Paid in Full

I stumbled in with a cast, an invoice for around $4000 and a pair of busted crutches. He was leaning against one of the pillars, smiling. Dark, polished shoes and a sharp suit; breast cancer pin on his lapel alongside a US flag.

‘I couldn’t help but notice your pecs and your deltoids,’ he said, pinching them and grinning. ‘You’re much bigger in real life.’

I brushed his hands off me, ‘Are you hitting on me?’

He smiled. ‘In a business sense. Can I buy you a coffee, big guy?’

I said no, but he had one hand on my back and the other on my crutch.

I asked for filter and he bought us both a black decaf. He took a sip of his before spreading his arms along the back of the booth we were sitting at. He looked out at the hot, busy street.

‘I’ve heard that snapping an ACL hurts like hell,’ he said, turning and leaning towards me. ‘That true?’

I thought about it a while. ‘You know, when you get a chicken leg, and you can just tear the meat off?’ I asked, and he nodded. ‘It was like, when you push *in* the meat. And it gets crushed into the bone, and all the shredded meat is left all over your thumb.’

‘Sounds rough.’ He had a grin that I wanted to slap off his face. ‘How long till you’re fully fit?’

‘Three, four months,’ I said. I rubbed my cast. It went from my thigh down to my ankle. It was bone-white and it scraped the floor. ‘What’s this all about?’

He sipped his coffee and sat back. ‘You’ve heard of ambulance chasers, right?’

‘Yeah. Scumbags who sue for people,’ I said. ‘Then walk with the money.’

‘Yeah,’ he said. ‘Scumbags. I’m nothing like that.’ He looked up at the ceiling before back down to me. ‘I’m the evolution of the ambulance chaser.’

He finished his coffee before pushing it aside and leant towards me. ‘I work for a men’s health magazine. You’ve heard of it. It’s our job to sell the dream to all of the slobs and fat-asses of America that they can get into your kind of shape. And we both know, they can’t.’

I found myself nodding. ‘They don’t work hard enough.’

He snapped his fingers and pointed a finger gun at me. ‘You know that half the people who sign up for gym memberships quit before 6 months? And did you know that 90% of *those* quit before three months?

‘No effort,’ shaking my head.

He nodded. ‘With your college career, you would have gone in the first round,’ he said. ‘If it wasn’t for that fight.’

I glared at him and he stared back. I put both hands on the table and leant towards him. ‘That wasn’t my fault,’ I said.

He leaned in too. ‘I know,’ he whispered. ‘That’s what makes it a great story.’ He smiled and it was all teeth. He sat back in his seat.

‘You’re naturally strong, naturally exciting, naturally gifted. That’s a rare thing, you know. You’re luckier than you think.’ He pointed at me before leaning back in his seat and looking out the window. ‘You’re an inspiration to all, but you don’t know it yet. You will be though, when they hear how you got rid of all that fat.’ I raised an eyebrow and he stood up and passed me one of my crutches.

I took the crutch and followed him. ‘So I’m an inspiration now?’

‘The world isn’t interested in beautiful men like you. They want underdogs. It gives them hope,’ he said. He spun round and walked backwards, but still kept pace. ‘The greatest battle of the common man is weight loss. They love to see people turn their wet-dough bodies into steel. To completely transform their once crappy lives From depression to perfection. They love it. And you’ve already done the second step.’

‘How hard is the first?’

‘Like taking candy from a baby. But that doesn’t mean you won’t be paid well.’

He walked up to a parked car and opened the passenger door. It was a jet-black Caddy with polished everything.

‘Say, 4000 bucks?’ his teeth shining brighter than the car. ‘To start?’ I could feel sweat crawl down my cast. I watched a kid on the other side of the street walk on the sidewalk. He was wearing a basketball jersey and an arm cast full of john hancocks. His dad was bouncing a basketball alongside him, pretending to pass over and over again.

‘You give me three months and two photo shoots, and I’ll give you enough money and the only telephone number you’ll ever need.’

I didn’t want to ask, but I needed to. ‘Who’s number?’

‘The Head Coach of the team you want to play for.’

I looked back at the suit and passed him a crutch.

It was pushing 90ºF and the metal in the car felt burnt. We drove past cars with rolled down windows and loud music. Dogs and kids sticking their heads out of the window, hair hanging down to the door handle. Ice cream trucks and skateboarders.

We rolled past a billboard above the highway. It was for the University of Florida, with the football team in the center. It told me to ‘Get Involved!’ and all the girls in the pictures were hot as hell.

‘They still got a picture of you at the University of Florida?’

‘What do you think?’

He looked at me and cocked his head. ‘C’mon. You *would* have gone in the first round.’

‘Shut up.’

‘You would have. Lot of teams looking for a running back this year.’

‘Packers-‘

‘Sure. You could play behind A-Rod.’

‘Yeah right.’

‘The Jets too.’ I looked down and shook my head. I scrunched my fingers into my palms until they hurt. ‘I heard your mom videoed it.’

‘Yeah.’

‘Bad?’

‘Never saw it.’ I draped my arm down the outside of the car and looked out. A kid had stolen a girl’s schoolbag and was running down the street hollering with it. I turned to the suit. ‘I heard it’ll make you cry though.’

‘It’s okay, man.’ The car stopped and he reached across and put an arm on my shoulder. ‘That’s all in the past.’

‘That’s the problem,’ I said. ‘It’s in the past.’ I looked at him and then his hand on my shoulder. He took it away and opened his door.

‘We’re here.’

The building looked like it used to be a factory. High, dark windows and scarred brickwork. He told me not to worry as we rode the elevator up.

It was a run-down building full of garbage, flattened beer cans and broken whiskey bottles, but the elevator was a shiny gray color and played chintzy muzak. The door slid open and we walked into a large, open room.

At one end of the room was a white backdrop. Lights and lights and lights and cameras and a photographer. The rest of the room was unlit, pillars of light and valleys of shadows between them. The floor was scuffed with cigarette burns. He took me over to the photographer; a short guy with slicked back hair and a gap in his teeth.

‘Hey, Chet,’ the suited guy said. ‘Here’s our latest “after”. Big time college football player. Threw it away. Got depressed. Gained weight. Now look at him!’ He presented me with a wave of his hand, still smiling strong.

‘I’m glad you got over that depression, sir,’ the photographer said, winking. ‘Now, if you don’t mind, could you take off the shirt and stand on the white sheet, please? Thank you, sir.’

He took a ton of pictures of me. He shouted, ‘show me, devotion!’ ‘Give me, hard work!’ ‘Howsabout a bit of pride! You earned this, man! You earned it! Smile!’ I did my best and tried to look like he wanted. He put a chair on the sheet and I leaned on it for some shots. He told me to stop grimacing and s-mile. When we were done I couldn’t see straight but he said I did just fine.

‘You look just like you used to in this shot, sir!’ he smiled and patted me on the back. The suit came over to me and said that they would look great in the magazine. Highly defined and glossy. He took me over to the desk and there was a set of scales on the floor beside it.

He told me to step on the scales and when I did, he told me I weighed 190. He waved a hand towards the desk and the paper on it. ‘Here’s the contract. Take your time.’

The writing was so small that I had to squint.I asked him about a part of it. ‘You won’t be responsible for my death?’

‘That’s on you.’

I carried on reading. ‘Payment by the pound?’

‘A flat rate of $4000, plus $750 for every pound over 50lbs.’ He shrugged. ‘We feel it’s a fair reward for your efforts.’

‘Yeah,’ I said eventually. ‘Seems fair to me.’

‘Fair to everyone.’

‘Fair to everyone.’

I kept looking at the contract and where I was supposed to sign. I glanced at him and he smiled but said nothing.

‘Any NFL team?’ I asked.

‘Any NFL team.’

I shook my head. ‘You sure?’

‘Absolutely,’ he nodded hard, rocking the muscles in his neck.

I breathed in and out and picked up the pen and signed. He walked over, shook my hand and patted me on the shoulder. The photographer came over and patted me on the shoulder as well.

The suit reached behind the desk and came up with a bottle of champagne and three glasses. He popped it off and poured it out for each of us. I held up a hand and he pushed it at me until I held it. He and the photographer raised their glasses. They looked at me expectantly until I raised mine.

‘To new beginnings.’

The suit dropped me off. When we got there he got out and opened the trunk. He lifted out a box and closed the trunk with one hand.

I limped to the front door, opened it and went inside. I walked into my living room, threw my crutches on the floor and collapsed into my chair. He followed me and placed the box next to my chair. He stood up and shook my hand.

‘I’ll be in touch.’

His car revved, the tyres screeched and I was alone. My living room was made up of a bench press, a rowing machine, a running machine, a TV and a chair. Old trophies lined the baseboards; running backs mid-stiff arm or diving in the endzone. An old Gators jersey was framed and resting against the wall, the glass full of scratches and fingerprints. Pictures of girls I had fucked back in college lined the walls. I had filled one, and was working on a second.

I lifted the box into my lap and opened it. Inside was a phone and a black bag. The phone was empty except a couple of contacts. ‘FOOD’, ‘DRINKS’ and ‘DRUGS’. The bag contained a bunch of prescript meds. Names like Depakote and Remeron and Zyprexa and Nucleomaxx.

Some were for bipolar disorder. Some were antidepressants, and one was for AIDs sufferers. It said it regrew the fat cells that you lose through ‘lipodystrophy’. Everything had the side effect of weight gain or appetite increase. I put the drugs back in the bag and pitched it into the wall.

I called the number for ‘FOOD’ the next day. After the third ring someone picked up and dropped the call and within an hour a box landed on my doorstep. I took it inside and laid everything out on the floor.

Supersized McDonalds meals that were still hot. Huge sticks of butter and margarine. Krispy Kreme doughnuts with icing that dripped. Clotted cream. Cake mix. Raw burger meat. Slabs of steak. A bucket of chicken from KFC.

I called one of the numbers every day. I never caught the guy who left the boxes, but they were always there within the hour. I’d ring the number in the morning then watch TV. Sometimes they’d put films in the boxes. Sometimes books. Sometimes other things. Toilet roll. Deodorant. Shower gel. Underwear. Clothes a couple of sizes up. Each with a note attached saying how many days till the photo-shoot. The boxes got bigger and bigger and bigger.

Sometimes I just sat there and just looked at the food. I Held it in my hands, thinking, ‘how much this McNugget is worth to me?’ How many I had to eat of these fucking things to make that phone call.

I sat and ate and ate and drank and ate. I ate till it hurt and then it’d hurt more when I shat it out. The days moved slowly, but they added up quick. I watched my arms and face sag lower and lower. My knee hurt every day. There wasn’t anything to do except to keep it iced and elevated and rested.

Piles of boxes lay around the room. Some had toppled over, but I never picked them up. I couldn’t see my bench press anymore, and the pictures of girls on the wall got dusty and smeared with grease as I pushed myself up off my chair to the door. Everything got greasy and dirty.

One of the boxes had an old game program with me on the cover. I was breaking a tackle versus Alabama, a defender slumping to the ground behind me. I looked at myself. A note on the box said that there was 52 days till the photo-shoot, with a badly drawn smiley face next to it.

The next time there was a ticket for a Gators’ game. I watched it on cable, still eating. It went into overtime and the Gators lost to a 48 yard field goal.

The next time I rang the food number the suit picked up.

‘How are you doing? Just wanted to touch base.’

‘Good. Bloated, feel like shit, but good.’

‘That’s standard,’ he laughed. ‘You see the Gators game?’

‘I watched it on TV.’

‘Great game, right? Shame they couldn’t win. I like their new offensive line. They’re young, but they’ll grow into it.’

‘Yeah,’ I said. ‘It was a great game.’

‘That Rainey is chasing your figures, aint he? He looks good.’

‘Yeah.’

‘Shame that the Packers picked up Cedric Benson, right? What’s a ready-made, quality running back like that doing as a free agent?’

‘Yeah. I’ve no idea why.’

‘I guess Green and Starks will get their chances a few seasons down the line.’

‘Starks could do with some work.’

‘Yeah he could! Well, I just wanted to check up on you. See how you we’re doing. Keep going, you’re nearly there now. Two months down, one to go.’ The line went dead and the box of food came an hour later.

The box was larger than all of the rest, and had a note in it saying, ‘Don’t forget the draft! April 26.’ I didn’t watch it. A couple of friends called to tell me where they got drafted to. I didn’t get back to them. I ate more and ordered more boxes.

I couldn’t remember how many days it had been. Too many, not enough, I don’t know. I got up, called the number and waited. When I checked later it was there, and I brought it inside. The note on the box told me that the photo-shoot would be in 3 days.

There was a DVD inside the box alongside heaps of warm and oily food. I put the DVD in. It showed a football field and hundreds of players doing drills. Guys in suits lining the fences, stalking them. Trying to convince the coaches they were good enough. Juking around bollards. Stepping through tires. Pushing defenders carrying heavy pads.

It zoomed in on one drill. A lone player tried to rush the ball against two defenders. Every time they made a stop, the coach would come over yelling. It repeated three or four times. Each time there was a sweet voice near the camera wishing, ‘Come on. This time, come on.’

The defenders gave him sharp elbows and knees when the coach’s back turned. He pushed them back but he got flattened and sprawled around on the turf. The coach yelled at him some more and he got up and went back to the mark and picked up the ball. The voice wished and prayed.

He ran up to one of the defenders who dived towards him, but the runner juked past him. He spun and swam past the other and ran into the endzone. The voice shouted, ‘Yeah! That’s it yeah!’

The coach clapped him and nodded. As the runner went back to his position he clapped him on the back, and turned to another coach. The defender tripped him up as he went past, and the voice next to the camera shouted.

The runner fronted up to the defender who laughed at him. He gestured towards his partner, who laughed too. The runner pushed him and the defender went to push back but the runner dived and speared him into his gut.

The runner forced him down and yanked his ankle up and up and up and cranked it to the side. He slammed his palms into the ground and waved his arms around faster and faster. The other defender kicked him and kicked him until he let go of the ankle. Some other players rushed in with spiked cleets and swinging fists. The runner disappeared under a pile of players.

The voice started to cry, getting softer and softer.

I had started to cry. Huge sobs and deep gasps. I twisted my knee and it sparked in my muscles. I stood up to try and straighten it out.

I looked around at the room and down at myself. Boxes lined all the walls, piled up to the ceiling, on top of my bench press, my running machine. I was covered in grease and sauce and junk food wrappings. Stretch marks covered all of my arms and neck and chest. I felt the grooves and scrapes in my flesh.

I stumbled around, my knees trembling. My body was screaming and shaking and betraying me. I picked up the trophies near to me and flung them at the walls, into the framed shirt, into the pictures of the smiling girls, into the boxes. They clanged around the room and put deep holes in everything.

I grabbed my swollen gut and tried to twist the fat off myself. There was sixty pounds of shit on me and I wanted to cut it off. To hack it off, to throw it down on the floor and burn it. It clung to me, with deep hooks inside of me, intertwined in my guts. I scratched at it, pulled at it, clawed at it until my stomach bled and my fingers stung. I turned to go and clean myself up, legs stumbling and buckling.

I hadn’t heard the door open. He was stood there, in the half dark, camera in hand and a curled up smile.