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*Nothing is so painful to the human mind as a
great and sudden change.*

—Mary Shelley, writer

When Leo Perkins retrieved his buzzing phone and saw the name of the caller, his drowsy eyes blinked twice. The ocean breeze suddenly lost its sweetness and the hot sand intensified under his feet.

He felt his wife's gaze as she adjusted her sunglasses. As much as he had tried to master his facial expressions, he couldn't hide stress from Teresa.

"Is it him?" Her eyebrows tightened just over the rims of her dark lenses. "Now?"

"Yep." Leo shook his head and sighed. So much for this oasis away from the job. He pressed "accept" and sank into the lounge chair.

THROUGH COLORED GLASSES

Teresa pointed at the phone, whispering like a muted steam engine. “Well, you can just tell that man to—”

Leo pushed his palm toward her. “This is Leo. Yeah, how are you, Bill?”

Despite his seven decades, the caller’s whiny voice sounded like a college kid’s. But Bill Grafton made up for his stature with practiced curtness. “Are you still flying through Miami tomorrow? We need to meet. Things are heading sideways. We’ve got to make some changes.”

Heading sideways? Changes? Where did this come from? Last he knew, Leo was still the golden boy in the eyes of the board. He’d righted the ship by putting some new hands on deck and single-handedly landing the largest account in company history.

The only other time the chairman had placed this kind of impromptu call was to offer Leo the CEO’s job a few years ago. The fact that he was calling after so long—while Leo and his wife were on vacation, no less—meant there was about to be blood in the water.

Leo’s mind sharpened as adrenaline lit him up. He was going to have to speed up his plans and unfold his new vision *now*.

“Can I call you later this afternoon?” Leo couldn’t look at Teresa. Her slamming down her piña colada voiced her protest. “Or when we get home tomorrow night?”

“What time will you be landing in Miami tomorrow?” Bill asked. “Still 3:20? I’ll swing by the airport.”

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There was no escape. When the chairman of Carter Phillips called a meeting, you took it. Even if you were on your first vacation in three years.

Leo smiled his politician's smile to force confidence into his voice. "Yep, 3:20. It'll be great to see you. Keep in mind we've only got a ninety-minute layover."

"This won't take long. Come out to baggage claim and someone will be waiting there. We'll meet in my car." The phone went silent. Leo's smile hung lifeless.

He was determined to not let this meeting be his last.



Before dinner, while Teresa was in the shower, Leo called Will Freeman.

As his publisher, Will was Leo's rainmaker—full of youthful energy, ambition, and creativity. His relative newness to the job was overshadowed by experience at Riverton Business Media, one of the largest publishers in the country. Leo needed every ounce of this young man's bravado, political savvy, and killer instinct.

But he needed it fast, before his wife emerged from the bathroom and caught him working again. The call from Bill had ruthlessly invaded her privacy, breaking Leo's promise of a no-work week in the sun with full attention focused on her. The Bahamas had been perfect. Right up until that call. He had a lot of making up to do—especially since he was going to desert her tomorrow.

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Will answered with a huffed breath. “Yes, sir?”

“Will, sorry to bother you this late, but we’ve got a situation.”

“Sure thing, Leo. Let me hop off this thing so I can focus.” The steady background noise deadened.

“You still work out twice a day?” Leo asked. “Making me look bad.”

“Nah, just keeping up with the boss. How can I help?”

“I just got a call from Bill Grafton.”

“Whoa, that can’t be good. Aren’t you still at the beach?”

“Yeah. He wants to meet me at the airport tomorrow afternoon on our way home. There’s going to be stuff hitting the fan at this meeting, I’m sure. I know this is short notice, but I need that presentation you’ve been working on.”

“You mean Vision One? But it’s still pretty rough. We haven’t finished talking about the restructuring part.”

“I know.” Teresa turned off the water. Leo paused and stepped out onto the porch. “Look, I just need him to understand we’ve got a plan and we know what we’re doing.”

I need him to realize he can't fire me.

“I understand.” Will’s voice hardened. “I won’t let you down, sir. I’ll fire off something to you in the morning.”



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Leo decided to risk a second call—just a quick one. Hal Perrone didn't talk much, anyway. As CFOs went, he fit the mold: conservative, emotionless, regimented, precise, impatient. Of course, being a former Marine accentuated those qualities, adding intensity and discipline to the mix.

Leo felt little love for the man. Maybe it was because he outranked Leo in age as well as tenure, and he constantly found ways to remind everyone of his seniority. As one of few survivors from the old regime, Hal bore his scars like a badge of courage. He actually strutted through the halls. *Surely he knew how many people didn't like him?*

Right now, Hal's likability was the least of Leo's concerns. He needed the man's financial prowess. He also planned on leveraging Hal's relationship with Bill and others on the board. They'd kept him after the last regime change for a reason.

After a few rings, Hal's voice came across faintly. "Yes, Leo?"

"I hate to bother you, but I really need your help."

"I heard you talked to Bill."

"Right. Look, Hal, I'm in a situation here. My Vision One plan needs to be fast-tracked."

"Okay."

"Can you have the numbers to me by noon tomorrow?"

The pause heightened Leo's blood pressure. "I suppose I could have an abbreviated version," Hal finally said.

“Great. I need a revised pro forma for year one, historical company performance for the past four years, and then one more thing.” Leo bit his lip. “I need you to call the bank and expedite the renewal on our line of credit. If you can, add another few hundred grand to it.”

“Are you serious?”

“I’m afraid I couldn’t be more serious. You’re the one who told me cash isn’t looking good. I need every stop pulled out before my meeting with Bill.” Leo sighed. “I think you know what this kind of meeting has to be about.”

“I’ll see what I can do.”



Will Freeman snarled at the fact that Leo’s project had interrupted his regular morning workout. To make up for the lost time and unburned calories, he promised himself he’d double the intensity on the treadmill that evening.

By way of a group text he’d summoned his entire team for this 6:30 a.m. meeting. Though he’d worked on the presentation himself until 2 o’clock in the morning, pieces of it still eluded him, and his concept for additional graphics needed his team’s polish.

Panic never overtook him, but it sure nipped at his heels this morning. He needed to stay a step ahead of it and project confidence.

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He pushed through the conference room door. “Thanks for coming in. If you haven’t had your coffee, I brought the strong stuff.” He dropped a box of cups brimming with dark roast on the table.

Their groggy expressions aimed at the brew. Once they filled up and settled back down, Will said, “Sorry to drag you out of bed. But our CEO may lose his job if we don’t help him out. I need you to be sharp and highly caffeinated for the next several hours. Everything else is on hold. We need to hone Vision One to perfection so Leo can present it to Carter Phillips this afternoon.”

Everyone was awake now.

“It’s not just Leo’s job on the line,” Will said. “It’s ours, too. I’m getting wind of another housecleaning in the works.”



Leo found himself holding his breath and then gasping for air as he half-jogged past the gates. Hundreds of people, each with their own uncomfortable expressions, sat or moved throughout the massive Miami terminal.

He tried not to sweat, which required a slower pace. But he only had a few minutes to get to baggage claim. How many stinking gates and concourses could there be?

Leo willed himself to breathe and slow his steps. He should be more confident than this. At forty-four, he was

in his prime: healthy, strong, and still athletic even though college baseball sat more than twenty years behind him. He had reached the pinnacle of his career; any company would be lucky to pick him up if he left Industrial.

But the thought of leaving—especially being fired—horrified him. The embarrassment would kill him.

Why did Bill hold so much sway over him? He was one of few people in the world who intimidated Leo. Maybe the Purple Heart from Vietnam did it, or his family's millions. It could simply be that icypick stare. Or the fact that he stood a foot taller than Leo.

And so what if the Industrial turnaround had stalled? Every company had its cycles. This downturn was temporary, a minor blip soon to be forgotten once Vision One took off.

Leo checked his phone one more time. The presentation from Will had arrived just as he and Teresa had positioned themselves at the bar in the lounge. Hal had sent the numbers an hour earlier, with everything he'd asked for. "No word on the LOC" came back as the only response to Leo's request to expand the line of credit with the bank. Just like Hal to leave him hanging.

Leo finally saw the baggage sign with an arrow slanting down. He was going to make it. When he reached the bottom of the escalator, he spotted a dark-suited young man holding the "Carter Phillips" sign. They locked eyes and with a cold nod, the man led Leo out of the terminal. *Like boss, like chauffeur.*

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They approached a stretch limo waiting at the curb in the stifling Miami air. At least Bill respected him enough to come first class. The young man opened the door, beckoning Leo to enter the dark interior.

Bill Grafton was not smiling. Nor were the three other board members sitting next to him.



For a moment Leo's brain sent nothing to his mouth. His thoughts stuck in the back of his throat. He stared at the group as a whole rather than individual faces.

"Hello, Leo." Bill's smug voice brought Leo to his senses.

"This is a surprise," Leo said, trying to smile. "I mean, well, a pleasure."

Bill's face came into focus. He was wearing a suit, as were his companions. "You know Bonita Carter, founding director of CP. She flew in from Toronto. To her left is Sam Phillips Jr., son of our other founding director. On the end is someone you haven't met. Christopher Hilton." Bill added no qualifier after his name. Leo restrained the question—but obviously this guy was going to be his replacement.

"Thank you for meeting with us," Bill continued. The others stared silently. "Let me get right to it. Yesterday the four of us were having an impromptu executive committee meeting at my flat downtown. We do this once or twice a

year to talk about things. It came up that Industrial Publications just completed its second full year of turnaround.”

“In a three-year plan,” Leo said.

“Nevertheless, the company’s results this far into your plan are dismal and heading for disaster.”

“Excuse me, Bill—can you clarify what you mean by ‘disaster?’” Leo’s heart picked up speed again. This was going dark way too fast. “Before you give me your verdict, can I at least make my case and present a new plan?”

“You mean you’ve revised year three of the original plan?” Sam asked. “Aren’t you a little late for that?” His curly hair seemed at odds with his suit. The young man looked like he’d been plucked from Miami Beach.

Leo clenched his jaw. “No,” he said. “An entirely new plan. I call it Vision One.”

“By ‘disaster,’ I mean a trend downward with an obvious ending,” Bill said. “Revenue, expenses, cash on hand, and receivables are past the point of no return. A new vision is a waste of time. The old one wasn’t executed.”

Leo had to get control. But Bonita cut in. “We already bought into your last plan. It didn’t work. Now you want us to listen to you again? We don’t have any more time or money for that.”

“Wait, wait a minute,” Leo said, raising his palms. “The market has changed. We have new competitors. New technology is disrupting the industries we cover—not just disrupting, but decimating them. Granted, we have some

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people that need to be replaced. Plus, we've never had enough of a cash cushion to make me comfortable. But remember that I've in fact grown revenue by 15 percent over the past two years and stemmed the tide of losses caused by my predecessor."

Leo rushed ahead so none of them could interrupt. "I'm not sure what financials you're looking at, but this business is not about to die. Give me ten minutes to explain my new strategy. It's drastic enough to get your attention, believe me."

Christopher, whoever he was, narrowed his eyes slightly. Leo could see each of his opponents clearly now and felt more confident. "I know you have doubts. But you have no idea what I'm going to present, do you?"

Sam harrumphed. Bonita raised one eyebrow. Bill turned his head askew but kept his eyes frozen. "I didn't bring you out here to lecture us on your version of reality," he said. "We are intimate with CP's businesses and know when changes need to be made in one of them."

"That's why you want to hear what I'm proposing." Leo leaned in, capturing Bill's gaze in his own. "I guarantee my changes will be effective. There will be a complete turn-around in six months, or I will resign. No questions asked."

"Give us what you've got," Bill said. His arms folded as if he'd just dropped a gauntlet.

That's more like it. Leo yanked his phone out and began the presentation of his life.