



CHAPTER ONE

JAKE BIRNBAUM LOOKED up briefly from his computer as his driver made a sharp left. He ran a hand over his buzz cut, then looked back at the specs on his computer.

It was going to be an incredible day. Tuesday morning was cold and crisp.

“It is going be an incredible day,” said Jake.

His assistant, Mark Beyda, nodded enthusiastically.

“This is what some schmo is sending around.” Jake pointed a finger at his computer. “This despicable self-help stuff.”

“Oh, sir,” said Mark.

“I intensely dislike self-help essays,” said Jake. “You just need to work hard, Mark. You must work hard and put your best foot forward and produce goods that will blow people away. But think positive? No. No thinking positive. Positive thinking is for people who do not desire to work really, really hard.”

“Right, sir,” said Mark.

“Because take me, for example,” said Jake. “I have never thought positive in my entire life.”

“It’s probably a waste of energy,” said Mark.

“True,” said Jake. “You just work hard. Do not think about thinking too much. Just get down into the mud and work like there is no tomorrow. That is what I say. Write that down, Mark. We have a company meeting tomorrow, and I want everyone to hear this.”

“Positive thinking is baloney,” Mark said as he wrote it down on the pad as fast as he could.

“You need to work,” said Jake.

“Need to work,” said Mark.

“Thinking is for the guys at the top,” said Jake. “Like me. The rest of you do not think. Just do. The mark of a good soldier is not the one who thinks of new ideas and tries to be heroic. The true hero is the one who follows orders.”

“Follows orders,” said Mark.

“You think that sounds inspirational enough, Mark?” said Jake.

“I...uh... I don’t—”

“Of course it is not inspirational,” said Jake. “I do not do inspirational. Make sure Helen gets the coffee and doughnuts for the twelve o’clock meeting. Send out an email to let everyone know it will start at twelve sharp. The doors will be closed from then on. Tell the guys in the Third Division I need two new plans, and make sure the troubleshooting nerds in the IAO have some hard specs by tomorrow.”

“Yes, sir,” said Mark.

“We’re here, sir,” said the driver.

“Thank you, Pete,” said Jake.

He got out of the car, right foot first, just like his mother had taught him. His shoes were polished, his laces were tied perfectly, his socks were black as midnight.

Jake straightened his tie, his suit. The building in front of him

loomed enormous. It seemed to glare down at him, its windows like a million glinting eyes that looked and whispered and mocked him.

"I am here," said Jake. "Fight me and *lose*."

"What, sir?" said Mark.

"Nothing. Come, Mark. Let us get this done. We have a lot to do."

"Yes, sir," said Mark.

They walked up the polished front steps. Jake's hand swept the banister, polished to a sheen.

"Tell the cleaning crew I want the banisters in the factory polished," said Jake. "They are waxing the floors every day, correct?"

"Yes, sir," said Mark.

"Good," said Jake. "Very, very good."

The atrium was enormously vast, all done in pale ivory. The floor was bright enough for Jake to see his reflection.

"This," said Jake. "This is how you clean a floor. Do you see this, Mark? We should bring the cleaning crew here on a field trip, so they can appreciate the beauty of a true floor waxing."

"Right, sir," said Mark. "Should I put that under 'proposed ideas' or the—"

"I would tell you to take pictures," said Jake. "But they might arrest us for that. Come, it is room thirty-four."

"Fourth floor, sir," said Mark, and he leaned forward to press the elevator button.

Reams of elevators opened seamlessly, and they entered the one to their left. It filled quickly with people in suits, speaking in professional whispers.

The elevator ride was so smooth, Jake didn't even feel the rush of pressure in his ears, or the tingling in his limbs.

"Fourth floor," said the cool female voice over the intercom.

“That’s us,” said Mark, and he led a path through the professionals and held the elevator door open for Jake.

They got to room thirty-four.

“Any last-minute instructions?” said Mark.

“Yes,” said Jake. “First, always look extremely confident. Second, only speak when spoken to. Third, you are *always* right.”

“I’m always right?”

“Well,” said Jake. “No, that is not right. You just look confident and speak when spoken to. I am the one who is always right.”

With that, Jake turned and knocked on the door.

The door immediately opened inward, as if someone had been waiting on the other side the whole time.

“Hello,” said the secretary. “Are you Mr. Jake Birnbaum?”

“That is I,” said Jake.

“The senators are waiting for you,” said the secretary.

“That is impossible,” said Jake. “The meeting was set for nine, and it is now eight fifty-nine.”

The secretary blinked. “No, no, I meant that they’re expecting you.”

“Yes,” said Jake. “They are definitely expecting me.”

“Okay,” said the secretary, and she blinked again before pasting a professional smile on her face and leading them to a room further down the hall. A blank mahogany door greeted them. The secretary knocked three times, then opened the door.

“Please enter, gentlemen,” said the secretary, and she closed the door behind them.

The conference room was open and airy and full of light. The windows were flawlessly polished, splintering prisms of rainbows on the walls. The eight members of the committee sat on one side of the table, talking quietly among themselves.

“Good morning, gentlemen,” said the man in the middle, a round, middle-aged, nearly bald man.

“Good morning,” Jake replied, and he sat down across from the Arms Committee. “I appreciate that you took the time to meet with us.”

The committee smiled at him with varying degrees of fake politeness.

“I know you’ve already met with Senators Shawn McDougal and Plymouth Irlin,” said the man. “I’m Senator Thomas Jones. To my left are Senators John Limber, Tracey Trencher, Jeffrey Lin, and Kurt Hoffer. On the far right is Ben Olbe.”

“A pleasure,” rumbled Jake, and he stood to shake hands across the table.

“All right, Mr. Birnbaum. Is it okay if I call you Mr. Birnbaum?”

“It is,” said Jake.

“Military contracting is major business,” said Senator Jones. “I know you’re used to dealing with Shawn and Plymouth, but it seems your company is fast becoming the household name in quality mass-produced rifles.”

“It is,” said Jake.

“You mentioned to Shawn about the new L74-B that should be going into production later this month.”

“Indeed,” said Jake.

“Our troops have been happy with the M16 for a very long time,” said Jones. “And our sharpshooters are happy with our current semiautomatics. Talk to me, Mr. Birnbaum. What are you offering that we don’t have?”

Jake took a deep breath.

No positive thinking. Just work hard, and you’ll get there.

“I am thirty-four years old,” said Jake. “Sixteen years ago, almost to the day, I joined the United States Army. It was the proudest moment of my life.”

The senator nodded.

"I started in infantry and headed toward sharpshooting," said Jake. "We all know that infantry has the most dangerous job. But the ones with the major bull's-eyes on their backs are the sharpshooters. You need a rifle that never jams, that has more round capacity, with scope range as far out as possible. You need a rifle that's easy to clean and assemble, with as little kickback as possible. That, in a nutshell, was the premise for the L74-B."

The senator nodded again.

"If the committee will permit, we have a slideshow and some graphs to go through," said Jake, and he turned to Mark.

Mark looked a little green. Jake gave him an intense glare. Mark swallowed hard.

"If the committee will look here..." Mark's hands shook as he handed out the prepared graphs and pamphlets. "Please note the projector."

A proposed model of the L74-B slowly revolved on the screen.

"It looks just like the M16," said Tracey Trencher.

"It is not the M16," said Jake. "It is much more advanced than a mere M16. Watch, committee."

The committee watched.

They went over slide after slide of proposed schematics; Mark's hands finally stopped shaking. His voice grew calmer and more measured. They went through graph after graph comparing the M16 to the L74-B. Time passed. Jake almost felt relaxed as he glanced out the window, at the beautiful prisms of rainbow dancing off the walls and floors. He almost felt happy for a second, before pushing the feeling away and turning back to Mark.

"Plymouth," said Jones. "Shawn. You guys have been down to Mr. Birnbaum's factory. You've tried out the prototype of the new rifle. What's your take on this?"

"I'll go first, with permission," said Shawn, and then proceeded

to go first without permission. “Mr. Birnbaum is probably tops in the industry. The guys we’ve been dealing with for a while have good tech, but it’s the same stuff we’ve seen for years. There’s very little innovation, and very little desire for growth. What Mr. Birnbaum brings to the table, besides the highest quality weapons and professional respect for our troops, is innovation. He’s got an incredible team of professionals who are truly at the top of their game.”

“Thank you for that glowing endorsement, Shawn,” Jones said lightly. “What about the new rifle itself?”

“It’s better than the M16,” said Shawn. “Definitely less kickback. More muffled sound. The scope is also better.”

“Allow me to interrupt with a thought,” said Jake. “We all want what is best for our troops. Our boys on the ground need the best of the best. A split second can mean the difference between life and death. When you have bloodthirsty terrorists on your trail, not having to reload as often as with the M16 can save lives.”

Thomas Jones nodded slowly before turning to Plymouth Irlin. “And what about you, Plymouth? What are your thoughts on the L74-B?”

Plymouth raised his shaggy head and opened his mouth slowly. His movements were sluggish, almost as if he had just woken up.

It was a ploy, of course. The man was one of the sharpest individuals Jake had ever laid eyes on. Eyes like a tiger, posture like a sloth.

“I did try the L74-B,” said Plymouth Irlin. “To be very honest, the only difference I really saw was in more bullet count. The scope seemed the same, as did the kickback.”

“You need better glasses, sir,” said Jake.

Plymouth looked at him mildly and continued. “Mr. Birnbaum is correct that the ability to fire more bullets per round is an exceptional upgrade, but the cost to start buying the L74-B over our

current M16 will take us so far over budget, it simply isn't worth it. How much of a difference will bullet count make? Three percent total? If not less? How does this affect our bottom line? Enough to think very carefully about putting an already precarious economy more deeply into debt."

"Shame on you," said Jake. "Our boys are on the ground facing hostile forces, and all you can think about is money? If a few thousand of our boys are not killed by hostiles because they had enough bullets to protect themselves, that is money well spent."

Plymouth looked at him through heavily lidded eyes and didn't respond. He seemed to be going back into hibernation.

"Please, Mr. Birnbaum, sit," said Thomas Jones. "Your patriotism is moving—"

"Sir," said Jake. "I spent time on the ground—"

"Twenty years ago," said Jones. "Remember, sir, that when you were in the army, skirmishes were often, and a working rifle meant life or death. Today, not all troops will see active combat. Great wars are taking place, but not on the ground. Online, sir. That is the new frontier of war."

"So weapons are obsolete?" said Jake.

Jones laughed. "Weapons will never be obsolete. Our issue now becomes this: We have a rifle that seems to be superior in many ways to our current M16. The cost per rifle is significantly more than the average M16. It boils down to money."

"It always does," said Jake.

"It always does," agreed Jones.

There was a long silence, and Jake wanted to yell and scream and shake this complacent man who would let boys go to their deaths over a few dollars per rifle.

"So," said Jones, "we'll ask you and, um...your associate to wait outside while we take a vote on this matter."

Jake nodded and looked at Mark, who still looked a little green. They got up as one and headed into the hallway, then toward the secretary's area.

"Water, sir?" whispered Mark. "A little tea? Coffee?"

"Water," said Jake. "Do not think positive, Mark. I can see you trying. You know this was just a formality. The committee already knew how they would vote before anyone stepped into that room."

"I'm thinking as negatively as I can, sir," said Mark, tripping on the carpet and almost falling flat on his face.

"Do not think," said Jake. "Leave the thinking to me. Get water. And get a drink. You look seasick."

"I feel a little seasick, sir," said Mark. "I-I may have to find a bathroom."

"The problem is that you are feeling," said Jake. "Just tell yourself that feelings are not to be taken seriously, and only go with complete—"

Mark was already gone, hurrying down the hall and disappearing behind a door.

Jake shrugged. His phone rang. He took it out and looked at the screen.

"Jake!" yelled a voice.

"Hello, Mother," said Jake, pulling the phone away from his ear.

"Did you hear?" said his mother. "The news?"

"No," said Jake, and his heart leaped. "Is Father okay?"

"Your dad's fine," said his mother. "Frankie and his wife had a baby girl!"

"Yes, I heard. That is old news,"

"That's not why I'm calling, Jake," said his mother. "And I don't know about old news. It's three days old at most."

"So no one is attacking the United States, no hurricanes are headed our way, everything is good, and you are a grandmother."

"No," said his mother.