

THE CEO

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The
CEO

A NOVEL

MICHAEL WHITWORTH



For my cousin Mary—

*Your prayers, love, wisdom, and truth-telling have
made a night-and-day difference in my life.*

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Chapter One

COMMENCEMENT

THE WORD “COMMENCEMENT” means beginning. Adam Cole didn’t think about that until years later, when he was old enough to understand that endings and beginnings are often the same door.

On the day he graduated from college, he sat on a folding chair in the middle of ten thousand other folding chairs, wearing a robe he would never wear again, and listened to a speech about changing the world. The speaker was a CEO—someone famous, someone whose company made something Adam couldn’t remember now. The man said things like “dream big,” “make your mark,” and “the future is yours to write.”

Adam believed him.

He was twenty-two years old. He had a business degree, a near-perfect GPA, and a sense that life was a ladder and he was ready to climb it. He didn’t know yet that some ladders lean against the wrong wall. He didn’t know that you can reach the top and find nothing there.

But that’s getting ahead of the story.

That evening, after the ceremony, after the photographs with his parents, after the goodbye hugs with

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roommates who promised to stay in touch but wouldn't, Adam sat alone in his apartment. His suitcases were packed. His lease ended in three days. Everything he owned fit in the back of a used Honda Civic.

On the kitchen counter, two envelopes.

They had arrived on the same day, which seemed like a coincidence at the time. Two job offers, from two companies he'd interviewed with months ago. He'd almost forgotten about one of them.

The first envelope was heavy cream cardstock, embossed with a logo of a flame. *Fyre Inc.* He ran his thumb across the raised lettering. Even the paper felt expensive.

He opened it and read the terms, and his hands trembled slightly.

The salary was more than his father made in a year. The signing bonus alone could pay off his student loans. There was a company car—a BMW, the letter specified—and an apartment allowance in the city, and stock options that vested over five years, and a fast track to management for “high-potential candidates.” The letter was signed personally by the CEO, a man named Lucian Fyre.

We see something special in you, Adam, the letter said. You belong with us.

Adam read those words three times. *You belong with us.* He had spent his whole life trying to belong somewhere. Trying to prove he was good enough. And here was proof, printed on paper so fine it almost glowed.

The second envelope was plain white and unremarkable. *Light Co.* He almost didn't open it.

CHAPTER 1

The interview had been months ago, and it had been ... different. No glass towers, no talk of market share or competitive advantage. Just a long conversation with a man named Joshua, who worked there and had asked Adam questions no interviewer had ever asked. *What kind of person do you want to become? What do you think you were made for?*

Adam hadn't known how to answer. He'd talked about career goals instead.

He opened the envelope anyway.

The salary was fair—comfortable, even—but not dazzling. The benefits were good. There was no signing bonus, no company car. The letter was brief, almost sparse.

We would be glad to have you, Adam, it said. *There is meaningful work here and a place at the table. But only you can decide if this is the path you want.*

It was signed by someone called “The Father.” Adam thought that was strange—maybe the founder, maybe a nickname. Underneath, in smaller script, was a note in different handwriting: *The offer will remain open. — Joshua*

He set both letters on the counter and stared at them.

His phone buzzed. A text from Jake, his roommate, who had already left for his own job in another city: *Dude. Fyre Inc??? That's INSANE. You'd be crazy not to take it. Think of the parties. Think of the CAR.*

His phone buzzed again. His mother this time: *Thinking of you tonight, sweetheart. Such a big decision! No matter what you choose, Dad and I are proud of you. By the way—Mrs. Patterson's son works at that Light company. She says he just loves it there. Says*

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they treat people like family. Just thought you should know. Call me when you decide. Love you.

Adam turned off his phone.

The apartment was quiet. The streetlamp outside cast an orange glow through the window. He held the two letters, one in each hand, as if weighing them on a scale.

One felt like destiny. The other felt like ... he wasn't sure. Something quieter. Something he couldn't name.

He thought about his father, who had worked the same job for thirty years and never complained. He thought about the CEO at graduation, talking about making a mark. He thought about the flame on the Fyre Inc. letterhead and how it seemed to flicker in the low light.

He didn't know it then, but this was the most important decision of his life. Not because of the money. Not because of the career. Because of who he would become.

Every road leads somewhere. The question is whether you'll recognize the destination before it's too late to turn back.

Adam stayed up until midnight, reading and rereading both letters. The Fyre Inc. offer never stopped glittering. The Light Co. offer never got louder. It just sat there, patient, like it had all the time in the world.

Finally, he turned off the lamp. He lay on his bare mattress—sheets already packed—and stared at the ceiling.

Tomorrow, he would decide.

Tomorrow, everything would begin.

Chapter Two

THE TOWER

THE BUILDING WAS MADE of glass and ambition.

Adam stood on the sidewalk and looked up, shielding his eyes against the morning sun. Fyre Inc. headquarters rose forty stories into the sky, a spire of black glass that caught the light and threw it back like a challenge. All around him, men and women in expensive suits hurried past, coffee cups in hand, phones pressed to ears. They moved like people who mattered.

He wanted to be one of them.

The lobby was white marble and chrome, with ceilings so high they seemed to vanish. A waterfall cascaded down one wall—actual water, flowing over polished stone into a pool filled with black river rocks. The Fyre Inc. logo glowed behind the reception desk: a stylized flame, elegant and hypnotic.

Adam gave his name to the receptionist, a woman with perfect posture and a smile that didn't quite reach her eyes. She made a call, nodded, and gestured toward a bank of elevators.

“Someone will meet you on forty,” she said.

The elevator rose so smoothly he barely felt it move.

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The doors opened onto a reception area with floor-to-ceiling windows and a view of the entire city. Adam could see the river, the bridges, the sprawl of buildings stretching to the horizon. From up here, everything looked small. Manageable. Conquerable.

“Adam Cole.”

He turned. A man was walking toward him—not an assistant, not a junior executive. Adam recognized him from the company website, from magazine covers, from the signature on his offer letter.

Lucian Fyre.

He was taller than Adam expected, with silver hair swept back from a face that seemed ageless—not young, not old, just perfectly preserved. His suit was charcoal gray and impeccably tailored. His handshake was firm and warm.

“I wanted to welcome you personally,” Lucian said. His voice was smooth, the kind of voice that made you lean in to listen. “We don’t get many candidates like you, Adam. When I saw your file, I told my team—this one’s special. This one’s going places.”

Adam felt heat rise to his face. “Thank you, sir. I—I’m honored.”

“Lucian. Please.” He smiled, and the smile was dazzling. “We’re going to be colleagues. Let me show you around.”

The tour lasted an hour. Lucian showed him everything: the trading floor, humming with energy and flashing screens; the executive dining room, where chefs prepared meals to order; the fitness center with its Olympic pool; the rooftop terrace where, Lucian mentioned casually, they sometimes landed helicopters.

CHAPTER 2

“We take care of our people,” Lucian said. “When you give everything to this company, the company gives everything back.”

Adam nodded, trying to absorb it all. Everywhere he looked, there was more. More luxury, more technology, more proof that this was the center of something important.

They passed a cluster of employees in a glass-walled conference room, huddled over laptops. One of them—a young woman about Adam’s age—looked up as they walked by. Her eyes met his for just a moment. She looked tired. Not just tired—hollowed out, like someone running on fumes. Then she looked back at her screen, and Adam looked away.

He told himself she was probably just having a long week.

“The thing about Fyre Inc.,” Lucian was saying, “is that we’re not just a company. We’re a family. An elite family, yes—we don’t accept just anyone—but once you’re in, you’re in. We protect our own.”

They ended up in Lucian’s office, a corner suite with windows on two sides. The desk was black lacquer. The chairs were leather. On the wall hung a single piece of art: a painting of a man holding a torch, leading others out of darkness.

Lucian gestured for Adam to sit.

“I’ll be direct with you, Adam. I see myself in you. Twenty-five years ago, I was sitting where you’re sitting—hungry, talented, ready to prove myself. Someone gave me a chance. Now I want to give you the same.”

He leaned forward, and his eyes—gray, like the sky

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before a storm—locked onto Adam's.

“You could go somewhere else. Take a safer path. Settle for ordinary. But I don't think that's who you are.” He paused. “Is it?”

Adam's heart was pounding. No one had ever spoken to him like this. No one had ever looked at him and seen... potential. Greatness. A future worth believing in.

“No, sir,” he said. “It's not.”

Lucian smiled. It was the smile of a man who had just won something.

“Good,” he said. “Then let's talk about your future.”

Adam left the building two hours later with a folder full of paperwork and a head full of dreams. The signing bonus had been increased. The apartment would be furnished. There was talk of a leadership development program, of mentorship, of a corner office within five years.

He stood on the sidewalk and looked up at the tower one more time. The sun had shifted, and the glass was darker now, more mirror than window. He could see his own reflection in it—small, distorted, swallowed by the building's shadow.

He didn't notice.

He was too busy imagining the view from the top.

There was still the other offer to consider—Light Co., with its quiet letter and its strange questions. He had scheduled a visit there for tomorrow. It seemed only fair to compare.

But standing in the shadow of Fyre Inc., with Lucian's words still ringing in his ears, Adam already knew. He had already decided. He just hadn't admitted it yet.

CHAPTER 2

Some choices are made long before we sign anything. They're made in the moment we let ourselves want something more than we want the truth.

Adam wanted to matter. He wanted to be seen.

Lucian Fyre had seen him.

And that was enough.

Chapter Three

THE GARDEN

LIGHT CO. WAS NOT WHAT Adam expected.

The drive took him out of the city, past the financial district, past the suburbs, and into a stretch of countryside he didn't know existed so close to everything. The road wound through trees that were just beginning to bud with spring green. After twenty minutes, he almost turned back, sure he had the wrong address.

Then he saw it.

The building was old—a converted factory of red brick and tall windows, surrounded by lawns and walking paths and gardens that looked like someone actually tended them. No glass spire. No marble lobby. Just a simple sign by the entrance: *Light Co. Welcome*.

Adam parked his Honda next to a row of ordinary cars—Toyotas, Fords, a few bicycles chained to a rack—and walked toward the entrance. The air smelled like cut grass and something blooming. Birds were singing. It was so quiet he could hear his own footsteps on the gravel path.

He felt, unexpectedly, like he could breathe.

The front door was propped open. Inside, the lobby

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was warm wood and natural light, with plants on the windowsills and a worn leather couch that looked like people actually sat on it. A woman at the front desk smiled when she saw him—a real smile, the kind that crinkled her eyes.

“You must be Adam,” she said. “Joshua’s expecting you. He’ll be right down.”

Adam nodded, unsure what to do with himself. There was no waterfall, no chrome, no logo glowing on the wall. Just a small framed quote near the door, hand-written in simple script: *We are his workmanship*.

He didn’t recognize the words, but something about them stayed with him.

Joshua appeared a few minutes later, coming down a staircase with the easy stride of someone who wasn’t in a hurry. He was younger than Adam remembered—early thirties, maybe—with dark hair and a face that was hard to place. Not handsome in the way Lucian Fyre was handsome. Just... open. Like he had nothing to hide.

“Adam.” Joshua extended his hand. His grip was firm but unhurried. “I’m glad you came.”

“Thanks for having me,” Adam said. He glanced around. “This place is ... different.”

Joshua smiled. “Different than what?”

Adam hesitated. He didn’t want to mention Fyre Inc., but Joshua seemed to understand anyway.

“Come on,” Joshua said. “Let me show you around.”

They walked through the building together. Joshua pointed out the workspaces—open rooms with good light, where people sat at desks or gathered in clusters, talking. Some waved as they passed. One man was

CHAPTER 3

laughing at something on his screen. A woman was eating lunch at her desk, reading a paperback novel.

No one looked exhausted. No one looked hollowed out.

“What exactly does Light Co. do?” Adam asked.

Joshua thought about it. “We help people,” he said. “Different ways, depending on the need. Consulting. Development. Sometimes we just ... fix things that are broken.” He glanced at Adam. “The work matters. That’s the point.”

It was a vague answer. At Fyre Inc., Lucian had talked about market share and growth projections and industry disruption. This felt ... smaller. Quieter.

Adam wasn’t sure if that was a good thing or not.

They ended up outside, on a bench near a small pond. Ducks floated on the water. The afternoon sun was warm on Adam’s face.

“Can I ask you something?” Joshua said.

“Sure.”

“What do you want your life to be about?”

Adam blinked. It wasn’t the kind of question he was used to. Interviewers asked about his five-year plan. His strengths and weaknesses. His salary expectations. No one asked what his life should be *about*.

“I want to be successful,” he said.

Joshua nodded slowly. “What does that mean to you?”

Adam opened his mouth, then closed it. He thought of the glass tower, the corner office, the BMW, the view from the fortieth floor. He thought of Lucian saying, *You belong with us*.

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“I guess ... I want to matter,” he said finally. “I want to do something that counts. Be someone people respect.”

Joshua was quiet for a moment. A duck dove under the water and came up with something in its beak.

“There are different kinds of mattering,” Joshua said. “There’s the kind where people know your name. And there’s the kind where you become the person you were meant to be.” He looked at Adam. “They’re not always the same thing.”

Adam didn’t know what to say. The words felt true, but he couldn’t hold onto them. They were like water slipping through his fingers.

They walked back to the lobby together. At the door, Joshua handed Adam a folder—much thinner than the one from Fyre Inc.

“The offer’s in there,” Joshua said. “Take your time. There’s no pressure, no deadline. If it’s right for you, you’ll know.”

Adam tucked the folder under his arm. “And if I choose ... somewhere else?”

Joshua smiled—not a salesman’s smile, not a winning smile, just a smile. “Then the offer stays open. For whenever you’re ready.”

Adam frowned. “That doesn’t make business sense.”

“Maybe not.” Joshua shrugged. “But it’s how we do things. My Father’s patient.”

There it was again—*the Father*. Adam wanted to ask who that was, but something stopped him. Maybe he wasn’t ready to know.

CHAPTER 3

He shook Joshua's hand and walked to his car. Before he got in, he looked back at the old factory with its brick walls and its gardens and its simple sign. People were leaving for the day, saying goodbye to each other, laughing about something. One man had his arm around his colleague's shoulder.

It looked like a good place to work.

But it didn't look like the future Adam had imagined. It didn't look like greatness. It looked ... ordinary.

He drove back to the city with the windows down, thinking about Joshua's question. *What do you want your life to be about?*

He still didn't have an answer. Or maybe he did, and it just wasn't the right one.

Years later, he would remember this drive. He would remember the sunlight through the trees, and the smell of the gardens, and the way Joshua had looked at him—not like a prospect to be closed, but like a person worth waiting for.

He would remember the fork in the road and the path he didn't take.

And he would be grateful, more than he could say, that the offer had remained open.

Chapter Four

THE SIGNATURE

ADAM SPENT TWO DAYS pretending he hadn't already decided.

He made lists. Pros and cons, written on a yellow legal pad in his empty apartment. He called his father, who listened quietly and said, "Seems like either one would be fine, son. What does your gut tell you?" He called his mother, who said, "I just want you to be happy. Really happy, not just successful-happy. You know the difference."

He didn't know the difference. Not yet.

He texted Jake a photo of both offer letters, side by side. Jake's response came in seconds: *Bro. This isn't even a question. Fyre Inc is the dream. Light Co sounds like a nonprofit for hippies.*

Adam laughed. Jake was always like that—certain, confident, untroubled by ambiguity. It must be nice, Adam thought, to see the world in such clean lines.

He looked at his pro-con list. The Fyre Inc. column was full of tangible things: salary, signing bonus, car, apartment, stock options, prestige, networking, corner office. The Light Co. column had vaguer entries: *seemed*

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peaceful, people looked happy, Joshua asked good questions, offer stays open.

How do you weigh peace against a BMW?

He told himself it wasn't really a choice. It was just math.

On the third morning, Adam woke early. His lease was up in six hours. His car was packed. It was time to decide, or time to admit he already had.

He sat at the kitchen counter with the Fyre Inc. paperwork spread in front of him. The contract was thick—forty pages of legalese, clauses about non-compete agreements and intellectual property and stock vesting schedules. He didn't read most of it. He was twenty-two years old, and he trusted that a company this impressive wouldn't do anything unfair.

Besides, he told himself, it wasn't permanent. He could always leave later. Work there a few years, pay off his loans, build his résumé, and then reassess. People did that all the time.

He didn't know yet how chains work. How they start as bracelets.

He picked up the pen. It was heavy and silver—a gift from his parents for graduation, engraved with his initials. He turned to the signature page. There was a line waiting for him, and below it, in small print: *By signing, I agree to the terms and conditions outlined in this agreement.*

He thought of Joshua asking, *What do you want your life to be about?*

He thought of Lucian saying, *You belong with us.*

He signed.

CHAPTER 4

The moment the pen left the paper, something shifted. It was small—just a tightness in his chest, a flicker of something that might have been doubt or might have been fear. He told himself it was excitement. The nervousness of beginning something big.

He initialed the other pages quickly, not reading them, and slid the contract into the prepaid envelope Fyre Inc. had provided. It was done. He was theirs.

Now there was only one thing left to do.

The phone rang three times before Joshua answered.

“Adam.” His voice was warm, unhurried, like he’d been expecting the call. “How are you?”

“I’m good,” Adam said. He was pacing his empty living room, footsteps echoing on the bare floor. “I wanted to call and ... well, thank you. For the offer. For taking the time to meet with me.”

“Of course.”

Adam took a breath. “I’ve decided to go another direction. I’m going to take a position at ... at another company. I wanted to let you know personally.”

There was a pause. Not a long one, but enough for Adam to wonder what Joshua was thinking. Disappointment? Judgment? The salesman’s pivot to a hard close?

“I understand,” Joshua said. His voice hadn’t changed. No guilt, no pressure, no edge. “I appreciate you calling.”

Adam exhaled. “You’re not going to try to change my mind?”

Joshua laughed softly. “Would it work?”

Adam thought about the signed contract in the envelope.

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lope, the BMW waiting for him, and the corner office in five years. “Probably not,” he admitted.

“Then I won’t try.” There was kindness in Joshua’s voice, and something else—something that sounded almost like sorrow. “But Adam, I want you to remember something.”

“What?”

“The offer will remain open.”

Adam frowned. “You said that before. I don’t understand. What if you fill the position?”

“There’s always a place for you here, Adam. That’s not a position—that’s a promise.” Joshua paused. “Whenever you’re ready. If things don’t work out the way you hope. If you find yourself … lost. Just call. I’ll come find you.”

Adam didn’t know what to say. The words were strange—too generous, too certain. No company made promises like that. No one waited for someone who’d already said no.

“Thanks,” he managed. “I appreciate that.”

“Take care of yourself, Adam.”

The line went quiet. Adam stood there for a long moment, phone in hand, staring at the wall.

Then he picked up the envelope with the signed contract, walked outside, and dropped it in the mailbox.

He drove to the city that afternoon. The furnished apartment Fyre Inc. had arranged was on the thirty-second floor of a sleek high-rise, all floor-to-ceiling windows and modern furniture and a view that made the world look small. The keys were waiting for him at the

CHAPTER 4

front desk, along with a welcome basket: champagne, chocolates, and a card signed by Lucian Fyre himself.

Welcome to the family, the card said. Your future starts now.

Adam popped the champagne. He drank a glass alone, watching the sun set over the skyline. His phone buzzed with congratulations from Jake, from college friends, from people he barely remembered adding on social media. Everyone was impressed. Everyone said he'd made it.

He called his mother to tell her the news. She was quiet for a moment, then said, "I'm proud of you, sweetheart. Just ... don't forget who you are. Okay?"

"I won't, Mom."

But he would. That's exactly what would happen. Slowly, piece by piece, he would forget who he was. He would become someone else—someone harder, hollower, more successful, and less alive.

He didn't know that yet, standing at the window with champagne in his hand.

All he knew was that he'd made it. He was here. The future was his.

Far below, the city glittered like a promise. Far above, the glass tower of Fyre Inc. caught the last light of the day and held it, burning, until the sun disappeared and everything went dark.

Chapter Five

ORIENTATION

THE FIRST WEEK WAS A DREAM.

Adam arrived at Fyre Inc. on a Monday morning, and from the moment he stepped through the glass doors, he felt like he'd entered another world. The new employee orientation was held in a penthouse conference room with catered breakfast—fresh fruit, artisan pastries, and coffee that cost more per cup than Adam used to spend on dinner. There were twelve new hires, all young, all bright-eyed, all chosen.

A senior HR executive welcomed them with a speech about excellence. “You are the top one percent,” she said. “We don’t hire good. We hire extraordinary. Look around this room. These are your peers now. These are the people who will change the world with you.”

Adam looked around. The others were nodding, sitting up straighter, trying to look like the extraordinary people they’d just been told they were. He felt it too—that rush of belonging, of being selected, of finally arriving somewhere that matched his ambition.

They were given laptops, company phones, and key-cards that opened every door. They were shown the gym, the cafeteria, the meditation room, the nap pods. “We

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believe in taking care of our people,” the HR executive said. “When you give your best, we give our best back.”

No one mentioned that giving your best meant giving everything. That would come later.

Adam was assigned to the Strategic Development division, which sounded important, even though he wasn’t entirely sure what it meant. His desk was on the thirty-eighth floor, two levels below Lucian’s office, with a view of the river. The chair was ergonomic. The monitor was enormous. On his first day, there was a welcome gift waiting: a leather portfolio embossed with his initials, a Montblanc pen, and a note that said, *Great things ahead. —L.F.*

He texted a photo to Jake: *Day one.*

Jake’s reply: *You absolute legend.*

His manager was a woman named Claire, sharp and polished, who spoke in bullet points and scheduled meetings in fifteen-minute increments. She assigned him to a high-profile project almost immediately—a market analysis for a major client. “We don’t ease people in here,” she said. “Sink or swim. That’s how we find out what you’re made of.”

Adam swam. He stayed late every night that first week, learning the systems, studying the data, trying to prove he belonged. The work was demanding but exhilarating. He felt like an athlete finally playing in the big leagues.

On Thursday, Lucian Fyre stopped by his desk.

Adam didn’t even see him coming—just looked up, and there he was, silver hair immaculate, that warm predator’s smile on his face.

CHAPTER 5

“How’s our rising star?” Lucian asked.

Adam stood up so fast he almost knocked over his coffee. “Mr. Fyre. I—I’m doing great. Learning a lot.”

“Lucian.” The CEO put a hand on Adam’s shoulder. “I’ve heard good things. Claire says you’re a natural. Keep it up. I’m watching.”

He was gone before Adam could respond, gliding down the hallway like a shark through still water. But Adam stood there for a full minute afterward, heart pounding, replaying the words. *I’m watching.* It felt like a blessing. Like being anointed.

He didn’t notice that the colleague at the next desk had flinched when Lucian walked by. He didn’t see the way she kept her eyes fixed on her screen, barely breathing, until the CEO was gone.

On Friday evening, Adam was still at his desk at eight o’clock, reviewing spreadsheets, when a voice interrupted him.

“You’re the new kid. Cole, right?”

He looked up. A man stood in the doorway of a corner office—mid-forties, fit, with graying temples and a suit that probably cost more than Adam’s car. His smile was easy, practiced, the smile of someone who’d learned to wear success like a comfortable coat.

“Adam Cole,” Adam said, standing. “And you’re...”

“Marcus Webb. Senior VP, Strategic Development.” He walked over and shook Adam’s hand. “Which means I’m your boss’s boss. Don’t worry—I don’t bite. Unless you miss a deadline.”

Adam laughed, a little nervously. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

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Marcus leaned against the cubicle wall, studying him. “Lucian’s taken a shine to you. That’s rare. He doesn’t notice most new hires until they’ve been here a year.”

“I got lucky, I guess.”

“Luck.” Marcus’s smile flickered, just for a moment. “Sure. Let’s call it that.”

He straightened up and glanced out the window at the darkening city. “Listen, Adam. You seem like a sharp kid. Driven. Hungry. That’s good—you’ll need it here. But let me give you some advice.”

“Of course.”

Marcus looked at him, and for just a second, something passed across his face. Something tired. Something almost like a warning.

“Enjoy the honeymoon phase,” he said quietly. “It doesn’t last.”

Before Adam could ask what he meant, Marcus’s phone buzzed. He checked it, and the easy smile returned, sliding into place like a mask.

“Duty calls. Get some rest this weekend—you’ve earned it. And welcome to the family.”

He walked back toward his corner office, and Adam watched him go. The phrase echoed: *Welcome to the family*. Lucian had said the same thing. So had the welcome card. It was everywhere, that word. *Family*.

Adam gathered his things and headed for the elevator. The building was quiet now, most of the lights dimmed, but he could see a few offices still glowing. People hunched over computers. People who’d been there when he arrived at eight that morning and were still there now, twelve hours later.

CHAPTER 5

He told himself that was dedication. Passion. The price of excellence.

He didn't ask what Marcus had meant by "honeymoon phase." He didn't want to know.

Not yet.

Chapter Six

PROMOTION

SIX MONTHS IN, ADAM GOT the call.

Claire asked him to come to her office at four o'clock. When he arrived, she was smiling—a real smile, not the clipped professional one she usually wore. Marcus Webb was there too, standing by the window.

“Close the door,” Claire said.

Adam’s heart was pounding as he sat down. He’d been working seventy-hour weeks, sometimes more. He’d delivered three major projects ahead of schedule. He’d earned this—whatever this was.

“We’re promoting you,” Claire said. “Senior Associate, effective immediately. New title, new salary, new office. Congratulations.”

Adam exhaled. Six months. Most people waited two years for this. He thought of his father, who’d worked the same job for three decades without a single promotion, and felt a swell of something that might have been pride or might have been distance.

“You’ve earned it,” Marcus said from the window. “Lucian’s impressed. That doesn’t happen often.”

That night, there was a dinner in the executive dining

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room. White tablecloths, waiters in black, and a toast from Lucian himself. He stood at the head of the table with a glass of wine raised and said, “To Adam Cole. He understands what it takes. He’s one of us now.”

Everyone clapped. Adam felt the warmth of it wash over him—the attention, the approval, the sense that he had finally, finally arrived.

He didn’t notice that Marcus barely touched his wine. He didn’t see the way Marcus watched Lucian with something careful in his eyes, something guarded.

He was too busy glowing.

The promotion came with a new office—glass walls, a view of the river, and his name on the door. It also came with new expectations. The seventy-hour weeks became eighty. The projects multiplied. Adam started carrying two phones: one for work and one for everything else. The work phone never stopped buzzing.

He told himself it was temporary. Just until he proved himself at this new level. Just until things settled down.

Things never settled down.

His father’s birthday fell on a Saturday in October. Adam had planned to drive home for the weekend—his mother had called three times to confirm, and his father, who never asked for anything, had mentioned he was looking forward to it.

On Friday afternoon, Claire dropped a folder on his desk. “Major client dinner tomorrow night. Lucian specifically asked for you to be there. It’s a big opportunity.”

Adam stared at the folder. “Tomorrow? I have—I was supposed to—”

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Claire was already walking away. “Seven o’clock. Don’t be late.”

He sat there for a long time, looking at the folder. Then he picked up his personal phone and called his mother.

“Hey, Mom. Listen … something came up at work. I’m not going to be able to make it this weekend.”

Silence. Then: “Oh. Okay, sweetheart. Your father will understand.”

But her voice said something different. Her voice said he wouldn’t understand, not really, and neither did she.

“I’ll make it up to him,” Adam said. “I promise. Next month.”

“Sure. Next month.”

Next month never came. There was always another dinner, another deadline, another opportunity too important to miss. Adam sent a gift—an expensive watch, nicer than anything his father had ever owned—and told himself it was enough.

His father called to thank him. “It’s a beautiful watch, son. I’ll wear it every day.”

He didn’t say what Adam knew he was thinking: *I’d rather have you.*

Emily left him in November.

She’d been his girlfriend since junior year of college—smart, patient, and kind. She’d moved to the city to be near him, taken a job at a nonprofit, and waited for him on the nights he came home late, which was every night.

They were supposed to have dinner on a Tuesday. Adam canceled—a last-minute crisis at work. They

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rescheduled for Thursday. He canceled again. On Saturday, he promised he'd be there, and he meant it, but then Lucian called personally to ask him to review a presentation, and what was he supposed to say?

Emily was sitting on his couch when he got home at eleven. Her eyes were red.

“I can’t do this anymore,” she said.

Adam set down his briefcase. “Em, I’m sorry. I know I’ve been busy, but things will slow down soon. I just need to—”

“You always say that.” Her voice cracked. “Things will slow down. Next month. After this project. But they never do, Adam. They never do, and I’m tired of being something you fit in between meetings.”

He wanted to argue. He wanted to tell her she didn’t understand the pressure he was under, the stakes, the opportunity. But he looked at her—really looked at her—and saw something he hadn’t seen before. She was grieving. Not for the relationship, but for him. For the person he used to be.

“I don’t even know who you are anymore,” she said quietly. “And I don’t think you do either.”

She left that night. Adam stood at the window of his thirty-second-floor apartment, watching the city lights blur through something that might have been exhaustion or might have been tears.

He told himself it was for the best. She didn’t fit into his life anymore. She wanted something small and ordinary, and he was building something bigger.

He told himself a lot of things that year.

At the company Christmas party, Lucian gave a

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speech. He talked about record profits, about market dominance, and about the family they'd built together. Then he pointed at Adam, standing near the back with a glass of champagne he didn't want.

"Adam Cole," Lucian said. "Stand up. Let everyone see you."

Adam stood, face flushing.

"This young man has been with us less than a year, and already he's outperforming people who've been here a decade. That's what we're about. That's the Fyre Inc. way. Talent. Drive. Sacrifice." Lucian raised his glass. "To Adam. And to everyone willing to give everything for this family."

Everyone drank. Everyone applauded. Adam smiled and nodded and felt the heat of all those eyes on him.

Later, in the bathroom, he looked at himself in the mirror. He barely recognized the man looking back. The face was thinner, the eyes harder, the jaw set in a way that hadn't been there before.

I don't even know who you are anymore, Emily had said.

He splashed water on his face and went back to the party. There was networking to do, hands to shake, and a future to build.

The cost of that future was becoming clearer every day. But Adam wasn't counting anymore.

He'd already paid too much to stop.

