

FIRST CONTACT



MALCOLM
DRESDEN



**THIS IS DEDICATED TO
THE WORKING CLASS**

FIRST CONTACT

MALCOLM DRESDEN

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PROLOGUE

This is the future account of the *Laurentius*, humanity before *first contact*. The account of a people, that after over 2100 years, finally shatter the final glass ceiling to a never-ending opulence of commonwealth. A *high rise* is within reach. A shattered glass ceiling of possibilities in wealth that never peak.

IVALIGE

The rain is pouring aquatic green
My life is essential
I see the timeline in broad daylight
I dreamed of every star
But only some were mine
I don't know the outcome of every prayer
I just take it all little by little
It's all beautiful
This is right
The world is mine
I live it
I love it
It's still my world
when I look at the withouts
I can open my eyes
I can be born
I did it all...



**HURRY UP
THIS WAY
AGAIN**

CHAPTER 1

In the solace of her sweet-laden dreams, the little girl felt the mightiness of all her superheroes. She kept them all in her heart as she saw the universe. Her world was filled with so much wonder and color.

2175

The music enriched her soul as she flew with the Gods of existence. Her eyes saw cities surpassing the stratosphere of the Earth in full futuristic glory and every galaxy she entered was built on steel, gold, and fine minerals gathered

in precious moments in time. Every hemisphere was like a masterpiece. Each one was like a painting lost in existence that could never be reached in one lifetime. She knew it was the future.

Then, tears then filled her bijou eyes as a beautiful royal azure ribbon unveiled her future. Before an audience of over five hundred thousand, she stood as a magnificently tailored woman shouting out into the crowd. Then she woke up and immediately ran to her parents' bedroom on the feet of her dreams, "Someday, I'll be like *Serena*. I'll be just like *Sailor Moon*."

The summer of *Bali 2175* rinsed into the month of *October* directly into the *Instagram* accounts of over six hundred and fifteen men and women as they walked the *Norfolk Waterside*. That *Friday* morning, the movement was consistent as each ride penetrated the scene with all sunroofs gradually opening. There were so many options to choose from so sadly, those *accounts* would eventually turn off at 1pm and people would move into entertainment districts. *Rie Americano* was beautiful.

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They could go to the *Waterside* theme park, a *Solarium*, the massive *outdoor* and *maxi* theaters, *Exordiums*, major districts of retail specializing in specialty, apparel and groceries, or the harbor waves of the pure Atlantic Ocean. The clear semblance of the pale coral orange burnt sky marked the coming of a new age.

Boardwalks were paved with active skateboarders and pedestrians on momentous outings enjoying life outdoors and so much music was on rotation, playing everywhere that day.

“Why is it that on the best of days, we have to work today?” she thought to herself as she drove. Her blonde streaks enjoyed the smooth air as she spoke.

The apricot sun glazed over *the sonic sapphire* exterior of her roofless four door *sigma Corvette Stingray* as the sky complemented her path. The immense attention surrounding her began to magnify further as her tires kissed the easy roads. She could feel the sunrays beginning to shift down the mirrored lenses of her *Ray Bans* as the buoyant breeze of the boardwalk embraced her face. People were everywhere but at least she was home. The sakura fell directly on cue just when she needed them. Suddenly, she knew she had to play the song.

Turn Based Chess, by a vocalist unmatched in her prime, a classic, was on rotation that morning in her playlist. The genreless piece of magnificent composition turned one hundred years old that day and listeners replayed the piece. The classic sampled *Hurry Up This Way Again* by *The Stylistics*. Still, it was on constant rotation via radio stations. Every echo of sound was filled with hilarity and grace as the horns and violas danced into the air of the wind.

For Lauren, maybe it was her way of getting back at the guy lying back next to her or simply to catch her vigor. For him, at least, she was playing the music on his *network*. Her full, royal Rosalian hair, tinted in atelier gold in the passion of the wind could rival *Wonder Woman* in the high heavens, Ethereally, she found herself soaring on Giavangaria’s immaculate vocals. Giavangaria was an immaculate pioneer for human rights and became the current president of the United States. Lauren

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worshiped her discography.

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“Babe, you know we shouldn’t have taken this way,” he was relaxed as hand waves reflected through the lens of his own Ray Bans as he spoke to his wife.

Look it’s *Lauren and Will*,” a couple holding hands smiled as they drove by.

“You know *Picasso*, you are lucky, *Buma* and *Boris* are with us this morning,” she replied as she continued to drive.

“I love you too, *Lauren*,” he reached for her shoulder as she smiled lightly while driving.

“Then say it with another car, *Endubis*,” He lightly laughed to himself as she smiled at him.

“Mommy, are we almost there?” Boris asked. They were enjoying their *Nintendo XWs* and stuffed *Pikachus*, both *Pink* and *Purple*, named *Huga* and *Julu* separately.

Lauren was uneasy that morning before her drive. She heard rumors about this new location where she’d be working but she told herself she’d maintain her optimism about the transfer.

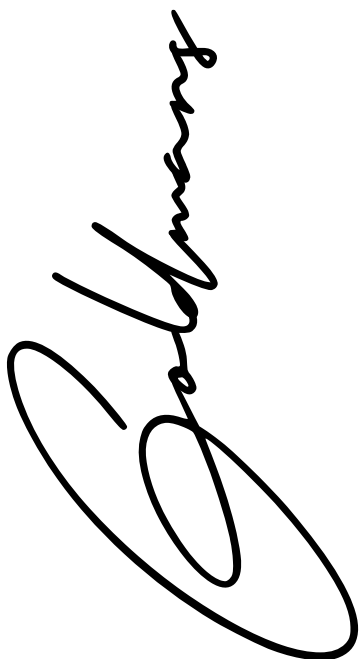
Goldmans was named the number one grocer in America by *Forbes* magazine. This was due to its prompt store growth, welcoming ambiance, employment hospitality and customer service.

Usually, a private company would rarely make the list but Goldmans was an exception. The corporation never released its figures to the general populace but the results were visibly paramount.

Spaniard, *Italian*, *Burundi*, *Parisian*, *Trinidadian*, *Japanese* and *German* in design, fortified in prism rendered impenetrable diamond, accented in high ebony granite, four hundred and fifty-five thousand square feet in size, when walking into a Goldmans store, a customer would bask in the glory of its high ceilings and tall splendor all the while

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witnessing what many hailed as the most astonishing hail Mary in grocery. The *CBS Today* show proclaimed Goldmans, *America's chocolate box* and since then it never looked back.



It was a hallmark in retail and a constant staple in the vast majority of the world's neighborhoods. Each location had been chosen carefully. Each location was tailored to every community's needs. Goldmans' method was to grow steadily based on high customer value.

Lauren Rembrandt was a part of that growth. For short, she went by *Lauren Picasso*. Of course, the work was outstanding, but it brought her lasting fulfillment. To many, retail and grocery, in general, were temporal pursuits but to Lauren, it brought her joy,

stability and a lasting career. She loved the hours; she loved the grind. She had spent much of her youth growing into a young woman in a Goldmans establishment. These days, she was sowing her roots and doing a favor for the big boss, *Laura Goldman-Bourdain*.

"Can you two ladies do this for me? We can get suitable placements but this is about family. This district is in dire crisis and I only want family involved."

How could Lauren have possibly said no? This was her family business after all. Not to mention, she wouldn't be alone.

Lauren's history consisted of *Grocer* to *Sales Director*, *Sales Director* to *Assistant Director*, and *Assistant Director* to *Goldmans Central Director*.

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Store 1629 was conveniently just five minutes away from their home in *Ghent* but she had to make a few quick stops.

"*Beemo*, hydro seats, please?" She was relieved as the seats slowly began to soothe her back. Will customized the car with an artificial intelligence that enabled the car to react when she spoke to it. *Thomas*, her brother-in-law built the car. Hopefully, this would ease her tension before the destruction of *Sector Seven* in *Midgar*.

"It looks like it's gonna get worse before it gets better," he said, standing outside the building as he spoke on the phone. He was Lauren's older brother *Malcolm*, *Malcolm Dresden*. He was finely cut, well-groomed and dressed comfortably in *Ralph Lauren* with vintage suede brown boots by *Polo Country*.

"Do you think they'll be ready before they get there?" *Thomas* answered as he spoke into his iPhone.

"I'm not sure, babe. They could either erase this entire staff or close the store all together. It's really bad. Wait. *Makeba* is pulling up."

The glint of steel from the garnet *Maserati Inferno* drew attention as the car settled in the corner of the parking lot. The greatsword of her might was already succumbing to the potency of the *Ultima Weapon*.

As she stepped out of her car, everyone knew who she was. The employees began to scatter signaling one another as *Makeba* walked slowly towards the building. "Look, *Makeba* is the new *Exordium Director*..." A customer smiled as she walked with her daughter.

She was fatale and fully present in long angelic tiger blonde hair, *John Paravari* and fragrant *Jimmy Choos*... *Makeba Reinhardt*. The sky swayed at the altar of her sunglasses by *Prada*. *John Paravari* was a high-end luxury brand made for men and women. Over thirty years old, it would remain most trusted brand for men and women working in corporate.

"Mommy, do you think she'll let us get a picture?" she asked.

"Hi, sweetheart, how are you?" *Makeba* said with a smile, as the mother and her child carried their groceries.

"It's nothing. My daughter wanted to see if she could get a

picture?" she replied.

"Of course, no problem, honey."

"I hope this doesn't ruin her day," Malcolm whispered to himself as she smiled for the selfie.

"Is there any reason why we should renege on our deal with *Deirdre*?" Makeba asked as she removed her sunglasses.

"The list is limitless I'm afraid. This is worse than the store, I was given a week ago."

"Do we have to start over here?" she asked.

"That's up to you but I think it's possible, there could be talented people here," he insisted.

"Like 195, possible."

"Not that possible. More like a third or a quarter. Look at this list here though. It's everything. The last *Store Director* didn't leave this *Writ* so Marisa and Miguel helped me with it. Alexis is trying to fix the schedule but the assessments."

"What's wrong with the GAA?"

"You'll know right away as soon as you walk the store. How far is Lauren?"

Makeba began to feel unwilling as he passed her the list but at least, he saved her the trouble.

"She had to tie up a few loose ends. She'll be here in a few minutes. Is there anything else I need to know about before we walk in?"

"Just hold your nose."

"It can't be that bad."

"Yesterday died here."

"Malcolm, it can't be that bad," Makeba laughed.

"Don't say I didn't warn you. Thomas is still here. He's in the main office with LP."

"Good to see you, Makeba," He was washboard-shaven smooth from ear to ear in *Downtown Abbey*, courtesy of *Bergamot Napoli*. His eyes were steel teal and his voice was subtle and stoic. He wore *John Varvatos* with accompanying *Irving Artisan boots*, *Thomas Dresden*.

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It was a dilemma he enjoyed to research but duty called him to Goldmans and it was a call he could not refuse.

“Thomas, I know this is a lot to ask. But I really need you, son.” He was his coach of many years with the *Cardinals*, *Eduardo Bourdain*. He also was the CEO of Goldmans recently, married to the present CEO, Laura Goldman.

“Of course, sir.” It wasn’t question of yes or no. There was only one line to walk and that was forward.

“Thomas, I didn’t know you were here. It’s good to see you. Is there anything you saw that I should know about?”

“We should go inside but. . . .” just as he greeted her, she began to walk into the store.

1629 was a star among the lowly of *gold* and surely it was gold that hadn’t been washed in eons. The store reeked of mildewed cardboard, carts among carts of pre-pillaged boxes with twenty-day old faded milk cartons, melon grey flounder, the shelves were bare and filled with acrimonious products no one wanted. One aisle of dairy was filled with nothing but twelve packs of eggs. There were miscellaneous tracks of horse manure scarred into the floors that would never come clean but the trademark of the store was obviously the walls. The walls, once originally emerald green, were discolored in over sixty shades of brown from the nefarious odor of two-dollar cigarettes. Still there was some light in what one would call the drier corners.

“What the hell is this shit?”

“The smell is pretty bad...” he smiled.

“It smells like pure hog’s ass in here. Pure ass. My god, Thomas, you could’ve warned me.”

“Don’t worry we’ll handle this, ma’am. Thomas, where do you need us?”

“It’s the entry ventilation,” he explained.

“Wait, that was supposed to have been done at the beginning of the year.”

“It should only take us a couple minutes, ma’am. It’s a pleasure to meet you. It’s good to know this store is getting a good leader. I’ve

been to 1826. My wife and I love that store. It's beautiful."

"Thank you."

"It's Kevin. Please call us if you need anything," he said, handing her his card. She was relieved.

"I did a thorough walkthrough on GIO for you. The store is a few years behind but it should be fine. It shouldn't be too hard to fix. These adjustments are minor but something else is wrong," Thomas explained.

"It's October and *Winter Wonderland* isn't off the ground yet," Makeba replied.

"I wouldn't walk the rest of this store until Lauren gets here. Her notes will save you the trouble. At least, while you process...Makeba," he smiled as he looked at her.

"This shit is really pressing me, Thomas. Dierdre didn't say it was this bad. The only thing left to do next is strike a match and it's over. We really are doing a service aren't we?" she replied.

"It'll seem like a lot at first but you and I both know how these things can turn around.. We could be out of here before the end of the year."

"You're right. I hope you are. If you get rid of all the weak links first...We've always done this, Thomas."

"The rest will fix itself in no time," he suggested, "Trista is transferring due to Lauren but you don't have to call us, just cut her loose. She knows better."

"Trista will be fine right here. This is a service. Besides, it would be nice to see my niece around here. Should we continue?" Makeba asked.

"Of course," Thomas smiled. And so he and Makeba continued their entry.

"Bye, honey," *Will* was six-foot-one as he stood out the car to kiss his wife on her right cheek. She smiled and looked at him.

"Whatever..." she replied in awe of him.

It was hard to be angry as he smiled at her but it was even more harder not to enjoy how good he looked. Like his brother, he was well

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groomed shaved in *Bourbon* musk. His chestnut hair was modestly trimmed and his choice of wear was, of course, *Ralph Lauren*. His usual *RLL* blue argon sweater and custom fitted jeans were normal for her but today, she couldn't help shifting the weight in her heart for a moment to like him. This was a subtle change for the chairman of *Picasso*.

They'd been arguing the night before but they couldn't continue this in front of the others.

"This isn't over, Picasso," she whispered in his ear, "Bye, sweetheart. Have a good day, honey."

"Bye, Aunt *Lauren*," the two-year old little girl tapped Lauren on her shoulder as she got out of the car and walked with her uncle Will.

"Bye, mom!" *Boris* smiled as she kissed her.

"Bye, sweethearts," Lauren smiled.

She then watched as the three loves of her life walked into the large metropolis building encrusted in granite. Buma and Boris would sit with Will in his office for a few hours before going downstairs to the daycare facility.

"*Beemo*, call Malcolm."

"Calling Malcolm."

"Lauren, sis, how are you?" he was sitting in at the office of his own Goldmans location as he answered.

"I just dropped off, buckethead and the girls. Is there anything I need to know before going in?"

"Look, Lauren, it's in need of an intervention but it's not the only store like this. There are twenty other stores just like this one including the one, I just got this past week." He sighed, picking up a stack of reports and tossing them onto his desk.

"Wow. That's good to hear. Do you think we should've taken the check?"

"I don't know but it's too late to look back now."

"Malcolm, Human resources is on the next line," his receptionist paged.

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“Good, Q, tell them to add another three hundred thousand. Lauren, I gotta go. I love you. Don’t worry too much. You and Makeba will be fine.”

It only took Lauren eight minutes to return to Norfolk. 1629 was just around the corner.

“It looks like the smell has gone down a little.”

“That’s a relief. Thank you, really. You saved us a lot of trouble,” Makeba explained as she stood next to Thomas.

“No problem. Just promise me, you and *Gabe* will link up with us later this week,” Thomas insisted.

“Sounds good. We’ll treat. It looks like Lauren is pulling up.”

“This should be interesting,” She was five foot nine and as guile as the wind that carried her *Louboutins*. Makeba smiled as she enjoyed her full long locks and festive *Paravari* blouse.

“There’s my girl. Thank god.”

As Lauren began to approach the entrance of the store sadly, she was interrupted.

“Ma’am, I’m so sorry to bother you. Could you please spare me ten dollars? For a bus pass.” Lauren smiled as the woman approached her.

“Hasn’t your car been parked in our parking lot for the last three days? Is that right, Ms. Richards?” Makeba asked the woman as she stood there, “Surely, you would have collected the money you needed by now. Yes?”

“Who the fuck are you?” This woman must have really lost her mind as Makeba reached for her purse.

“Listen, I don’t know who you think you’re fooling but you do realize were the leaders of this establishment,” Lauren smiled.

“No, Susan and...”

“They’re gone. Eviscerated...” Makeba replied, “And you need to go with them. Get your ass out of here or the police will be here to do it for you. This is a place of business. You’re soliciting.”

“What am I selling?”

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“Fraud. How many people have you screwed today with this bullshit story of yours? I’m sure our security team would be happy to hear there’s a woman with the latest October *Michael Kors*, in front of private property loitering money out of our customers,” Lauren smiled as she looked at Makeba.

“I’m sure that’s how you got it right? The bag?”

“Whatever, you silly bitches. The people don’t tip here much anyway.”

“Just get out of here please. We better not see your ass here again either,” Makeba replied.

“Wow. Day one and we already have to blacklist someone,” Lauren implied.

“I know. We need to blacklist her ass immediately when we get inside.”

“Do we have her profiled?”

“Actually, we do and there’s more of her where that came from. They’ve been running this game for a while,” Makeba explained, “I’m starting to feel like we’re overdressed? Do you think?”

“Hell no. Not at all. Let these fuckers see who we are,” Lauren suggested.

“After you.”

Lauren smiled as she looked at Makeba. Not only was she her older cousin. She’d known this woman for many years and watched her grow in Goldmans since middle school. Makeba was family. She’d assisted Lauren in getting what would be her first position at Goldmans.

As they walked into Goldmans, the sweet aroma of the entering iridescent soulmates, *Burundi Italiano and blonde*, flustered the hall with awe. The beauty of the moment flew into the atmosphere as their silk blouses complemented each footstep in their picturesque bodies and paramount fire. Lustrous. *Serena and Rey*, The *Asalia*. *Princessias* and Goldman Roses. Queens.

“Damn, they look really good,” his name was *Ricky Duran*, he was on break from the Market department.

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“Dude, that’s nasty. That’s your cousin,” his friend replied. It was as if epic girl songs were on repeat, according to the number of utterances as they glanced. The two of them were cleaning the forge in the Meat department. Ricky was a new hire. He’d been there two weeks..

“Ladies, it’s nice to see you. Really, it’s nice to meet you. Ah?” he smiled as he reached for Makeba’s hand. Lauren smiled as he completely ignored her.

“Makeba.”

“Lauren, good to see you, cuzzo. Is Will still hiring right now?”

“Ricky, don’t think because we’re *Durans* that I’m gonna give you any leeway here. What department are you in?” she smiled as they conversed.

Makeba spoke, “We should look at his department,” Ricky began to get nervous and excited all at once. She then reached out to shake his hand. He grew even more nervous. He knew he was in trouble.

“What department do you work in, Ricky?” Lauren asked. Suddenly, the rain began to pour down his forehead. How would he answer? What would he say?

“Ah...I cut in the Market.”

“We’ll be over there in few.” Suddenly, he felt the urge to confess.

“I hope not. Its filthy. I can’t even front. It’s pretty bad,” he was embarrassed as he stood before them. Lauren couldn’t help but smile.

They both smiled as if it wasn’t something they already heard.

“Let’s us be the judge of that. You just enjoy your lunch,” Makeba explained.

“Hey look, I’m not the director over there. All I do is cut! All I do cut!!”

“Just chill. We won’t fire you. Just be back here in an hour so we can walk it with you,” Lauren asked. He was relieved as he left the ladies. Maybe things could get better after all as they looked laughed at how fast he took off.

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“So how was the game? How was Dallas?” Makeba asked Lauren.

“It was great. Dad and I drove Will nuts. You know those Eagles really got their ass beat by our boys.”

“Girl, whatever. We’ll see how ya’ll do against us next week.”

“Oh, please girl, you think those Steelers have a chance against us in the playoffs?”

“Man, that wack offensive lineman y’all hired to replace Harris won’t last two minutes so I’m banking on at least twenty Benjis that ya’ll won’t get even get the Wild card.”

“When was the last Super Bowl you guys won? Yeah. I thought so.” They laughed. It was great to take a break from their current reality.

“Well, back to reality. Take a look at these, Lauren,” Makeba passed Lauren the sales report.

“Oh my god. Is this real? What is this? Take this back. These aren’t our figures,” Disbelief filled her thoughts as she turned each page. There was little hope to find on every page.

“The number is so low but strangely..” Makeba explained.

“The dry departments are keeping everything afloat. It’s incredible,” She found the figures. They hadn’t yet walked but the numbers were there. There was some stability and the stability meant only one thing. There was hope. Still there was one more problem.

“Is that what we have to look forward to? Two hundred thousand. How are the lights still on in here?” she replied.

A Goldmans typically averaged *two million on one* normal business day, some stores even averaged *three million* but this store was only averaging eight hundred thousand a week.

“I wanted to walk the sales floor before you got here to save us both the trouble. I’m glad I didn’t.”

“Where’s the notepad?”

“Here it is..”

“You know, Makeba, we should really renegotiate these salaries,” Lauren asked, “Do you know what they call this place?”

“Ghoul’s..”

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“Yep, they call it *Ghoul’s Borough*.”

“The dead bird’s nest of the southern district.”

“What’s crazy is I don’t think I’ve ever shopped here before,” Makeba explained.

“I had to take a drive before coming in. You know my place isn’t far away from this store,” Lauren explained, “Will told me last night, he was afraid to grab a gallon of *Almond Breeze*, it was so dirty in here that night. Now I get why I always drove to 195. It wasn’t just to catch you.”

“Trust me the stories are true. Every one of them. This place is a nightmare. I don’t smoke and I feel like I have to have a cigarette but that would further bleach the walls. You know we’ll have to order a paint job,” Makeba explained.

“The floors could use some work too. Is that horse manure?”

“It is. They couldn’t get it out. How I don’t know and I hope we don’t find out,” Makeba replied.

“Malcolm and Thomas did these reports for us didn’t they? These are very precise. Everything looks accurate. Wait. How the fuck???” Lauren was visibly disturbed as she began reviewing the numbers. Inventories, the dreaded list of what is missing, stolen, or lost in a department. Sales always reflect the state of a department’s inventory.

“I’m dreading it already. The fresh inventories have been in the the past few years. How did the people managed to stay working here?”

“Did you take a quick look at the fresh departments?” she asked.

“I haven’t but you and I both know they have to be the worst areas in the store. Yesterday, the Boardwalk did only two hundred dollars in sales and the product was prepackaged in the Creamery. Actually, now that you mention it, this store’s Market has had quite a few failed inventories. The DD just referred a new director for the department but I fired her ass before she even got through the door. She was too drunk for my liking.” Makeba replied.

“We need to fire this produce director.”

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“You’re right. He was high as damn kite. Don’t worry, his ass won’t be here tomorrow.”

Several positions at Goldmans had to be filled as some directors had already been fired and replaced by the HR *Norfolk* department prior to Makeba and Lauren’s arrival. Thomas had a field day.

“You’re fired. Don’t bother touching that monitor. Get the fuck out of this building. Tears don’t save anyone. Dry them the fuck up and start that job search. *Indeed* still works. Don’t try *Corteno’s* or *Target*, they don’t tolerate bullshit either. You should find work that suits you better. Find a new line of work that won’t mind you lying on your back to get promotion but be careful those looks won’t get you by forever. Now get the fuck out of here.”

“Wow, the big wigs are already involved...What’s this one’s name?” Lauren asked, exasperated.

“They didn’t tell you,” Makeba responded, disappointed, “Listen, Lauren, it’s not what you think..”

“No, Not that man, Makeba. No.”

“He’s back but not for the reason you think,” Makeba explained as they stopped.

“What the fuck are they doing? I thought he was gone! You are telling me that Goldmans, a fully anti-sexual harassment company has rehired *Derek!*” Lauren was astonished, “God, I knew I shouldn’t have gotten involved with him.”

Late into Lauren’s career as an *Assistant Director*, Lauren dated Derek until the relationship abruptly ended. It would be many years into her marriage to Will, she would be forced to work with him again. It was a great relationship and they were quite the team until things got complicated.

Lauren was *due for a promotion* to Central Director when she arrived at Derek’s office. She was thrilled to meet with him to discuss the terms but unfortunately, Derek had other plans for Lauren. He filled the office with white roses.

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Surely, he knew she was a happily married woman but why make such a romantic gesture? Sure, he was unhappy in his marriage but did he have to drag her into it.

At first, she was incomplete denial of his advances until he stood up and tried to kiss her. Her first reflex was to take a bouquet of flowers and deliver a striking blow to his left eyebrow. Then she poured a full vase of water all over him to seal his disgrace.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?? If you think I’m fucking you to get something I’ve already earned! Fuck you and fuck Goldmans!” That day, Lauren nearly quit. She was so embarrassed, she told no one and she kept it to herself.

She never thought the man she once cared for would stoop this low. This left her in a pool of confusion and defeat. She had lost her comrade. She thought of quitting but working for many long years made her dread it. She had no intention of throwing down her AK-47.

This was the most uncomfortable she’d ever felt in her career at Goldmans. It was as if the unlucky awning of all the women in her struggle before were passing their torch to her in martyrdom. Sure, many of these women in the battle of equality and fairness were her heroes but she didn’t want to join them. She thought to herself this was different.

She once loved this man and never expected this behavior from him. She’d had dinner with his mom, been best friends with his daughter and was the muse of his child mother. She didn’t want this to go public. He always treated her respectfully before, maybe if she let him slide, he would see the error of his ways. Sadly, afterwards, Derek’s misconduct escalated. This time, he was more indirect.

Two weeks later, he grew indifferent towards Lauren. After being recommended for a well-deserved promotion, she was not only turned down, his wrongs would further ensue. He indirectly and divisively overwhelmed her store budget with unrealistic demands he knew she wouldn’t meet. None of it came from his mouth but she knew he gave the order. In other words, get more done with much less. Her overall

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resources for productivity suffered as a result. Her performance began to fumble. She knew she needed a begin a paper trail.

Derek gave her minimal wages for hiring, when she would not complete his assignments. Lauren would follow this trend, choosing to take the high road instead. Until one day, she looked at her daughter *Trista*. She was graduating from high school. She knew she couldn't allow it this mistreatment to continue.

Once she told Will, the first thing he wanted to do was grab his *Desert Eagle Mark XIX* and send Derek to the afterlife but Lauren miraculously convinced him to reconsider. Will felt betrayed considering he hired his son Taylor. Ironically, the day Lauren went to HR to report him, Derek resigned in conjunction with depression and an underperforming sales district. However, they kept her report to banish him from rehiring. Goldmans built a formidable reputation for employee assiduity and greatly rewarded Lauren with an offer of two hundred thousand dollar raise. This would accompany her promotion to *Central Director*. Lauren refused without hesitation. She didn't want this to be the legacy of her career. It was then she made the decision to transfer to another district.

The transfer was a disappointing move for Lauren but it propelled her into a place of resilience and self-discovery. She didn't want to remember *District 25*. She was motivated to work harder and learn the means of every district in Virginia. *A year later*, she was promoted to *Central Director* with a much higher salary. Lauren became the first woman to be the highest paid Central Director in a retail organization. She ranked at *one million five hundred thousand dollars*.

Makeba was also no stranger to sexual harassment. In her fifth year as a Store Director, he was the President of Merchandising, *Edmond Fields* made advances towards her. Like Derek, he made similar advances but he was much less subtle and much more of an asshole. He couldn't respect the fact she was a married woman and Makeba had no personal or romantic ties to him. One day, she had enough, Makeba clinched the sharp knuckles of her fists and funneled them directly through his face. Makeba didn't lose her job that day but he did. Since then, no one

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working with her would even think to look at her without thinking twice. Needless to say, she completely understood Lauren's outlook.

"Why would they move him over here?" Lauren asked.

"This *district* was under his leadership during beginning of the collapse. Originally, they did not want to bring him here again but the only way to figure out how we got here is..."

"Is to gut the fish that rotted the waves. I get it. I'm hoping this has nothing to do with politics. He is married to..."

"I know *Harper's* opponent. Lauren, he can never come into this store after what he did to you. That's 100% fact. Everything he does is being watched. They are desperate to figure out how his district hit rock bottom so fast under his leadership and why," Makeba explained.

"It's not about him. I should've..."

"You did. Lauren, it would've been a nightmare for the family. Everything happened as it should've. His ass got exactly what was coming to him. He hasn't been able to work anywhere since."

"Trista..." Lauren began to tear up..

"Her mother is one of the highest paid women in retail and her father runs one of the most successful companies in the world, underneath her uncle Gabe's.." Lauren smiled as Makeba explained.

"As long as he keeps his distance from me, we'll be fine," Lauren explained to Makeba.

"If something does happen..."

"You know it."

"At this point, he doesn't have any leeway here. His duties only entail of monitoring the profit and loss reports. We will never see him," Makeba reassured, "I have a call."

"Babe, what going on?" her cheekbones flushed into bliss as she smiled at his voice.

"You shouldn't be calling at this hour. What is it, Gabriel?"

"Ok, so you don't want to know I'm cooking that chicken you forgot to bake last night."

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“Gabe, look I’m sorry. This store really took me away from cooking last night.”

“It’s alright baby, just make sure you’re home before I’m finished. I love you alright.”

“I love you too bye.”

Lauren’s return to *District 25* from *District 33* was requested by Makeba. She, Makeba, and their boss Dierdre had lunch at *Shula’s* in *Downtown Norfolk* to talk terms.

Lauren was happy with her successful run and had made enough money as one of the most requested Central directors in the district. She was ready to quit retail all together and end it on a high note but when she met with Makeba and Dierdre, they were able to convince her to stay on board. She and Makeba would be offered corporate positions upon restoring store, 1629.

Dierdre Carr was a *Sales Operating Director* of Goldmans. She oversaw all the districts of the company but was positioned in *Southern Region 3, to be close to family*, this included *District 25*. She had acknowledged *Malcolm, Makeba, Thomas, Lauren* and three others as power players within the company. These men and women were frequently requested to restore broken stores all over the region.

“Listen Dierdre, I can’t take this job with this offer. These customers won’t stop asking me about my husband. I’m going to need a little more,” Lauren suggested as the three women sat in the restaurant. The steam from the *seared Ahi tuna* and *prime drizzled short ribs* permeated the air as they enjoyed their house salad.

“Dierdre, she’s right. She needs over a million five hundred,” Makeba suggested, “People are taking pictures of her even while she’s performing store walks. It’s distracting. I personally have been bothered over the years by these people. It’s lot to handle.”

“It does die sometimes but what happens when Picasso releases another stylus? Do I smile every time, I’m trending on the internet?”

“Every time there’s a tour in London, Gabe and I can’t go anywhere either.”

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“Another problem.”

“Alright, ladies, you have a point. I know it’s risky having you both here but Thomas and Malcolm seem to have settled well. Still, I already have enough trouble myself as a *Carr*. We can get more security and ban all pictures without approval. I can make the adjustments immediately. Not a problem. I’m sure *Mrs. Bourdain* would not mind the increase. Welcome to the round table,” Dierdre smiled with a dance. The three ladies then lifted their glasses and made a toast to history.

That day, Lauren signed a one-year salaried contract of *three million eight hundred thousand dollars*. This contract came with fourth quarterly bonuses of *three million two hundred thousand dollars* per quarter.

Makeba, that day was not only given a contract of *three million five hundred thousand*, she was given quarterly incentives of *five million* consecutively per quarter. She was immediately ranked number one as the highest paid *Store Director* ever in retail.

This was not the norm for any of the directors but these two directors along with Malcolm and Thomas, were paid these salaries due to their caliber, hard work and consistency. The typical *Store Director* and *Central Director* were contracted with *one million three hundred thousand* and *five hundred thousand* respectively.

The *Store Director* and *Central Director* roles were equal and subservient to one another in every way yet both heralded tremendous responsibility that separated them.

The *Store Director* facilitated all the logistical and industrial occurrences. They oversaw the interior base of the store. They simply would not be as visible as the *Central* and only would be if necessary. They would take meetings, make the uncomfortable phone calls to corporate, budget weekly hours, promote and fire in human resources, review duties and delegate with local businesses as well as mass productions like *Coke*, warehouse regulation, be the necessary pillar of support in times of crisis, initiate all store activity through store huddles

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and one-on-one mentoring. They typically worked fifty hours a week at most and forty at minimum.

The Central Director was the ambassador everyone would see more frequently. They oversaw the exterior base of the store. They constantly designed and merchandised all departments, reviewed performances, facilitated immaculate schedules for the staff, handled customer relations, stabilized inventory flow, full store recovery, emergency drills, hired the best of the best, promoting and firing, safe workplace practices, fixture supply, leadership development for grocers, regulated product quality, human resources, warehouse regulation, and local store events. They typically worked forty-five hours a week at most and forty at minimum.

The Walk at Goldmans was standard duty of all Directors within the store. Each department would be detailed on a list of tasks in which needed to be fulfilled within that day or sometimes, week. Each task could be big or small from reestablishing bathroom cleanliness to maintaining the overall integrity of the store. The Store Directors would delegate to the Assistants, the Assistants to the Sales Directors and the Sales Directors to the Grocers. This would create an establishment of order and accountability.

Generally, a Store Director would walk with not only her Centrals but her Assistants as well. Makeba was not comfortable walking with the present assistants, so she only walked with Lauren.

Store leadership wardrobe was held to higher altitudes so mediocrity was unacceptable. The distinction between director and grocer had to be established. Women and men operating off the sales floor had to wear slacks, blouses, sweaters and oxfords with a dark green *Goldmans* waist apron. Women could not wear stilettos unless they were salaried.

Grocers working on the sales floor were required to wear well fitted jeans or slacks, black shoes or boots. Jewelry was considered completely inappropriate in the food handling department. Flashy jewelry were strictly banned.

THE EXORDIUM

Lauren and Makeba were well paid, so they enjoyed the rules of the game and took it to soaring heights. *Ralph Lauren, Givenchy, Anna Sui, Michael Kors, Diane Von Furstenberg, Tom Ford*, and their favorite *John Paravari* were few of the many brands they enjoyed wearing. They hoped the way they dressed would influence and inspire 1629 to improve.

Within every Goldmans lied several departments, *The Boardwalk*, a homely bistro with over forty entries of cuisine from the famous *field North Carolina Tilapia, Waterside BBQ Chicken*, and *House Parisian Steak*. Within the Boardwalk would be two additional departments, the *Bakery* and the *Deli*, the Deli was filled with over fifty fine meats including fat-free hams from several local commodities such as the *Honey Baked Ham Company* and the *Old Virginia Ham Shop*, thirty fresh bread baked every hour not exceed a two hour period, this included soft pretzel, sweet potato, and banana nut. In *Produce*, for fresh agriculture, fillings of over five hundred different varieties of fruits and vegetables including *Wonderland apples, oranges, grapes* from Norfolk, seven versions of cauliflower geared towards mental wellness. *The Market* contained custom-cut fat-free meat and poultry with thirty different verifications of brisket, beef, steak, chunk, lobster, flounder, crab, tilapia, and forty different pre-cut of organic chicken. *Grocery*, for dried consumables featured nearly twenty to seventy versions of general brands from *Sugar Free Blueberry Pop-tarts*, eleven different various versions of *fresh fat-free Otis Spunkmeyer muffins* included *Champagne* and *Bourbon*, to *Strawberry, banana and blueberry cereal*, organic cane sugars, candy by one hundred brands made from *London to Washington*.

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Ketchups, dressings and BBQ sauces were made from *Kentucky* to as far as *Thailand*. There were twenty different brands of coffee from *Folgers*, *Starbucks*, *Dunkin Donuts* featuring mint strawberry and honey banana. For curative purposes, one hundred teas were all built on reducing anxiety and relaxing the nervous system. This included rose and orange tea. Freshly baked breads prepared over twenty hours including grain, wheat, sourdough, decadent Hawaiian, and *the signature Goldman Potato wheat* were featured. The *Beauty department*, for personal products, featured over ten thousand brands of skincare and medicine such as *Proctor and Gamble*, *Johnson and Johnson*, *AMBI*, *Giza* and more. *Goldman Gardens*, the lawn and garden department offered forty-five thousand different pieces of floral and herbal nature. The *Creamery*, which offered dairy and frozen consumables with over eight thousand choices from brands like *Ben and Jerry's*, *Edy's*, *Blue Bell*, and *Breyer's*, *Bourdain* and *Luis*, and finally, *Home and Style*, for apparel and furniture with over five hundred affordable high end lines including *Ralph Lauren*, *Abercrombie and Fitch*, *Vans*, *Paravari*, *Ortega*, *Adidas*, *Nike*, *Timberland*, *Michael Kors*, *Martha Stewart*, and more. 60% of all the products were featured in beautiful transparent glass cabinets refrigeration for pure revitalization and freshness.

The first department they began tallying was The Boardwalk. The Boardwalk was the genesis of Goldmans.

Dietrich Goldman was a young realtor when he founded Goldmans. In *Bertioga, São Paulo, Brazil*, Dietrich met his wife, *Isabella Ortega*, at a quaint bistro, they fell in love there and purchased the place.

A few, short five years into the business, Dietrich added products to the bistro. He made a discovery that it was more profitable to sell products than stay in the restaurant business so he built on to the bistro and transformed the location into a grocery store. The Bistro was then rebranded into the *Boardwalk*.

Twenty years later, discovering an atmosphere of community in each *Boardwalk* was important to Dietrich. Especially, when a customer entered a Goldmans' location. *The Boardwalk* was the trademark of his company and he wanted his love for his wife to be felt in every location.

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"Trista knows better. They didn't teach her anything did they?" Lauren suggested as she watched Trista.

"Not a damn thing," Makeba replied.

They noticed not only was she wearing hoop earrings, but also the Boardwalk had not been cleaned or properly prepped.

The Boardwalk was octagonal in shape. Tables and bar stools were in the center of the Boardwalk. The bakery was positioned on the left and the deli and gourmet area was on the right. In structure, the octagon was painted in murals of the city of São Paulo with photos of Dietrich's earlier years with Isabella.

"Hi." Malcolm greeted Thomas with a passionate kiss as he arrived home.

"Do you think Trista is still wearing those earrings?" Thomas asked as he arrived in the house. He helped Thomas out of his jacket as he kicked off his shoes entering their home on four miles from 1629 in Norfolk.

"You know Trista will be ok. How do you feel?"

"I feel good but. . ."

"This is exactly what I need right now."

As Thomas began to take off Malcolm's clothes, Malcolm got a text message.

"Can you guys take *Buma* and *Boris* tonight?"

"Who is it?"

"It's Will. He asked if we could watch *Buma* and *Boris* tonight?" Malcolm replied as he looked at Thomas.

"It's cool. We can leave them with Trista."

"Hey Will, you need us to watch *Buma* and *Boris* tonight?"

"Yeah, Lauren and I are going through some shit right now and I need some alone time with her."

"Man, Lauren will be ok," Malcolm replied.

"Can you please just do this for me?"

"I hope everything works out. Trista will watch them," he replied.

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"Thanks, man. Love you, man."

"No problem. I love you too, Will."

"I'll go pick the kids up," Malcolm suggested.

"At least, we have a few hours to ourselves. You wanna join me,"

Thomas smiled as he prepped for the shower. They'd spent all morning since 3:00am assisting 1629 and Thomas was exhausted from working.

"Yeah," he asked as Thomas began to remove his shirt, "there's no time to really prepare anything." He was flustered as he nibbled on his neck. Malcolm was flustered as he felt the hair on Thomas's chest brush against his.

"We'll grab *Cold Stone* and order in for them later," he suggested as they kissed back and forth.

"Wait, we can't do Chinese again. It'll put them to sleep too quickly."

"Babe. That's exactly what we want," he laughed as they made their way to the bathroom in laughter.

"Are you ok?"

"Malcolm. Be quiet and let's have sex please."

"I gotta go it's my mom, she's here," the young lady smiled as she hung up the store phone.

"*Trista Lauren Vivienne Dresden*, you do know you can't wear those, right? It's against dress code." Trista did know better but the prior staff was extremely lenient in those days concerning anything. She was a Goldman scholar and it was her senior year in law school at *Hampton University*, the last thing she wanted or needed was to worry about the *Boardwalk*.

"Hi, mom. Ok Look, guys. Gerald, let us do whatever we wanted around here. It's not mandatory to care around here. I know the store is filthy but he just didn't give two fucks. Beside this isn't even my department they put me over here because everyone left. I'm the only person here," Trista responded. She worked hard not to touch anything as the sticky counters rusted of honey and turquoise icing. Underneath were the words encrypted, '*Fuck this place. I quit. Ari.*' Trista tried to clean it but the effort she put into it was keeping her from assisting

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customers. She tried to put a towel over it but eventually, it withered away into the smudge.

“Trista, you told me on the phone that things weren’t that bad around here,” Lauren laughed.

“Look, I didn’t want you to stop me from working here so I lied. They told me you were coming and I had no choice,” Trista smiled, “What was I supposed to do? I can’t wait until I finish law school.”

“It’s *Alcatraz*. Look at this, Makeba, I’m really sure these condiments haven’t been thrown away in a few days,” she told Makeba as they made their way behind the deli. There was mold everywhere. They slowly kicked through old boxes moldy baguettes and croissants, everything was expired, as they paced themselves.

Trista began to freeze with fear as she saw the two women walk the department. She wished her long braids were tighter under the Boardwalk cap, she wore. She’d never seen the two women this serious as they examined. It was culture shock of the ages in her mind.

The more they strolled the more disturbed they looked. Suddenly, her disposition began to switch. These women were no longer her relatives, they were her bosses. At least she could rest on the fact she was in dress code. She wore simple *Levi* jeans and a white blouse from *Kobi Halperin*. Finally, she was finally motivated to ask questions.

“Where’s Patrick?” Makeba asked Trista. She was sick of standing back there without much a clue so she took the cap off and stood before the ladies.

“He went on lunch but I don’t think he’s coming back. What am I supposed to do in the meantime?” Trista asked. Her concern was growing as Makeba and Lauren stood in front of her.

“Just breathe, sweetheart. Everything will be fine. It’s ok but please don’t wear those hoops in your ears to work. Not only is it not sanitary, it’s against policy,” Makeba explained.

“Ok, that’s fair, but what do I do next? What am I gonna tell the customers?” Trista was also disappointed with the quality of the department.

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"There's not much you can do right now, Trista. Just go take a break and come back. We'll definitely be discussing the store you're transferring to?" Lauren suggested.

"Alright, I'm going home, I think I left my phone on the kitchen counter," Trista insisted.

"*Bora! Bewmee!* It's time to go downstairs but let's do a review before you two go," Will smiled at his niece as she sat on his lap and his daughter on his desk.

"Ok that's fair, Uncle Will! Shoot! Numero Uno!" Buma replied.

"What did we do last month in sales?" Will asked as he smiled at his niece.

"We sold *forty million units* and *ten million bundles*," she replied.

"That's good, Bewmee. That's impressive. How many people work here in this building, Bora?" Will asked as he reviewed their morning stocks.

"Ten thousand sixty-seven people. You, mommy, Aunt *Karina*, *Ceph* but five million people work overseas and here in America. Aunt Karina is in *Beijing* right now. *Ceph* is on the road," The sneer on Will's face then morphed into a great smile as he listened to how well-versed they were. His beautiful office overlooked the *Atlantic Ocean*. It was filled with so much character. For the plushies for his girl brought a little discomfort to his usual modern and eclectic atmosphere. Maybe he'd gone overboard with Buma in town.

"Ok girls, it's time to go," his assistant walked in as he kissed Buma and Boris smiled.

"Yes, girls, time to go," Will smiled as he looked around his office. As the girls left the office, Will stared at a photo of his sister and found the courage to make a call he hadn't wanted to in days.

"Will. ...I was waiting for you to call me back," He was positioned in the office in *Chengde, China*. It was filled with assistants as he took a brief exhale of his Cuban cigar. The Italian wool of his suit was freshly assembled and tailored as directed his assistant with his left hand.

"Did you find out anything?"

“Karina is fine but it’s not good, son. She’s stuck. I have my people on it though.”

“It hasn’t spread to Beijing, has it?”

“No, but there is an uproar in *Dalinur*. Every city surrounding it has been quarantined but.”

Will immediately dropped his phone. “Will!!!! Come on. Pick up the phone!!”

Will nearly began to panic as he looked out his window. All he could think of was Ceph and Buma.. Before he could hang up, he still felt Will’s anxiety drifting.

“Listen, son, I’ll handle it, alright. Let me handle this.” He only hoped Lauren’s day so far was much better.

“Look at these dates, Makeba,” Lauren slowly began to check dates of consumables within the cooler. Many of the items for presale were outdated by the weeks. There hadn’t been any direct orders for meat, cheese or even loaves for sandwiches either.

“If we open, the company will catch a lawsuit. I don’t think Trista would have sold this. She’s probably been pulling from this fridge here. The product is fresher.”

“We have to get them to take everything out of these freezers and throw it away. It’s all bad. How is this even possible. There’s so much product but its young product. It’s like it was put here.”

“Every one of these cases are *cross contaminated* but we can call Kevin from *Cleaning Authority*. This is well beyond even our capable hands,” Lauren recommended.

“Kevin was just here actually. There was really bad smell in entry way,” Makeba explained.

“They didn’t change vents, did they?”

“You said it. It hadn’t been changed in months up to one year at least. We should leave. If we stay here any longer, we could get sick. We’ll put in a new order. We’ll have to shut this department down for today unfortunately.”

“No, Boardwalk. That’s a first.”

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“I’m sure the customers won’t miss it. At least for today. These are our complaints.”

“There’s no time to answer any of these,” Lauren was amazed as she held the stack in her hand.

“We should just make everything free for the week. That would cut us a break.”

“That’s great. We could start tomorrow. Do you think this team is gonna have it done by then? You know we can’t go pass tomorrow.”

“No, Thomas is sending his boys to fix it overnight for us. Gabe is sending in a crew to help us with our resets.”

“Should we call more people from other stores?”

“Absolutely.”

“We have one more area to check.”

“Oh God....The bakery case.”

The bakery case was often a flamboyant stage showcasing the delicacies of the department but this...

“Ugh. The fuckery of it all. Literally. That’s ten thousand dollars in shrink accrual in total. It’s all gone,” in the back of Lauren’s mind she hoped it would be better, in all the stores she worked, there was some semblance of hope. And if the bakery was this far in the hole, where was rest of the store?

“What the fuck are we doing here really? Look at this dump! Fucking shit every....Fuck this place! They can’t even take out the trash every morning! I give up! They can take it. Take back the check, I don’t want it!” Lauren smiled as she yelled, “How do that expect us to recover this shit in one year? This place is so under, I’m not sure if it can come back.”

“Look at me! Listen. Look at me, Lauren,” Makeba smiled and looked at her stood in front of her, “We got this. It’s gonna get a hell of a lot worse before it’s gets better. Stay with me. Trust me. We’ll get it right. We are queens. We can’t let this place get under us. Now come on let’s do some hiring.”

Suddenly, at that moment, the tide began to shift as the two women re-entered the building by the strings of steel violas. Then it came to them.

"This is like 3757."

"You're right. It's exactly like 3757," Makeba remembered.

3757 was the most disastrous store in Goldmans ten years ago for Lauren and Makeba. Every store and central director in the district was sent there to correct the issue. Like 1629, the store was disfigured, ugly and past due on many of its adjustments. The solution was simple.

"This place has a severe staffing and product flow problem," Lauren suggested.

"That explains much of the mishandling. No one here seems trained to do their job except a few transfers."

"Everything is discombobulated into this vortex of bullshit. It makes me wonder if it was intentional. Look at these assessments," Lauren passed Makeba her tablet.

"You're right. It says her that Alexis placed high in Home and Style so why was placed on the front end? What is this guy, Miguel doing in a freezer? Marisa is in dry grocery. You're right something way off with these placements."

"We need to start here. There's no need to walk this entire store. We should check a few departments and start there," Lauren suggested as they looked at their assessment logs.

"We have to look at the Boardwalk," Makeba dreaded mentioning it. They both knew they find nothing but one word. Shrink.

Shrink was the loss of any and all assets that could be sold or used within any establishment. It was a detested word that any director or executive would avoid using. It killed profit. It killed customer service. It killed companies. 1826 was a major overhaul for Lauren. The store accrual was *one million eight thousand dollars*.

As Central Director, when Lauren was done, the store was over green at just *five hundred dollars*. It was a method she taught in every store she worked in and eventually, this would replicate throughout the

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company. Lauren was offered the store, but she refused to accept it. She was too busy working with her husband at *Picasso* to take on totality of a store. She was brilliant and unmatched in her prowess of fresh ideas. In these days, without someone like Lauren, shrink couldn't be avoided. For this store, she knew it would be tougher than other ones. They'd have to start from ground zero.

Thomas and Malcolm were huddled in the base of their kitchen as the couple enjoyed each other in their underwear.

"That's Trista's fucking phone."

"Fuck it. We'll rush upstairs," Thomas insisted.

"Thomas..." he was out of breath as his lips thrust against the pulse of Thomas's chin and arc of his chest. He couldn't wait, he slowly began to remove his *Calvin Kleins*.

"I'm guessing you two won't be too hard on me the next time I have a guy over?" Trista smiled as she walked toward the corner, "Can I have my phone please?"

Strangely, this wasn't new to her.

"Sure, sweetheart," Thomas passed his daughter, her phone as she stood in shock. They were positioned behind the counter of the kitchen so she could only see them from the waist up.

Thomas placed his arm over Malcolm's shoulder as they stood in the kitchen and smiled.

"Tara is here," Lauren informed Makeba as they sat in main office.

"Already? Beside I thought she retired with her husband in *Sao Paolo*."

"It's not just that. They gave her a big check and she lives here now. They relocated her. Gave her a new apartment, company car, everything."

"Day one and we already have a visit from the director of Human Resources." *Tara Bourdain* hated more than ever that she and husband *Romulus* had to relocate back to Virginia but at least she got a chance to work with Lauren and Makeba again like the old days in *Brazil*.

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Upon entering the building, her scarlet red *Michael Kors* suit and six-inch pumps commanded an audience. Most veteran knew who she was and she needed no formal introduction but she was only there for one reason.

“I’m just here to assist you two. That’s all. Laura told me to be on standby if something happens.”

“Did she give you any more details?”

“Not much, unfortunately, you ladies do realize you ladies have executive authority.”

“Dierdre revealed this to us but what exactly does it entail?” Lauren asked.

“For starters, you can fire anyone you choose without going through any channels. Try to avoid doing this too often. You have direct access to the RGF.”

“That’s the biggest replenishment building in Virginia,” she explained.

“All freight is pre-prepped for delivery and can be sent here and to the others stores two hours beyond normal arrival.”

“How many pieces?” Makeba asked.

“In the beginning, all of them will be over two thousand and with the fresh departments down in every district. There should be no problem with product flow.”

“What about GIO?”

“You’ll love this. Every single item you order is set for delivery that day no longer in transition. There’s more. We will be anticipating with the local business owners within this district as well as small businesses overseas. They are free to set up shop in our stores with your approval. Your assistants should take full advantage of this.”

“That’s great, especially with this Holiday season, coming up so fast.”

“I’ve looked at your pre-scheduled shifts, it looks great but with your first daily walk, I have to ask, ladies. Can I take you out for drinks? Christmas is not even up yet.”

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“We can link up this weekend.”

“Oh, Tara’s here,” Trista was in better spirits since she returned from lunch but a little thrown off by her arrival. She was carrying a large tote of lunch from the *Cheesecake Factory*.

“Hi, Trista. I’m hearing you almost done with law school,” She didn’t know Trista was working there but she was happy to see her. As she embraced her, she slowly began to whisper discreetly in her ear.

“Don’t worry honey, I won’t tell anyone about what you and Rashid did this August.”

This was music to Trista’s ear as Tara whispered. “Well, I should get going. Call me if anything changes.”

“Thank you, Tara.”

“Thank god. Food,” Lauren was happier than ever to see Trista.

“I’m sorry if I was a little late. I had to see dad at the office. He said he wanted *Cheesecake Factory*.”

“He left the tote I made him this morning?” Lauren asked, “That’s strike two this week from Rembrandt.”

“Oh, God, you two haven’t stop arguing?” Trista whispered, “Uncle Will is still set on going?”

“Yes, honey, he is. He’s always trying to be a fucking hero. He’s not getting away with this shit. Trust me.”

Will was enjoying his break as he finished his slice of cheesecake. Sadly, he forgot to tell Trista to actually get him lunch.

“What the hell could’ve happened in the past twenty-six minutes that NFL stock would go down three points?” Will wondered as he checked his phone. He knew immediately he had to turn on his *Blitz* app to find out.

“It is with great satisfaction that today, I announce my retirement from the league. The last six years have been the best of my life. I want to take the time to thank my coach, *Hendrick Luis*. Thank you for believing and supporting my recovery. For choosing not to coerce me into changing my mind,” he smiled, “Fred, your offers were appreciated but it’s time for me to focus on the next stage of my life. Like raising my son with my beautiful wife. I love you, *Anisa* and building our legacy at

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Sunrise and Hyacinth with my family,” He was six foot five, clean cut in a *Herringbone* suit by *John Paravari* as he stood in front news outlets at *Waterside District* in Norfolk, Virginia.

“Wow. Harris is really doing this,” Will was shocked as he watched.

“So Uncle Will, you’ve seen it?” He was six foot two as he stood in Will’s office. His name was *Chris Dresden*. He was a *Harvard* grad and *Director of Logistics*.

“Is he ok?” Will asked.

“He’s good but it’s definitely a big day for him.”

“Ah, shit man. You should’ve told me Harris was retiring,” Will was thrown as Chris sat in front of him. He could only think of his shares.

“I didn’t know until a few hours ago actually. It looks like they’ve lost a few advertisers but I’m sure it’ll pull up. *Ayo* seems to be serious. He’s in talks with *Hendrick*,” Chris explained.

“We can talk about it downstairs if you want,” Harris was relieved to see Will and Chris as he stood by the door.

“That’s good to know. I didn’t really eat much before I got here,” Will explained. He knew he would enjoy eating at his sports bar, *Omega*, with the two of them over a few drinks. The bar was designed for anyone who worked there to enjoy but they did have regulars. They served great steaks, sandwiches, seafood and wholesome Italian entrees by brilliant chefs currently in college. Everyone loved eating there during and after work.

“I’ll take the smokehouse special,” Chris requested.

“I’ll take the house salad. I can’t eat too heavy. I have to get home earlier today,” Will explained.

“What’s going on, you on some kind of diet?” Harris asked Will.

“Lauren is mad at me. I have to make up for it,” Will explained.

“Did you order from?” Chris asked.

“From *Wholesale*. Yeah, I did. Just like you recommended but that’s not gonna work this time. She’s more apeshit than ever. I’ve never seen Lauren like this,” Will explained.

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“She’s tired of the traveling, I saw the run-throughs. I don’t leave my house without this with me,” Harris suggested, “but I thought Lauren was done with Goldmans. Anisa was telling me, Lauren was ready throw it up and start her new company.”

“She was. She was ready...but the company offered her a really big raise and more equity. Lauren figured it would only help her retirement,” Will explained.

“So she expected you not to continue your own work?” Harris replied.

“Not really but yes...Damn, man. I just don’t know how to convince her. I’ve done everything. It’s been three days and all we’ve done is argue. Lauren and I have been married a long time but the only thing I can say we’ve got going for us right now...” Will replied as the enjoyed a small glass of *Sake*.

“The sex...” Chris smiled. “Yeah, exactly. We will never have a problem there,” Will raised his glasses with the two of them as they were served their food. Every plate steamed with a fresh aroma.

“*Jane* and I used to be like that...After we would argue I’d cook for her. You should try it. Don’t order in. I’m telling you it won’t work. Filet mignon and that open bottle of *Ruwa*,” Chris recommended as he took a bite from his steak.

“*Anita Baker* works well. It gets Anisa every time. It’s really hard for that woman to get mad when I play that music,” Harris explained, “I can’t lie I get a kick out of it. There’s no way I lose.”

“I’ve done this before already. Damn, she’s not responding to my texts. I even sent an emoji,” Will smiled as he looked at his message box.

“Did you try..”

“Yeah, the pics. That only worked last week. I even put a bow around it. I need some new fucking material. Shit! She won’t respond.”

“It’ll be okay. You should get out of here if you want to execute your plan.”

Just as Will as began to leave, it was hard not to notice *Gametime* pull up at the bar.

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Gametime was a show on *Blitz* network covered by *Kareem Carr*, himself. He was *Will's* uncle in law. Mr. Carr established *Blitz* in his late thirties, at the time Kareem was a three-time Superbowl champion with the *Washington Redskins* and possessed a Master's degree in *Broadcasting* from *Howard University*. *Blitz* started out in cable broadcasting but eventually spread in television on an international scale and advertisers loved the network.

Anyone with a love of the game could view *Blitz* on any platform. They would have access to full live coverage of any game at any given moment, a library of free gaming, and a collage of dramas and comedies as based on sports.

"The point I'm trying to make right now is that *Harris Daniels* is way too young and too gifted to pull into retirement! He's not even thirty. Reem, he used to come over your house a lot in his teens. You should talk to him," he was sitting with *Marcus G. Dresden* and *Chuck Corteno*. They were members of his board. *Gametime* was highly rated thirty-minute show on the network. Will, Chris and Harris couldn't help but crackup as they watched.

"Are you kidding me? The man has four Superbowl championships and his new hotel with his family is becoming a major franchise! He's making a lot of money. *Sunrise* raked in one hundred fucking million dollars this first month opening. Besides his wife is six months pregnant. I get it. The man just wants to be boo'd up with his wife. I've been there," Kareem explained. He was wearing his usual oxford suit from *Tom Ford*. Marcus and Chuck wore *Calvin Klein* and *Ralph Lauren*.

"This isn't about money. This is about this man's legacy!" Chuck argued as they converse, "That kid is the best offensive lineman in the league. How are they going to replace him? We've seen this in the preseason, the Patriots are shit right now. How can we expect them to take the AFC? Did you watch the past game with the Texans? KJ was lost in Kansas. That man needs help!"

"Ayo is looking like an option," Kareem explained.

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“What?? Ayo Demarcus!!! That’s definitely!!! Aesthetically!! Absolutely, not a good idea! I’ve said this time and time again, he’s absolute fucking trash!” Marcus was livid.

“You’re right, he’s not good on the field and he parties way too damn much! He’s not the first round draft pick from the *Eagles* we saw three years ago,” Kareem suggested.

“I’m gonna play Devil’s Advocate here and say that yes, Ayo’s got potential. Yeah, made a few mistakes but if...it works with *Hendrick*, maybe that would be the fuel that he needs to become a better player and you know how Hendrick is with these boys. He’s really tough on these guys. They have to practice sometimes, at 2:00am in the morning sometimes before a game,” Chuck explained.

“Listen to me, Hendrick, don’t do this. We know you turn these players around but you’re digging a big ditch with this one. We know you coached him in high school to get him where he is but listen he’s not ready. He’s just not ready,” Marcus was serious as he stared at the screen.

“Come on, Marcus, give the kid a chance?” Chuck insisted.

“This is *Ryan* two days before meeting with Hendrick. We have new footage. Do you guys want us run it?” One of the director’s asked.

“That’s not necessary, Kelina,” Chuck asked.

“No, play it Kelina, run the footage!” Marcus asked. She then looked at Kareem.

“You brought it up, got damn it, so we have to run it! Just run it,” Kareem suggested.

The three men were ashamed as they watched the footage. Ryan was stone cold drunk at *Sunrise* in New Hampshire with his three friends and girlfriend Lila. He was supposed to be at a mock run with *Hendrick*.

“These boys don’t have the discipline,” Kareem smiled, “When I was his age, every day was about the game. They don’t have the stamina. They don’t understand what it means to put in the work. Every day, it was five-o-clock in the morning just me and Junior running plays. Every morning.”

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His son Kareem, Jr. was the current quarterback of the *New England Patriots*. He held five *Superbowl* championships. He was known for his sniper shot passes, humility, speed and large afro tucked under his helmet in corn rolls. His parents were tough on him in upcoming years explaining to him that his career wasn't finite and he had to finish his degree at *Stanford*. Junior, though he loved the game, he always had a passion for law that would make him an awesome negotiator. He was able to negotiate every one of his contracts.

"Maybe, I should think about pulling my stocks?" Will told Harris as he kept laughing. During this period of history, every national league in America was public.

"That's not a good look," Chris replied.

"You didn't know about this shit, did you?" Will asked Harris.

"Man, I shouldn't have never recommended that clown," Harris insisted, "Look at this fool, man!"

"Check you guys later! See you tomorrow, kid," Will saluted his crew and headed for the exit.

The moment could only move downward as Makeba and Lauren continued their walk.

"There's way too much ground chuck on this wall," Lauren laughed as she and Makeba made their way into the Market. There was no poultry or seafood insight on the display cases. The area was clean and there was no residual smell but the department felt bare and unapproachable.

"These labels aren't even correct. It's all steaks. It looks as if it's all subject to decline in a few days. I know these dates aren't correct either but at least it's well cut and well packaged."

"Ricky should be able to help us..."

"It's not really much to see it's all chuck. All of it. And it's gonna expire in a few days if we don't do something about it," Ricky just returned from lunch.

"What about your freezer?" Makeba asked.

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“Thank god, it’s somewhat stable. This is great. Very organized,” It was the one of the first areas of the store that felt safe.

“Yeah, Tara did a lot of firing before you ladies got here so I took advantage of the situation and reorganized the cooler and the freezer but the meat. There’s so much meat that hasn’t been processed,” he explained.

“If we were to measure the amount, it would be about five thousand pounds of meat that haven’t yet been accounted for in this room,” Makeba explained.

“So that explains your chuck wall,” Lauren smiled as she looked at Ricky.

“I went too far with that..”

“It’s fine. You weren’t taught the proper procedures. Remember that you always have to have the accurate representation of the planogram. If you have to lose product, lose the product. Where’s your seafood? Where’s your chicken?” Lauren explained to Ricky, “What should we do about this, Makeba? We won’t sell all of this in time.”

“We could add it to the Boardwalk menu the day after. *Luciana* will add some new dishes so we can sell through it without losing too much money,” Makeba explained, “I have to say I’m impressed with these storage areas. Your packing is impressive. Who taught you how to cut like this?”

“Marisa.”

“Lauren, can I speak to you for minute?” Makeba and Lauren left the Market to talk.

“I know, Marisa just put in her resignation a few days ago with the previous Store Manager,” Lauren explained.

“I denied it. She didn’t even give me much of an explanation and I want to hear from her myself. She’s too talented not to be working here.”

“Miguel and Alexis also put in resignations as well. We need them here. I can talk to Alexis,” Lauren replied.

“The Boardwalk recently had an inventory, we have to get back over there.”

“It was about a week ago, Lauren. I knew something was off about the way Patrick was doing it. It was way too sketchy. I mentioned it to Susan but she brushed it off like it was nothing. I knew it was all fake.”

“Is there a report of it lying around anywhere?” Lauren knew there was no way this Goldmans was projecting green with its Boardwalk. Each inventory report would highlight what was missing and be taken out of the bottom line and the department would replenish itself electronically. Every inventory whether big or small was considered the progress report of not only the department but also the director and its grocers. It would explain the overall sales trends within that department and provide necessary steps to improve it.

“Here it is,” Trista passed Lauren the fabricated reports.

“This is unbelievable... He’s so fucking fired. You didn’t hear that honey,” Lauren laughed as she scrolled down the reports. Each sub area of the department were marked eighty to ninety three percent as she engaged the report. Makeba then began to scroll the report after Lauren passed it to her.

“There’s no way in hell, Patrick, is passing these inventories. This department is Hades and these sales have been down for the past six months. This report is a fallacy,” Makeba explained to Lauren as they walked further in the back towards the Boardwalk office, “Alright, come here, sweetheart, I don’t care who’s in leadership. When stuff like this happens you always report it to Human Resources, ok. This man is a bioterrorist. Just look at this, Trista.”

“Patrick isn’t coming back. He was supposed to be here three hours ago,” Lauren added.

“Why am I not surprised,” Makeba picked up her tablet removed Patrick from the internal roster.

“Finally, almost done and it’s after hours. How long are we gonna be here?” Lauren asked.

“You’re right. This is the longest walk we’ve done in years. Do you want to leave and let me finish the rest?” Makeba asked.

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“No, let’s finish this. We’ve already walked every other department here. Let’s finished this inventory audit and get the hell out of here,” Lauren suggested.

“I just got a text from Will. He says a couple of our people were spotted in Omega,” Makeba explained as she looked at her text message.

“I might go to Omega after this really,” Trista explained as Makeba smiled.

Fresh departments, departments with products containing *limited shelf life*, were often considered rigorous and tough among directors. Many found themselves quitting or finding their way around the system for job longevity. They saw it as a means to an end. Assistant Directors would occasionally shift so training was not often a high priority in some Goldmans. However, Fresh Department directors unlike Dry Department directors were paid at a higher level. This was due to the challenge of maintaining those areas.

“Trista, I want you to stand next to me...Come closer,” Lauren pulled Trista close to her as they looked from the door of the Boardwalk office. It was obvious these women meant business.

“Look, honey, I’m going to make a call and have Dierdre deny your transfer. Makeba and I going to train you to take over this department. Goldmans will bypass me being your mom. Frankly, you and Tina are one of the few trusted people we have here to keep this place from going under,” Lauren asked, “I want you to remember this place, Trista. Ask yourself. If you were a customer would you eat here? Mold everywhere, trash everywhere? Do everything in your power to avoid this. I love you, honey.”

“Thanks, ladies, I appreciate it.”

“We appreciate you but please always update us if you see something wrong. I mean anything. It’s World War III in this place,” Makeba replied.

Lauren then threw the rest of the replicated reports in the trash bin of the office.

“Trista, just give us a few minutes. In the meantime, we need you to resuscitate this dining room. It’s clinging for oxygen. Spray and re-

cloth all these tables. And please, please collect any and all remaining trash within the area. This department is going to undergo a reset.”

Lauren and Makeba closed the office door and began to make a list of all the tasks for the Boardwalk. Trista among four other grocers would be assigned to complete these tasks for that shift.

“Where’s Tina?” Lauren asked Makeba as she wrote the list.

“Tina needed a day off so I gave it to her. She’s been doing way too much,” Makeba replied. Tina was Makeba’s private eye and Dierdre Carr’s aunt. She’d worked for Goldmans for over thirty years comfortably as a Sales Director at 195. She transferred to 1629 for Makeba. They’d worked together for years.

“You know I actually agreed with that decision given these circumstances,” Lauren replied.

“We have to completely strip down this Boardwalk and build it back up again. We have to open tomorrow. There’s no way we can go another day closed. We need an emergency order forwarded to distribution. At best, we could get a shipment here by tonight, but just in case we may have to get a grocer supply truck run. We need a full crew of grocers to finesse the department and Boardwalk-prep at 2:00 am. This should get us open on time tomorrow. I’ll have a stats call meet with the Assistants this afternoon.”

“We haven’t even walked the entire store yet?” Lauren laughed as she continued to make the lists for Makeba.

“Hmm. Believe me there’s not much to see after this,” Makeba smiled and laughed as she looked at Lauren.

“Ok, Makeba, I think this will do,” Lauren explained as she passed Makeba the list of tasks for Trista to delegate on down and complete.

“This looks good. I think we’re free now. Let’s get out of this department. We still have to walk the rest of the store.”

As the two women walked out of the office, they approached Trista. Trista, by then, had made steady progress as the trash in dining

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room had been gathered. The cherrywood on the surface of the tables began to shine. She even used lemon wood polish to freshen them.

"It smells good in here, Trista," Makeba told Trista as she examined the dining room. Much still needed to be accomplished.

"Thanks, ladies."

"So this is what we've outlined for you today. You'll be leading the grocers for this month and then you'll begin training with Marisa after next week. This is your first shift team and they have the half of these tasks completed approaching five upon you exiting the building. We will follow up with you at 2:00pm so be ready. Your Assistant Director will be here with you to re-order and supply the Boardwalk by 2:30pm."

Makeba strolled down the list and explained each task detail by detail. Lauren, then began to inventory any equipment that was needed in repairing so she could later place a tech haul for replacement or refurbishing. A technician would follow suit following the haul placed for admission.

"Lauren, can you pull up the employee admissions log?" Makeba knew they had to multitask the hiring and the salesfloor because the sales floor was going to require more attention. There was no room to sit and the Main Director office and review applications.

Each department came with its share of lists and challenges, Lauren would make assessments and Makeba would diagnose and delegate. Strangely, the strongest departments weren't any of the fresh departments but the dry ones. Makeba explained to Lauren she examined the reports and knew before entering the store. The dry areas of the store were the strongest. Though the main displays were behind on advertisement cycles, the integrity of each area remained fully intact. Many of the fresh department directors needed to be replaced and it was an obvious aspect to them both. Many had no drive or willingness to push through and save their departments. Patrick would be fired that afternoon.

By 9:00pm, Lauren and Makeba were completing their walk and approaching the final department, Goldman Gardens, the lawn and garden. Goldman Gardens was considered a highlight within every

Goldmans store. The Goldman family placed a major stake in its development to compete with retail chains like *Lowe's* as well as *Home Depot*. Its garden was well known for its wholesome plant options with long plant life, fertile premium mulch, soil, grilling, furniture, and various outdoors products.

This current department lied dead, void of finesse, and desolate. Scattered soil packs and broken pots filled the outdoor garden gazebos and many of the plants were dry and wilted. The registers appeared soaked in dust and discolored due to the sun. The holiday season was in motion and Goldman Gardens needed to make a major shift or it would miss many opportunities for events being held in the city.

"I actually think we have a few heavy hitters. Four to be precise." Makeba replied.

"Alexis is Alexis naturally. I just don't want people think I'm giving her any special treatment because we're cousins. Marisa, I don't know much about her but she's excellent."

"She will be fine. We just have to convince these guys to stick around."

"You're right. I don't know much about Marisa and Miguel but they will stick around too I hope," Lauren replied.

As Makeba began to relieve Lauren home for the day. She noticed something different about Lauren.

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"You're not headed to the courthouse tomorrow, are you?
Where's your ring?"

"It's nothing. I threw it at him this morning and told him I wouldn't wear it until he changed his mind about China. See you tomorrow, Makeba."

"You too, Lauren."

Makeba relieved Lauren of her duties for the day and took both her tablet and notepad.

Upon arriving in her car, Lauren sat her purse down and pulled down her rearview mirror. She looked at her smartphone and noticed forty text messages in her box, she knew she needed to talk to Will. So much was on her mind but at least her home was only few moments away from the store. She couldn't think of a better place to be. The faster Lauren got to *319 South Laurent* the better.

Will and Lauren lived in the umbral yet gracefully comforting community of *Ghent*. Ghent was always easily one of the most beautiful neighborhoods in all of Norfolk. It was safe, filled with festive attractions, over fifty critically acclaimed restaurants, clear skies, beautiful harbors and it happened to be declared the heart of *Downtown Norfolk*. Will and Lauren loved each other for many years sitting, kissing, holding hands and arguing under one another's eyes all in Norfolk. Lauren would often take Boris with her walking to view the fading clouds at the harbors before Will returned home from work.

The breathtaking townhome of Will and Lauren was a labor of great continuity and connection for the couple. Naturally, they argued about everything. They both owned their own apartments and homes prior to living together. Lauren owned a two-bedroom spacious brick cottage in the *Devonshire* suburbs near her old high school with a colossal lawn and basketball court. Will spent most of his time with her

When I look in the mirror, I see all that I am and can be but sometimes the weight of the world overwhelms me. In the core of who I am, I see every possibility but my misfortunes tell me every day I'll never make it. Yet still I choose to go forward. This is my story and only I can write it. I always know how it ends, it doesn't matter how I get there.

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there along with his family. Will owned his three-bedroom apartment, he purchased when he attended *Old Dominion University*. Will would renovate it into a private office and have parties there from time to time. Eventually, they came to a truce and they moved all their furnishings into the *Ghent* home after realizing it actually required more than what they had. The home was seven bedrooms, four baths, an underground pool, basketball court, theater room and a large balcony with a docking area.

In true Lauren and Will fashion, the exterior of the brownstone was classified *Burundi Milano*, Lauren found a way to furnish by seven different designers *Ralph Lauren, Paravari, Jomo Tariku, Magaba, Valentino, Hermes and Prada*. She even managed to design a few pieces of her own and created two beautiful office spaces for her and Will to work in.

The bedroom was refined in the smoothest of cottons, silks, and golds. They both designed their two-story closet with Will above and Lauren below. The elevator was a plus Lauren saw coming from Will. Karina asked a favor of *Miramonti*, a furnishing company, to gift Lauren and Will with a chandelier centerpiece for their foyer. Will designed the entire interior of the house, he embedded the walls and floors with marble and granite from *Burundi* and the floors from *Shinjuku*. Upon entering home, for anyone it would be difficult to leave.

9:45pm, Lauren was surprised at how at ease things were. Light jazz illuminated the atmosphere as she rested her feet from her stilettos but it wasn't until she heard the keys of a piano, her eyelids soften with tears as she began to hear the sweet vocalist.

It was Anisa. She was singing a special rendition of one of her favorite songs by Anita Baker, *Lead Me Into Love*. There were two violists and a backtrack produced by Will, built on pure instrumentation without any synths or any electronic enhancements. It was so full of soul and easily saturated her emotions with ease and joy.

Anisa was happy to serenade the couple as she worked with Will on many occasions regarding her music. She was a steady leader on his music network and most importantly, she was family. She couldn't have

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felt happier to do this for Lauren. The living room was cleared in a pasture of roses and the aroma of soft cherry blossoms.

Typically, during an argument, Will would normally be in the driveway to greet Lauren but he wasn't in the driveway this time.

"Romulus William Vahn...Reginald...Endubis Rembrandt," The dining room was elegantly furnished as usual per Lauren. Anisa enjoyed watching them as he stretched out his hand for hers.

Lauren enjoyed the smell of *Sakura oil* from *Eugenia* in New York, as Will held her next to him. The *cherry blossom scent* was so sweet and savory like the aroma of the Gods to her senses. It was soft yet subtly calming for Lauren's tumultuous day at Goldmans.

"Welcome back, Beemo," She smiled as she heard the nickname, he had given her upon meeting one another. She loved *Adventure Time* and carried a keychain of the character. Somehow, she was stuck with it.

As Anisa finished the song, she approached the couple, "I hope this night will bring the two of you as much joy as it has been for me looking at you."

"I don't know how he convinced you to do this but thank you, Anisa," Lauren smiled as she stood next to Will.

"I love you guys. I'm in town for a while so you both are permitted to come and see Harris and I."

"Of course, we will," Will replied as he wrapped his arm around Lauren. He then subtly clicked his right finger and the violist headed towards their bedroom.

"See you later, Anisa and congratulations on Bourbon, the baby, everything," Lauren smiled. Anisa then left the apartment.

"So you've clearly won me over. What else do you have planned?" Lauren asked as she looked at her husband.

"This way, Mrs. Picasso."

As Lauren entered the door, white and red rose petals were positioned around the bedroom. He ordered the roses from *Roseshire*. A dinner table was positioned in the terrace of the room with candles and

Godiva chocolates. He wrapped his arms around her shoulders and kissed her on the cheek as she stood in awe of what he'd done for her.

"This is beautiful, Will."

"Are you hungry?"

"Sure, what did you order for us?" she smiled.

"I didn't."

"You didn't?"

"Have a seat."

As they sat at the clear table, a waiter came in with a silver case of Will's masterpiece.

"Here, why don't you have some of this?" As she sat in front of her glass, he reviewed his old bottle of *Ruwa*. The bottle was gifted to him from the CEO of a company named *Vermillion*. The company invested in *Picasso* and sent him the bottle as a gift. He wanted to send Will, *Chateau Lafite Rothschild* but Will didn't drink much in those days.

Lauren was surprised as she looked at the entrées in the center of the table. Will prepared well-done *filet mignon* and *seasoned steamed asparagus*, *sweet white harvest corn*, and *Irish mashed potatoes*.

"Is this real?" she asked herself looking at him.

"Try this," Will fed a piece of his filet to his wife.

"Umm...It's good," She enjoyed its rich flavor as he smiled at her. For a moment, she then decided to agree to his truce and save her petition until after dinner.

As the smooth jazz replayed *Lead Me Into Love*, the poetry of their hearts synced with one another as they enjoyed every moment of their meal. She loved the innocence in his face and the tone of his voice. All he could do was lose himself as her relaxed her shoulders and the angle in which she held her glass of *Ruwa*. She was so beautiful and not one word could erase the peace her presence gave him. He enjoyed the glow of her *Italian* skin as she did his. They never wanted it to end.

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Lauren
Bundi

"Will..." she knew she couldn't avoid it any longer. He could feel the weight his name as she began to complete her sentence. What would he do now?

"Can we dance just a little more?"

"I can't agree to this, Will!" Suddenly, the moment went red as she stood from the table.

"Lauren, you know I have to go!" He reminded her. He then stood up and held her.

"No. Not this time. Don't press up against me with those hands and that smell of yours this time."

He could smell the *sweet Paravari* shampoo. Paravari was one of Lauren's family companies. He enjoyed her beautiful *Asalia* caramel blonde hair she'd washed and rinsed that morning. She had been arguing with him that entire morning before heading in for work and lacked the energy to even speak. Suddenly, the night lost its delectable tone.

"Will, it's two to four months in China! What about Trista, me and Boris?"

"That's not fair, honey, that's bullshit and you know it. You know I'd never step out on you!"

"So wait...you think that because you made me dinner after work I'd be ok with you leaving me and Boris for a third of the year."

"It's for our family, Lauren. My sister needs me out there. The warehouses...."

"Baby, you can rebuild the warehouses in other nearby cities. It's not safe out there. Baby, look at me, we have made so much money. You don't need to do this," she explained.

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"We've lost over three thousand units since the outbreak. The product is rupturing from tampered shipments."

"But Karina, can handle this. She has in the past."

"It's a foreign country and she's alone!"

"It's no different than leaving me here alone with Boris and no, you can't factor anyone into the equation! We can't keep putting everything on our family!"

"Lauren, I'm going and there's nothing you can do about it," Will was serious.

"Here it comes. King Will, here to save the day! Poor Karina, the vice president of *Picasso*, can't do it alone. You think she's gonna be happy to see you. Mother of God, give me a break, *Bill Gates*."

"Come on Beemo, relax! That's not what it is,"

"Fuck this stupid thing! I hate I pushed you to even make the shit!" she picked up the device and threw it across the room as she stood before him.

The *Nexus Atlas* was a sensation among over four billion users around the world. It was a next generation product, Will created four years into his marriage to Lauren. Throughout, its conception, creation and rollout there were many huddles in challenges for the Rembrandt family.

"What else do you expect for me say? I already have to worry about 1629 now and now you want me...to worry about you for the next four months. No. I'm sorry, Will. I'm not agreeing to this, Picasso."

"What happened at Store 1629?" He pinched the side of her shoulder as she looked away from him with no words. This was no laughing matter in her eyes.

"It's on the ground. Literally," She spoke loosely as she smiled at him. He laughed as she mentioned it.

"Like four years ago to say the least? *Jackin' Sack*?" Will smiled.

"Yes but worse. The store's a fucking nightmare but much darker and dirtier than four years ago!" She was serious as she looked at him. Both Will and Lauren were Assistant Directors and were asked to

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help at a Goldmans *store 10* in Columbia, Maryland for several weeks. They dubbed the store, *Jackin' Sack*. It was poorly staffed with a few hitters who could stock well but the warehouse of the store was heavily congested. The sales left the shelves bare on a consistent basis with many directors constantly filling the shelves to save the company of labor costs.

Lauren once walked the *Creamery* and laid herself across a twelve-foot section where eggs should've been. Will had been searching for her but couldn't seem to find where she was that day. He was amused and hysterical at her sense of humor when he saw her. Many directors would opt for transfers or take pay cuts to leave the store. The customers weren't the typical neighborhood bystanders by any means.

After their two-month stint as Director-stocking grocers at store 10 in *Columbia, Maryland* both Will and Lauren were offered promotions. Lauren accepted hers and was transferred to a store in Norfolk as a Central Director. Will was offered a store in Emporia after their two-month stint but he decided to quit instead. He pulled his retirement pension, got a part time job and used his time to create what would be his first commercial invention. The Nexus, however, wasn't his first invention.

As an engineer, while attending *Old Dominion University*, Will developed the idea of a four-way cube tablet device. He would spend his first year in college working on this device by trial and error. One night, however, his sophomore year, while drinking and partying with his friends, he made a crucial mistake on the device that would change his life forever. Somehow, the four-way cube projected light monitors in midair that were touchscreen sensitive. He named the device Omega. He would later call this system *Teradynamics*. He defined it as system of midair monitors that mirrored their alpha processors. Will would later be awarded a scholarship that would pay off all his student loans.

The Omega, at the time of its discovery, was considered in many ways revolutionary. Will received an investment from Vermillion and repackaged the design into a more sleek titanium cubic version. He named each monitor *Alpha, Beta, Delta, and Zeta*. Alpha was a word

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processor, Beta was a mini game similar to Tetris, Will developed this with his friends, Delta, a dictionary, and Zeta, a blue tooth camera.

The device was effective but there were two problems, it's inconvenient size and the fact each monitor had its limitations. Every monitor could only project one program at a time. Will wanted it to be more convenient and portable for users. Will decided not to release the product.

For years, Will worked to perfect the Omega even during his marriage to Lauren. She was extremely supportive and enjoyed seeing him work on it.

"Listen, babe, the problem is its size," Lauren suggested. They were sitting in the living room of their first house.

"You're right. I need to make this more convenient. It's too fucking big," Will laughed in frustration.

"What if we reshaped it into the size of a calligraphy pen? Like a stylus?"

"The stylus could project one of the monitors and that monitor could do basically anything we programmed it to."

"Exactly. It's genius!"

"Come here!" Will made a phone call to Vermillion and the *Nexus Atlas* was born. Lauren would continue working as a Central Director at Goldmans and Will would devote all of his time developing the Nexus. Lauren would test the stylus during her store meetings and major executive meetings as well. Once the stylus was completed, it was fully patented and copy written by the government. It's debut week chartered sales of *two million seven hundred thirty seven one hundred and twenty five units*. Will made history that day as the first man to sell that many units debuting as a company. He and Lauren purchased their home in Ghent three years later and established *Silvance*, a journal insignia celebrating rap and hip hop in all its glory. It was a sonic publication on a beautifully designed tablet. Its headquarters lied in *Berlin, Germany* so Lauren and Will would work there during the summer.

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They had to stay in Virginia due to Will's offices in both Norfolk and Emporia. His sister would work in Emporia running those offices.

"Let me see the store. Did you drone it?" Will asked. Lauren pulled the stylus and handed it to Will.

"This is really interesting. Wow, that's really bad. There's shit everywhere! Now I'm actually glad I'm not doing this anymore," He laughed as she punched him in the arm. It sounded to him like she was way in over her head.

The stylus flashed major footage droned, massively recorded, in extreme detail earlier. The light and sexy titanium stylus could hold and project recorded footage and any documents via Bluetooth and WIFI. There was also one projecting touchscreen PC available for users.

Eight terra bytes of data could be uploaded to the Nexus. This was highly unusual, for a product during its period. The footage could be scaled from the block of one brick to the scale of a standard bedroom wall. Lauren and Will would watch films on it and read documents. It was a huge step up from working the usual ten-hour shift, he and Lauren were working.

"Derek is back as District Director?"

"Are you serious? They rehired the man who you reported for harassment? Babe, why didn't you just quit?" She could see the lie through his smile as he spoke.

"Wait. You know something about this you?" Lauren pressed.

"Ok. You're right. I called Deirdre a few days before you started at 1629. She practically begged me to support you staying but don't you see? Lauren, that changes nothing. We don't need this. Baby, we could be in China. We could go to Barcelona. You, me, Trista and Boris, we could be on the road together?" Will suggested.

"I have to do this for myself. I can't stand behind you for the rest of my life. Baby, I want our daughters to look up and see their mom in the chairman seat of her own enterprise. My enterprise and someday, they will but I have to do this for myself first."

"My god, you Paravari women are so damn difficult," Will was frustrated and allured all at once as he is drowned in the beauty of Lauren.

"I'm a woman of my word."

"But you have to understand a man is just the same. This is so fucked up. We should've talked more to each other about this before making these commitments," Will replied.

"There's no way we would've been prepared for any of this," Lauren sighed as she stood in front of him.

"I am proud of you, Lauren," Will said seriously, "I'm serious."

"I'm proud of you too but what am I supposed to do late at night when you're not there to reach for? Call Trista? We can't rip and run like we did in the old days. We have another little one. Look at her, she's so beautiful. She's getting older every day and you're missing it... You're missing it, Picasso," They sat next to each other and looked at a photo of Boris.

"Lauren..." she immediately knew where he was going.

"Oh my fucking God! Now we're here again!" Lauren argued.

"Listen to me, Lauren. Stop," he explained. They were sitting on their bed as they looked at each other.

"Will, what is it?"

"It's about the widespread of Ebola in Asia," he asked her.

"No... Oh my God. There was a scare near Beijing but that region went under quarantine... It's Karina isn't it? No.. Will, what do we tell the girls?" Lauren began to tear up as he looked at her.

"We nearly lost fifteen warehouse workers three days ago in that region," she was shocked as he explained the situation.

"It's not in Beijing now. Thank God but Karina received threats from an unknown source to cease all development of the Nexus. Baby.. I can't stand by while my sister is still out there."

"It's too late, honey, you can't go out there," Lauren explained as she pulled up her phone.

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“The Ebola crisis has spread to south toward Beijing. The outbreak has not reached the city but it lingers along the outskirts. The Reinhardt medical team has already began opening quarantine camps for vaccinations and emergency surgical procedures.” Will held Lauren as they listened to the news.

“Lauren, my sister is out there and I can’t do anything about it. What do we tell the kids?” as he looked at his wife.

“You’re worried about what we’ll do next but you forget about who we are. We’re Rembrandts. We’ll figure it out. We always do,” she whispered to him.

“You think so?” He laid his head on her lap as she softly brushed his hair.

“Of course, and besides you need to be here,” she then took his hand and placed it near her womb, “Our little one here will need his dad with his mom when he gets here.”

“Are we pregnant?” Will laughed.

“Yeah.” She could feel all of eternity as she looked at him with her smile. So much of him wanted to enjoy her but he allowed her to continue.

“We’re pregnant,” she smiled in tears as he looked at her in absolute joy.

“Why didn’t you say anything before?” he asked.

“You had to make the decision for yourself,” she laughed as she teared up. He then just held her close to him and kissed her.