

GOING DOWN



CHRISTOPHER  
PELTON

## Going Down

“Listen, Rob, Roy, Rick, whatever the hell your name is. I need those invoices processed and on my desk by nine o’clock Monday morning.”

Justin Pearce made his way down the hall, Bluetooth in his ear, as he continued to berate his hapless assistant on the other end of the phone. Pearce was the model for the successful middle management type. A graduate of Northwestern University’s school of business at twenty-one, he was aggressively recruited by Baxter and Marshall right out of college. By the time he was twenty-three, he had risen to the rank of Junior Analyst. At the age of twenty-five, he was a Senior Analyst. By the age of twenty-six, he found himself in a private office on the forty-second floor, and he made his first million by the time he was twenty-eight. If the rumors going around had any truth to them, he was on a shortlist of potential names for an upcoming junior partner spot. Of course, assuming that his assistant pulled his head out of his ass and got those invoices finished.

“I’m sorry, did I somehow give you the impression that I gave a fuck as to whether or not you have plans tonight?” The frustration was almost enough to bring him to tears. What part of this request did this fuckwit not understand?

“Just to make sure there is no miscommunication, let me make this clear for you. Either you get it done, or I will have them find me somebody who can follow simple directions. Do you understand me?”

Pearce shook his head in disgust as he approached the elevator bank. This was the third assistant he had gone through in the last two years. Unlike most of the other departments in the building, Pearce had no in with HR. This meant there was no way to find out who was responsible for this seemingly endless parade of incompetents. Whoever it was, he couldn’t shake the suspicion that they were just as useless. He reached out and hit the call button for the elevator.

“Okay, maybe it’s me. Maybe it’s not clear enough, although I can’t even begin to comprehend how that is possible. I will explain this to

you one more time. The quarterly reports are due at the end of the month. For me to prepare the outlooks for management, the invoices must be processed so they can be reconciled with the rest of the reports covering the last three months. Now, given that I'm the one with an office and you are the one sitting at a clutter-filled desk, which still smells of your predecessor, who was gone so quickly I don't even remember his name, which one of us do you think is going to get these things done?"

Despite the increasing volume of his voice, Pearce heard the tone that indicated the elevator had arrived. The doors slid open, and he stepped inside.

"Listen dip shit, I'm getting on the elevator and will probably lose you. I don't care how long it takes or how long you have to stay tonight to get it done, but I swear to god if I come in at nine on Monday morning and those invoices are still sitting on your desk, I can guarantee you that by nine-fifteen you'll be sitting on the steps with whatever crap you brought with you in a box. Do we understand each other? Good. By the way, have a great weekend."

Pearce disconnected the call through his earpiece and pressed the button for the level one garage. The doors closed, and the car began to descend. He removed the iPhone from his pocket and began to scan his email. One of the more complicated, and if he was honest with himself, annoying aspects of his job was email. He regularly received between two and three hundred emails a day. Most were just forwards from the different accounting departments, keeping him in the loop on day-to-day transactions. Occasionally, he would receive something important, like market updates or changes to filing procedures. After the screen loaded, the messages began flooding in. A quick scan showed nothing that required his immediate attention. Returning his phone to the inside jacket pocket of his Brooks Brothers jacket, he turned his gaze to the digital readout indicating which floor he was passing. While not the fastest elevator in the city, it moved at a respectable pace. Until, of course, the car came to a screeching stop, somewhere between the twenty-second and twenty-third floors.

"Oh, what the fuck is this?" Pearce said aloud in the empty car.

"It would seem that we've encountered some type of mechanical problem." A voice came from behind him.

Pearce turned and was surprised to see the older man standing behind him. He could have sworn that the car had been empty when he stepped in.

“Just another example of modern convenience, am I right?” The man said.

The mysterious gentleman stood about six feet tall. He had a head of hair the color of cigarette ash with a beard to match. If Pearce had to guess, he would have placed the man around his early to mid-sixties. The unexpected visitor wore a black suit with a pin-stripe so subtle it was barely noticeable. His shirt was a sky blue color with a patterned tie. On his feet were a pair of Stefano Bemer shoes, worth easily \$2000.

“Sometimes, I wonder if we would have better off just sticking with stairs.”

“Hey, listen, I’m sorry for my language as I was getting on. I’m in the middle of dealing with an incompetent assistant and didn’t realize anybody else was in the car.”

“Apology accepted. The name is Balaam, William Balaam.” The man extended his hand. Pearce reached out and shook it.

“So, do you work here in the building, Mr. Balaam?”

“Not exactly, my boy. I’m a consultant for several of the companies here. I usually handle business through teleconferencing, however sometimes things require a bit more of a personal touch. I need to come up and collect signed final drafts of contracts. Even in this wondrous digital age we live in, there will always be, and I truly believe this, a need for a hard copy.”

“There always seems to be paperwork. Sometimes I think it will never end. You sign one form, and then there’s three more to verify that the first document was signed. It could drive you to drink. So if you don’t mind me asking, what companies do you consult for?”

“That is information that has to stay up here.” Balaam tapped his forehead with one fine, slightly extended, manicured fingernail. “Confidentiality and all. I’m sure you understand.”

“Completely understandable. I swear I’ve signed more non-disclosures this year than I wrote term papers when I was in business school.”

“So tell me, within the bounds of your contracts, what do you do for Baxter and Marshall?”

Pearce paused for a moment, trying to recall whether or not he had told Balaam where he worked.

“Well, right now, I’m a Senior Analyst. It’s my job to predict trends in the markets and, based on that information, provide responsible financial planning for my clients.”

“Ah, the stock market. Well, that explains it. I had a feeling when you stepped in that you were involved in some kind of finance. How has your year been so far?”

“Not too bad. I’m tracking a seventy-nine percent success rate for my clients. All told it’s more than fifty million dollars, and it’s only July.”

“That is quite impressive. I would think that if you keep up this pace, that promotion should be all but guaranteed.”

Again, Pearce wondered how this unusual old man had knowledge of a promotion that no one in the office had heard about.

“You seem to be on top of a great many things, Mr. Balaam. Nobody in our office even knows about the partnership position opening up yet.”

“That is the sign of an outstanding consultant Mr. Pearce. It’s my job to know things that other people don’t. Now tell me, what would

that promotion be worth to you?”

Pearce stopped for a minute to ponder the question. What exactly would this promotion mean to him? If he could make junior partner before the age of thirty and keep his nose clean, he would be on the fast track to senior partner before turning forty.

“Well, Mr. Balaam, I’ll say this. Receiving this promotion now would probably set me up for the rest of my life. I’m great at my job now, and I know that I would be an invaluable asset to the company as a partner. Of course, all of this is just idle talk since they haven’t even announced the opening.”

“Let’s say, hypothetically of course, I was to tell you that this partnership will be opening up by the end of next month. Do you think there is time to dazzle your bosses enough to secure the position?”

Pearce began to speak, but cut his voice off to gather his thoughts.

“To be honest, Mr. Balaam, I’m not entirely sure. I’m very good at what I do, but there are certainly people here who have been here longer than I have.”

“Then perhaps, Mr. Pearce, you and I can come to an arrangement.”

Pearce looked puzzlingly at his fellow passenger.

“Here is what I propose, you and I will sign a consulting contract. While the contract’s language is the usual legalese, the long and short of it is that over the next thirty days, I will work on your behalf to ensure that you will receive the promotion and all the perks that go along with it.”

The offer dumbfounded Pearce, but a little voice in his head assured him that this man, this mysterious stranger on the elevator, could deliver just what he promised.

“Well, it sounds as if a partnership with you would be quite beneficial, Mr. Balaam. I have two questions. One, how long would this contract be for, and two, what do you get out of it? I’ve got plenty of money to pay you for your services. What’s the cost?”

“There is no monetary charge for my services. The contract is good for one year, and at the end of that year, I will call upon you and ask for a favor. Once that favor is complete, our business will reach its conclusion. Does that sound fair?”

Pearce had to admit to himself that while some of the details were a little shady, this promotion would change his life.

“Alright, Mr. Balaam, why don’t you have your people draft a contract up and send it over to my office on Monday.”

“No need for that Mr. Pearce, I despise working with underlings. I have a contract right here in my pocket.” Balaam reached inside his suit jacket and produced a contract and pen.

“Feel free to read it if you like, but it is a standard consulting contract. It says if I don’t deliver, the contract is null and void. I have thirty days to deliver on my promises, and you have one year to keep up your end of the deal.”

Pearce reached out for the pen and paper. He gave the contract a quick perusal. It was a word-for-word transcription of the contract as it been verbally explained to him. Figuring he had nothing to lose, he leaned the paper up against the car’s wall and signed where indicated at the bottom of the page.

“Excellent! I will go ahead and get things moving on my end. It’s nice to be able to do business with three generations of Pearce men.”

“What? Three generations? What are you talking about?”

“Oh, Mr. Pearce, you are the third member of your family line that I’ve had the pleasure of working alongside. In 2007, I met with your

father James Pearce, and signed a similar deal with him. I remember speaking to him about six months in, and everything was going as promised. I was sorry to hear that he passed in 2008. Who could have guessed that the housing bubble would burst? Suicide, wasn't it? A mouthful of pills and a bottle of scotch will do that."

Pearce stood mouth agape.

"And I met your grandfather back in 1986. Now he was great at his job. When I met him, he had already made \$50 million by the time he was 60. He was much more obsessed with financial gain than your father. Of course, nobody, well almost nobody, saw the crash of 1987 coming. Your Grandmother came home from the grocery store and found him. Hooked a hose up to the exhaust in the garage, if I recall correctly."

Suddenly the car jerked forward, and the elevator resumed its journey down to the garage level.

Pearce turned to face his fellow rider.

"How did you know all those things about my family?"

But the man in the black suit was gone.

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