shook her head. "No pitcher. No pitcher," she yelled out.

"We'll see about that," he said loudly, then leaned down and shook off the imaginary signals that the imaginary catcher was giving him. He finally nodded, ready to pitch the first ball. He pumped his arm, over-emphasizing a windup, as if he was going to pitch a fast ball. Instead, he pitched a slow one with a high arc and Jacob pounded the ball past Rodney into center field. Kit clapped her approval as Jacob jogged past her and encouraged the make-believe people in the stands to applaud him.

Rodney quickly ran after the ball, and Jacob ran as fast as he could around the bases. Rodney grabbed the ball in short center field and ran all the way to home plate, but Jacob arrived there before Rodney did.

"Home run," Jacob yelled.

"You're getting faster, Jacob," Rodney could barely say in one breath, as he had his hands on his knees and heaved gulps of air to the ground.

"My turn," Kit bellowed. "My turn."

"Whuddya think?" Rodney asked. "Should we let her get up?"

"I guess," was all Jacob could muster. He was still egging on the imaginary fans to applaud his achievement.

Rodney motioned for Kit to get up to the plate. She grabbed a smaller bat and took a couple of practice swings with it which was hard to do because the bat was almost the same size as her,

Rodney moved in closer and pitched the ball as gingerly as he could. Kit swung and hit

the ball past Rodney, who ran slow motion after it.

“Run, Kit,” Rodney yelled. “Run.”

At first Kit ran to the pitcher’s mound, but Jacob and Rodney yelled their instructions on how to run the bases. Instead of running to first base, Kit got confused and ran from the pitcher's mound to third base, cutting out first and second base altogether.

“Smart move if the umpire allows it,” Rodney whispered. “Run Home...HOME!” he bellowed.

Jacob soon echoed those same instructions, and Kit stood on third base proud and confused at the same time over why Jacob and Dad were ranting for her to run home. So, she turned toward toward the outfield, and ran home. More of a waddle, really.

“Not your real home, knucklehead,” Jacob yelled.

Rodney just laughed then instructed Jacob to get the bats. “It's time to go, Son,” he said.

“But we just got here,” Jacob yelled, defiantly kicking the dirt. As he gathered the equipment, he mumbled loud enough for Rodney to hear, “She always ruins everything.”

Later that evening, Rodney plopped the last dish on the dining room table. Maria brought her glass of wine in from the kitchen, but her motions were exaggerated, as if she might be upset.

Kit, who was sitting without her baseball cap, sat next to Rodney. Her bald head showed the effects of the chemotherapy. Rodney leaned over and kissed her.

“I like real kisses,” Kit said. “They're much better than air kisses.”

“Yes, they are, Sweetie,” Rodney said.

Their dog, Lady, sat by Jacob's chair begging for some human food to eat. Rodney folded his hands and everyone else followed suit. They bowed their heads and Rodney recited grace.

“Bless us, Lord, for this food which we are about to eat...”

As Rodney said grace, Jacob twirled a green bean between his fingers and motioned to Kit that he was about ready to pick his nose with it. Kit giggled and covered her eyes with her hand. If he was going to do it, she didn't want to see it. Disgusting ...

Rodney looked sternly at Jacob. Maria glared at Rodney, then at Jacob. Kit continued to giggle while Rodney finished the dinner prayer. When he finished they all said 'Amen' in unison.

Silently, they all prepared their plates, each passing the dishes of food to the other.

“Can you believe it?” Rodney said, as he prepared Kit's plate. “Sixty degrees outside, and it's January.”

He paused purposely waiting for Maria to say something. But she just smiled so Rodney continued, “So ... what did Mom do today?” he asked.

“I cleaned Kit's mess in the living room. And I watched the home videos that Kit watched before she left for the park. Remember those videos that we took a while ago? I got a good laugh. The fashions ... the hairstyles.”

Rodney nodded his approval, and winked at Kit who gobbled her food down as if she hadn't eaten anything in a week. After Kit took her last bite. and showed Rodney her plate, she asked to be excused so she could watch some TV.

“Of course,” Rodney said. When Jacob took his last bite, he asked the same question and Maria told him that homework came first.

“But I don't have any homework,” he argued, using a tone of voice that was either mean, rude, sarcastic, mouthy or sassy, depending on what mood the listener was in. Rodney instructed Jacob not to use that tone of voice with his mother while Maria gathered some plates, and headed

for the kitchen.

Maria and Rodney both knew that Jacob was ‘acting out’ as Dr. Marino had previously warned them. Jacob didn’t understand to the full extent what was going on with Kit, although he knew Leukemia was a very serious disease. Still, he felt neglected and Rodney was really searching his soul to cut him some slack.

“She's not my mother,” Jacob said.

“What?” was all Rodney said.

”And you're not my real father,” Jacob added.

Rodney just sat there dumbfounded, not knowing how to respond.

Maria came back in the dining room with a filled wine glass. She put it down, then picked up Jacob's silverware and slammed them together.

“If we’re not your parents, then who are, pray tell?” she asked.

“How should I know,” Jacob said. “I’m adopted.”

“I see. And who told you that?” Maria asked.

“Uncle Darin.”

Now, in order to understand Jacob’s last statement, one had to know ‘Uncle Darin’. Darin was Rodney’s brother, who lived with the Hopkins family for almost five years while going to college. And his sense of humor wasn’t exactly appreciated while he lived there. So, telling Jacob he was adopted wasn’t all that unexpected or funny to Maria.

Darin Hopkins was a lawyer, but not one of those fancy lawyers that you might see on TV, like *Boston Legal*. No, he was a family lawyer who did people’s wills and testaments as a primary source of income, but he dreamed of making his ‘payday’ money by suing a big corporation for misdeeds, or for what the plaintiff thought was a misdeed. And he loved to play

practical jokes like telling his nephew he was adopted and saying it when he was young enough to believe it. That, to Darin, was funny.

But Darin always felt he helped people settle disputes, and that was how he advertised himself. He was in court a lot, the primary location where he could practice his dream.

He could hardly believe it at the time, but Rodney asked him to be his lawyer. Of course, since he lived at his house while going to college, Darin made it clear that they had free service whenever they wanted it.

“Oh, you poor orphaned child,” Rodney said. “Homework, now!”

Jacob started to object, but Rodney interjected in a louder voice. “NOW!”

Jacob got up and stomped off. Maria went into the kitchen and Rodney followed.

While putting the dishes into the dishwasher, Rodney said, “My brother should be a standup comic instead of a lawyer.”

“I told you this would happen,” Maria said. “Jacob feels neglected.”

She dropped a dish, picked up the pieces of ceramic, then tearfully rose and threw away the ceramic in the garbage. But she couldn’t speak because of the lump in her throat. Rodney hugged her and whispered, “We made a conscious decision, didn’t we? We have a lifetime to give him what he needs. We may not have had that luxury with Kit. But that’s not all that is bothering you. There’s something else. What is it?”

Maria shared that she was worried about Kit because she had only been off chemo for a couple of weeks, and Maria heard her sneeze twice. Maria felt that it was too cold for Kit to be playing outside.

“We weren’t out there for long,” Rodney argued. “Besides, Doctor Marino said she could play like other kids now. You should’ve seen her,” Rodney said. “She hit that ball ten feet and

you would've thought she smacked a home run.”

“Rodney!” Maria said with an alarming tone. “The hospital sent us a notice and...”

She couldn't finish the sentence because she'd have to admit she was scared for the whole family. The hospital was looking for more money than their N-TEC insurance plan could provide – close to a half a million in fact. She was extremely worried that the Children's Hospital would not readmit Kit if she needed it.

The doorbell interrupted her and after a short pause, they heard, “Anybody home?”

“It's my brother,” Rodney said. “Hold that thought.”

Maria quickly wiped her eyes and motioned for Rodney to greet Darin while she composed herself.

Darin walked past Kit who was watching TV. She didn't even notice her uncle, but when she did she got up and jumped on him saying “Pick me up. Pick me up. Tell me a story, Uncle Darin. Tell me a story.”

So, Darin picked her up without grunting, although she was growing taller, but losing weight at the same time. He put her right back down and she went back to the TV. Neither one was serious about telling a story because, presently, Darin wasn't in any mood to tell her a story, and she seemed to be more interested with what's on TV than any story Darin could muster.

“This was a good day for me,” Darin told Rodney as he sat down at the dining room table. “I won the ‘Bingo Case’, the biggest case of my life;” Darin said.

“Was that the case where a bingo board fell on a woman,” Rodney whispered, “and she claimed that caused her to have spontaneous orgasms.”

“Yes. The very one,” Darin said.

Maria did an about face and returned to the kitchen sensing Darin and Rodney needed

more alone time to discuss the case's merits.

"Fortunately," Darin added, "the hospital exam showed a concussion and I was able to sell pain and suffering to the jury and she got twenty thousand. And I got five grand for my efforts. Not bad for a day's work."

Kit came running up to Darin just as Maria came in from the kitchen again killing any chance of Darin to continue any part of the story about the bingo case. Kit wanted to be picked up, and for Darin to tell her a story.

"It must be a long TV commercial," Darin said, jokingly. "What are you watching? *A Cat in a Hat?*"

"How did you know," Kit asked.

"I saw a cat in a hat when I first came in."

"Uncle Darin will take you to bed while he tells you a story," Maria said. "But he's not going to tell you the story of the 'Bingo-lady'. Right, Darin?"

"Of course not," Darin said, and he picked Kit up and started on his way.

"And stop in Jacob's room," Maria added, "and tell him that he's not adopted. Please."

"Of course," Darin said. "Where the heck did he get an idea like that?" Darin wondered out loud.

"Hmm. I wonder," Rodney added suggesting that Darin may know more than he was letting on.

As Darin carried Kit into her room, he poked his head into Jacob's room and said, "You're not adopted. And you live with our wonderful birth-parents who are in the kitchen right now. They deserve a hug for everything they have done for you."

"Okay," Jacob said.

Darin continued on to Kit's bedroom and he said to Kit. "Okay. Now let me see. A story. Do you want a horror story, or a true story?"

"A true story. A true story," she said as she jiggled in his arms.

"Okay. Okay, calm down." Kit calmed down, "All right. Here we go. Not so long ago," Darin started and he began telling the true story of him living there in the house, in Kit's room, as a matter of fact, because he was going to college. Kit heard this story a thousand times, but she talked with suspense in her voice as if this was the first time she heard it.

"Just two days after I moved in, you were born," he said. "And you slept in a bassinet in your parents room, and I slept in this very room. I had a different bed, though. And when you got a little older, you slept in Jacob's room." Darin pointed all around himself. "Anyway, I slept right here, in this very room, and I remember that first day when you came home. I picked you up and you curled right up in my arms. And I thought I heard a purr, and I said, 'My, my, doesn't she purr just like a little kitten.'"

"And that's why you called me Kit."

"And that's why we called you Kit, because you purred like a kitten. Ever since then everyone has called you Kit. Thanks to me."

Darin and Kit talked a little bit longer and then Darin sang her a lullaby song. He sang,

Goodnight, sweetheart, well it's time to go.

Goodnight, sweetheart, well it's time to go,

I hate to leave you, but I really must say,

Goodnight, sweetheart, goodnight.

Darin sang one more stanza, and before he finished, Kit was sound asleep.

As he walked down the hall, he noticed Jacob's door was ajar so he poked his head into

his room and Jacob was bedside doing homework. "How's my favorite adopted nephew doing?"

"What are you talking about? I'm your only nephew. I got papers to prove it."

Back in the dining room, Maria was showing Rodney some hospital bills. Darin stopped at the edge of the room where Maria didn't see him. He listened.

"The insurance company paid over three hundred thousand already," Rodney said. "What more do they want for crying out loud?"

"They want a lot more than what we're giving them," Maria said.

"They want more than fifty dollars a month until the balance is paid off," Rodney said. "It would still take fifty years to do that."

"But what if she relapses? They won't take her back if we don't start paying more money."

"My insurance company will pay another three hundred thousand. I was told the hospital will not turn that down. Not with all the dead beats who don't pay a dime."

"We have to do something, Rodney. So ... so ..."

"What's the matter," Rodney said. "What did you do?"

"Nothing. I just talked to Audra about going back to work."

"I don't think you're ready, Sweetie," Rodney said. "No, you can't go back to work now."

Darin thought that was a good point to interrupt, so he walked in just as Maria buried her head in her hands. Darin queried his brother with a high eyebrow move, as if to say, 'what's up?'

"Money issues," he said. "What else?"

"Come on. Let me help," Darin said. "I owe you guys."

"We have free legal service whenever we want it, remember?" Rodney said. "That's our

agreement.” Rodney turned to Maria to continue their conversation. “Kit's better, now. She's got a clean bill of health from the doctor, and my new salary from the promotion kicks in soon. We'll start paying a hundred dollars next month, I promise. Okay?”

Darin and Rodney could tell Maria didn't like it, but for now she had to deal with it.

Maria then turned to Darin and said, “Did you talk to Jacob?”

“I told him you stole him away from very depressing circumstances.”

“That's not funny, Darin,” she said as started to go back into the kitchen.

“I'm sorry,” Darin said. “I told him he wasn't adopted, and should never listen to me.”

Darin looked to Rodney for help. “I'm sorry,” Darin said. “I came at a bad time.”

“No time is good time these days,” Rodney said. “She's not upset with you. She's upset with...I'm not exactly sure who she's upset with, but it's not you.”

Darin sat with that thought for a second “I gotta go. I just wanted to share my success with you guys.”

“Hey, it'll make great dinner conversation/,” Maria said before she went back into the kitchen./

“Racquetball soon?”

Rodney nodded.

After Darin left, Jacob walked over to Rodney with his homework in his hand.

“Well, Mister *Harry Potter*,” Rodney said. “You figure out who your parents are yet?”

CHAPTER THREE

The building where Rodney worked was in Center City Philadelphia. People strutted down the halls in a plush, multistory building with an opened atrium, except for this one guy who walked backwards all the time. He couldn't get from point A to point B without walking backwards.

The building had 5 floors and a woman on the third floor disappeared into her office space that was partitioned off with four half-walls with room dividers. The people around her looked the same. They wore the same same pin-strip suits and they all were pounding on their keyboards as if they were playing the piano, busy composing.

Rodney worked on the third floor computer room, in a cubicle, which was divided by half-wall partitions, and was equipped with a PC and a desk and two chairs, one for the occupant at the desk and one for a visitor. There were several cubicles in this computer room that looked eerily similar to those outside the room. But the room was bigger, and it had a round table that crowded the middle of the free area in case one of the four people who occupied the space wanted to have a meeting with more than one person. A steel closet and storage cabinets lined the walls.

Rodney stoically sat at his desk in his computer room. What was rummaging through his mind at the moment were thoughts of a layoff. Was the rumor he just heard true/ Could he be targeted? Just then Paul, his boss, called interrupting his thoughts.

"I'll be right there," Rodney told his boss. He left the computer room and it took Rodney no time to enter the area where the district managers were. Paul's office was a room complete

with a corner window and a view of a lake with a pump in the middle of it that turned on every minute and stayed on for 30 seconds creating an image that the water was so pure one could actually drink from the lake.

Paul Jacoby was about 50 years old and appeared to strut while sitting down. He had his sleeves rolled up and sat at a steel desk in a plainly decorated room. Rodney walked in and closed the door behind him.

“Hi, Rod,” he said. “Let me get right to the point. Appraisals are due.”

“Oh, my god,” Rodney said. “It's that time again, isn't it?”

“Oswald wants us to be tougher on this year's performance appraisals. She perceives that we're doing a disservice to our first liners by rating them so high. She says half our first-liners must be rated as average or below average. Seventy percent of your people are above average or higher. We need to lower that figure.”

Rodney fell silent for a few seconds. This news did not make him happy. “We had a mid-year review of their performance, and I told most in my group that they were, in the first six months of this year, doing a great job. We can't deviate too much from that! They're probably expecting a big bonus this year. In fact, they're doing a great job this year. All of them. And that's what I told them, and I have the feedback letters from the business units to prove it. Every single one of my people are wizards at their jobs.”

“Yeah. Yeah. I know. I've been talking to the other district managers in the business units, and this edict is creating a lot of havoc. But do you want to argue with an executive VP?” Paul said. “Cause I don't.”

All Rodney could do at this point was grit his teeth. It was hard for Rodney to accept the fact that he had to go back to his people and tell them they were just ‘average’ workers when the

data downloads and ability to 'be on time' with those downloads and reports got Rodney's group the reputation as the 'go to' place in the division, if anyone wanted maintenance or provisioning data. Everyone in the business units favored Rodney over other Information Technology (IT) units because of his timeliness of getting the data in the business units hands. His group's ad-hoc reports became the ideal of every business unit. It was a matter of training the field people to fill out their tickets properly, and for Rodney's people to download that data properly and to understand, as well as the process people, what each field meant. It took him months to perfect that process, but the effort was paying off.

Rodney entered the computer lab where he worked with three of the ten people who worked for him: Tatum Dennehy, Brian Sykes and Mike Peersal. Tatum and Brian had already arrived. They were both about 30 years old, and were dressed in business casual as was the dress of the day.

Tatum was busy typing on her PC, as was Brian. As soon as Rodney entered the office, Brian waved some papers and yelled, "I need help."

Brian got up and headed over to Tatum. "I have a couple of hot jobs here," he said.

"I can tell this is going to be a putrid day," Tatum responded. "I just got in, Brian. Coffee first, if you don't mind."

"Somebody got out of the wrong side of the bed today, I see," Rodney said. "Can't we be a bit more civil and positive?"

"Okay. I'm positive today is going to be a putrid day," she said as she got up to leave. "I have to pee." She got up and walked out of the room.

Brian tossed the jobs on the round table. "You got to prioritize these jobs, Rodney,"

Brian said. "I got them from Kathy from the Maintenance Business Unit. The ones on top are the most important. Time-wise, I mean."

"Work it out with Tatum," Rodney said.

Brian waited a beat, then walked over to a cabinet and removed a roll of masking tape and ducked into Tatum's cubicle. Ripping sounds enticed Rodney enough to get up and investigate what he was hearing. He walked into Tatum's cubicle and saw Brian wrapping Tatum's phone with masking tape.

"She's not in a good mood for this," Rodney said.

Still, Brian hid Tatum's phone in her desk drawer. It looked like a soccer ball with a wire extension hooked to it.

Brian was going to have to pay for this one. Rodney just knew it.

Mike Peersal, the nervous and fragile-type--someone you wouldn't want to upset because he'd probably break down and cry on the spot--walked in the room with a briefcase in hand and his jacket draped over his forearm. He put the briefcase on the round table and walked to the coat closet to hang up his coat.

Brian looked for somewhere to put the masking tape. He spotted Mike's briefcase on the table and put the masking tape in it as quickly as he could. Mike turned from the closet, took his briefcase case from the table and ducked into his cubicle. Rodney walked back to his desk while Brian sat at the table and waited for Tatum to arrive, who finally appeared at the door with a cleaning person. She talked Spanish to her, then finally Tatum said "Hasta luego, Princess." She entered with her cup of coffee and sat down at the table. She thumbed through the pile of papers. Brian got up and sat with her.

“So pip-squeak,” Tatum said to Brian. “What's so crucial?”

While Tatum ducked down to pick up the paper she dropped on the floor, Brian gave Rodney a nod to Tatum’s cubicle, and a finger-to-ear sign for Rodney to call Tatum's telephone.

Tatum read the paper then crumpled it up determining it was useless. She shot it into Brian’s wastepaper bucket, basketball style. “Score,” she yelled.

As she read the top few pages of the requirements, she heard a muffled ring. After a few rings, she asked, “Am I the only one who hears that?”

No one answered so she got up and followed the sound to her desk drawer. She opened it and just stood there. “Okay,” she finally said. “Who's the court jester?” Tatum looked at Brian who pointed at Mike's briefcase. Tatum took Mike’s briefcase that was lying by his cubicle, and placed it on the round table.

She opened it and took out the masking tape, and pointed at Brian. ”I would've expected this from you,” Tatum said. “Not from him.” She pointed to Mike and yelled over to him. “Very cute! Funny little man.”

Mike showed minor confusion, but mostly he was disinterested.

CHAPTER FOUR

Charlotte Oswald, the executive VP who Rodney's boss referred to earlier, looked like she was praying at the desk. Rather, she was in deep thought with the tips of her fingers resting between her upper lip and nose, as if she were smelling her fingers. She wore a pin-stripe suit, and fit the executive part of her job very effectively. She sat at her mahogany desk in a tastefully decorated room that had its own bathroom. A knock at the door disrupted her meditation.

Joseph Collins, the one on TV mentioned earlier as the one who said he didn't recall to five consecutive questions, entered nonchalantly carrying an attaché case.

Charlotte greeted him with a "Well, well. If it's not the snake."

He pulled out a large printout and a list from his attaché case and slid both in front of Charlotte. "We've waited a long time for this," he said.

"Yes, we have," she fired back. "And I'm glad it's almost over." Charlotte's door was open and her secretary, Priscilla, could see them, but not hear them. However, they both looked suspicious to Priscilla, like they were hiding something. Oswald's face conveyed the feeling that Charlotte was saying something very secretive. And when Collins spoke he depicted the same deception. Nevertheless, the only word that she heard was layoffs.

Priscilla never Oswald. Maybe it was because of her squinty eyes that were probably the result of her furrowed-looking brows that no amount of mascara or other makeup could correct. Oswald nodded giving the impression she and Joe were in perfect agreement of something. They were shady characters for sure, Priscilla thought.

Just then, Dan Patterson came out of his office. He was the VP of the maintenance unit. His office suite was next to Oswald's. He approached his secretary, Dawn, who probably was in

her late twenties, as was Priscilla, but no one was talking. Priscilla worked next to Dawn. They both were good typists, as good as anyone on the fifth floor.

“Who's in with Charlotte?” Dan asked Dawn.

She told him it was Mr. Collins from the board. Dan tightened his lips, wondering why was he down here with Oswald. After a brief, thoughtful silence, he asked Dawn for the name of the development manager of the results group.

“Rodney Hopkins,” Dawn said

“Tell him to come up, will you?” Dan responded, then went back into his office.

A few minutes later, both Collins and Oswald exited her office, and Priscilla saw Collins wink at Oswald, as if they had something going on between them.

“If you were a guy, you know what they would say?” Collins said to Oswald.

“They would say I had a brass pair of them and they are very large. But what do I need a set of balls for when I collect them for a hobby?”

Collins belted out a chuckle, then left.

Oswald sauntered into Dan Patterson's office which had plenty of office space, a mahogany desk, nice view out the window, etc. However, it had no bathroom, a tell-tale sign that Oswald was a higher rank than Patterson. Oswald inspected the pictures on Dan's wall and spotted a photo of Dan's son.

“I admire the way you juggle your life, Danny,” Oswald said. “Still going to counseling with your wife?”

Dan admitted that he was; everyone seemed to know that he was going to marriage counseling, so it wasn't a big secret. But no one seemed to know why. Oswald did.

“Have you mentioned 'us' yet?” Oswald asked. Dan shushed her as she closed the door and sat down in the reclining chair he had next to the desk. She nodded to those who were working outside the room and added, “They know what's going on?”

“Probably, but let's pretend they don't.” Dan responded. “It'll make me feel better.”

“Speaking of pretending,” Oswald said, “Are we still on for tonight?”

“I can't,” Dan admitted. “I have to prepare for tomorrow's speech on the re-org.”

“Oh. That's right. I forgot.”

“I've tasted the pastries anyway,” Dan said. “Sweet, but not delicious. Of course, if you give the speech, then I'll be free tonight.”

“Oh, no, no. That's why I hired you, to do my dirty work.” Oswald prepared to leave. “I guess it's business before pleasure. But with you...I wonder. Which one is business, Danny boy?”

“It's all business!” Dan admitted.

Oswald laughed, thoroughly enjoying the banter.

Rodney sat in a conference room on the fourth floor with a dozen other people. Everyone remained quiet while he read. Finally, he finished. “I don't see why we can't do this,” he said. “All the people in the field need to do is fill out the ticket properly for you to get the results you're looking for. We download the maintenance data once a month, collect the new fields, and write the reports. The output would be only as good as the input, as usual.”

The door opened and Dawn, Dan Paterson's secretary, waved for Rodney to come out. She instructed him that Oswald wanted to see him, and Rodney ducked back into the room and told the members he had to go, then followed Dawn to the fifth floor.

Priscilla walked toward Oswald's office just as Rodney rounded the corner with Dawn. Priscilla and Rodney collided and the folder marked 'PRIVATE', and its contents, flew out of Priscilla's hand and onto the floor. She quickly picked up the papers before Rodney could help.

“I’m so sorry,” Rodney said.

He noticed a document under the desk that was overlooked, but he couldn’t retrieve it in time to give it to Priscilla because she quickly disappeared into Oswald's office. He picked it up, read it. It was list of names with their respective social security numbers, and an exorbitant dollar amount next to their names that made no sense. The list of names was on the company’s letterhead with the initials ‘JC’ as the signatory of the letter.

Rodney was concerned because his name was on it, so, he quickly went to the copier, placed the paper on the glass and hit the start key just as Priscilla came out.

She rushed over to her desk, grabbed a folder and went back into Oswald’s office. Rodney sheepishly fumbled with the copier, hitting every button in front of him to stop the machine from spitting out copies. The machine jammed, and the 'number of copies' window displayed 30, and the sector 3 blinked on and off on the instruction panel.

Rodney opened the sector 3 door and pulled out the jammed paper. Priscilla's body appeared in the doorway. One head-turn and he would be busted. So, he quickly took the original, removed three copies from the tray, stuffed them in his notebook, raced to Priscilla's work station and tossed the original under her desk.

He overheard Priscilla say, “I don't know. It was in the first folder. Let me look.”

Priscilla stormed out of the office and began looking around. Finally, she saw the paper under the desk where Rodney tossed it. She sighed, picked it up, and headed back into the office. “Here it is,” Rodney heard her say as he was leaving the room. “Whew. That was a close one,”

he whispered to himself, wiping imaginary sweat from his forehead.

Dan stormed into Oswald's office just as Priscilla came out. His secretary, Dawn, entered from another direction and spotted Rodney. When she saw her boss was in Oswald's room, she drew Rodney closer to her desk and told him to wait in Dan's office, which he did.

Meanwhile, a sector 3 message on the copier still blinked on and off, indicating there was a problem. When Rodney copied the list, it jammed on the last few copies. Rodney pulled out one, but there was still another paper 'list' jammed in sector 3. Rodney didn't notice that and he went right into Dan Paterson's office and waited for him while the sector 3 light blinked on and off at the copier machine.

He had no idea what Dan wanted, and Rodney was slightly nervous thinking the worst. Maybe he did something wrong. He sat down, took a deep breath, and held his chest indicating 'that was a close call' in that he wasn't caught 'red-handed' copying a private paper from Oswald's folder.

The room carried sound well, Rodney could hear partial phrases their conversation next door. While trying to get the gist of their chat, he read a copy of the list of names and wondered why his name was mixed with other people who seemed to be randomly selected. He scratched his head as he wondered what the dollar amount on the last column was referring to.

"You're telling me I don't have a choice in the matter?" he heard Dan say clear as day from next door.

"Keep your voice down," Charlotte said. "People can hear you. And let's not forget who works for whom around here, shall we Dan?"

"I don't want to do this, Charlotte," he said. "Why don't we just let the Re-engineering Task Team do their job? You're taking advantage of... our relationship."

“Calm down,” Charlotte said. “It's business. And you're getting paid plenty for it.”

Meanwhile, outside Charlotte's room, Dawn and Priscilla could hear their conversation loud and clear. Dawn typed on her PC, and Priscilla grabbed the paper from her typewriter machine and headed toward the copier.

“You'd think they were married,” Dawn said.

Priscilla agreed. When she reached the copier, she saw the flashing sector message, opened the copier door, and searched for what was causing the jam.

“This is not a request,” Charlotte Oswald said.

Dan mumbled something, but Rodney couldn't hear because Oswald raised her voice which made the sound more of a muffle than anything else. “We don't owe them anything. Let them eat cake for all I care.” Rodney heard that as plain as day and winced at the thought of what she could've meant.

“Spoken like a real dictator,” Dan said.

Rodney pondered these words as Dan slammed Oswald's door and appeared in his room as if he was walking as fast as the speed of sound.

Dan slapped the list down on the desk and sat, not even noticing Rodney.

“I don't believe that shithead,” he said, still thinking he was alone.

“I heard that,” Charlotte said from next door.

“You might want to be careful. Your voice carries around here,” as Rodney pointed to the overhead opening between the rooms. Rodney stood, not knowing what else to do.

“What the hell do you want?” Dan said, annoyed as if his anonymity suffered.

“You wanted to see me, Sir?”

Dan took a deep breath to compose himself, summoning a calmer demeanor. “Hopkins,

of course. I'm sorry. There's a lot going on around here." He motioned for Rodney to sit and obediently, he did. He noticed that Dan had the same list in his hand that he was reviewing.

"We're assessing staffing requirements at the work centers," Dan said, "and I need you to retrieve some data for me."

Outside the office, Priscilla was on her knees, looking for the jam in the printer. She finally found the paper in sector 3 - the list. She looked around with suspicion.

Back in Dan Patterson's office, Dan nervously tapped his fingers on the desk and said, "I need an hourly count of customer calls for each center by month for the last three months. No is not an option, Rodney. I've got an important speech tomorrow. I need this info yesterday."

"You'll have it by the end of the day," Rodney assured Dan. "I promise."

Rodney stormed into his cubicle while Mike, Brian, and Tatum were huddled at the round table having a discussion. Rodney hid his notebook in his top drawer, then took the list from his shirt pocket and tucked it behind the wall calendar. He emerged from his cubicle and joined the conversation at the round table.

"Piss-head Oswald has a set this big," Tatum said, with her hands held apart to indicate just how rhetorically big they were. She felt she had all the facts and rendered her decision accurately, more like a Judge, who loved facts more than a psychologist, who loved opinions.

"What are you guys talking about?" Rodney asked.

"What they told us at the staff meeting today. After you left they told us that the VP of Operations said we had to sacrifice on our bonuses this year," Tatum offered. "They're getting tough on performance appraisals, and they're lowering the bonus checks."

"The same thing happened in IMS," Brian said. "They got tougher on appraisals just

before they had layoffs.”

“Did they use the word 'layoffs' at the meeting?” Rodney asked.

“They didn't have to. It was implied.”

“The writing has a wall message,” Mike added. Everyone stopped talking and looked at Mike for an awkward second.

“You mean, the writing's on the wall, don't you, Mike?” Brian said.

Mike's face twitched. He appeared confused and awkwardly retreated to his cubicle.

“Don't get so absorbed over something you can't control,” Rodney bellowed.

“That's easy for you to say,” Brian said. “You're a second-line manager now. You don't have to worry.”

Hell I don't. If they have layoffs, I'm just as vulnerable as you are,” Rodney said, but he saw that he wasn't winning over any admirers, so he added, “All I'm saying is that during the last downsizing that N-TEC had I couldn't eat or sleep. For what? I'm still here, aren't I? You're still here, right?”

Tatum waited for everyone to say their peace. When she was sure everyone said what they wanted to say, she piped in trying to inform rather than instruct. “Hey, I'm not having one of my premenstrual epiphanies here. Call it something in the air. We're gonna get screwed, royally. I feel it.”

Rodney smacked his hand down on the table and added, “Enough! We got a hot job, and we can't leave today until this it's done.”

Tatum and Rodney retrieved the data at Tatum's cubicle using using her computer.

CHAPTER FIVE

Rodney carried Kit into her bedroom and tucked her in bed that night. He noticed a black and blue mark on her leg. He pointed to it.

“What happened here, Sweetie?” Rodney asked.

“I don't know” was all she could say. She really didn't know, but she did know it was a bad omen that she had a bruise.

He inspected other parts of her body, then kissed her and said, “Sleep tight, Sweetie.”

“Good night, Daddy.”

Maria had already nestled herself in bed and was reading a book when Rodney crawled into bed next to her.

“Did you notice the black and blue on her leg?” she asked. Somberly, Rodney nodded and the book fell from Maria's hand. She appeared ready to cry.

“What did I do wrong?” she asked. “Maybe I shouldn't've given her the children's aspirin when she was an infant. Maybe I used too much baby powder. I should've breast-fed her...”

Rodney moved closer to her and stroked her arm. “You didn't do anything wrong,” he said. “Maybe we should just take one day at a time. Call Doctor Marino tomorrow and see what he has to say.”

Rodney kissed her, stroked her face, then slowly turned to his side of the bed. He hid more than his face from her.

At work the next morning Rodney sat at his desk studying the list and wondered why his name was on it. Worse, he was second on the list with a large number listed on the dollar column. He didn't know what the number represented. He sighed, then folded the list and tucked the list behind the wall calendar.

Tatum walked over to Mike's desk with an inkpad in her hand. She took the phone off the hook and tapped the receiver end of the phone on an inkpad. She returned the phone to the cradle, and went back to her desk.

Before long, Mike returned to his desk and quietly began to type on his computer. Mike's phone rang and he picked it up. Rodney knew it was Tatum, but Mike didn't know that. Tatum hung up just as he picked his phone up. Of course, there was no one on the other end of the line. In fact, he just got dial tone so he hung up right away. "Nuisance," he yelled to no one in particular.

Nevertheless, his ear was smudged with ink, but he didn't know it. He fidgeted with his ear, then he touched other parts of his face transferring the ink on his ear to the rest of his face. When Tatum appeared at his cubicle Mike looked like he went through a war.

"Oh, my God, Mike. What happened?"

Mike looked at his hand, saw the ink and quickly left.

Tatum ran back to her desk, took the inkpad out of her top draw, and ran back to Mike's desk. She pounded the telephone receiver on the inkpad again, and put the phone back in its cradle.

"Nobody farts in my church and gets away with it," she said as she went back to her cubicle.

Meanwhile, in the men's room, Mike washed his face, vigorously rubbing the ink off his

skin. He scrubbed hard, mumbling obscenities into the mirror. He appeared to be losing his composure.

Mike returned to his cubicle just when his phone rang again. He answered it and again he got dial tone, so he hung up and a fresh imprint of ink covered his ear.

Like before, he fidgeted with his ear, nose, all over. His face looked worse than before although he couldn't see it. When he saw the ink on his hand, he picked up the phone and saw the ink on the receiver. At that point he figured someone was playing a trick on him.

All of a sudden, Tatum appeared in front of him and pointed to his face which was ink-ridden and twitching. Rodney walked over and looked to Mike, then Tatum.

"Really," was all Rodney could say, and it was directed more at Tatum than Mike.

"If there's a rumble in town," Tatum said to Rodney, "you better be wearing the same street clothes as I am, because you're going to get them scuffed up."

"Are you okay, Mike?" Rodney asked.

Mike bolted out of the room, sobbing, almost.

"It was Brian who wrapped your phone with masking tape," Rodney confessed to Tatum. "Not Mike. And I called the phone, so I was in on it, also."

Her eyes sunk, then closed because she knew she made a big mistake. She groaned under the force of that mistake.

"You turds!" she said with an air of superiority. "You could've told me."

"I thought it was a harmless joke and I forgot about it. You turned it into something else."

Much later Tatum and Rodney entered the auditorium and found a couple of seats. They sidestepped their way to their seats and they spotted Mike a few rows away. Tatum noticed ink

behind his ear.

She sank in her seat and forcibly groaned. "I'm going to pay for this for a long time."

Dan Patterson stood close by a technician who tapped the podium's microphone. He nodded to Dan who then stepped up with index cards in his hand.

"Bob Greene, the company's CEO," Dan began, "announced today that N-TEC will undergo a business unit consolidation that will better align our maintenance and provisioning processes in bringing the services to the markets. This re-engineering initiative will impact all of us in operations at the headquarters business unit level, and the field employees in each business unit."

Dan turned to the next index card, studied it, and then looked up. "A lot of hard work was put into this analysis which has led us to the conclusion that we can become a more effective organization with a smaller work force."

Tatum looked at Rodney, then back to Dan, then to Rodney again. "Is that the data I got yesterday? You had me collect data that is being used in a layoff?"

"I didn't know it was going to be used for layoff purposes," Rodney replied.

Dan continued, "And we will obtain the desired level of support in two phases of a Management Force Reduction Program and a Non-Management Consolidation Effort..."

As Dan spoke, some of employees' faces appeared stunned with their jaws locked open and their eyes furrowed. Others appeared more stoic. Resigned.

"Our data shows that we can manage our work centers with less people simply by adjusting the hours of coverage. Non-management and first level managers will be targeted in phase one. In phase two, the focus will shift in March to second level managers and above."

Rodney's deadpan stare hid his feelings. Could it be that his name on the list had

something to do with this layoff? He became more suspicious that the list had something to do with the rumors that were circulating.

A little later, in the computer lab, Rodney and Tatum came back from listening to Dan Patterson in the auditorium.

“I don’t believe it,” Rodney said.

“Believe what?” Tatum said rhetorically. “You bend over backward for this company and what do you get? You work hard and all you get is the corporate salami. Watch out because here it comes.”

Rodney noticed his family picture was moved on his desk. He put it back to where it was. He also noticed his desk drawer was slightly opened. He opened it fully and searched for copies of the list. Gone!

He bolted to Tatum's desk and asked her if she was at his desk at all.

“No. I was with you all this time. Why?”

“I found a list yesterday,” Rodney confessed, but didn’t finish the statement. Rodney bolted back to his desk and almost ran over a cleaning lady who entered and began emptying garbage cans.

Tatum stormed out of her cubicle and wanted to know if anyone wanted coffee.

There was no response so she said to the cleaning lady, “Hola, que tal, Angela. Do you want coffee?” Just as she said this, she bumped into the VP.

“Go get your coffee,” Oswald said. “Leave Mr. Hopkins and me alone for a minute.”

Tatum slowly walked around Oswald, each eyeing the other. Oswald nodded for Angela to leave.

Rodney, not realizing Oswald was in the room, pulled his only remaining copy of the list from behind the calendar. He held it high as if it was the Eucharist and he was worshiping it.

Suddenly, Oswald appeared and grabbed the list from Rodney's hand. After a hard beat of reading its contents, she asked how many more copies Rodney had.

Rodney shrugged his shoulder and shook his head indicating he had no more.

"You pull a stunt like this again, Hopkins, and I'll have your..." She paused, realizing she needed to pull back on her disposition, so she became more reserved, but still icy "... do *not* start with me, Hopkins. You don't have the power to win."

Then she turned to leave but before leaving, "You stay under the radar and everything will be okay."

Rodney looked to the ceiling and let out with a deep, resonant 'I'm screwed' type of sigh.

Just then his phone rang. It was Maria. She told him the results of the doctor's visit today with Dr. Marino. "He took a lot of tests," Maria said. "The results should be in by Friday." Maria waited but got no response. "Did you hear me?" Maria asked. "Are you there?"

"Yes," Rodney said. "I'm sorry. I heard you. I'm very busy here, that's all." He didn't want to worry Maria, so he kept quiet about what just happened.

And that's the way it was for the rest of the work day. Rodney was half there and half not.

Rodney played *Slap Jack* with Kit in the living room. It was dark outside and Kit already had her pajamas on. Rodney turned over a 'Jack' and Kit hit it first and yelled, "Slap Jack."

Rodney turned over cards until another Jack appeared. He slapped it. He started to take the pile, but Kit took them instead.

“You didn’t say ‘Slap Jack,’” she said.

She lay her head down on her arm and she shared a smile with Rodney as he continued turning cards over. She closed her eyes and drifted off to sleep. After a few seconds, Rodney put the remaining cards he had down on the floor and whisked Kit away to her room.

Rodney carefully laid Kit down on the bed and covered her up with the blanket. He brushed her thinning hair back and kissed her.

“Good night, Sweetie,” he whispered.

Rodney lay in his bed the next morning with his eyes wide open, thinking about why he was on the list. Before he knew it, the clock alarm sounded. It was 6 a.m. He shut off the alarm and got ready for work.

Rodney rounded the corner on the third floor of the N-TEC building and headed toward his boss’s office. Actually, he came over to see Paul’s secretary and he found her busy typing. “May I see the personnel files of Mike Peersal and Brian Sykes?” Rodney asked.

She held one finger out indicating she would be able to fulfill his request in a minute. Once she finished her typing, she gave Rodney what he had asked for.

Later Rodney and Tatum sat at the round table in the computer room. Folders and a white sheet of paper with names printed on it lay in front of Rodney. After he told Tatum what happened to him up at the executive suites and what happened with the VP in the computer lab, Tatum sat back and was quiet for a moment. Finally, she said, “So she came in down here and took the copies of the list you had? What was on this list that was so important?”

Rodney explained they were the names of the people who were on the list. It wasn’t all

the names on the list, just the ones he remembered. And he didn't remember the actual social security numbers or the dollar amounts that appeared next to their names, but they were sorted out high to low by those numbers as best as he could remember. Originally, these names were typed on the company's letterhead, initialed by JC as in Joseph Collins, and Mike's, Brian's, and his name were on it.

Rodney handed her the white paper. "Besides our names, those are the other names I remembered who were on it."

Tatum began reading. "Well, poke my buttons," she said. "Julia Sanders! That baby-talkin' prissy...and Preston? He's as old as the Red Cross. But Brian, Mike, you...if this is a hit list of some kind, I'm going to feel very lonely in this place. Just kidding, just kidding." She examined the list. "No, I don't see a common connection, except all three of you are a pain in the ass. I mean, it's not age or gender. How about sick days?"

"Who knows? I can't remember the numbers of sick days we took off, but the numbers on the list were a lot more than sick days. I mean, I had over thirty days because of my daughter. But Brian had zero, and some had only one or two, so it can't be attendance. I'm trying to find a common thread. I'm so confused."

"The only thing is that dollar amount you don't remember. Maybe it's how much it will cost to murder you. Maybe they're gonna murder ya. Yeah, that's it. They want to put you out of your misery."

"Tatum, be serious. This is a serious matter. Will you help me find out what's going on here, or not?"

"Come on, Rod. My humor is just a disguise for my insecurity. My dad was laid off from his job two years before he was eligible for retirement. That was five years ago. He hasn't

recovered from that. Yeah, I'll help you. I have an attitude, and I'm ready to use it. We don't want to wait for the ax to fall. We need to act on this now. I get it."

"Good. Chit-chat with these people. See if you can find something that is common between them. Right now the dollar amounts seem to indicate something but I don't know what. They can't be salaries because I don't make that much money. Neither does Brian or Mike. And the one lowest on the list is another second line manager and he makes way less than that number. So...I don't know what's going on."

Tatum got up from the table and was halfway out the door when she said, "I'll find out."

CHAPTER SIX

It was late at night and Rodney and Maria sat on opposite ends of the couch with the monthly bills spread between them. He divided his attention between the TV and writing checks when the TV host finally spoke up: “N-TEC is the largest communications provider in the country and Joe Collins, the CEO of N-TEC, said it would cut six thousand jobs this year, maybe more...”

Rodney pointed the remote at the TV and shut it off because he didn't want Maria upset. But it was too late. Maria heard what the News Host said, so she took the remote from Rodney and turned the TV back on.

“In a related story,” the Host continued, “N-TEC stocks jumped again today making it the single highest advance this week for a Fortune 500 company.”

Rodney mumbled something at the TV before he shut it off again.

“What does this mean?” Maria asked. “Are you safe?”

“Don't worry” was all Rodney could say.

Maria could tell he was hiding something “You're going to lose your job, aren't you?”

“Maria! Everything will be okay.”

“No. All will not be okay. I can go back to work, Rod. That was our plan, anyway.”

“You think you're ready to sit with clients and talk about how pretty you can make their houses when you think we may have to give up ours?”

Maria put her legs up and Rodney began stroking them. “Hey, I just got promoted. They're not going to lay me off.” Actually, he was wondering when the ax was going to fall. He could worry, but he didn't want his wife to worry.

“But what if the test results come back positive? Her shoulder hurt today. What if it

comes back?"

"It's not going to come back." But Rodney didn't really believe that. At the moment he had to keep things together because she was going to cry if he gave any hint he was going to be laid off. So he said what he thought she wanted to hear. But then reality took over.

"We need to go to group, Maria."

Instead of crying, she angrily said, "I'm not baring my soul to those strangers; don't ask me to do that again. I can't. I just can't."

Rodney relented and returned to doing the bills.

Rodney sat in a meeting with his boss, and some other people who worked for Paul. Their sleeves were rolled up indicating they had been there for quite a while. They were having a performance appraisal session where the first line supervisors under Paul were being rated by Paul and the other 2nd line supervisor working for Paul.

Names appeared on the whiteboard in two columns. One group was labeled 'Met Expectations or Below' and the other group was labeled 'Exceeds Expectations and above'. Brian and Mike were on the Met Expectations side of the ledger. Tatum was on the Exceeds Expectation side.

"Okay," Paul said. "Do we finally agree on this?"

"No." Rodney yelled out quickly. The other participants seemed reluctant to speak up. Most of them nodded without conviction. Rodney looked around the room. "What's with you guys. Aren't you going to speak up? I don't think this is right, forcing people into lower categories just because some higher up said..."

"We are not forcing anything, Rodney," Paul said. "This is what you and your peers

agreed to.”

“Mike is an ace DB administrator, and Brian is the most knowledgeable analyst we got. Damn it, they should be up there with Harold and John.”

Paul rubbed his face in frustration. “Knowledge does not necessarily translate to value, Rodney. Mike and Brian are very knowledgeable, yes, but what do they contribute to the process?”

“Are you saying process people are more valuable than support people?”

“You were their peer most of the year. You're too emotional. Besides ...”

Rodney didn't know whether Paul was pausing for dramatic effect or because he lost his train of thought. “Besides, what, Paul?” Rodney asked

“Tatum is on the ‘Exceeds Expectation’ side of the ledger, so what more do you want?”

Doctor Marino sat at his desk shuffling through some papers while Maria and Rodney sat patiently waiting for him to talk. Finally, he said, “We got a burst cell count of eight.”

The look on Maria's face told anyone who didn't know, this was a matter of concern.

“Are you going to meetings?” the Doctor wanted to know. He interpreted the silence to mean, ‘no’. “There's a meeting in the hospital in an hour. I want you both there.”

Rodney nodded, but Maria was non-committal.

“Kit needs treatments again,” the Doctor said. “We haven't found a match in the HLA Registry, so I think it's time you talk to Jacob. We'll do it together if you want.”

Rodney nodded. Maria remained silent. Withdrawn.

Doctor Marino wished had better news, but he didn't. “What you went through before,” he said, “is nothing compared with what you'll go through with the marrow transplant. Two

weeks of intensive chemo-radiation therapy. And if she's strong enough to survive that, we'll do the transplant, which means a careful watch for a month in isolation. Then two, three months in a more controlled..."

"She so frail now, Doctor," Rodney interrupted. "How can she survive two or three months of constant...?"

"That's why you both must be there for her. At least one of you, every waking second. We need Kit to be emotionally strong."

They all remained quiet for a couple of seconds. Maria was ready to cry. "Your son is the only donor we have that's a match," the doctor said. "But we'll search for others. For right now, let's go with moderate treatments."

Marino looked in his drawer and pulled out some papers.

"I'll start the paperwork for a transplant with the hospital today. You have insurance and a good job, Rodney. You're one of the lucky ones in that sense."

The look on Rodney's face suggested otherwise. He helped Maria up from her seat and they exited the office.

Some people were sitting in a circle in the Children's Hospital Self-Help Group room. Most were listening intently to the moderator talking. The people in the group don't notice Maria and Rodney at the entrance. But the moderator did. Maria refused to step into the room. Rodney made a motion to continue but Maria pulled back again.

"Come in," the moderator urged them.

Maria turned to Rodney. "I need to prepare dinner for Audra and your brother," Maria said.

“But it's only two o'clock,” Rodney said.

She turned around and left. Rodney reluctantly followed her.

Darin's law office was on the 25th floor of the tallest building in Philadelphia, equipped with a bathroom, and it was decorated by Maria which meant it was decorated tastefully, but not lavishly. A wall of windows displayed a beautiful view of the Philadelphia skyline. He was lucky, and he knew it. Most lawyers worked at ground level, and they didn't get a bird's eye view of what the rest of the world was doing.

The buzzer on Darin's phone indicated his secretary wanted him. He was in the bathroom changing from a suit to something more casual. He rushed out of the bathroom and hit the speaker button.

“Wallace is on line two, Mr. Hopkins,” his secretary told him. “He said he didn't receive the deposition yet. And your brother's on line three.”

“Thank you, Sharon,” Darin said. “Tell Wallace the deposition will be in the mail tomorrow. And I'll get my brother. By the way, it's getting late. Shouldn't you be on your way home?”

“Yeah, yeah. Put it in my check.”

He disconnected Sharon and hit line three for Rodney. He was still on the speaker phone and adjusting his pants.

“What's up with Kit?” Darin asked right away. “Results in yet?”

“It's back. Kit is sick again.”

Darin didn't know what to say, so he just said, “I'm sorry.” He stopped buttoning his shirt and walked over to the window and stared out.

“Damn,” he said in a whisper, but wanted to yell it. “You want to cancel tonight?”

“No. Maria needs a diversion. I didn't want to hit you with it when you walk in the door. I also wanted to let you know that Maria is playing cupid and she ... we invited Audra over. Maria just wanted to spring it on you, but I won that argument.”

“Oh, for crying out loud, Rod. Will you please stop trying to hook me up with her.”

There was silence for a couple of seconds. “Have Maria ask Audra to wear that red dress she wore on Thanksgiving. Very sexy.”

“Bye, Darin. See you at seven.”

Audra came to the Hopkins' house early that night wearing the red dress that Darin like so much. Kit and Jacob sat in the living room watching TV and eating their dinner while Rodney was trying to figure out how to set the table.

“Does the knife go on the right or the left?” Rodney asked.

“On the right,” Audra said.

Audra had brought her sketch book because she needed Maria's magic touch on the Stafford Account, as Audra called it. They agreed that they would do the design after dinner.

But Maria did not have confidence in her creative touch since she was absent from that line of business for so long. Still, Audra assured her that her interior design skills would be appreciated no matter where she was sent. “On your worst day you are the best interior designer in the city,” Audra said. “I hate you for it.”

Still, she felt that she hadn't kept up with interior fashions. “It's like technology,” she said. “It changes so fast. You gotta keep on top of it if you want to stay alive.”

“By the way, Jeremy left the company,” Audra said, realizing she wasn't getting

anywhere with her pep talk.

“I know,” Maria said. “I can't believe that. He was one of the founders of the company, for crying out loud.”

“All the good people are leaving for greener pastures,” Audra said. “That's why we need you back badly.”

“Except for you,” Maria said. “You haven't left for greener pastures.” Maria noticed that Rodney was still having a difficult time setting the table so she rearranged the spoon to the outside of the knife on two settings.

Rodney continued to set the table unnerved by Maria instance to do it right.

“My mother always set the table,” Rodney said then directed his attention to Audra. “My brother thinks you're hot in that dress.”

“Rodney!” Audra commanded, “Don't start.”

“Yes, Rod,” Maria added. “Don't embarrass Audra in front of Darin.”

Rodney was just trying to make polite conversation. Or was he? “Okay,” he said politely. “I'm just saying...”

”What's the matter with your brother, anyway,” Maria added “Audra's so hot without the dress.”

Rodney sat with that analogy for a second.

“What I mean to say, Audra is so beautiful and intelligent and ...”

“Domineering and opinionated,” Rodney added.

Audra couldn't believe they were talking like this right in front of her, and she started to say so, but just then the doorbell rang. It was Darin. He entered with a bottle of wine and a cinnamon-streusel coffeecake.

Jacob ran up to him and tried to jump on his back. Kit remained on the sofa, humphing while sitting down.

Darin walked over to her with Jacob still attached to his back, and bent down and kissed her on the cheek.

“Doesn't Audra look nice?” Rodney said, embarrassing Audra and Darin a little.

“Stop with the cupid routine,” Darin said. Audra seconded the motion and told Darin that Maria told her to wear the red dress. She said it in such a way that Darin didn't know whether she was trying to please him or Maria.

Darin loosened Jacob's grip on his neck and eased him down.

“Uncle Darin,” Jacob said, “I got the new Mario Brothers. Wanna play it with me?”

“Not now, Bud,” Darin said. “But I'm sure Kit would love to play that one...”

Kit didn't show much enthusiasm, but seemed happy at the idea.

Rodney put the coffeecake on the table and took the wine into the kitchen. Maria left for the kitchen as well, leaving Audra and Darin alone together. Darin moved closer to Audra and whispered, “Have you told them yet?”

“No. Not yet.”

Rodney came out of the kitchen with a food dish while Maria put the wine bottle in an ice bucket and placed it on the table. Audra poured herself a glass of wine, filled a second glass and then followed Maria into the kitchen.

“You two make a nice couple,” Maria said. “I wasn't trying to...”

“I know,” Audra interrupted, then gave Maria a glass of wine and sipped her own. Maria grabbed a bowl of vegetables, and they both left the kitchen.

After dinner Audra reached for the wine bottle and shared the remaining drops with herself and Maria.

“So, let me get this straight,” Maria said to Audra. “You've been dating Sir Galahad over there for two months now, and you didn't tell me?” Audra nodded and Maria directed her attention to Rodney. “Did you know about this?”

“No,” Rodney said, truthfully. “I did not.” That comment was directed more toward Darin than Maria.

“It's no big deal, Maria,” Audra said. “We're just dating. I haven't gotten my hooks into him yet.” Audra then turned to Darin and said, “Isn't that right, Counselor?”

Darin didn't know what to say. “What can I tell you? Just when you thought it was safe to go back in the water.”

Rodney laughed, then got up and said, “Well Counselor. Dishes?”

Darin got up and started to collect the dishes with his brother. He threw a wink at Audra. “We just started dating, really,” Darin assured Maria and Rodney. “We thought we would shut you two up.”

“I hope you know what you're doing,” Rodney said. “She's a lot to handle, bro.”

Although that was a small lie, they all chuckled because there was some truth behind that statement.

The brothers finally disappeared into the kitchen and let the girls kibitz on their own.

Maria and Audra hovered over interior design sketches in the living room while Darin watched TV and his brother took care of the kids in their respective bedrooms. Finally, Rodney entered from Kit's room.

“Kids are in bed,” he said as if that was the last mission he had to accomplish for the day.

“Why don't you two go for a walk,” Audra said. “We need some privacy here.”

“Good idea,” Rodney said remembering that *The Harmony Trio*, a local band, was playing at O'Leary's Bar and Grille tonight.

Rodney felt they needed a good walk, so they ambled down the street smoking cigars. Rodney commented on his disbelief that Darin kept Audra a secret from him.

“It was all her idea to tell you tonight,” Darin said, as if he was throwing her under the bus. “I was having fun stringing you along.”

They walked past St. John's, a church down the street. Rodney looked up at the cross and blessed himself. “Hey,” Rodney said, “Do you remember St. Leo's while we were growing up? I went to church every Sunday back then. I really felt close to God, like he was right there next to me. I miss that feeling.”

“Maybe you should go back to church,” Darin said.

Rodney's face conveyed a not-too-convincing maybe. He was happy just blessing himself whenever he passed a church.

The boys turned the corner, and the O'Leary's Pub sign appeared in the forefront of a beautiful Philadelphia skyline.

Meanwhile, back at Rodney's house, Audra poured wine into her glass then poured the rest into Maria's glass. “Jen said she's got everyone in her church praying for you guys,” Audra said.

“I guess it's good somebody's still talking to God. He and I are not on good terms at the moment.”

Audra picked up a sketch and held it up. “What do you think?”

“No,” Maria said very quickly. “Too modern looking. The feeling you’re going after is rustic.”

Meanwhile, Rodney and Darin sat at a private table at O’Leary’s Pub, while a three-piece band played. A female singer playing a guitar stepped up and prepared to sing when Rodney had just told Darin that he might get laid off, and he was feeling a bit melancholy thinking about it. Darin brought up their dad and reminded Rodney how it was when their father lost his job. That was a big deal back then. Most people worked for a company for life – from ‘cradle to grave’ as they said. “It’s a different world today,” Darin told his brother. “Nobody’s promised a job for life anymore.”

Of course, that didn’t make Rodney feel any better. Darin told his brother that when he looked at him, he didn’t see their Dad. Rather, he saw a man who dealt with life on its own terms. “Besides,” Darin said, “N-TEC has laid off people before. You survived it then, and you’ll survive it again.”

Rodney told his brother that, although those were reassuring words, this situation was different. Before, he had help from his bosses who had some power. Today, he had nobody to turn to.

Then Rodney told Darin about the list he found with his name on it. That got Darin’s interest because although having layoffs was not illegal, targeting people for a particular reason was, especially if the executives who engineered the downsizing stood to make money from it.

Additionally, Rodney told his brother that two people on the list worked for him and he worried for them because it looked like his boss made sure their appraisals were less than they

deserved. Coincidence? Darin doubted it. The way Rodney explained it to Darin was Brian and Mike were smarter and more skillful than the average rating implied. The executives were targeting them for some reason, but Rodney didn't know why. The high dollar amounts on the list obviously had something to do with it, but he didn't know what.

“They can't fire someone who's an exceptional worker in their boss's opinion.”

“But I have no one to speak up for me,” Rodney said.

“Okay. Okay,” Darin said. “Let's take one issue at a time. As long as you're willing to speak up for them. I mean, how do you fire five thousand people? What criteria do you use? The company has to use performance ratings because doing anything else would be finger pointing. But to force someone into the lower performing category for the purpose of firing them is not right either. Something's amiss.” And Darin believed that list was the clue.

The band finished the song. And after a polite applause, Rodney and Darin headed back to the house. “If N-TEC does anything to my big brother,” Darin said trying to bookend the subject, “we'll sue their asses.” And he meant it too.

The brothers entered Rodney's house and found sketches, notes and paint swatches covering the dining room table. The girls obviously had been at it since they had been gone, and Rodney saw the vintage wine bottle empty standing upright on the table and another empty bottle that they started at dinner was empty standing next to it. The men heard mumbling sounds, and then Maria came out of the den looking energized as she held a red color sample over a fabric making a point to Audra. “The colors should match now,” she said, “The colors we had originally selected were too far off.”

“Make it red, like your dress,” Darin said.

Kit entered wearing her pajamas. She looked very tired. "I can't sleep," she said. "My shoulder hurts."

"C'mon, honey," Rodney said. "We'll get some medicine."

Maria started to go toward Kit, but Audra grabbed Maria's arm and stopped her.

"Rodney's got this," Audra said. "Let him do it."

Maria watched Rodney carry Kit off to bed, but Audra pushed a sketch in front of her to distract her more than ask for her opinion.

"This looks hideous," Maria said.

Then they both laughed with energy, more than the situation deserved, but Maria caught sight of Rodney disappearing into the hallway, and her robust laugh was short lived.

Rodney got up early the next morning and was going to make Maria breakfast and serve her in bed. But she got up early also and ruined his plans. Although she hugged Rodney from behind while he was making Eggs Benedict, she had a wicked headache from drinking too much the night before. All she wanted this morning was just a cup of coffee.

"You need to talk to Jacob," she said while she enjoyed a cup of coffee. "He got sassy when I told him to clean his room. This wasn't the first time, either. I think he's acting out."

Rodney agreed, having noticed a change in his son's attitude as of late. So, when he finished eating, Rodney left the kitchen and went to Jacob's bedroom and knocked on the door.

"It's open," Jacob yelled. Rodney opened it and saw an unusually messy room, and Jacob reading a book while sitting on the bed.

"I want you to clean up your room," Rodney commanded. "No arguments. You hear?"

Jacob mumbled something then slid down in the bed. Rodney sat bedside.

“What's going on, Son?”

Jacob put the book over his face. Rodney removed it.

“Talk to me,” Rodney said.

“I don't want to give Kit my bones.”

Rodney appeared stunned. “It's just marrow, Jacob. They suck a little out, put it in a bag. It's mixed with her blood and stuff and presto, you have a ... cocktail, I think they call it.”

“I don't want to die. I'm too young to die.”

“You're not going to die, Jacob. I would never let that happen to you. Even to keep Kit alive. Where did you get an idea like that?”

Jacob was silent. Rodney knew if he waited long enough he'd get an answer. “Doctor Marino,” Jacob finally said. “He said my bones may not work because I have the same crummy genes as Kit. If I have the same crummy genes, then I'm going die before my time.”

Rodney held Jacob's hand. “No,” Rodney said. “All the doctor is saying is just because you're Kit's brother that doesn't mean you're a good donor. You're a good match but not a perfect match, is what he was trying to say.”

“You mean, I'm not going to die?”

“Of course not. I would never put you in harms way like that. And Kit's not going to die either. In fact, you're saving her life.”

Jacob sat up and they hugged. A livelier spirit enveloped Jacob.

CHAPTER SEVEN

That Monday, Rodney walked into the computer lab and went right over to Tatum and he told her he couldn't find a connection as to why people are on the list. He told her he talked to his brother, and he also had a suspicion that it had something to do with the dollar amount that was listed.

Tatum left to get coffee down at the cafeteria. She just had gotten her end-of-year appraisal from Paul, which she was happy with since she got 'exceeded expectations' for the 7th year in a row at N-TEC. But she was still worried about Mike and Brian.

Rodney noticed that Mike wasn't in his cubicle. In fact, he was in with Paul getting his appraisal, and Brian was next in line to get his rating. Rodney knew they weren't going to be so happy about their feedback. He was to be the one who gave his first line supervisors' their appraisals, including Tatum's, but this year was different. Not only was it up to him to evaluate them, but Paul, his boss, never gave a performance review before. Since Rodney gave Brian and Mike a higher than average ratings in their mid-year review, this was going to be a hard pill to swallow for both of them, especially since there was nothing in their performance during the second part of the year that suggest they were to be taking a step down from where they were rated during the summer. 'Fully Met Expectations' wasn't a bad rating, they just deserved higher, Rodney felt.

The phone rang and Rodney responded, "I'll be right there," Rodney said. Mike walked in just as Rodney hung up. Mike started to say something but stopped because he saw Rodney hustle past him. But he turned to Mike and said, "I tried to get you a better appraisal. Honest. But...listen, do you want to go back to Systems?"

"Yes. I do," Mike said.

“Start looking at the internal job ads, then. I'll support you any way I can.”

Rodney ran into Tatum who said, “Every person I checked got average or unsatisfactory appraisals, Something's rotten in Denmark, Rodney.”

“Okay. It's what we thought, then” Rodney said. “The people on the list are being targeted in some way.”

Rodney walked into Paul's room and sat at a round table as if he were going to the guillotine. Paul handed Rodney his performance papers. Rodney read them, and then looked Paul straight in the eyes.

“What's non-rated mean?” Rodney asked.

“It means you haven't been a second line supervisor long enough to be rated as one.”

As Paul held out his hand, he added, “Good job!”

Rodney refused to shake hands.

“That's it? That's my feedback? I don't think so, Paul. Rate me as a first level manager. That's what I was most of the year.”

“It's out of my hands...” was all Paul would say. His expression said otherwise, but it was more of an impression Rodney had than anything else.

“What does non-rated even mean?” Rodney asked again.

“It means nothing.”

“It means nothing!!?”

“You're doing fine. Your promotion says it all.”

Paul slaps papers on the table. “They're skill sheets on your people,” Paul said. “You need to sign them. Now.”

“Why now?”

“Too many people rated as average. The task force needs to separate them by their skills. I’m very tired, Rodney. Please sign them and leave.”

Tatum’s skill sheet had her leadership skills items marked mostly as ‘HIGH’ from a selection of HIGH, MEDIUM and LOW. Rodney had no problem signing hers.

“Just sign the rest of the skill sheets. Please.”

Rodney signed a few others, since he agreed with their ratings, but Mike’s and Brian’s he pushed aside. “You have Mike and Brian as low. I don’t agree with that.”

“Yeah. So?”

“Their skills are high. There’s no better DBA and there’s no better SQL programmer than these two. I don’t agree with their performance appraisals and I don’t agree with what you put down as their skill sets.”

“But you signed their performance appraisals...”

“Yes, but ...” Rodney threw the pen down on the desk. “... I didn’t agree with them. I shouldn’t have signed them. I wish I didn’t.”

“Come on, Rodney. Don’t give me a hard time.”

After a beat, Rodney slammed the table with his hand. “What does non-rated mean?”

“I told you. Nothing. I need your signature. Now sign these last two.”

After a long pause, Rodney slowly slid the sheets back to Paul. “No. I don’t agree with them,” he said. “I’m not going to sign something I don’t agree with. It’s like agreeing that I’m guilty when I’m innocent.”

“It’s not going to look good if I have to sign these, Rodney.”

“Then don’t sign them. Put the onus on me.”

“That’s not an option.”

“Sign them if you must. But I’m not,” Rodney insisted.

Paul handed Rodney a folder. “Have it your way,” Paul said. “Tomorrow you’ll be told if any of your people have been put into the risk pool. Read this. It explains what you have to do and say.” Rodney took the folder and got up to leave.

“I would learn to choose my battles better, Hopkins. I’m not the enemy.”

Rodney knew he was in trouble. If Mike and Brian were being considered in the layoff, then the list was those folks who were being ‘targeted’ for some reason. He had to find out that reason. He had to, if he wanted to help Kit by keeping his medical insurance.

Rodney sat on the couch reading the 'Force Management Reduction Policy' papers when Maria entered. She sat down with a sewing basket and a pair of Jacob's pants. She began hemming them.

“We find out which supervisors get laid-off tomorrow,” Rodney said. “They actually have a script I have to read if any of my people get hit.”

“What about you?” she said.

“Second-level management are in phase two. Don't ask me when that is, because I don't freakin' know.” Maria gave a look to Rodney that suggested she thought he wasn't telling the whole truth.

Upset, and not paying attention to what she was doing, Maria pricked her finger while hemming Jacob's pants. She sucked on her finger, and looked at Rodney pleading with him to tell the truth.

“I'm sorry,” Rodney whispered. “Sometime in March. First levels get notified tomorrow.”

Kit waddled into the living room looking tired and frail. "Daddy, I can't sleep," she said. "My tummy hurts."

Rodney picked her up and tried to smile. He could not escape Maria's gaze. Kit saw the hurt in her mother's face and said, "Does your tummy hurt too?"

Maria tried to smile, but couldn't. She shook her head. Kit's face indicated that she might vomit.

"Do you have to throw-up?" Rodney asked.

Kit nodded. Rodney whisked her out of the room and into the bathroom.

Later, in Kit's bedroom, Rodney tucked Kit into bed and sat by her side. He stroked her head and smiled.

She rubbed his cheek causing a bristling sound. "You got splinters again, Daddy!" Kit said, then paused. "Are you mad at Mommy?"

"No. Daddy is just a little frustrated about something at work. Is your tummy okay now?"

Kit nodded, barely being able to keep her eyes open. "I love you, Daddy."

"I love you too, Muffin"

CHAPTER EIGHT

In the N-TEC computer lab, Rodney, Mike and Tatum sat in their respective cubicles. Rodney stared at the PC screen playing PONG, an old game that started the computer craze two decades earlier. It was hard for him to concentrate. Mike poked his head around the partition.

“Did you get the packages yet?” Mike asked.

“Not yet,” Rodney responded.

Tatum got up and walked over to Rodney. “It's like the Inquisition around here. Everyone's afraid to breathe. We're supposed to find out whose head is put on the chopping block today. Making us wait is inhumane.”

Just then, the phone rang. He answered it then hung up and got up in one motion, “It's Paul,” he said. “We'll find out soon enough, I guess.”

In route to Paul's office, Rodney sang the song *'Don't Worry, Be Happy'* in a sarcastic way. The more he sang it, the louder he got. Just before he arrived at Paul's office, a book flew over a partition; hit the wall to his left, and fell in front of Rodney. A man who Rodney knew by sight, but didn't know his name, came walking out of cubicle as Rodney reached the other side of the building. “Scum sucking jerks,” he said not too enamored with management at present. “I busted my ass for these corn-fed idiots, and this is the gratitude I get.”

Rodney passed another cubicle that had a mission statement taped to the partition that says, “Mission Statement: DON'T GET CAUGHT. Rodney walked toward a district level's office where the person inside the office was a balding, overweight man who was on the phone. “I have people flipping out here,” he said. “What? This is a HR issue? No. No. You call security. Now.”

A woman at her desk fondled a family picture of her and her three young children. She broke down and cried.

Rodney stopped singing and walked into Paul's room and closed the door. Paul handed Rodney two packages. Rodney looked at the names.

“Why am I not surprised? One for Mike and one for Brian.”

“Don't start.”

“I'd be more than happy to let you tell them,” Rodney said.

Rodney walked into Mike's cubicle, sat down next to Mike, and folded his arms as if prepared for the bad news.

“Why me?” Mike asked.

Rodney took it as a rhetorical question and didn't answer, he just handed Mike the package then took out a single sheet of paper and began reading. “As you know, the Communications Unit has identified an imbalance in the supervision ranks. You have been identified as 'at risk' of involuntary termination two months from today unless you find another position in National Technologies...”

“Rodney,” Mike interrupted. “I found a job yesterday with the System's group.”

Rodney threw the paper up in the air. “Why didn't you tell me? Thank God. Which System's group?”

“Frank Jackson's. But...”

”Good! I'll call him right now. Maybe he's got a job for Brian.”

Mike tried to grab Rodney's arm to stop him, but couldn't. Before Mike knew it, he heard Rodney dial the phone. Mike left the room. “I'm going to die,” he yelled out and left.

Rodney had the phone to his ear, waiting. Frank finally answered and after a minute of pleasantries and explaining who he was, Frank told Rodney that Mike had the skills he needed but HR had pulled all 'at risk' employees under some new organizational code and he couldn't hire anyone with that code.

Rodney slumped in his chair at the news. "Dear God," Rodney exclaimed. "I don't believe this. Does Mike know?"

And Mike did know. Frank had told him that morning.

Somewhere on the fifth floor, Mike loosened the top bolt to the glass guard rail. He jiggled it, and the bolt came out of the casing, just hanging there ready to fall.

Back in the computer lab, Rodney sat down at the round table. Tatum entered and sat beside him. "I got this humongous headache," she said.

"I just saw Mike. He didn't look good. How did Brian take it?"

"He didn't throw anything at me. So I guess he took it well."

A THUD, then a loud SCREAM startled Tatum and Rodney. They both rushed to the door and saw several people run to the third floor guard rail. Rodney ran to the guard rail himself and looked down and saw Mike lying on the floor with blood surrounding his head.

"God help us," Rodney said.

Rodney rushed to the exit door, flew down two flights of stairs. He powered his way through the first floor exit door and past twenty or so people who gathered around Mike who had just jumped five stories to his death. Rodney rushed to the middle of the atrium and bent down over Mike's body. He looked up and saw the guardrail dangling from above. Glass fell and

Rodney winced as it hit the floor close-by.

Commotion built as more and more people congregated nearby. Rodney touched Mike's head and then slowly withdrew his bloodstained hand. In shock, Rodney touched his own face, transferring Mike's blood to his cheek and forehead.

Rodney looked up again and saw Tatum looking down. Other people gathered at the rail on the floors above.

Rodney sat at O'Leary's Bar alone. He was deep in thought and playing with a cross that was chained around his neck when his brother approached him.

Darin touched Rodney's shoulder breaking his trance.

"Maria told me you were here," Darin said. "I'm so sorry, Rodney."

Darin sat and watched his brother fiddle with the cross. "Ya know," Rodney said, "I got this from Mom and Dad for my First Communion..."

"I know," Darin said as he gathered Rodney's money and put it in his coat pocket.

"They said it would protect me," Rodney said. "I even remember the card. It had a poem in it. Wanna hear it?"

"On the way home, okay?" Darin said as he pried him off the stool and propped him up. Darin escorted his brother out while Rodney tried reciting the Rudyard Kipling poem, "If you can keep your head blah, blah...and...and...and, blah, blah..."

"The first line is the only line I know," Darin said. "If you can keep your head when all about you are losing theirs," Darin paused long enough that they were halfway out the door when Rodney yelled out, "...then my son, you are a man!"

Rodney walked into the computer room and into Brian's cubicle, and sat in the chair next to his desk. Rodney rubbed his head and moaned. "My head feels like a field of horses trampled over it." Brian just smiled. "I need to know something," Rodney said.

Brian stopped what he was doing. "I think you're being targeted along with everyone else who's been laid off," Rodney said. "I think there's a connection between you and the others who got packages." Rodney expected to get a reaction but he didn't get one. "I'm trying to make a connection between you and Mike. Can you help out at all?"

Brian retreated in thought but couldn't retrieve anything useful. "Nope," he said in a tone that implied he knew more than he was telling. "Don't see anything. Nope."

Before Rodney had a chance to leave, Brian added, "I'm very sorry for what happened to Mike. But I'm getting twenty grand with the package. I'll be okay."

Rodney nodded, wondering how long twenty grand would last. As he got up to leave he added, "Yeah, but you see, Brian, Mike took a lot of days off beyond his sick and vacation days. And you didn't. So, it's not attendance."

"Yeah. So?" Brian rightfully asked.

"But you did take all your sick days and most of your vacation in a row. You said you went to Yosemite National Park. But for thirty days? I don't think so. What was that about?"

"That's none of your business," was the only reply Rodney got.

And with that, Rodney left.

CHAPTER NINE

Dan lay naked in his bed awake. Oswald paraded in front of the bed getting dressed. She appeared to be all business, and silently wished she never had got involved with Dan Patterson.

“I wouldn't worry too much,” she finally said. “From what I'm told, this kind of thing happens to men over forty all the time, especially men who are under a lot of stress. And you're under boo-coo stress these days.”

“Jesus, Charlotte, you just don't get it, do you?” Dan asked. “I can't get it up because I feel...” he can't finish the statement.

“Oh, please. I suppose the next thing you're going to tell me is you need to take a shower to wash my scent off of you.”

Dan got up and headed for the bathroom. “Don't make this about you, Charlotte. It's the choices I've made. Go! Just go!”

Oswald finished getting dressed and as she left said, “I'd leave money on the dresser, but we didn't do anything.” She paused at the door and said, “See you in the pit, Danny boy.”

Rodney was playing exceptionally aggressive racquetball with Darin. After he won the point, he said, “What if I could get the list back?”

“The partners at my law firm would never agree to sue N-TEC,” Darin said. “because downsizing is not against the law.”

“Yet, people get hurt,” Rodney added. “These people are on a signed Nebraska Mutual letterhead and they are being canned. All of them. Well, I'm assuming all of them. Doesn't that prove it was pre-planned?”

“No. Not really. Because you don’t know ‘when’ they were put on the list. “What would change their mind is if we had something to prove they were breaking the law, like evidence of wrongdoing, but you don’t have it. Now serve. It's match point.”

Rodney served. The point became an exceptionally aggressive one as Rodney grunted with every hit but in the end ... he won it.

Later, in the shower room, Darin told Rodney that a Judge might agree to an injunction if they could show that the CEO, or others, planned the layoff to raise the stock value for their personal gain. That was certainly something that Darin’s partners could sink their teeth into.

“Now that would be a case worth taking,” Darin told his brother. “We need to show the Judge they were unjustly targeted. Age discrimination. Gender. Anything.”

“How do I do that? The only thing might be questionable is the dollar amounts. I don’t know what the dollar amounts stand for but, all the numbers seemed exorbitant.”

“You didn’t hear this from me,” Darin told his brother. “Break into Oswald's office? I think she knows why. Someone higher up started the ball rolling, probably, and she got sucked into it. But it’s been my experience that there is document proof in the lower ranks. They have more of a tendency to leave things hanging around, like in folders and desktops. I'm sure she's got documents she doesn't want anyone to see. Go find out.”

“Snoop,” Rodney bellowed. “Are you telling me to snoop? I don't believe you're saying this. That's illegal. It would be inadmissible evidence, if I got caught. No?”

“That’s only if they find out,” Darin said. “Besides, those laws are for the Government versus private individuals. Employee versus a company is different. Just don't get caught.”

Rodney sat at his desk in the computer lab when Tatum sauntered in, and sat down next to him.

“I want to break into Oswald’s office,” Rodney said out of the blue.

“Why? For what?” Tatum asked.

“For proof they're conniving bastards.”

“You're un loco, bandito,” Tatum said. “But I do like your spunk.”

“I was thinking. You're friends with the cleaning people, right?” Rodney knew Tatum could get a master key pretty easy, so it wasn’t a matter of how to get into the office, it was a more of an issue of what would happen when they got in and if they got caught. Rodney thought for a second. “But how do you get into the desk if it’s locked?”

“Hey, let me stop you right there,” Tatum said with a tone of confidence. “I learned how to pick locks a long time ago. That’s the least of your worries.”

Rodney gave Tatum a dead pan stare, as if he didn’t believe her. He checked his pocket to make sure he had his keys, and then asked her to prove it. She gathered the tools she needed from her desk, and he locked his desk draw. She manipulated his desk drawer lock for a few seconds and, sure enough, she popped it open within seconds. She told Rodney that it was a family history she was not proud of...breaking into desks and such, she meant. Tatum seemed reluctant, though. “I don't know, Rodney,” she said. “It's risky. I have to think about it.” She briefly thought about it, then said, “Okay. I just thought about it. Let's do it.”

After working hours with janitor clothes and black ‘Buddy Holly’ glasses on, Tatum strutted down the aisle of the executive suites with a watering can. She watered the plants in the hallway while Rodney pushed a large garbage container along side of her.

Rodney stopped at Oswald's office door. The coast was clear, so he took a key from Tatum and opened Oswald's door.

Rodney went right to Oswald's desk, scoured the top, which had nothing on it, and checked the drawers. Sure enough, it was locked. Tatum retrieved a set of lock picks from her pocket and wiggled them in the key hole. The drawer promptly opened.

"You look. I'll cover you outside," she said as she left the room while Rodney checked the drawers. He spotted a tape recorder where a wire went to a foot pedal on the floor and from there another wire went from the foot pedal to a mic jack in the tape recorder. Then he spotted a microphone that was hidden on the snake lamp on top of the desk.

Rodney closed the drawer and opened another. He pulled out a folder. Nothing. He noticed a tab on another folder marked personal. He pulled it out. Again, nothing. He found another folder marked 'COLLINS'.

Outside the office, Tatum inspected the secretaries' in-boxes when she heard someone coming. All of a sudden Oswald appeared.

Tatum said loudly, "Hola. Que tal senorita, Ms. Oswald" creating the illusion she was a cleaning person, and to warn Rodney at the same time.

Inside Oswald's office, Rodney heard the warning and carefully closed the drawer, and with the Collins' folder in hand, he ducked under the desk and leaned against the tape recorder's on/off button and turned the recorder on unknowingly.

A paper fell out from the folder and he began reading it while hiding under the desk.

Outside the office Oswald studied Tatum, then noticed her door was opened. Tatum moved quickly with the garbage container and squeezed her way into the room before Oswald could enter.

“Un momento,” Tatum said, playing the cleanup person. “Pardname, por favor.”

As Tatum grabbed the wastepaper basket by the desk, she gently kicked Rodney's feet out of Oswald's potential view and then emptied the basket into her garbage container while Oswald headed to her book case and looked for a binder.

“Que pasta?”

Rodney winced expecting the worst. He knew a little Spanish, enough to know it was ‘Qué pasa’ for ‘what’s up’ not ‘que pasta’.

Oswald measured Tatum for a beat, found the binder she was looking for, and headed for the door. Tatum followed.

Once outside her office, Tatum closed the door and Oswald gave Tatum a good once-over, as if Tatum looked familiar. Tatum nodded, then began sweeping the floor.

After Oswald was gone, Tatum walked back into the office and wiped an imaginary sweat from her brow and said, “Whew. That was a close one.”

“Come here,” Rodney said. “Look at this.” Rodney pointed to the papers inside Collins’ folder. “It has all my medical claims from last year for Kit...six months of hospital and doctor bills. That’s what that money column was. What we cost the company in medical bills.”

“My God, Rod,” Tatum said. “Three hundred and fifty thousand dollars! That's a lot.”

“Yeah. Well, they don’t have it all. And don't get leukemia. It's very expensive.”

He paged through the papers quickly. “Look at the medical claims. Brian and Mike each put in for a hundred grand last year. They're canning people based on medical claims. That’s what they’re doing. And that’s illegal.”

“Well, you have to prove it first,” Tatum said.

“And look at this,” Rodney said pointing to a letter. “A letter written and signed by

Joseph Collins.”

Rodney looked at Tatum and reacted to her forlorn gaze. “Why the sad look?” Rodney asked. “This is good.”

“I don’t know. I just got a bad feeling about this.”

“Okay. You’re entitled, but look at this,” Rodney commanded with excitement in his voice.”Mike wasn't on vacation last year for twenty something days at all. It says here he was at CAI. CAI is the 'Center for Addictive Illness'. He was in rehab last year for substance abuse. He had a major problem, Tatum. More than we knew.”

“And the rehab cost a lot of money,” Tatum said. “I think he tried to make it look like an accident so his wife could cash in on his life insurance.”

“Maybe,” Rodney said without conviction, “but listen: this is exactly what my brother's looking for. I'll copy it all and put it back.” While they continued talking, Rodney and Tatum were totally oblivious to the fact the tape recorder was on all the time they talked.

CHAPTER TEN

Rodney walked into Brian's cubicle the next day and sat down next to Brian and looked directly into Brian's face. Brian ignored Rodney.

"I'm not leaving until we talk," Rodney said.

After a long pause, Brian surrendered. "I'm gay, Rodney. I was HIV positive, and that's why I took off last year. Because I went to the hospital."

"I know, Brian. I'm sorry you're sick." There wasn't much Rodney could say except he was sorry for Brian's malady. But Rodney had to come to some kind of closure as to what the company was doing. "You cost the company a lot of money in medical expenses, no?"

"Yes. There was a lot expensive medicine. Testing. Specialists. Everything was done in the hospital."

"And that's why you're being laid off, Brian. Not because you're gay, but because you're costing them a lot of money in medical expenses."

"Really?"

"Yes. And Mike went to rehab, and that cost a lot of money and that's why he got laid off."

"And what about you? You have a daughter with Leukemia. That had to cost a lot of money."

"It did. And I'm sure I'm going to be one of a chosen few to say goodbye. Unless we do something about it right now. And I need your help, Brian."

"Okay. You got it. What do you need?"

"I just need you to be ready. Not so secretive."

“Ok. I can do that.”

The next day Rodney and Maria sat on a couch reading magazines in a hospital waiting room. Maria turned a couple of pages almost ripping them from the magazine, as if she was angry.

“Why are you doing this?” Maria asked. “You can't sue the company. They'll fire you for sure.”

“They're going to fire me anyway,” Rodney said. “No matter what I do.”

Doctor Marino came in and pulled up a chair. “OK,” he started out, “I'm not going to sugar coat it. It's getting worse.”

“Is it time for the transplant?” Rodney asked.

“Children's Hospital hasn't agreed on the procedure as of yet. The short of it is, your catastrophic insurance is dwindling. There's not enough to cover cost of the transplant and the aftercare, so they're balking.”

“They can't do that, can they?” Maria asked. “They have to take Kit.”

“I'm just the messenger here, Maria. But Rodney has a good job. I'll talk to the hospital. They should listen to me. For now, we'll continue the weekly treatments. Go get your daughter. She's pretty washed out.”

A couple of weeks later Rodney showed up at Darin's office and wanted to go over the material that they would use for the preliminary injunction hearing. Darin put names on the easel, like Frank Jackson, Brian Sykes, etc. to keep tabs of what they were going to say and, who they would call as witnesses. They went over the material and were pretty much set as far as

what they were going to do and say.

At the Market Street Courthouse, a couple of days later, the Hopkins brothers were seated at the plaintiff's table. The N-TEC's crew lawyers, and Oswald, were seated at the defense table. Rossellini was N-TECs lead attorney, sitting adjacent to Rodney. Brian, reporters and others sat behind the rail.

Darin leaned over to Rodney and whispered that he would be the one to do all the talking. Unless the Judge asked him a direct question, Darin instructed Rodney to be silent, and that the judge was the only one who would talking at this point.

“You mean I can't yell 'objection'?” Rodney always wanted to do that. He loved those TV shows where lawyers gave their objections to stalwart arguments of the other lawyers.

“Forget that crap,” Darin told Rodney. There are very few objections raised at preliminary hearings, anyway. I've been to a few hundred of these and, if anything, they are boring as hell.”

Rodney eyed Oswald who appeared cool and collected at the defense table. When Judge Baker finally came out of his chambers, everyone rose. The Bailiff gave the entrance monologue and everyone sat and then waited for further direction by the Judge.

Darin knew that although this is just a Preliminary Injunction hearing, certain formalities would be observed, so he clasped his hands and waited.

“I will have order in this court,” the Judge said, and then waived for Darin and Rossellini to come forward, which they did. Rossellini seemed smug, self-reliant. Darin handed the Judge the subpoenaed papers. He read them, briefly, then handed the papers to Rossellini.

“Is this the same list you received in Mr. Hopkins' deposition?” the Judge asked

Rossellini. He nodded.

While Darin and Rossellini talked to the Judge, in the back of the court, Maureen Temple, from The Philadelphia Inquirer, entered and took a seat. She pulled out a pad and pencil from her attaché case and rested them on her lap.

Rossellini handed papers back to the Judge. The Judge dismissed them and they headed back to their seats. Darin smiled at Maureen and she smiled back. Darin noticed his brother's attention being diverted.

"Who is she?" Rodney leaned in and asked.

"She's just a reporter-friend," Darin said. "We'll take all the help we can get."

"Mr. Hopkins," the Judge said, interrupting them. "You have the floor. A short synopsis, please."

Darin got up and moved to the center of the room so he could be heard by everyone, especially Maureen. "The list before you," Darin began, "is from Nebraska Mutual, the medical insurance provider for N-TEC, and a subsidiary of N-TEC. We intend to call people from that list to prove that N-TEC and the CEO of Nebraska Mutual colluded to remove employees from the N-TEC payroll to save money on medical expenses. That's it, Your Honor. That's all that paper in front of you is trying to say."

"Thank you for being brief, Mr. Hopkins," the Judge said. "Mr. Rossellini, would you like to say something before we begin? And please make it short."

Rossellini stood and began by saying, "It's not corporate policy to fire employees based on how much they cost the company in medical claims. Although some employees on this list will leave the company under the Force Reduction Plan, some will not. The Hopkins' claim is a fallacious one and...well, Your Honor, these proceedings put our company in an awkward

position and, considering the emotional nature of this appeal, we would like to resolve this today if we can.”

”Duly noted”, the Judge said. “But I doubt whether we’ll be able to finish today. Let's continue. Mr. Hopkins, will you begin, please?”

Darin stood up and called George Preston, an employee of N-TEC. The Bailiff opened the gate in the center of the room and Preston, a stout, middle-aged man came forward and sat in the hot seat.

Darin stood in front of him and asked what job rating he received.

“Met expectations,” he said. “That's average.”

“And what did you get last year?”

“Exceeded Expectation.”

“And this year you got ‘Fully Met’.

“Yes.”

“Did you have a mid-year review.”

“No.”

“It says here,” Darin said, “that you have a heart condition.” The paper in Darin’s hand was actually a recipe for an apple pie. He would certainly be screwed if the Judge asked to see the paper, but Darin was willing to take the risk. “How much have the medical claims been in the past two years, Mr. Preston?”

“About three hundred thousand.”

“That’s a lot of money. Now, are you one of the employees who are being laid-off by N-TEC?”

George said he was, and Darin thanked him and sat down. “That’s all, Your Honor.”

Rossellini got up and asked how much he received in the severance package.

“That’s irrelevant,” Darin said.

“Sustained,” he Judge said. “Rephrase please, Mr. Rossellini.”

“Mr. Preston, you're close to retirement, aren't you.”

“Yes,” Preston said.

“And with this severance package, are you still going to be able to retire?”

Darin rose and said, “Your Honor. How Mr. Preston feels, or what is given in the severance package, is irrelevant...he was let go because of he cost the company a lot of money in medical claims. It has nothing to do with retirement.”

The Judge agreed with Darin, but he nevertheless allowed the question. He wanted to see where it was leading. The end result of Rosillini’s questioning was that Preston was able to retire.

Darin noticed a smug-looking Oswald at the defense table. He looked to the Bailiff and wondered who he would call next. “Brian Sykes, please.”

Brian was sworn in and Darin asked him if he was HIV positive.

After a long pause, Brian finally said, “Yes”.

“Would you tell the court how much you had filed in medical claims this past year because of you being HIV positive?”

“Over a hundred thousand,” Brian said.

“And you're going to lose your job?” Darin asked.

“No”, he said.

Rodney looked at Oswald and she winked as if to say, 'Gottcha'.

“You have not been placed in the 'at risk' pool of people?”

“I was,” Brian admitted, “but, recently, I have been placed in a new position with N-TEC.”

“How recently?”

“Three days ago,” Brian said.

”I would like to jump ahead, Your Honor, and call Frank Jackson to the stand. This testimony, this information, is new to us, and I need to find out what’s going on.”

“Me too,” the Judge said. “Call your next witness.”

Darin called Frank to the stand and he was sworn in. Once he got settled, Darin asked, “Is it true that the people who were placed 'at risk' were given a special organization code?”

“Yes.” Jackson said.

“Did Mike Peersal call you to be placed in one of your open positions?”

“Yes. He called me for a job.”

“And did you hire him?”

“No,” Jackson said. “I mean, at first I told him ‘yes’, but then told him ‘no’ because I was told by HR that I couldn't hire people with certain organizational codes.”

“To the best of your knowledge, who had those organizational codes?”

“All the ‘at risk’ people.”

Rossellini objected, but the Judge allowed Darin to pursue this line of questioning, which he did.

“Not to belabor the point,” Darin continued, “but are you telling me that you couldn’t hire Brian Sykes because he was put in the ‘at risk’ pool of people.”

“Well, what happened was HR called me a couple of days after I told Brian he got the job, and said they made a mistake. But I assumed they were told it was because Mr. Sykes was

being laid off.”

Rossellini rose and objected. “I thought assumptions weren’t allowed in this courtroom.”

“Sustained,” the Judge said. “Please strike the last testimony off the record and...” the Judge stared Rossellini down. “It’s how you phrase your objection, Counselor”

Rodney slammed down his hand on the table. He peered over to Oswald who appeared more smug than ever. The Judge banged his gavel and gave Rodney an icy stare as well.

“Mr. Jackson,” Darin said real official-like, “does it seem logical to you that HR would make a mistake like this?”

Rossellini objected again by saying “Mr. Hopkins is asking the witness to speculate...”

“Sustained,” the Judge said again. “You don’t have to answer that question, Mr. Jackson.”

Darin paced back and forth in front of Frank, stalling for time because he didn’t know what to do or say. He saw the looks that Rodney gave Oswald. He could tell that a rage was brewing inside his brother and he was going to explode if he didn’t act quickly. So, he asked the Judge for a continuance based on this new information. Rossellini objected, of course, because he wanted the case to end today.

“We’ll need to hear from the HR people and they’re not present,” Darin said, which convinced the Judge to have a continuance.

In the back of the court, Maureen, the reporter, sensing defeat, got up to leave, but before she opened the door, Rodney burst to his feet.

“This is horseshit,” he yelled.

“Sit down, Mr. Hopkins. Sit down,” the Judge said in a tone that wasn’t all that nice.

“Your Honor,” Rodney said and then pointed at Oswald, “That woman over there is

manipulating this process.”

“Mr. Hopkins,” the Judge remarked, “Don't make me place you in contempt.”

Rodney walked in the middle of the room, and the Judge motioned to the Bailiff to contain him.

“She's in contempt, Your Honor,” Rodney said, and then he turned to her, “How many people did you get to?”

“Sit down, Mr. Hopkins,” the Judge yelled.

Rodney approached Oswald, but the Bailiff stopped his advance.

In the back of the court, Maureen sat back down and watched, as everyone else did as well.

“What's in it for you, Oswald?” Rodney asked. “Money? Stocks?”

The Judge banged the gavel down hard several times. “You're in contempt, Mr. Hopkins,” the Judge said.

“Tell them, Oswald,” Rodney yelled. “Tell them what you said about us peons.”

“Take him away,” the Judge told the Bailiff.

While the Bailiff dragged Rodney away, he ranted “Let them eat cake! That's what she said. Tell them, you puffed-up slut. Let them eat cake, she said! LET THEM EAT CAKE!”

Maureen was actually impressed with Rodney's performance, as if he was auditioning for a movie. Nevertheless, Darin approached the bench while Rodney disappeared through the doors, still yelling.

“Your Honor,” Darin said, but was interrupted immediately.

“He stays in overnight,” the Judge interjected. “Let him cool off.”

Rossellini approached the bench. “Your Honor, we wanted to finish...”

The Judge interrupted him as well by saying, “Well, it's not going to happen, Mr. Rossellini. Not by a long shot.”

“Do I get the continuance, Judge?” Darin asked.

“I want your brother in my chambers tomorrow morning. I want an apology. If he apologizes, we'll reconvene on this matter in two weeks from yesterday. If he doesn't ... I'm ruling on this matter tomorrow.”

The Judge banged the gavel one last time and then left.

At the Jailer's desk moments later, the Jailer watched Rodney sign a paper for his belongings he was giving up while he was a resident with the state, like his wallet, money, etc.

“May I make a phone call?” Rodney asked.

The jailer handed Rodney a phone and Rodney dialed.

On the other end of the line, Kit answered the phone and said, “Hopkins' residence.”

“Hi, Sweetie,” Rodney said. “It's Daddy.”

“Daddy, I learned a new joke today. Do you want to hear it?”

“Sure,” Rodney said. “What is it?”

“I went to the diner yesterday with my horse, and I sat down and the waitress came over and said, “Hey, what's with the long face.”

Rodney laughed. “You never cease to amaze me, Honey.”

“When are you coming home?” she asked.

“I don't know, honey. You'll probably be asleep when I get home.”

“Mommy bought peach ice cream.”

“She did. Does it taste good?”

“I don’t know. I accidentally dropped it on the floor and Lady is licking it up now.” Kit bent down, and as Lady was licking the ice cream from the floor, she whispered to the dog, “Does it taste good?” Rodney heard one bark, then more licking sounds.

“It tastes delicious,” Kit said phone.

Maria took the phone away because the next thing Rodney heard was her voice. “Where are you?” she barked.

Rodney told her what had happened and where he was. She wasn’t happy.

Back in the courtroom, Darin and Rossellini gathered their papers. Rossellini put his into an attaché case, and left giving clearance for Maureen to walk up to Darin. “Your brother put on quite a show,” she said.

“Yeah, but he's got to work on his delivery,” Darin said.

“If you don’t mind,” she said, “if you're going to see him, may I go with you?”

“You better. Because I wanna kill him.”

At the county jail, Rodney sat on a cot that he was going to sleep on. Maureen, Darin, and a guard suddenly appeared at the cell block door. The Guard opened the cell door. Darin and Maureen entered while the Guard waited outside.

“What's the matter with you?” Darin asked Rodney.

“It was justifiable anger.”

“Justifiable, my ass,” Darin said. After buzzing through the introduction of Maureen to Rodney, Darin told Rodney if he wanted his brother to continue on with the case he would have to keep his mouth shut.

“Oswald got to those people. She's...she's...”

“A slut, I think you said,” Maureen offered.

“All right. What's done is done. Can't change the past. Right now, I gotta figure out what to do next. I'm screwed if I don't.” Darin then explained that if Rodney didn't want to spend a month in jail, Darin would be at the jail tomorrow to take him to apologize to the Judge. Rodney was told in no uncertain terms to practice the apology and that Darin would be here 8:30 sharp.

Darin signaled the jailer, who opened the cell and Darin left, but Maureen stayed and sat down on the cot with a pencil and a pad of paper. “Did Oswald really say, ‘Let them eat cake’?” she asked.

Rodney nodded. “I overheard her say it.”

“Okay. I gotta ask then: why are you suing one of the biggest corporations in the country?” Maureen waited patiently for his response.

“Because I'm scared to death about what's going to happen to my daughter if I lose my job. She has Leukemia and I need my medical insurance.”

Maureen appeared stricken with sympathy. She opened her pad and started to write. “You can get another insurance, no?” Maureen asked.

“No. Most insurances won't accept pre-existing conditions.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Darin entered the county jail and handed Rodney's release papers to the guard. Within seconds the guard punched in a couple of numbers in a computer and the cell doors in front of them open.

The guard read the release then picked up a set of keys which he handed to the escort guard.

"How did he survive the night," Darin asked him.

"I was told he was a model prisoner," the Escort Guard responded. "Wow. Have you seen the parking lot. Are they waiting for him."

He took a deep breath, nodded, than exhaled loudly, as if this was going to be another 'bad' day.

Within seconds they appeared in front of Rodney's jail cell. He sat up, groggy, apparently sleeping. "Let's go, Pacino," Darin said. "Your public is waiting."

The Escort Guard opened the cell door and Rodney followed his brother out.

"How was your evening?" Darin asked.

"Oh, simply divine," Rodney said on. "How was yours?"

Once the brothers had a little privacy on the way to see the Judge, Darin pulled Rodney in and said, "Now, you listen to me. You're going to apologize to the Judge. If you don't want to end up back here, and if you want to win your court case, be sincere when you give the apology. Do you understand?"

Rodney, or course, understood.

They walked down a hall of the courthouse and sat down on a settee bench right outside the Judge's chambers. Darin had the newspaper tightly clutched under his arm, and Darin guessed Rodney had no clue as to the furor, the excitement, and commotion this case was causing.

Rodney pulled at the paper, but Darin wasn't going to let him have it. "Apologize first," Darin said.

Even though it would be a terrible decision for the Judge to send Rodney back to jail, Darin knew he would if he didn't get his way. So, Darin told Rodney to practice his apology again.

After a few minutes of waiting, the Judge finally came by. He unlocked his door, walked in his office and hung up his coat. Rodney and Darin followed him into the room, and the Judge motioned for them to sit.

"Did you see that mob?" the Judge asked.

"What mob?" Rodney said.

"He has no clue, Judge," Darin said. He waved the paper. "He hasn't seen this yet. He has no clue."

"Oh. Yes, well...he'll find out soon enough." After a few seconds of rearranging stuff on his desk, the Judge said to Rodney, "You may apologize now. I'm listening."

"I'm sorry for behaving so atrociously, Judge," Rodney said while putting his hand to his chest, a nice touch that he did on his own. "I don't know what happened to me. I just saw Oswald and that smug look on her face, and I flipped out, I guess. I am truly sorry for disrupting your court and disrespecting you. It will not happen again."

"If smugness was a crime," the Judge said, "we'd all be serving time. Right? Anyway...it

looks like you boys have your job cut out for you. Go..." And he waved them off. "I'll see you both in two weeks." Then he directed his attention to Rodney. "And I expect you to be on your best behavior next time I see you."

Rodney nodded and the Hopkins brothers left. As they walked out of the main entrance area of the courthouse, Darin handed the newspaper to Rodney who read the front page headlines when they reached the exit doors. As they walked out onto the steps Rodney saw the headlines which read, "LET THEM EAT CAKE".

Rodney looked outside to the parking lot and saw a sea of people waiting for him to arrive. Rodney alternately looked at the newspaper article, then out to the mass of humanity.

"That's him," one reporter yelled out.

Darin knew he was in trouble at that point. There was no getting away of the questions being pumped at Rodney non-stop. He couldn't answer even one question without ten more being thrown at him in rapid-fire succession. The news people were relentless. They kept coming and coming. Darin was used to the paparazzi throwing questions at him, but Rodney was not, and Darin had never experienced anything like this.

Rodney appeared dumfounded, paralyzed, so Darin just directed him to the car and guided him into the front seat.

They escaped the courthouse parking lot without having, or giving, any injuries.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The entire Hopkins family was sitting in the living room, including Darin.

“You should've seen it, Maria,” Darin said. “It was spectacular. News people popping questions, people yelling praise from everywhere at once.”

The phone rang and Maria answered. She hand-cups the phone.

“It's someone from the Oprah show,” she whispered.

“Give me it. I'll handle it.” Darin took the phone and winked at Rodney.

“Hello. I'm his brother and his counsel. What do you want?”

What they wanted was a piece of Rodney, and Darin was astute enough to realize the time to strike was right now, while the iron was hot. So, Darin set up a time and a place for them to meet with with Oprah which she taped in Chicago. They also got a call from Dr. Phil's people as well as *Good Morning America*, NBC, CBS, and FOX news. They all wanted to interview Rodney tomorrow, but Darin had to parse out his brother's attention and promised he would call them all back with a timeframe of when Rodney could make it.

But first, they had to go to Chicago. And then on to New York if they wanted to be in a “Good Morning America” segment or Dr. Phil. They couldn't do all in one day, of course, so he had to set up appointments.

No one in Rodney's circle expected this kind of attention and it was a lot to bear considering the present circumstances. Kit came running over and hugged her father's leg. She looked tired, sickly, but Rodney picked her up, lovingly, while Darin and Maria answered the non-stop phone calls. Kit fell asleep in Rodney's arms.

Exhausted, Maria sat down in a daze, and Darin turned on the TV to see what the news

had to say about what was doing on.

The face of a major newscaster filled the screen. “N-TEC,” he began, “conveyed to us last week it would cut six thousand jobs this year in the tri-state area, but they didn't count on an employee who, in this great city of Brotherly Love, is fighting back. His name is Rodney Hopkins.”

Everyone stirred with excitement, but Darin, like a conductor of music, motioned for silence. “He sued for an injunction to stop a lay-off at N-TEC,” the Newscaster continued. “And this is what happened at the courthouse today.”

The TV switched to a taped video at the courthouse. A few people in the background were yelling 'Rocky' and they won't stop chanting.

Questions were hurled in rapid succession as Rodney and Darin headed towards their car. The reporters around them had to yell over the noise of the cheering crowd. Finally, one question surfaced above the rest. “Mr. Hopkins. Do you really think you can stop them?”

TV Rodney stopped to answer that particular question. “I don't know,” Rodney said. “Right now I'm just putting one foot in front of the other.”

“Oh, God. I sound so stupid,” Rodney said, as he watched himself on TV.

Just then, Darin grabbed the microphone and said, “I think we have an uphill battle.” Another question surfaced. “Did a colleague commit suicide because he was laid-off?”

Surprised by the unexpected question, the brothers ducked into the car, and drove away.

At Rodney's house, Darin grabbed the TV remote control and muted the TV. He kissed Jacob and Kit goodbye, and told Rodney “We gotta work on your delivery.”

“What's going on, Darin?” Maria chimed in. “What's happening?”

“It looks like your husband woke up an entire city with this law suit. Damn, he woke up

an entire country!” Darin turned to Rodney who seemed aloof, not really paying attention. “Get a good night sleep,” Darin said. “I’ll be here early with a limo. We got a lot of preparing to do.”

After Darin left, Maria consoled Rodney then asked, “Is everything going to be okay, Rodney?”

“I haven’t got the foggiest idea,” Rodney told her. He leaned back. For the first time he realized what all this meant. He was a celebrity now, and he knew he had to work on how he presented himself, and that he shouldn’t be so impulsive in court.

When Darin arrived at Rodney’s house the next morning with a chauffeur driving a limo, papers cluttered the back seat of an otherwise spotless interior. Darin referenced the papers as he talked with his brother. “I was up all night pulling this,” Darin said. “N-TEC’s average medical cost per employee is less than a thousand. A point to remember. You cost the company a lot of money because of Kit. If you talk about layoffs, use euphemisms like re-engineering, restructuring, right-sizing, down-sizing. It makes you sound like you know what you’re talking about.”

“You mean, even if I don’t. What’s this?” Rodney asked pointing to a particular paper.

“Stock quotes.” Darin said. “Greene, your CEO, took advantage of his stock options after 5 years of doing nothing. Why now? He cashed in half of those stock options, and because of the layoff he’s worth twenty-five million now.”

“Yeah, but what’s that going to prove?” Rodney asked. “That he’s rich? He just took advantage of what he had.”

“No. He got those stock options when he was hired. He held on to them. The question is, why was he selling them now? And did he have anything to do to increase their market value?”

Please, listen to me.” Darin stopped, then picked up again. “We have to create a perception of wrongdoing. Perception is reality in this case. Get that. Example: the ratio of your CEO's annual salary and the line worker is four hundred to one. The Fortune Five Hundred ratio is three hundred, which means Greene is one of the highest paid CEOs in the country? Nothing wrong with that, but against the backdrop of the huge profits because they're laying off thousands of people, it appears wrong. People will be on our side like they are now. But that could change, so stay awake and know what you're doing at all times. And if we can prove they're laying-off people illegally, they will all be criminals. That's why Oswald did what she did. She doesn't want to go to jail over this and you present a threat to her and to them. All of them.”

Darin looked at some more papers. Rodney dug in with him. They pulled into the airport.

Some directors, producers, camera people and stage hands prepared for the interview which Oprah was going to perform. The Cameras were moved into position, and the arrow signs directed Rodney and Darin on where to go. ‘Harpo studios, this way. Just follow the arrows.’ And so Rodney and Darin just followed the arrows on the floor. They stopped because Oprah appeared from afar. “There she is,” Rodney said, appearing nervous as hell.

“Calm down. Relax,” Darin advised, as if he wasn't nervous himself.

Darin saw Oprah asking a question of one of the producers, and the producer pointed towards Rodney, as if she asked the producer if they had arrived. She looked and Darin waved.

“Oh, my God,” Rodney bellowed. “She's coming this way.”

“Hello,” Oprah said when she arrived. “Which one of you is Rodney Hopkins?”

“That would be me,” Rodney said as he extended his hand. They shook hands. “And this is my brother, Maria...I mean, Darin.”

Oprah chuckled, as if she was familiar with this ‘star struck’ behavior. “Now, Rodney,” she said real soft-like, “I want you to feel comfortable. I’m just thrilled that you’re here. I think what you did was terrific, and we’re just going to expose what you did a little bit.”

“Thank you, Miss Winfrey,” Rodney said.

“We’ll talk a little about the business side of layoffs,” Oprah said, “but you’re here to explain the human side of this issue, and what you’re going through. Of course, you’ll have the audience and me to support you. And call me Oprah. Remember, I’m on your side.”

A makeup person joined them just as Oprah was ready to leave. “Relax. You’re going to be a hit. This is Jennifer, your make up person. You’re in good hands.”

“Mr. Hopkins,” Jennifer said. “Follow me, please.”

As Jennifer whisked Rodney away, Oprah and Darin walked towards the stage.

If all goes well, today”, Oprah said, “we’ll actually publish the magazine today, but the special will air tomorrow. I haven’t done a TV show like this in a while. I mean, we don’t usually have a quick turnaround like this, but your brother is hot news so...Come. We have a special seat in the audience for you, or you can go to the control room and watch from there if you want.

Darin opted to go to the control room, and that’s where he headed instead of the audience.

Darin watched the monitors take in the pre-show hype in the control room. Music played as the sound director tested the sound system. The four cameramen out on the floor checked in. Darin could see what each camera saw, and was focused on the TV monitor ‘One’ as they prepared to open the show.

The countdown began. Finally, Oprah walked out onto the stage and faced the Camera

One squarely and welcomed everyone to the ‘Oprah Special’. She began her monologue, then waited for the applause to subside.

“Over the years,” she said, “millions of people have suffered tremendous hardship and humiliation because they have lost their jobs due to downsizing. Our self-esteem is affected. Our ability to support our family is compromised. Some of you here, and many of you watching, have lost your jobs, or know someone who has lost a job due to downsizing...”

While a director viewed all the monitors at once, he shouted a command for Camera One to zoom in.

“Most people struggle through the hardships and pick up the pieces and move on,” Oprah said. “Families are tested, sometimes beyond their means to cope. Today, we will talk to someone who decided to fight back. Rodney Hopkins is suing one of the more powerful companies in the world. He was driven by the need to maintain his medical insurance continuity for his daughter who is home fighting against leukemia. This single act of courage has people all over the country buzzing their approval. Welcome, won’t you ... Rodney Hopkins.”

The audience gave a standing ovation. The spirit of acceptance was extraordinary. The production people in the booth were actually applauding as well, the first time that had ever happened, Darin found out later. The whole atmosphere of acceptance caught Oprah by surprise.

Oprah, teary-eyed from the joy given in this reception, stepped back and sat down on an aisle-step. And listened. And watched. Her approval rating increased, if that was possible.

As Rodney looked out in the audience and humbly accepted the accolades, Darin left the control room and clapped along with the audience.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Audra and the rest of the Hopkins family watched the Oprah show on TV in the Hopkins' living room as Rodney and Darin burst through the front door all excited and charged from the day's events.

Maria got up and hugged Rodney. "You were wonderful," she said. "I can't believe the reception you received. Sit."

Darin sat next to Audra while Rodney took a seat next to Maria and the kids. Kit got up and sluggishly climbed on Rodney's lap. A commercial ended and the Oprah show came on.

Rodney sat on the edge of the stage and Oprah walked up on the top step and sat down next to Rodney.

"Some people are saying you are more popular than Rocky in Philadelphia," Oprah said. "How does that make you feel when people talk like that?"

"I don't think anyone in Philadelphia can be more popular than Rocky Balboa," Rodney said. "Besides, he's not a real guy, is he?"

Jacob ran around the couch with his hands over his head humming the tune to Rocky. Maria buried her face in her hands.

"I was trying to be cute," Rodney said from the couch.

"Okay," Oprah continued. "Let's talk to the audience but first tell me, what do you think your chances are of winning your case in court?"

"I don't know," Rodney said. "But my brother, my lawyer, is in the audience, or somewhere. Ask him."

Darin walked out on stage and a producer ran over to him and handed him the

microphone.

“Oh, you're so handsome on TV,” Audra said. She sarcastically added, “Oh, you’re my hero.”

Darin smacked her hand, kidding around.

“It's just a Preliminary Injunction hearing at this stage,” Darin said on TV. “If it were a jury case, I'd feel more confident. It wouldn't be prudent to speculate further than that.”

In Hopkins living room, Rodney ruffled Darin's hair. “Your big moment,” Rodney said mockingly. “I'm sorry, I can't talk to you, cause I don't have anything to say. Wow. Way to go barrister bro. “

Just then the phone rang.

“The phone has been ringing all day,” Maria said. “Maureen, from the *Philadelphia Inquirer* called. And *People Magazine* called. Twice.”

Maria got up to answer the phone.

On the TV, Oprah moved to a person in the audience. She picked a woman and handed her the microphone. “Are you married or divorced?” she asked Rodney. “If you're divorced, are you available?” Everyone in the audience laughed.

“Yes, I am happily married to a beautiful woman. And I have two wonderful children.” Jacob and Kit made a fuss over Rodney’s answer on TV.

Maria covered the transmitter of the phone and said, “It's a producer of *The John Brown Show*.”

And that’s the way it was for the next week. Darin spent that night and the rest of the week coaching Rodney about gestures when talking. Darin had lots of training as a lawyer on

how to influence a jury with just hand gestures, also with tones of voice, and body movements. There was a lot to take in and to do it right meant that one had to be convincing, likeable, and above all, trustworthy. There were even instructions on how to walk.

Darin told Rodney that most people made up their minds on the truth of what a person was saying just by the way that person hung their head, or twirled their hands, or folded their arms. “Everyone, it seems,” Darin said, “do not like folded arms. So never fold your arms. It makes you look like you’re talking ‘down’ to the viewers. Everyone will have an opinion of what you’re thinking about, not because of what you’re saying, but other things. For example, when a control group was asked what the president said in last night’s interview, they quoted him as saying something he never said, not because they misunderstood him, but because he folded his arms and he looked smug to them and they read into his comment.”

Listening, of course, was a good way to know and understand what other people wanted, Darin explained. Great listeners have great relationships, Darin told Rodney. “Dale Carnegie told us in his book *How to Make Friends and Influence People* how to negotiate. How does one know what to say unless he knows what the other person wants? And other people are just sick and tired of being bullied and pushed around by the news media.”

Darin watched Rodney as the *People Magazine* photographer took his photo. In fact, he took a hundred of them, actually. Rodney was a natural, the way he mugged the camera. But it was Kit that motivated him these days. Rodney held Kit in his arms. The *People Magazine* photographer could tell he loved his family by the way he looked at his wife. and his son. and the way he held his daughter. People trusted him. And the photographer captured that feeling.

Darin even got whisked away to have his picture taken with Rodney, but it was mostly

Rodney who people wanted to see, and Darin knew that. He just went along for the ride. Still, Darin helped Rodney look the part as they went shopping for clothes. Rodney always took Darin's advice of what to buy and what colors to wear. It became clear that Rodney needed more advice than just hand gestures. And Darin was able to give Rodney what he needed as he toured the talk show scene.

The N-TEC executive's secretaries for Collins and Oswald heard everything that was said between the two of them. The secretaries knew more than they should have based on what their bosses said in the executive suites. But they were not going to share that information with anyone, officially. Among themselves, maybe, but it was nobody's business what their bosses said.

Joseph Collins got right into Charlotte's face, the day before Rodney was to go on *The John Brown Show*, and said, "People are not only listening to him, they're believing him. If he's going to play this in the media, then so do you."

"Greene will never go for it," Oswald said.

"So, don't tell him, then he won't know until it's too late. Listen, I found out that Rodney was going on *The John Brown Show* tomorrow. He's going to be uncontested if you don't go. Besides, the producers of the show think it's a great idea to have you there. Point-counter-point kind-of thing. And besides that, the Security and Exchange Commissioner, Henry Fisher, told me that we better come to closure on this real quick, else he was going to get involved. And we don't want that. We'll be iced for sure."

Oswald surrendered to the fact that she was going on *The John Brown Show*, and Collins made sure nobody knew that, except for Brown and Oswald, herself, of course. So, on *The John*

Brown Talk Show, which was the the highest rated talk show in Philadelphia, Rodney was backstage talking with a camera man and still thinking he was the only one to be on the show.

Audra was with Maria in case Kit needed care or needed to go to the doctors. Kit was real sick and Rodney wanted this interview to be over quickly so he could go home and be with Maria and Kit.

Two chairs and a small round table set the stage for the TV interview between Rodney and Brown. Rodney walked over and sat in one chair. The other chair was empty. Rodney placed a copy of *The Readers' Digest* under his chair.

John Brown was standing in the isle with the audience and said, "So, let's welcome Rodney Hopkins to Philadelphia's newest live afternoon talk show. He is the man of the moment. One man against a huge corporation. A person who makes all Philadelphians proud. Won't you welcome, Rodney Hopkins."

Loud applause emanated from the audience, and Brown tried to quiet them, but couldn't. He turned to one of the producers and said, "Now I know how Ed Sullivan felt when he introduced Elvis Presley for the first time." The applause finally subsided and he said, "Now, I wouldn't be a good host if I didn't have the opposing view on as well. Also with us today is the executive VP of N-TEC, Charlotte Oswald."

This introduction startled Darin and Rodney. Had Darin known he would've prepared Rodney differently, but he didn't know. And he felt that Rodney was entering the lion's den.

Charlotte strolled onto stage like she owned it. She exuded confidence even though a bevy of boos overwhelmed any applause she may have gotten. Some men whistled conveying Charlotte's good looks, but others booed her.

In the control room, the TV monitors show all the camera outputs. Camera One showed Oswald taking her seat. Another showed Rodney sweating, like he was in the center of a Presidential debate.

The Director of Photography in the control room yelled, “Ten seconds to commercial.” The Assistant Director counted down. Brown, who was on Camera One said, “We’ll be right back after this.”

Rodney couldn’t find Darin in the audience. Darin saw the terrified look on his brother’s face on Camera Three, so he opened the control room door and yelled out to him to let Rodney know where he was. Darin actually came to the side of the stage and motioned for Rodney to calm down, as if he was a coach telling Rodney to slide into third base. When Darin thought Rodney had regained his composure, he went back into the control room.

The microphones were attached to Charlotte and Rodney, and their carried their voices to the control room as well. “I told you to back off,” Charlotte said to Rodney. “But you wouldn’t listen, would you?”

Rodney took a deep breath and watched the production people performing their tasks. One producer was out on stage and pronounced the countdown. “Five...four...three...” and just like that they were back taping the show. Brown looked into Camera One and said “Welcome back. Okay. Let’s start. Layoffs. Why are companies downsizing? Ms. Oswald, you first.”

And just like that, they were into the thick of it.

“First, let me tell you that corporations are NOT downsizing for a myriad of reasons, Mr. Brown,” Charlotte said “Sometimes, companies have invested in areas where they shouldn’t have. I believe that was what happened to us. For example, we had too many people in the

business units and it was very hard to keep our costs down.”

N-TEC’s CEO Greene stoically sat at his desk reading a pamphlet when his telephone rang. He answered it. As he listened he took the remote, turned on the TV that was bolted to the wall, and switched the channel to *The John Brown Show*. He saw Charlotte Oswald in mid-conversation.

“We created business units years ago,” she said, “and each unit had the same processes in each area. They performed similar work functions in seven areas, actually. We couldn’t afford that any longer, not if we wanted to compete effectively.”

A close-up on Oswald showed her confident, self-reliant. “We need to eliminate redundant functions,” she said, “consolidate work centers.”

“There’s many reasons for downsizing,” Rodney piped in. “But what Ms. Oswald is failing to tell you, very little is done for the chaps who lost their jobs. That is, to find them new jobs or find alternatives other than throwing these people out in the street.”

As they continued, work people across the nation were watching this show in the break rooms across America. They seem to hang of every word that was being said.

On *The John Brown Show*, the focus was on Oswald. “The implications are clear,” she said, “make the necessary changes today, or forfeit the future.”

“Change could be good,” Rodney said, “But if every time we change business direction we throw people off the payroll, we start to lose our core people, our experts, and it will become harder, not easier, to do business. Mark my words. This is what is going to happen.”

Oswald countered, “A company’s survivability depends on what is done today...”

Rodney rebutted, "You'll spend millions of dollars fixing problems created by an unmotivated, demoralized workforce. A company can't survive without the loyalty of its employees."

The responses of the people at *The John Brown Show*, both in the audience and crew members, are clearly cheering for Rodney. However, Darin was dumbfounded that Oswald was so effective in neutralizing Rodney.

Darin watched the director pace up and down watching the monitors. "Hopkins is sweating," he said. "Zoom in on two." A close-up of Rodney showed beads of sweat on his forehead.

"Camera two," the director yelled. "Zoom back and hold."

On stage Oswald appeared to be very much in control, but Rodney was holding his own, "If we don't cut now," Charlotte said, "we'll have to cut more people later when competition will have gotten stiffer, and N-TEC would have grown weaker."

"Mr. Brown," Rodney said, "If you're watching: executives like Ms. Oswald don't care what their actions do to the employees and their families." He directed his attention to Oswald. "You say you care for the employees, but you treat us like numbers. You talk about a viable future in terms of financial gains...productivity...rising stock prices...you treat us as if we don't matter."

"How is a company supposed to get high quality executives if it doesn't offer competitive perks?"

"What's your bonus this year, Oswald. A couple hundred thousand? You can't have employee loyalty when you lay them off while you're buying new cars and installing backyard tennis courts."

“Executives who protect the bottom line are being responsible. Would you have them make it corporate policy to ignore the bottom line in favor of a comfortable life style for their employees?”

John Brown raised his hand to stop the debate. “Okay. Okay,” he said to break the heated discussion up. “Great stuff. We have to stop here for a commercial break.”

During the break Oswald pointed her finger at Rodney as he got up and said, “What are you doing? You can't leave.”

“Watch me,” Rodney said. Darin straggled behind Rodney. As they walked off the set Darin told Rodney that he talked to his HR people, and they said the org code was established to give 'at risk' people first choice of open jobs, not the other way around. “They say Jackson misunderstood this,” Darin said. “Sorry to stress you Bro, but we don't have a case anymore.”

Rodney kept on walking without responding.

“This is your only battleground,” Darin said. “You go, she ... excuse me, THEY win.”

Rodney continued walking. As a last resort, he said, “Fine. I'll call Children's Hospital and tell them that you'll pay for Kit's transplant with your indignation.”

Rodney turned the corner out of sight. “My daughter needs me right now,” was all Darin heard.

Darin stopped and yelled, “Then do it for her, and the hundreds of kids like her whose parents are getting screwed by people like Oswald. They don't get the chance to fight back on national TV.”

After a couple of beats, Rodney came back into his view. “You melodramatic little prick,” was all Oswald said.

And before Darin knew it, he was back to the control room to watch the continuation of

the debate.

“Well, it seems that Mr. Hopkins had to go to the Men’s Room,” John Brown said. He's still here. Good.”

Rodney took his seat back at the conference round table and put the microphone back on.

”I may not know how to run a company,” Rodney said not missing a beat, “but what I do know is N-TEC made record profits for two quarters in a row. So, why are they laying us off?”

In a N-TEC break room, Dan Collins was leaning against the wall, intently watching the TV with other employees.

“This year N-TEC will give a half a billion dollars in bonuses to its employees,” Rodney said, “most of it going to executives.” Rodney was oblivious to the cheers of the audience, and he certainly couldn’t hear the N-TEC employees cheering him. “And N-TEC has twenty billion dollars in the pension fund. Now that's a lot of money, and I wouldn’t mind sharing a little of it to help my company stay on its feet. We should be using some of it in seeking alternate means to layoffs. Our company spent nearly one million dollars on toilet paper alone last year. That doesn’t surprise me since we have so many executives who are assholes.”

Mr. Greene sat at his desk watching the TV. Expressionless. His secretary came in with a handful of papers.

“Just put them on the desk,” Greene said. She put them down then looked up at the TV and saw Rodney, who said, “Look what's happened to N-TEC's stock prices since the announcement of the layoff. Our CEO stands to make millions from this re-engineering process and become one of the richest CEOs of the country. And how about your stock options, Ms. Oswald? What are you worth now?”

“What's your point?” she asked. “That executives make more money than you?”

Meanwhile, in the control room, Darin looked at Camera Three which settled on the audience. You could hear a pin drop, it was so quiet.

“No! Of course not. It's just obscene that corporations are reporting profits when...”

“Well,” Charlotte interrupted, “N-TEC spent two million in training for the displaced employees. And our severance pay is generous.” To Rodney, Oswald appeared to be fumbling, and showing signs of vulnerability.

So he yelled out, “Severance pay! You just don't get it, do you, Oswald?”

Rodney reached under his chair for the *Reader's Digest*. “Let me read you an article about an executive who understood the dynamics of a layoff.” Rodney began reading. *Bud Miller, president and CEO of Arvida, a real-estate company that closed regional offices, reorganized departments and cut his work force in half. In the process, he turned a money-losing company into a profitable one. But despite the trimming, Miller, 50 years old with an upper six-figure salary, believed one layer of excess remained. So last March he resigned. ‘I couldn't justify me to me,’ says Miller. ‘Every fiber of my person wanted to stay. But I couldn't look at the people I let go and say I applied a different standard to me.’*

A quiet permeates the set. Then, started by the producers, people began to clap. At first it was a small group, but then it increased until the whole audience was clapping.

When the clapping subsided, Rodney continued. “You want to talk about what is right?” he asked. “Call Bud Miller. Ask him. I'm sure he'll have a few ideas for you. I'm finished here.”

With that Rodney tried to remove his hands-free microphone, but Oswald wasn't finished. “You pompous nobody. What gives you the right to launch this attack?”

Rodney didn't say anything at first, but sensing victory, he said, “It's unethical for a company to fire people because they have medical handicaps. And when that company makes

money in the process, it's evil.”

“Are you implying...”

“I'm implying nothing,” Rodney interrupted. “I'm accusing. I accuse executives of N-TEC of accumulating their personal wealth on a foundation of broken families and shattered careers. I accuse my coworkers for sitting back and walking out like lambs to a slaughter house. I accuse myself, and others like me, for sitting back for so long when we were not personally affected. I accuse you, Ms. Oswald, of deceit and immorality, and all the other cohorts that side with you who are dumping tons of flesh on the streets so you can fill your fat bank accounts with money. You obviously have great power over people. But you no longer have it over me.”

Rodney got up, took off his microphone and left. A loud applause followed him.

Oswald was full of rage as she stood up and motioned for the cameraman to follow Rodney and started to say, “That man is full of unsubstantiated accusations...” but the volume of the applause was far louder than anything she could produce.

One of the directors instructed the sound person to shut off her mic, which he did. The only place her voice carried was in the control room. “And since he was laughed out of court,” she said. “He's trying to seduce the public with his emotional platitudes.” She looked around, wetting her lips and tried to force a smile, as if she was posing for a photo. She appeared very awkward and very stern.

Back in Bob Greene's room, Mr. Greene could see on TV that Oswald was floundering.

CHAPTER FORTEEN

At the isolation ward in the Children's Hospital, a nurse and Doctor Marino helped Kit as she had the dry heaves. Rodney and Maria stood by dressed in gowns, masks and gloves.

Marino shook his head at Rodney and Maria, indicating things were not well with Kit. "She caught a virus," he said.

That night, at the Children's Hospital visitor's lounge, Maria slept on a couch. Rodney slumbered in his chair when a nurse walked in and nudged Rodney awake. He grunted, waking Maria.

"Your daughter's condition..." the nurse said not knowing how to finish that statement. With a somber look on her face she added, "It's extremely serious."

At first Rodney thought he was dreaming, but he sobered quickly as the nurse left. Looking exhausted, he was unable to talk. Rodney led Maria out of the room to the Isolation Ward, where Kit laid on her hospital bed, unconscious and struggling for every breath.

After a few beats, Rodney and Maria walked in wearing gowns, masks and gloves and sat by her bed. The monitor by her bed read her vitals, including her temperature, which read 102.2 degrees.

"Hold on, Kitten," Rodney whispered to her.

That morning on street somewhere in the city, a newspaper truck pulled up and dumped a few bundles of newspapers and magazines by a newsstand. At the newsstand, the cover of *People Magazine* showed a picture of Rodney and Darin.

Back in the ICU at the hospital, Rodney and Maria, still wearing gowns and masks, sat in their respective chairs. Maria fell asleep again, and Rodney sat by Kit's bedside trying to stay awake, but came alert when Kit suddenly awakened, looking a lot healthier than before.

"How are you feeling, Sweetie?" Rodney asked.

Kit stuck out her tongue, as if to say 'yucky'.

The sound of Kit's voice awakened Maria. She quickly looked at the temp monitor. It now read 98.9. Maria got up and came over to Rodney, removed her mask, and kissed him on the forehead.

"At last. Something to be grateful for," she said while taking a deep, soothing breath.

"What does grateful mean?" Kit asked.

Her mother quickly obliged by saying, "It means to be thankful for what you have. Or for something good that happens to you. It means I see signs that you're healthy again. It means you say thank you...to God."

"Do you have anything you're grateful for, Sweetie?" Rodney asked.

"Oh, yes," Kit said. "For sure."

"What's that," Maria wanted to know.

"My skin," Kit replied broadly smiling. "If I didn't have skin, my insides would tumble out."

Rodney and Maria chuckle.

Maria added, "Well, I would be very, very grateful for a cup of coffee."

"Me, too. I'll buy if you fly."

"Deal." Rodney pulled out his wallet, gave Maria money and she left.

Kit noticed the pictures in Rodney's wallet. "Show me the pictures," she said.

Rodney flipped through the pictures in his wallet, and when Kit saw her picture, she grabbed his wrist and took a long look at the picture.

“You look very pretty in that dress,” Rodney said.

“Daddy,” she said with a hushed whisper. “When you think of me, think of me when I looked like this.”

Rodney struggled to smile as Doctor Marino appeared at the window and gave Rodney a 'let's talk outside' head-nod.

Rodney walked outside the isolation ward room hoping it was good news he was going to hear.

Maria approached with coffee. She handed a cup to Rodney, and they both sat down, waiting for the worst.

“I guess I don't have to say this,” the Doctor began. “I'm sure you know. Last night was a miracle.”

Rodney took a deep breath waiting for the ‘but’ at the end of that statement. Instead, the Doctor had good news to share. “HLA found a match,” he said. “We can go for the transplant as soon as we think Kit is ready.”

Maria leaned into Rodney and sighed as if she had been holding her breath for a month.

“Wait. I don't want to give you false hope. Two things: first, Kit will have two intensive weeks of radiation treatments. Her immune system...well you saw what happened this past week. She'll be on medication all the time because she won't have a cell in her body to ward off infection. It'll be a five month ordeal. And you two must be with her all the way.”

Rodney put his arm around Maria. They knew the routine. Well, actually they knew the routine up to this point. What Kit would have to prepare for was going to be all new to them ...

and Kit.

“You both need to be there every day for her,” the doctor said. “Every moment, if possible. Now, I know your hopes are up. But Children's Hospital hasn't approved the transplant yet. I'll tell them we got a match. And they'll have to move on this once they hear that.”

Maria's knees buckled from exhaustion. The doctor and Rodney escort her to a cushioned seat that was close by. He examined her eyes, then pulled out a prescription pad and wrote out a prescription. He handed it to Rodney. “It's a mild sedative,” the doctor said.

Dr. Marino looked straight into Rodney's eyes and jammed his finger into Rodney's chest. “My second point: stop traveling around the country on your crusade and go to group.”

Rodney knew what he had to do, so he and Maria appeared at the self-help group the next day. In the meeting room Maria clutched onto Rodney's arm while they walked past the table with self-help literature. Rodney guided Maria to a chair and they both sat. The leader started the meeting.

“Welcome,” she said. “Please join with me in reciting the Serenity Prayer.”

Rodney spoke the Serenity Prayer by heart, “God grant me the serenity to accept the things I can not change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The next day, after *The John Brown Show*, Dan entered Oswald's office. The tension between them was palpable. Dawn, Dan's secretary, could tell.

"I left my eye drops in your bathroom," Dan said.

Oswald waved him on as she took a folder from her inbox marked "Rodney Hopkins".

Dawn saw Bob Greene walk down the hall. She and Priscilla perked up and respectfully greeted him as if he was a demigod. He headed right into Oswald's office and slammed the door behind him.

Dan, who was in Oswald's bathroom, was startled by the door slamming. He slowly picked up his eye drops and moved closer to the door and listened.

Greene walked to the side of Oswald's desk and sat. "It's quite a mess you got us into, Charlotte." Bob Greene seemed calmer than Oswald, but it was obvious he had a grievance he wanted to get off his chest. "Our market value has gone down five percent in two weeks and Congress is giving the SEC some heat to investigate us. You know what that means? Two years of planning...gone down the shitter...and a lot of pissed-off people both in and out of the company."

Oswald leaned back in her chair appearing defiant and rebellious.

"I've canceled the force reduction plan," Green announced. "I'm disbanding the task force."

"You can't do that."

"Hell I can't. You've been careless letting a second-level manager go toe-to-toe with you on a live talk show. Stupid move, Oswald."

“What about Collins?”

“He’ll go along with it. He doesn't want to go to jail any more than the rest of us. We're cutting our loses. It's over.”

Dan’s head was glued to the door. He was trying to listen to every word, but it was hard to maneuver without making a noise. There was a long pause, then he finally heard Green getting up from his chair.

Greene walked to the window stared out and for a brief moment, and found a little serenity from what he saw.

“We did what we did,” Greene said, “because...it was easy. If my instincts are right, we'll probably pay for it for the rest of our lives, but for now we need to stop what we’re doing. Maybe we can salvage our futures in the process.”

He walked to the door to leave, but Oswald stopped him because she wanted to know what she was to do about Rodney.

“People are listening to him, you numskull,” Green said. “Unless he has seriously violated corporate policy with a terminable infraction, leave him alone. Understood?”

Oswald nodded, and he left. A few seconds later Dan came out of the bath room. He wanted to leave a pearl of wisdom before he left, so he said, “What a tangled web we weave.”

Oswald seethed alone. She opened Rodney's folder and in it there was a tape, presumably from the night Tatum and Rodney broke into her office.

A week later, in the court room, some of the townspeople mingled with the reporters in the gallery. Rossellini sat with Oswald at the defense table. Rodney and Darin sat at the plaintiff’s table. And the Judge sat at the bench where he was presiding over the hearing.

“I have an affidavit from N-TEC's HR director here in front of me,” the Judge said. “It explains the policy misinterpretation by Mr. Jackson. As a result, the plaintiff has withdrawn the complaint.” The Judge then directs his attention to Darin. “Is there anything you would like to add before we adjourn?”

“No,” Darin said “Nothing further.”

Rodney shook his head as if to say he wasn't ready to give up the fight.

The Judge looked to Rossellini who said, “Your Honor, N-TEC will be making an official announcement this morning. After careful consideration of the human stress that is being caused by the recent restructuring effort, there will not be a downsizing. At least, not right now.”

Cheers erupted from the gallery causing the Judge to bang his gavel.

Rossellini raised his hand but, as the Judge got up, he said, “Save your editorials for the press. This hearing is over.” And just like that he left and the hearing was over.

The Bailiff handed Rodney a note. Rossellini came over and shook Darin's hand. Rodney pulled his brother in and whispered so only Darin could hear. “Kit's vomiting blood. I gotta go.” Darin gave Rodney his keys and told him to take his car. “Sneak out the back,” Darin said. “I'll take a taxi or an Uber and meet you at the hospital later.”

As Rodney walked to the back entrance, he caught Maureen's eye and tried to smile, but couldn't.

Later, at the Children's Hospital Isolation Ward, Kit laid in bed asleep, frail and sickly as ever. Maria had already arrived. Rodney entered and they both sat bedside,

Rodney sat at his desk in the N-TEC Computer Lab with mixed feelings. He remembered how Kit looked at The Children's Hospital's Isolation Ward, sickly and withdrawn, but now she

had a donor, so things were looking up.

Just then Tatum walked in with a *People Magazine* under her arm, the one with Rodney on the cover.

“How's she doing?” Tatum asked.

“She's holding her own, I guess,” Rodney responded.

Tatum's demeanor was sympathetic, and she thought it inappropriate to pursue recent events, so she just held out the magazine and pointed to the inset photo of Rodney.

“These peckerheads,” she said, “They actually hinted you might've made up the list to save your own skin.” She tossed the magazine on Rodney's desk and retreated to her own desk.

Later, in Paul's office, Rodney, a security person, and Paul sat at the round table. Oswald stood close by Paul.

“This is a voice copy of you and Tatum Dennehy,” she said as she waved the paper. “The night you broke into my office. It's ample proof that you did break into my office and Legal tells me I can prosecute you for breaking into my office based on that alone. Consider yourself lucky. I feel compassionate today. I'm just going to fire you, since you masterminded the break-in. If you fight this, then I'll fire Tatum Walker, and I'll press charges against both of you. Capiisce?”

The security person reached out his hand to Rodney and simply said, “Badge”.

Rodney studied Paul who looked away as a coward might. Rodney took his off badge from his belt and handed it to the security person.

Oswald beamed with a countenance of a conqueror.

“Pick up your last check and your belongings on Friday,” she said. “Now leave.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Rodney was on a bus going home. Maureen, the reporter, had called and said she had important news for Rodney and would meet him at his house. Two passengers sat together in front of Rodney. One was reading a newspaper whose headlines read, HERO IS FIRED, with a picture of Rodney on the front page.

“The guy who sued N-TEC got fired,” the guy with the newspaper said.

”Too bad” the other guy said. “What was he thinking, anyway? You can't fight City Hall and expect to win. How the Flyers do?”

The guy with the newspaper turned to the Sports section. “They won,” he said.

Maureen sat next to Rodney in the dining room of his house. They drank coffee as they talked.

“He just walked right in the newsroom,” Maureen said, “and told me this incredible story. He waved his anonymity, too. The man's got courage.”

“Dan Patterson must've been stuck between a rock and a hard place,” Rodney said.

“The way it works,” Maureen said, “is the CEO of one company sits on the board of another. They're required to buy stocks or are given the stocks or options as an incentive to make the correct, strategic decisions. It's called an Interlocking Board of Directors. Paterson is accusing Collins, who is head of Nebraska Mutual, the company that handles your medical claims, of planning this layoff two years ago with N-TEC board members. At that time they all bought stock like it was going out of style. This should've raised a flag with the SEC. But here's the kicker. The SEC Chief, Henry Fisher, okayed this interlocking behavior and said it was

aggressive but not illegal.”

“But they all knew, full well, the layoff would make the stocks go up.”

“Yes!” Maureen yelled out. “That's why I have to prove intent. I think I can with Paterson willing to talk, and the list you found. I can prove that Joseph Collins was promised a two million dollar bonus if he improved Nebraska's bottom line by 5 percent.” By having a layoff with the top drivers of medical insurances, I think I can prove it.

“So let me get this straight. They layoff N-TEC people with medical problems,” Rodney said. “Nebraska Mutual has fewer pay outs, and Collins reached that 5 percent goal, no problem. But how did Collins convince Green and Oswald to go along?”

“He appealed to their greed. Lower payouts by Nebraska translated to lower premiums for N-TEC and their stock goes up some more. But it gets better. Collins has colluded with more than just N-TEC. Another informer tells me that this is just the tip of the iceberg. Other companies are doing it. But N-TEC didn't count on one thing.”

“What's that?” Rodney asked.

“You. You spoiled their plan.”

Maureen saw more depression than pride in Rodney's face. “Well, all this is interesting,” Rodney said, “but I need to go to the hospital now.”

They both stand and shake hands. She gave her condolences and said she hoped everything would be okay with Kit, then left.

Later in the Children's Hospital Waiting Room, Rodney waited patiently for Doctor Marino to arrive. Finally, he did.

I'm sorry, Rodney," Doctor Marino said. "The Children's Hospital won't do the procedure because they know you got fired. And even with COBRA you don't have enough to pay for what needs to be done long term. And even if you get another job, most insurance companies don't accept pre-existing conditions."

"So, what are my options?" Rodney wanted to know.

"Money, Rodney," the doctor said. "You're screwed if you don't get the money. The hospital wants at least half up front."

Rodney leaked a gruff, sarcastic chuckle. Too tired to cry. Too tired to react.

Tatum was talking on her phone. Several pages of a blue-line pad are flipped up exposing the list of names. All the names were crossed off except the last name, indication she had gone through the list of contacts she had written up.

"Amanda, baby," Tatum said. "You got your bonus check today, didn't you?" Tatum waited for a response. She finally got one. "Yeah, me too. We gotta talk. I'll be right over."

Tatum scratched off the last name, and got up and left.

Rodney appeared in the computer lab on a Friday. Everyone received their bonus checks and were marveling about the amount they received. Rodney appeared, carrying an empty box. He walked in with a security person. Tatum got up from her desk and came over to Rodney's cubicle.

"I'm so sorry, Rod. Paul took me aside, and told me what happened."

"Couldn't see us both going to jail," was all Rodney could say. Rodney packed up his desk belongings as the security person watched. Rodney took a good look at a picture of Kit,

then went to show it to Tatum, but she had vanished out of the room already. He put it into the box and started to put other knick-knacks into the box as well. After glancing around the room for the last time, he left.

Seconds later Tatum walked to the third-floor atrium banister right outside the computer lab. She whistled like a truck driver and several people appeared. “We’re ready to rumble,” Tatum yelled out.

People on the floor below and above appeared to be waiting for this signal. Tatum waved her hand and yelled, “It’s show time. To the elevators.”

The security guard appeared and escorted Rodney out of the computer lab and to the elevator. Rodney and Tatum’s eyes meet.

“Walk me down?” Rodney asked.

“I can’t.” Tatum said.

Rodney put the half-filled box of his computer lab belongings down and walked over to her. They hugged. He picked the box up and walked to the elevator with the security officer. Once he turned the corner to the elevators, Tatum looked down in the atrium at the many people who were congregating below. Tatum pointed, then yelled down, “To the elevator.”

She looked up and saw Oswald.

“Hey, Oswald,” she yelled. “Check it out.”

Oswald saw the congregation below at the ground floor and just shook her head. All she could do was watch the events unfold. She was powerless to do anything about it.

Meanwhile, on the ground floor, the elevator doors open. Rodney’s face showed surprise and confusion. From his point of view, he saw two rows of people lining the corridor forming

two lines clear down the length of the building, which was not quite one and a half football fields long. As he got out of the elevator, a colleague approached and put his signed bonus check into Rodney's personal box. "For your daughter," she said.

As Rodney walked between the two lines, employees rip out personal checks from their checkbooks, and were using the back of other employees to sign their bonus checks over to Rodney and deposited them into the box. Others would put cash in the box.

As he walked past the atrium and down the long corridor to reach the outside parking lot where his car was, people threw in their money literally left and right as he walked the length of the building. From above, Oswald watched this display of goodwill and yelled to the security guard for it to stop. "Clear the atrium," she yelled down, but to no avail.

Rodney continued to walk with his eyes closed. He was ready to cry at the generosity that his coworkers were displaying. Another colleague stepped up and deposited a check in his box. "It's not much," he said. "but I hope it helps."

As Rodney continued walking down the aisle, and people continued to put money in the box. Rodney's tearful and dazzled expression said it all.

Oswald shouted for the crowd to disband. In a frenzy to stop what she saw, she pushed the person next to her and said, "Go down there. Clear those people." But nobody was paying attention to her. All their attention was given to Rodney.

Dan walked up to the rail and joined Oswald watching the people dump checks and cash into Rodney's personal box. She commanded them stop but no one was paying attention to her. It was as if she didn't exist.

Dan pulled out a check of his own from his pocket.

"I heard this was going to take place. Don't worry, though. It's not my entire bonus. I'm

going to need a little cushion while I look for a new job.”

On the ground floor, Rodney continued accepting money while walking down the center of the building. He finally reached the exit which was next to another bank of elevators at the other end of the building.

The elevator door opened and Dan ran out and stood behind Brian and Tatum.

Brian put a check into the box and tried to say something, but Rodney tossed him a forgiving look. “No need to say anything,” Rodney said. “I forgive you.”

After a long, choking pause, Rodney moved on, but stopped at the sight of Dan Patterson. “Well ... well,” Rodney said, not knowing what to say. “I’m not one to be lost for words, but I am now.”

Dan Patterson approached and put his check into the box. A ceremonious roar resonated throughout the building.

As Rodney walked down the steps, he looked up to the sky and took a deep, soothing breath. Darin came running up and saw the money dropping out of his box.

“Will you look at this.” Rodney could barely get the words out.

Darin could swear he saw tears in Rodney’s eyes. “People just gave you their bonus checks? No strings attached?”

“Yes,” Rodney said.

“Tatum called me,” Darin confessed, “and she told me what was going to happen. I didn’t believe her. I had to see this for myself. She engineered this, you know?”

“Yeah, I suspected that.” Rodney couldn’t say much else, he was so choked up. He continued to walk briskly to his car while Darin followed.

“Rodney, Maureen's writing an article for tomorrow's edition. It's going to blow the lid

off...”

“Look!” Rodney said. “I got to get to the bank, and then to the hospital. Come with me.”

Darin tried to jump in his way, but Rodney kept moving.

“You don't understand,” Darin said. “WLLB will be here in fifteen minutes. They want to interview us and your CEO...”

“Counselor. You've been amazing. But I need to get to the bank.” Rodney continued walking with a purpose. “And I need to show the hospital that I have the money so they can start the procedure.”

“But Maureen's got another executive talking. My phone's been ringing off the hook. Everybody from CNN to NBC is calling. They all know the truth.”

”Good,” was all Rodney said as he turned a corner and disappears from Darin's view.

“All I want is Kit to get better,” Rodney yelled. “And for Maria to be happy again. And I want Jacob to have a normal life. Enjoy your press conference, Bro. You've earned it.”

“Ok.” Darin said. “Tell Kit I'll see her tonight. I'll let you know what happens then.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Rodney and Maria were peering through a glass window at the Children's Hospital at the intensive care as the nurse manipulated the three-pronged Hickman line which terminated in Kit's chest.

The TV played at the nurses' station, and the news headlines attracted Rodney's attention. He walked over to the nurses' station to listen. Maria was close enough to hear what was being transmitted from the TV.

Gloria, the newscaster on TV at Washington DC, reported "Senator Almqvist was angry today when he found out that the daughter of Mr. Fisher, the SEC chief, was given a job with Nebraska Mutual right out of college for seventy thousand dollars. Wait, here comes Fisher now. Mr. Fisher. What happened in there today..." Mr. Fisher dodged all questions and kept on walking.

A nurse walked by and stopped and peeked in the window with Maria. She waved to Kit who could barely wave back, then the nurse headed to the nurse's station.

At the Nurse's Station, a female nurse walked up and whispered to the other Nurse, "Do you think she's going to make it?"

The other nurse looked over to Maria and Rodney and shook her head.

Outside the Senate Building, Gloria was interviewing Maureen in front of a TV camera. Limos were parked curb-side. Some News people were leaving, and others were waiting for something to happen.

Maureen spoke into the mic, "Well, sadly people like Rodney Hopkins, who have no

position, no power, become victims. However, no one counted on him fighting back the way he did.”

Just as she said this Bob Greene, Oswald and a host of other people, stormed through the doors of the Senate building, while Maureen and Gloria rushed to get a closer look as Greene and Oswald tried to push through the mob of reporters. The news media hurled questions at them as one question surfaced above the rest to Greene.

“Is it true that you are facing a prison term?” a reporter asked. “What are you being accused of exactly, Mr. Greene?”

Greene did not answer and pushed the microphone away as he ducked into the limo with Oswald.

Eight years later at a high school baseball field, the third baseman pounded his glove yelling, “No batter...No batter”. And the pitcher threw a blistering fastball and the batter smacked it to the third baseman who gloved the ball like a pro. As he turned to throw the batter out, the letters 'HOPKINS' appeared on the back of his shirt.

In the stands, Rodney and Maria and Tatum clapped exuberantly. Rodney and Maria were wearing spring jackets with 'EASTERN BELL' lettering on the back.

“Way to go, Jacob,” Rodney yelled.

Audra and Darin were close by on the first row. Audra was rocking a stroller. She peeked in the stroller and fussed over Sarah, their baby.

Later, by the dugout, the coach was in the middle of a post-game talk. Maria stood by the dugout waiting for Jacob.

Rodney noticed a woman walking up to greet Darin. They hugged then Darin pointed to

Rodney.

Rodney squinted as the woman approached him. When she got within hearing distance, Rodney finally recognized her. It was Maureen, the reporter. They hugged.

“How's the Pulitzer Prize winner doing?” Rodney asked.

“I'm doing well, thank you,” Maureen said.

“I heard you're an editor now.”

“That's right. And I heard that you're the director of HR at Eastern Bell.”

“Yeah, strange, isn't it. HR. Hmm.”

Maureen handed Rodney the paper and the headline read: EASTERN BELL TO LAYOFF 20,000.

“I thought editors stay in the office.” Rodney said.

“Not on this story,” Maureen said. “There's too much history involved. Talk to me, Rodney. What's the real story – please, no fake news.”

“We're merging with another company. There's a lot of redundancy.”

“That sounds eerily familiar. So, how do you plan to handle the layoff?”

“Our pension fund is bulging at the seams. I gave a proposal to the board last week for a full benefit VOLUNTARY early retirement package.”

“Why haven't I heard about this?”

“Because that news doesn't sell papers,” Rodney said.

“Come on, Rodney. Don't do that. We have a history, don't we?”

“Listen. Our lawyers and the IRS are trying to make it happen now. We can't announce it until they approve the early retirement package. The IRS and SEC have to approve it first.”

“Of course. I should've known.”

Maria and Jacob approached.

“Good game, Jacob.” Rodney said. “You played great.” He then turned to Maria and said, “Remember Maureen?”

“Yes, of course,” Maria said politely.

“And this is my son, Jacob.”

Jacob and Maureen shook hands

From nowhere, Kit entered full of life. Vivacious. “Hey, Dad ... Mom. Can I sleep over Courtney's house?” she asked. “She's having a slumber party. Please, please, please?”

Rodney looked to Maria, who nodded her approval.

“Thank you,” Kit shrieked. “You guys are great. I love you. Bye.”

Kit started to run off, but Rodney pulled her back.

“Whoa. Where's your manners? Maureen, this is Kit...”

“Daaad!” Kit said in two syllables.

“Whaaaat,” Rodney replied in two syllables. “Oh, that’s right. I'm sorry. Her name is Katherine,” he said to Maureen.

He turned to Kit, “Katherine, this is Maureen Temple.”

Kit extended her hand in a formal greeting gesture. Maureen took her hand and Kit forced an exaggerated hand shake. “I'm happy to make your acquaintance.”

She turned to her father and said, “And stop calling me 'Kit'.”

“Nice meeting you, Katherine,” Maureen said being careful not to call her Kit.

Kit left as if she had a plane to catch.

“She has certainly grown into a fine young woman,” Maureen said.

Anxious to get moving, Jacob said, “Come on, Dad. Let's move it.”

Maria took Rodney by the arm and leaned against him. “Come on,” she said. “You promised Jacob pizza if he won.”

As they walked to their cars, Rodney turned to Maureen. “You want to join us for pizza?”

”I’d love to.” Maureen said.

Kit joined a group of girls who were alive with chatter. Kit looked back and watched her parents walk away. She hopped into Courtney’s car.

Rodney waved and held up his pinkie to his mouth and thump to his ear indicating she should call, and they locked eyes and had a private moment. He put two fingers to his lips and flicked her a kiss.

Kit happily returned the gesture.

-THE END-

About the Book

When greedy executives implement an illegal downsizing process, they almost get away with it. They don’t count on a desperate employee who needs his job to help his daughter battle leukemia, proving his courage and family loyalty is stronger than any of their corporate policies.

About the Author

Robert Gately was born in Salem, Massachusetts. His father molded him into a Red Sox and Patriot fan before he could even talk. He moved the whole family to Levittown, Long Island, when he was five—a character-building experience as Robert remembers.

Robert served in the USN for four years and had a career with AT&T for twenty-seven years. He grew up loving movies, and he includes in his life experience lessons learned in tales such as *Inherit the Wind*, *Les Miserables*, and *Twelve Angry Men*. All during this time, he wrote with passion being inspired by the likes of Dickens, Heller, and Roth. Since retiring, he’s been writing full time and has enjoyed some recognition for winning 57 writing competitions and reaching finalist or better in 230 contests as of 2022, mostly for his screen and stage plays.