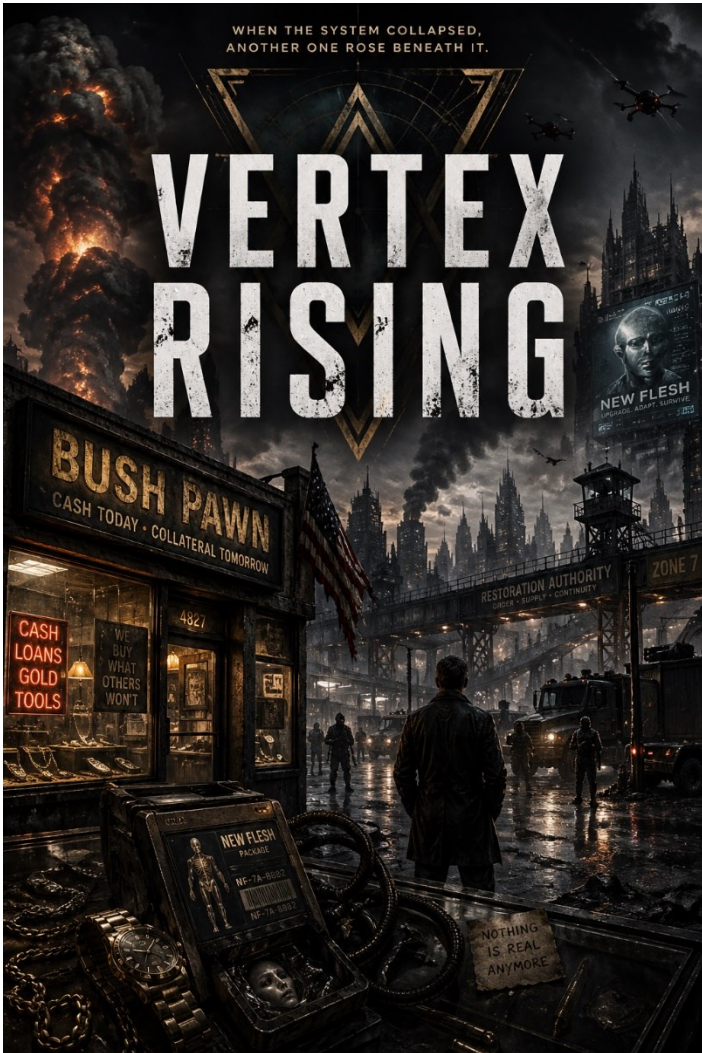


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Chapter 1: The Skinny on Jimmy

Jimmy Bush grew up in South Florida during the long, uneasy years of the 1980s, in neighborhoods where the heat settled heavily against concrete streets and faded apartment walls, where people learned early how quickly stability could disappear once money stopped moving. By the time he was old enough to understand the rhythm of adulthood, he had already spent years watching his father drift through the slow erosion that unemployment creates inside a man. It had not happened all at once. There had been no single collapse dramatic enough to define the beginning of it. Instead, it came through accumulation; jobs lost, temporary work accepted, promises of recovery that never fully arrived. One position dissolved into another. Weeks became months. Months stretched into years.

His father carried the frustration of it everywhere. At the dinner table, in the garage, late at night with the television flickering low in the background, he spoke constantly about systems that had become too large to resist. Corporations. Banks. Political institutions. Invisible networks of influence that, in his mind, no longer served ordinary people but fed upon them instead. He talked about centralized power the way other men talked about weather, something distant yet unavoidable, something capable of shaping entire lives without ever asking permission. He believed America had been hollowed out from above by people who manipulated populations through debt, dependence, and fear, and as Jimmy listened over the years, those ideas settled into him less as ideology and more as pressure.

The instability inside the house forced Jimmy to mature earlier than he should have. While other kids trotted through adolescence with the assumption that adulthood would eventually organize itself around them, Jimmy learned to view survival as something

engineered. Nothing could be left to chance. Every decision had to justify itself. Every weakness had to be corrected before the world discovered it first.

That pressure followed him into college. He approached education not as exploration, but as extraction; a process through which he intended to pull stability out of a system that seemed designed to withhold it. He studied relentlessly, driven less by ambition than by the fear of becoming trapped in the same endless cycle he had watched consume his father. While other students spoke casually about careers and opportunities, Jimmy treated employment like a defensive structure that needed to be built before the storm arrived. The effort paid off. He earned an internship. Then a position as an Industrial Engineer.

For the first time in his life, he felt close enough to the machinery of the American economy to observe how it actually functioned beneath the language corporations used to describe themselves. Inside logistics operations and transportation networks, he saw systems stripped down to their raw purpose; efficiency, optimization, throughput, margin. Human lives translated into movement patterns and cost variables. Routes became equations. Time became measurable loss. Labor became a controllable expense.

And yet, despite the cold precision of the environment, Jimmy found himself listening closely to the truck drivers. They talked constantly during loading delays and dispatch waits, leaning against trailers with exhausted expressions while diesel engines vibrated in the background. They spoke about marriages strained by distance. Children growing up while they crossed state lines. Weeks spent sleeping in cramped cabs beneath fluorescent truck-stop lights. Some complained openly. Others defended the life with stubborn

pride. But beneath all of it, Jimmy heard the same thing repeated in different forms.

They wanted stability. Or at least he thought they did.

From his perspective, the inefficiencies inside long-haul transportation were obvious. Trucks crossed massive distances carrying partial loads while other trucks duplicated routes nearby. Drivers spent days away from home burning time, fuel, and labor against poorly coordinated distribution patterns that could be reorganized into something far tighter and more efficient.

Jimmy began building models.

What started as small routing adjustments evolved into something much larger; a triangulated transportation structure designed to reduce long-haul dependency entirely. Freight would move through coordinated regional corridors instead of individual coast-to-coast runs. Drivers would remain localized. Transfer points would replace endless highway miles. Assets would cycle faster. Fuel costs would shrink. Delivery times would stabilize.

On paper, it was brilliant.

The projections showed lower operational costs, higher asset utilization, improved scheduling consistency, and dramatically reduced downtime. Executives loved it. Investors loved it. Efficiency spread through the system like a new religion. And for a while, Jimmy believed he had solved something important.

Four million drivers became tethered to local and regional routes. Companies celebrated reduced costs and predictable delivery schedules. Drivers returned home more frequently. Families regained routines that had once been impossible under traditional

long-haul operations. But something inside the industry began to rot. The open road disappeared.

What Jimmy had interpreted as a desire for stability turned out to be far more complicated. Many drivers had never wanted ordinary life in the first place. The distance had been part of the identity. Motion itself had mattered. Freedom existed out there between state lines beneath endless highway skies where no supervisor stood over them and no fixed routine controlled every hour.

Now the routes repeated endlessly. The same roads. The same warehouses. The same schedules every day. Home every night, but trapped inside monotony.

Jimmy watched morale deteriorate across operations that had once seemed successful in every measurable way. Drivers quit. Others stayed but carried a quiet bitterness that surfaced in complaints, absenteeism, and growing hostility toward the systems managing them. What looked efficient inside spreadsheets felt suffocating in practice. Then the contractions began.

Automation layered itself over the network improvements he had helped create. Route optimization reduced labor needs further. Consolidation spread. Positions vanished. Thousands of drivers disappeared from payroll structures entirely.

The company celebrated increased efficiency. Jimmy felt something else. For the first time, he understood that systems rewarded outcomes without asking whether those outcomes should exist in the first place. He had optimized movement. Increased profitability. Reduced operational waste. And in doing so, he had helped build machinery that erased livelihoods. When the contracts began collapsing and major accounts withdrew from the restructuring model, the company turned quickly, searching for failures to isolate

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and remove. Jimmy became one of them. He was terminated quietly. No dramatic confrontation. No public blame. Just separation. Afterward, he withdrew from the industry almost completely.

He relocated to a small homestead near Splendora, Texas, far enough from the corporate systems he had once trusted that the silence itself felt unfamiliar during the first months. The property was modest; unfinished fencing, uneven ground, equipment repaired more often than replaced; but it gave him something the corporate world never had. Control.

There, surrounded by scattered acreage and long stretches of rural highway, he began studying systems again. Only this time, he studied survival.

The engineer inside him never disappeared. It simply redirected itself. He organized planting schedules, water systems, storage methods, supply rotation patterns. Over time, he connected with other homesteaders across the region; people growing produce, raising livestock, preserving food, repairing equipment outside traditional retail systems. Slowly, another idea began to form.

He organized small distribution chains linking rural producers to farmer-market convenience stores stretching from Livingston down toward Humble along Interstate 69. Unlike the massive logistics systems he once worked inside, these networks operated through proximity and trust rather than scale. Goods moved quickly. Waste stayed low. Relationships mattered more than corporate contracts.

And as the years passed, the national economy began changing in ways that felt disturbingly familiar.

Every night the news carried fresh reports of layoffs, closures, and restructuring campaigns described in sanitized corporate language

that concealed the human damage beneath them. Older workers spoke about being discarded after decades of service. Younger workers struggled to enter industries that demanded experience no one would give them the opportunity to obtain. Entire sectors compressed under automation, outsourcing, and consolidation.

Jimmy watched the reports with growing intensity. The numbers climbed higher. Millions unemployed. Then tens of millions at risk.

He recognized the same patterns he had once participated in; systems rewarding ruthlessness while disguising it as efficiency, corporations manipulating labor scarcity to enforce obedience, populations becoming increasingly dependent on structures that no longer intended to support them.

And beneath all of it, he saw something far more dangerous beginning to emerge. Desperation.

Because once enough people lose stability at the same time, morality itself begins to mutate. Principles weaken under pressure. Laws become negotiable. Communities fracture. Survival starts replacing ideology.

Late at night, sitting alone beneath the dim glow of the television while reports of economic contraction rolled endlessly across the screen, Jimmy felt the same anger he had once heard in his father's voice years earlier. Only now he understood where it came from.

His resentment hardened toward the executives, institutions, and financial elites he believed had transformed the country into a machine that consumed workers faster than it replaced them. To him, centralized power no longer looked inefficient. It looked predatory.

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And as unemployment projections climbed higher, one thought began repeating itself in his mind with increasing clarity. If a hundred million people lost the ability to survive inside the existing system... Then another system would have to rise beneath it.

Jimmy leaned forward in his chair, eyes fixed on the flickering television light as economic analysts argued over labor projections they clearly did not understand. Somewhere beyond the noise of the broadcast, beyond the language of markets and policy and corporate restructuring, he felt the outline of something larger beginning to take shape. Not collapse. Transition. And for the first time in years, the engineer inside him began building again.

Chapter 2: Here Goes Nothing

The bell above the pawn shop door did not ring so much as drag itself across the moment, a thin metallic protest that lingered just a second longer than it should have as Jimmy Bush stepped inside and let the door fall shut behind him. The sound seemed to hang in the air rather than dissipate, as if the building itself had grown tired of announcing arrivals, as if every new presence inside its walls was less an event and more a continuation of something already in motion. Jimmy paused just past the threshold, not because he needed to adjust to the light, but because the space demanded a kind of recalibration that had nothing to do with vision. It was the density of the place that settled on him first; the feeling that the room was not merely filled, but compressed, that every surface, every wall, every suspended inch of airspace had been claimed, defined, and put to use long before he had arrived.

Nothing in the shop felt accidental. The power tools lining the far wall were arranged with a rigid discipline that suggested not care, but necessity; each box squared, each label facing forward, each row aligned with a precision that came not from pride but from repetition. Above him, guitars hung from ceiling mounts in uneven rows, their polished bodies catching the overhead light in dull reflections, their strings vibrating faintly in response to the constant electrical hum that seemed to live in the wiring of the shop. Beneath the glass counters, gold chains lay coiled in quiet loops, watches arranged in deliberate lines that implied order but also hinted at urgency, as if their placement was less about display and more about readiness; ready to be moved, ready to be converted, ready to leave.

The air carried a layered scent that took a moment to resolve. There was metal, unmistakable and sharp at the edges, but beneath it

lingered something softer; aged leather, worn fabric, the faint residue of objects that had passed through hands under pressure. It wasn't the smell of decay or neglect. It was something more controlled than that. Something quieter. The lingering trace of transactions made when options had narrowed.

Jimmy moved forward slowly, his hands resting in his pockets in a posture that might have appeared casual to anyone watching, but his eyes betrayed something else entirely. He wasn't browsing. He wasn't evaluating items in the way a customer might. His gaze moved across the room with deliberate precision, tracking not the objects themselves, but the relationships between them; the spacing, the density, the pathways through which people would naturally move. He noted the gaps in the shelving, the slight inconsistencies in inventory distribution, the way certain sections felt heavier than others. He wasn't looking at merchandise. He was reading a system.

Behind the counter, a man stood hunched slightly over a glass surface, a jeweler's loupe pressed to one eye as he turned a gold bracelet slowly between his fingers. The movement was unhurried, almost meditative, as if time inside the shop operated under a different set of rules. The man did not look up when Jimmy entered. He did not acknowledge the sound of the door, or the shift in the room, or the presence of someone new standing just a few feet away. That, more than anything, told Jimmy what he needed to know.

He approached the counter and stopped, saying nothing.

The seconds that followed stretched just long enough to establish a quiet tension, not hostile, not confrontational, but deliberate. Jimmy allowed it to settle. There was no advantage in rushing this moment. The first exchange between two people was never about words. It was about who chose to break the silence, and why.

Finally, Jimmy spoke, “Are you Ned Ryerson?”

The man didn’t respond immediately. He continued examining the bracelet, rotating it once more beneath the light, checking something only he could see, before setting it down with a careful, almost exact placement. Only then did he lift his head, his eyes sharp and focused in a way that suggested not curiosity, but assessment, “I am,” he said, his voice flat and unembellished. “Who the fuck are you?”

Jimmy gave a slight nod, acknowledging the question without reacting to the tone, “My name’s Jimmy Bush.” He let the name sit there between them, unaccompanied by explanation, watching for recognition that didn’t come. That absence didn’t bother him. In fact, it confirmed something, “You’ve been doing this a long time,” Jimmy continued, his voice even, controlled, as if the conversation had already begun somewhere before this moment. “I figured I’d understand how you see things before I start telling you what I want.”

Ned leaned back slightly, one hand resting against the counter, his posture changing just enough to signal that he was now engaged, even if he hadn’t decided why, “See what?” he asked.

Jimmy held his gaze, letting the answer arrive without adjustment, “The civil war that’s coming.”

The words did not land like a provocation. They were not delivered with emphasis or intensity. If anything, their calmness made them heavier, as if they had been considered long before they were spoken, as if they were not an opinion but a conclusion.

For a moment, the space between them held still.

Ned’s expression didn’t change dramatically, but something in the set of his shoulders tightened, just enough to register, “What the fuck

are you talking about?" he asked, though the question carried less dismissal than it might have a moment earlier.

Jimmy didn't smile. He didn't soften the statement or attempt to reframe it, "I'm looking to build something," he said, his voice steady, measured in a way that suggested this was not the part he was improvising. "A network. Pawn shops, specifically. Not corporate. Not franchised. Something tighter than that." He gestured lightly around the store, his hand moving not to dismiss the space, but to include it in what he was describing., "Owner-operated. Independent. But aligned."

Ned let out a short, dry laugh, the sound more reflex than amusement, "You want to franchise misery?" he asked.

Jimmy shook his head once, a small, controlled movement, "I want to organize it."

That qualified as something.

It wasn't agreement, and it wasn't interest; not yet, but it was attention. Ned's posture changed subtly, his arms folding across his chest as he studied Jimmy with a more focused intensity.

"Alright," Ned said. "Let's say I don't throw you out yet. What do you want from me?"

Jimmy didn't hesitate, "Your signature."

This time, Ned's reaction was immediate. A sharper laugh, louder, edged with disbelief as he shook his head.

"Jesus. Just like that?" he said, his eyes narrowing as he looked at Jimmy more closely. "What are you offering?"

Jimmy didn't reach for a briefcase or produce paperwork. He didn't need to.

"You keep ownership for thirty-six months," he said, the terms coming out with quiet precision, as if he had already run through them a hundred times. "I pay you sixty thousand a year as salary. You retain twenty-five percent of the profits. Inventory valued at forty percent of retail. Pawn portfolio at fifty. Seller-financed over three years."

Ned didn't respond right away. He stared at him, not casually, not dismissively, but with a level of attention that suggested something had shifted beneath the surface of the conversation, "No money down?" he asked finally.

"No money down."

Ned leaned forward slightly, his hands resting on the glass, "Then what exactly are you putting into this?"

Jimmy met his gaze without hesitation, "Myself."

Ned's expression tightened faintly, "That's not currency."

"It is," Jimmy replied, his voice lowering just enough to carry weight, "if the business performs." The space between them thickened again, but this time it wasn't uncertainty. It was calculation. "If it doesn't," Jimmy added, "I don't get paid. You keep everything."

Ned tapped his finger once against the glass, a small, deliberate sound that seemed louder than it should have been, "That's better than most garbage I've heard," he said slowly. "So, where's the catch?"

Jimmy shook his head, “No catch.” He glanced around the shop again, slower now, more deliberate. “I’m interested in things that still function when everything else stops,” he said. “Pawn shops don’t rely on credit markets. They don’t need stable supply chains. They move cash. They move goods. They operate when banks hesitate.”

Ned watched him carefully, the skepticism still there, but layered now with something else. “What do you get out of it?” he asked.

Jimmy didn’t hesitate, “I win the war.”

The words settled into the space without movement.

Ned let out a low breath, something between a laugh and an exhale, “Your army’s a bunch of pawn brokers?”

“Cash flow builds the army.”

Ned leaned forward again, both hands planted on the counter now, fully engaged, “And how exactly does that work?”

Jimmy’s gaze moved across the shop, but this time it wasn’t observation; it was demonstration, “When the economy tightens,” he said, “this place fills up. Not with junk; with assets. People don’t sell garbage when they’re desperate. They sell what matters. Gold. Tools. Equipment. Value under pressure. You buy low,” Jimmy continued. “You move volume. You generate liquidity when nobody else can.”

Ned nodded once, almost involuntarily, “That’s the business.”

“Individually,” Jimmy said, “it’s survival. Collectively, it’s leverage.”

That word stayed in the air longer than the others.

Leverage.

Ned didn't answer right away.

"There are about twelve thousand pawn shops in this country," Jimmy went on. "In a downturn, they become the financial system for people who don't have access to anything else." He paused, just long enough, "Thirty million customers become sixty."

Ned narrowed his eyes, "You're guessing."

"I'm preparing."

The silence that followed wasn't empty. It was full of movement, calculation, risk, possibility.

"For what?" Ned asked.

Jimmy's voice dropped slightly, "For when a hundred million people don't have jobs."

This time, it didn't just land. It stayed.

Ned's gaze shuffled, just for a fraction of a second, "You planning to hire them?" he asked.

"Yes."

"With pawn shop money?"

"With pawn shop cash flow as the base layer."

Ned leaned back slowly, studying him in a way that had nothing to do with the numbers anymore, "You're talking about billions."

"I'm talking about everything that gets discounted when the system breaks."

Ned's eyes didn't leave his, "Companies?" he asked.

“Companies.”

“With what capital?”

Jimmy leaned forward slightly, his voice steady, controlled, “With undervalued assets.” A brief pause. “Equity buys control.”

Ned sat there for a long moment, the weight of the conversation settling into something that no longer felt theoretical.

Finally, he reached under the counter and pulled out a pen, placing it on the glass between them with a sharp, deliberate click.

He looked at Jimmy one last time, holding the gaze long enough to make a decision that went beyond the terms on the table.

“Where do I sign?”

Chapter 3: Separation

The meeting appeared on Elena Cruz's calendar without explanation, and that absence of context lingered longer than any subject line ever could have. It sat there in the middle of her morning, 8:30 AM, surrounded by the usual structure of her day, embedded between operational reviews and vendor calls, but somehow separate from all of it, as if it had been placed there deliberately and then stripped of meaning. She had hovered over it the night before, her cursor resting on the entry as if something more might reveal itself through patience alone, but the screen had remained unchanged, offering nothing beyond the time itself.

Meetings always carried language. Even the unnecessary ones came dressed in justification; alignment, coordination, strategic review. There was always a reason, even if it was thin. This one had none. And that absence didn't feel like an oversight. It felt intentional.

By the time she shut her laptop that night, the unease had already begun to settle into her in a quiet, persistent way. It wasn't sharp enough to alarm her, not sudden enough to demand immediate attention, but it remained there beneath everything else she did, like a low-frequency vibration she couldn't isolate but couldn't ignore either. She moved through the rest of the evening on habit; dinner, a brief glance at emails, a final check of the next day's schedule; but her thoughts kept circling back to that empty block of time, trying to assign it meaning, trying to anticipate something that hadn't yet taken shape.

Sleep came, but not cleanly. It drifted in and out, interrupted by fragments of thought that never fully formed into worry, but never dissolved either. By the time morning arrived, she wasn't exhausted,

but she wasn't rested either. There was a subtle tension in her that she couldn't quite justify.

At 8:27, she was already seated in the conference room.

The space felt colder than usual, though she knew, rationally, that it wasn't. The temperature hadn't changed. The lighting hadn't changed. The arrangement of the table, the chairs, the glass walls; all of it was exactly as it had been the day before, and the day before that. But context alters perception, and now the room carried a different weight. The air felt sharper. More deliberate.

Elena sat upright in her chair, her posture composed out of long habit rather than conscious effort. A legal pad rested neatly in front of her, the date written at the top in clean, controlled handwriting. The rest of the page was blank. Her pen lay parallel to the edge of the paper, aligned with a precision she hadn't intended but didn't correct.

She glanced at the clock mounted on the far wall.

8:28.

Through the glass, she could hear the faint rhythm of the office beginning its day. Footsteps moved past the hallway in steady intervals. Voices carried in brief, indistinct fragments. The low hum of computers and printers coming online blended into a familiar background noise that she had long ago stopped consciously noticing.

Everything outside the room sounded normal. That was what made the silence inside it feel so pronounced.

At 8:29, the door opened.

Elena looked up immediately, her attention snapping into focus with a clarity that surprised her. It wasn't Tom.

The man who entered first was someone she didn't recognize; mid-thirties, neutral expression, dressed in the kind of understated professionalism that was designed not to draw attention. He carried a thin folder in one hand, held loosely but deliberately, as if it were both necessary and routine. His movements were efficient without appearing rushed, each step measured in a way that suggested repetition. This was not new for him.

Behind him came Tom. He didn't look at her.

That was the moment everything aligned; not in her thoughts, not through conscious reasoning, but somewhere deeper. There are certain realizations that don't arrive through logic, but through pattern recognition at a level too fast to articulate. Something in his posture, in the way he avoided her eyes, in the slight stiffness of his movement as he entered the room; it all converged into a single, quiet certainty.

She understood.

The man closed the door behind them, the soft click of the latch sealing the space in a way that felt final, even though nothing had yet been said.

"Good morning, Elena," he began, offering a small, contained smile as he took a seat across from her. The expression was practiced, not insincere, but controlled. "Thank you for coming in."

She didn't return the smile. Not out of defiance, but because the moment didn't allow for it, "What's this about?" she asked.

Tom squirmed slightly in his chair at the far end of the table, his hands moving just enough to suggest discomfort before settling again. He still hadn't met her eyes. That detail continued to hold her attention more than anything else in the room.

The man in front of her placed the folder on the table with careful precision, aligning it with the edge as though the placement itself mattered. He opened it briefly, then rested his hands lightly on either side, "As you know," he began, his tone smooth and measured, "the company has been undergoing a strategic realignment in response to—"

Elena raised her hand. The motion wasn't abrupt. It didn't carry force. But it was enough, "Don't," she said.

The word settled into the room, interrupting the script before it could fully form. For a brief moment, something roiled in his expression. It wasn't resistance. It wasn't irritation. It was something closer to relief.

He closed the folder, "Your position has been eliminated," he said.

There was no buildup. No cushioning language. Just the statement itself, delivered cleanly.

Elena felt the words land in a way that was almost physical; not as an impact, but as a weight settling into place. It didn't shock her. It confirmed something that had already been forming, "Eliminated," she repeated, the word sounding unfamiliar when spoken aloud.

"Yes."

She turned her head slowly toward Tom.

He was looking at the table.

“How many?” she asked.

Tom cleared his throat, his voice coming out slightly tighter than usual, “It’s across multiple departments,” he said.

“How many, Tom?”

There was a pause; just long enough to acknowledge that the answer mattered, “...About two hundred in this round.”

In this round. The phrase lingered in the space between them, carrying implications that didn’t need to be stated directly.

Elena leaned back slightly in her chair, the movement instinctive, giving herself a fraction more space as her mind moved through the information. The number didn’t overwhelm her. It organized itself immediately into something more tangible.

Two hundred meant structure. Two hundred meant selection. Two hundred meant this wasn’t reactive; it was planned.

Twenty-five years of experience moved quietly through her thoughts, not as memories, but as context. Late nights resolving system failures. Vendor collapses managed through negotiation and persistence. Teams looking to her when things broke, expecting stability, expecting answers.

She had been the constant. And now, she had been removed.

“What about transition?” she asked, her voice steady, controlled.

“Handover? My team?”

“They’ve been reassigned,” Tom said quickly, the speed of the response suggesting preparation. “We’ll handle continuity internally.”

Of course he will. The answer didn't surprise her. It fit.

The man across from her slid the folder slightly closer, a gesture that felt procedural rather than meaningful, "This includes your severance package, benefits continuation, and access to outplacement services—"

She didn't reach for it, "How long?" she asked.

"Eight weeks of pay," he replied. "Plus accrued vacation."

Eight weeks. The number didn't stay abstract for long. It converted immediately into something more concrete; mortgage, utilities, insurance, food. Eight weeks wasn't time. It was a measure of distance, "And after that?" she asked.

The man offered a sympathetic expression that remained contained within professional boundaries, "We encourage you to take advantage of the resources provided—"

She didn't let him finish, "Why me?" she asked.

Tom looked up then, finally meeting her eyes. "It wasn't performance," he said quickly. "You've been—"

"Don't," she said again, more quietly this time. Because if it wasn't performance, then the answer was already clear.

Cost.

She knew her numbers. She understood the structure. She knew exactly how a spreadsheet like that was adjusted when pressure increased.

She stood.

The movement stirred up the room slightly, not dramatically, but enough to mark a transition from conversation to conclusion.

“I assume my access is already cut,” she said.

“Yes,” the man replied. “Your credentials were disabled this morning. IT can assist with retrieval of personal files.”

The efficiency of it registered immediately. Preemptive. Controlled. Risk minimized.

“Can I say goodbye to my team?” she asked.

Tom hesitated, “...Briefly.”

Elena nodded once, “Good.”

She picked up the folder, though she still didn’t open it. The weight of it in her hand felt disproportionate to its contents.

For a moment, no one moved.

Then the man stood, signaling the end of the meeting not emotionally, but procedurally, “Thank you for your contributions, Elena,” he said.

She looked at him; not unkindly, but directly. She tried, for a brief second, to imagine doing what he did. Delivering that sentence over and over again, across rooms like this, to people whose lives tumbled in the span of a few minutes, “Yeah,” she said quietly. “You too.”

When she returned to her desk, everything was exactly where she had left it. That was what felt wrong. The monitors still glowed with open windows. Emails remained half-written. A draft message sat waiting for a response that would never be sent. The continuity of the space clashed with the finality of what had just happened.

People noticed her as she approached. They always did. But this time, the recognition carried something else. Awareness.

Jason stood when he saw her, his expression already tightening, “Hey... what’s going on?” he asked, though the question lacked conviction.

Elena offered a small, controlled smile, “Restructuring,” she said. “I got caught in it.”

His reaction came immediately, “That’s insane,” he said. “You run this place.”

“Not anymore.”

The words settled more heavily than she expected. He started to respond, then stopped. There was nothing useful to say. There never was.

Elena sat down and opened her drawer, her movements methodical now, deliberate in a way that gave her something to focus on. She gathered small items without hesitation; a photo, a pen she preferred, a notebook filled with years of problem-solving that no one else would fully understand.

Jason remained beside her, his uncertainty visible, “What are we supposed to do?” he asked quietly.

For a moment, she almost answered the way she always had. Solve it. Stabilize it. Keep things moving. But that role no longer belonged to her. She closed her bag, “You’ll figure it out,” she said.

And this time, it wasn’t reassurance. It was reality.

By the time she stepped out into the parking lot, the brightness of the day felt almost artificial. The openness of the space contrasted

sharply with the compressed atmosphere she had just left behind, and for a moment, she stood beside her car without moving, her keys resting loosely in her hand.

People passed by her in small, quiet streams. Some moved quickly, their focus fixed ahead. Others avoided eye contact entirely. No one wanted to engage with the possibility of what had just happened to her. No one wanted to be next. She got into the car and closed the door. The silence inside was immediate. For the first time in years, there was nothing waiting for her. No incoming problem. No system depending on her. No urgency demanding her attention. Just space.

Her phone buzzed. She glanced down. Bank Balance Alert. She opened it, looked at the number, and without thinking, her mind began to calculate. Weeks. Maybe a few months, if she adjusted everything. Outside, traffic moved normally. Cars passed. People continued their routines, moving through a system that still appeared intact. But something underneath it had reformed. She could feel it now. Not a collapse. Not yet. A change in tension. A loosening. And if it could happen to her, after twenty-five years, then it wasn't isolated. It was spreading.

Elena sat there for a moment longer, her hands resting on the steering wheel, her thoughts no longer scattered, but narrowing into something more focused. Then she started the car, and drove.

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