

# CHAPTER 1



*“I’m sorry. Your cancer is spreading . . .”*

Morning gridlock on the LA Freeway gave Doug Zimmer too much time to think again.

*“ . . . you may have weeks, or you may have months . . . .”*

He turned on the radio. “Let It Snow” fit neither the sunny day nor his mood, so he jabbed the power button. Enough of Johnny Mathis.

*Will life be worth living after Ruth is gone?* Yet she was looking forward to heaven. Imagine that.

Doug rolled his old Ford Explorer into the corporate parking lot with only a minute to spare. He opened the door and slid down until his feet hit the pavement. Briefcase in tow, he stepped into the building.

“Good morning, Michelle,” he said to the receptionist.

“How’s Ruth?” she said, reviewing her computer screen through half-frame reading glasses.

“Not good, but thanks for asking.” Doug grabbed his mail, then flew by her garland-trimmed workstation before she could ask any more questions. Michelle meant well, but she didn’t get it.

Lorna came down the hallway in her gray suit. “Doug, how’s Ruth doing?”

He didn’t stop walking. “Not good.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. Ryan and I have been praying for you.”

“Thanks,” he said as he passed her. “I’ll take any help I can get.” What else could he say? If people only knew how Ruth and Doug’s world had been turned upside down, they might resort to more than just prayer.

He stepped into his unadorned office and set his briefcase on the table beside his desk. A bright light blinded him, so he tilted his head to avoid it. It came from a wall full of plaques. Not bad for an Iowa farm boy. However, the sunbeam spotlighted his most recent award, now six years old. *Sales. What a roller-coaster ride.*

As he plopped his weary body into the chair, his eyes met those of a younger version of Ruth in the frame on his desk. His chin quivered, so he looked away. He reached for his mouse when—

“Afternoon, Zimmer. Rollins wants to see you.”

*Afternoon. Typical Banister. Wise guy.*

Todd Banister, the winner of the latest sales award, had poked his head in the door. Along with it came that slicked-back hairdo of his. A split second after delivering the message, he disappeared—to fetch their boss’s morning cup of coffee, no doubt.

“I’ll be right there,” Doug replied to the empty doorway.

Though Doug had ample seniority over Banister, he’d learned not to turn his back for fear the man would pierce him with the proverbial knife. Like a bloodthirsty shark circling a man overboard, Banister snatched credit for the latest contract on a lucrative account Doug had serviced forever.

Doug pried himself out of the chair, then stooped and tilted his head up so he could scan his unopened email messages. He turned and walked down the hall to the corner office.

“You wanted to see me?”

Frank Rollins took a sip from a cup of steaming coffee and then set it on his spotless desk. He got up, reached his starchy white cuff toward the doorknob, and closed the door.

As Rollins returned to his chair, Doug looked up—as he did with most men—to read his face. The man’s expression suggested he was prepared for a game of poker.

“Doug, have a seat.”

Intimidation was nothing new to Doug, but the closed-door privacy gave him the jitters.

A star athlete in college with a mind as sharp as his pinstriped suit, Rollins could do no wrong in coworkers’ eyes. Doug was old enough to be his father, but even he respected how Frank’s leadership had grown sales substantially during the man’s three-year tenure.

Rollins held his solid red tie to his chest as he seated himself.

“I haven’t heard anything from McIver,” Doug said.

“I have.”

When silence permeated the room, Doug drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly.

Rollins merely looked across the desk at him. “They said you misled them.”

“What?” Doug studied his boss’s double-barreled glare. “I mean, about what?”

“They said you offered them a three-month bonus.”

Doug opened his mouth to object, but Rollins continued, “When the elder McIver looked at the contract and didn’t see the bonus, he went ballistic.”

Doug grasped the arms of his chair. His boss had jumped to an unfair conclusion—again. Regardless, escalating the tenor of the conversation would only make matters worse, so he remained silent.

“What were you thinking?”

“What do you mean, ‘What was I thinking?’”

“You know we can’t offer three-month bonuses. We stopped doing that two years ago.”

Doug's heart pounded. "I *didn't* offer them a three-month bonus."

"They said you did . . . and turned down the competition because of it."

"That's ridiculous. I—I did no such thing."

Rollins reached into his desk drawer and pulled out a sheet of paper. "Brown vouched for him. They called late yesterday and then forwarded this email from *you*."

Rollins passed the paper to Doug, who grasped it with his sweaty hand. Sure enough, it had come from Doug's own email address. And it included the bonus.

"I . . . I know what this looks like, Frank, but I didn't send this email."

"IT already checked into it. It was sent from *your* account and from *your* computer."

"Well, I didn't send it." Doug's jowls shook with every word.

"McIver has been one of our best customers. They told me that if I didn't honor the bonus, they would walk." Rollins's face grew red. He leaned forward with furrowed brows and pounded his fist on the desk. "That's a \$100,000 mistake you just made, and I won't tolerate it."

"I'm telling you, it wasn't my mistake."

Rollins's glare shot daggers across the desk. "I warned you last quarter on the Benson account, Zimmer. You cost the company on that one too."

"What are you talking about?" But suddenly Doug knew what was coming.

"They were going to sign for four years, and you shortened it to two."

"That's because you told me to." Rollins had made an unwise decision, but Doug had failed to push back, fearful his boss might retaliate.

Neck veins popped on both sides of the desk as Doug hid his clenched fists in his lap. The two men exchanged fiery looks.

"Clean out your office, Zimmer. You're fired."

Doug stared at him. “What?”

With the bullet discharged, Rollins calmed down. “HR will help you with the termination details.”

“What do you mean? You—You can’t just fire me.”

A wry smile crept onto Rollins’s face but vanished quickly.

“Don’t I have any rights after thirty years? You can’t do this.”

Rollins got up, walked calmly to the door, and opened it. He held the doorknob with one hand and swung his free arm, pointing the way out.

Doug jerked himself out of the chair, sending it spinning, and stormed out.

He darted to the men’s room, entered a toilet stall, and slammed the door so hard the walls around him rattled. *Ridiculous! How will I pay the bills? And with only five years to go. What a violation!*

It took fifteen minutes in the bathroom to subdue his emotions. Avoiding eye contact, he scooted down the hall to his office and closed the door. He turned to his computer but was already locked out of it. He grabbed his phone to check email, but that account had been secured as well. *Thirty years of loyal service and hard work have come to this?*

He dumped some old files from a cardboard box onto the floor. Yanking open a drawer, he tossed aside some interoffice memos until he unearthed an old Rolodex, two neckties, and a sweater Ruth had given him. Underneath were golf magazines and a decade-old cycling magazine. From another drawer, he pulled an open bag of Milky Way candy bars. He wrapped the sweater around the picture of Ruth and placed the items in the box. He pulled his most recent sales award from the wall, then paused to look at it. He gnashed his teeth and tossed the plaque into the trash can.

By ten o’clock the security team was escorting him to the door. Several coworkers strode through a distant hallway looking over their shoulders to see what was happening, Banister among

them. Michelle clickety-clacked away on her computer, more than likely feigning business as usual.

Shock and embarrassment were the only colleagues that cared enough to accompany Doug to his car on his final day at Josephson's. He'd experienced something he would never have thought possible ninety minutes earlier.

Doug loaded his car and squealed out of the parking lot. For two hours, he rode the freeway with no destination in mind other than to avoid anyone who knew him, driven not by his Ford but by his anger and his overwhelming sense of loss and dignity. He stopped at a bar but couldn't bring himself to enter it. Instead, he used the drive-thru at a fast-food joint to bury his pain in saturated fat and a large shake.

He would kill another four and a half hours before visiting Ruth in the hospital. She needed this news about as much as he needed more questions he couldn't answer.