

The Creative Exiles



Partly Truth. Partly Fiction.

Wilson

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Author's Note

The following story is based
on actual events.

This makes it true.

At least, as true as any story
about advertising could be.

Unavoidably, there are some
parts that are also made up.

Which is which,
I will leave for the reader to decide.

That said, all the characters'
names are fictitious.

This is to protect the innocent.

As well as the guilty.

The First Rule of Wing-Walking

Never let go of what you have
until you have hold of something else.

Chapter 1

San Francisco – Pacific Heights – Nick Watson’s Condominium

The text arrived some time in the early morning:
Available?

Depends, Nick Watson thought to himself, on who the hell sent it. Looking at his watch, he saw the time. Six-thirty. It had come through 90 minutes ago. Five a.m. for him.

East Coast, thought Nick. He heard the kettle start to whistle behind him. Turning off the burner, he poured the boiling water into his French press.

He liked his coffee strong. Five full scoops of caffeine. No cream. No sugar. Black as the devil’s heart.

You can say those types of things when you get to be my age, he thought, smiling to himself. Now 43, salt starting to pepper his thankfully full head of hair, he was once married. Three years. Never made it to four. Never had kids.

The latter bothered him. The former didn’t.

He noticed the quiet. It was why he particularly liked mornings

with San Francisco waking up slowly and softly below him. His condominium was on one of the taller hills in Pacific Heights, giving him a good view of the bay below. This time of day, the water was calm. The kite surfers would undoubtedly be out later in the afternoon, once the wind picked up.

But for now, it was peaceful. The sun, just starting to shimmer off the east side of the Golden Gate. The bridge wasn't far from his condo. Perhaps tomorrow he'd cycle over it. Do the tour around Tiburon. A quick 40 miles, before work.

But today he had a lot to do. Starting with this text that he hadn't been expecting.

He always found it interesting when a text came in as the number was unlisted. But people who knew people who knew people who knew Nick could, if they were interested, get it. Then they'd send a text. Always the same one word question.

Available?

If he was, Nick would text back two questions.

When? Where?

What he never asked was who. That would scare people off, something he was trying to avoid.

Usually the answer to the question of *when* was immediately. These days everyone was always in a hurry. But it was the answer to *where* that always proved to be the more revealing. For that was the answer that gave him the one piece of information that he wanted without having to

actually ask.

Who he was dealing with.

It didn't take long for the responses to arrive.

Next week.

Detroit.

Nick smiled. H'mph, Detroit made it interesting.

After all, Detroit meant that the big guys were fishing.

Chapter 2

Detroit – 1 American Road – Ford Headquarters

“I sent the text.”
“And?”

Amanda Weeks paused.

“Well? What did they say?” Jeffery Bell asked.

“They asked when and where?”

“And... you said?”

“Next week. Here.”

“And by here, you mentioned us? Ford? Or, Detroit?”

“Detroit.”

“Which means they probably know who we are,” Jeffery said, rubbing his temples.

“It means they can at least narrow it down to three,” Amanda replied with a slight smile. “The question is, what do we tell our other agencies, Jeffery, I mean...”

“The truth, sort of,” Jeffrey answered, cutting her off. The truth, he thought to himself. What an amorphous concept. The one thing that experience had taught him about the truth was that in the ad business it was more fleeting than not.

He had walked over to the window and was staring out. From here on the top floor, he could see all the way to downtown. Detroit was changing. Or, at least attempting to. The start of a new renaissance was what everyone was claiming. Yeah, right, Jeffery thought. See how well that works out. It's still Detroit, after all.

"We say we're looking at these guys for this... hell, I don't know, what do we call it?"

"Project?" Amanda said.

"Yeah, good. Project." Jeffery sounded hesitant though. At 52, he had been in the business for 30 years – long enough to remember the days when clients used to have one advertising agency. An *agency of record* it was called then. Now it seems that instead of an agency of record, every advertiser has a record number of agencies – creative, media, digital, search, print, banner ads – fuck all. You needed a spreadsheet just to remember who was responsible for what.

That said, if they went through with this, it wouldn't be just about adding *another* agency to the list. This was about upsetting the whole apple cart. Because if a client their size takes this leap, it could well start to change the way an entire industry makes money.

Or loses it.

"We're just talking, right? Just talking."

He looked at his Chief Marketing Officer for reassurance. Only 33, Amanda had moxie, if not a lot of time in the business. And, Jeffery had confidence in her. He'd brought her along with him when he took the

CEO position at Ford, making her an EVP and Chief Marketing Officer overseeing all of the Ford brands.

She nodded and smiled.

“Sure,” she said, as she picked up her phone and started to leave. “Got an eleven o’clock with the social guys. I’ll circle back after.”

“Yeah, okay,” said Jeffery, turning once more to look out the window. Just talking, he thought to himself. Just talking. Sure. Sounds so innocent.

Until you realize that what you’re “just talking” about is fucking up the nearly \$600 billion global ad industry.

Chapter 3

Over LaGuardia – Descending From 30,000 Feet

Shelby Porter shut down her iPad.

Her eyes hurt from looking at all the numbers. The pilot had just announced that they were starting their descent into LaGuardia. The guy sitting next to her was coming back from the lavatory, still looking sheepish. Why do guys always think that they can hit on women flying alone in the front of the plane? She hadn't meant to verbally castrate him. Oh hell, sure she had.

He was in insurance. When he had asked her what she did, she had answered vaguely, hoping he would take the hint and shut the hell up. "Problem solver," was her reply.

"Ah, interesting," he had said. "Because I have a problem that I think only you can solve. You see, I'm not quite sure how I can get you to have a drink with me tonight."

Not a bad line, she thought. And, he wasn't bad looking. Probably late 30s, early 40s, same as her. But it was the presumptuousness that she was so sick and tired of.

A good-looking woman, flying alone, first class. Must be a player.

She knew that men found her attractive. And when she wanted, she

used that to her advantage. But she didn't always want it.

For the longest time, she had blamed it on her red hair. Why do men always equate red hair with passion? What they should equate it with is fire. In other words, get too close and chances are you're going to get a little burnt.

She had been able to see that picking up on subtleties was not something that this guy was good at.

Deciding to be more direct, she had said some not nice things. Quietly. Discreetly.

Or, so she had thought. Until she had caught the guy behind her try to stifle a laugh.

Obviously, she hadn't been quiet enough.

But effective, that she was, as Mr Insurance had kept mum the rest of the trip, letting her focus on the meeting that she would be walking into.

Five representatives would be present – one from each of the advertising industry's largest holding companies.

That would be a lot of salaries all in one room. Usually that much clout only got together when there was a shitload of money at stake.

Which was usually the case when Shelby was called in.

She was after all, in fact, a problem solver. Or, a fixer, as some liked to refer to her. She charged a hell of a lot of money to fix things. Justifiably so. She was damn good at making problems go away. As she just had with Mr Insurance.

The plane slowly pulled into the gate.

Mr Insurance stood up and grabbed her carry-on from the overhead bin, handing it to her, somewhat sheepishly. “This is yours, I believe.”

“Thanks,” she said. “And, you know, I mean, well, sorry.”

“No problem,” he replied, before quickly turning and exiting the plane in front of her.

Hell, she thought, maybe she had been too hasty. From the titles of those attending, a good stiff drink afterward was going to be sounding very attractive.

Chapter 4

San Francisco – South of Market Area – (SOMA)

Nick Watson had started as a copywriter. Moved up to Associate Creative Director. Then Creative Director. Executive Creative Director. Got fired. Started his own agency at the age of 40. Why? His rationale had been simple. If he was in charge then the only one that could fire him was him.

Not surprisingly, when he had started his own agency, Nick had sworn that he would do it differently. He knew that every new agency starts out swearing that they're going to do it differently. Seldom does that way of thinking last for long. Realities set in. The biggest one being making money. Soon, compromises are made. And before too long, their new way of doing things has vanished, leaving room for the next new agency startup to claim that they're going to do it differently.

Nick had known that if he wanted to succeed where others had failed, it had to start with the way his agency was structured. To that end, he intentionally designed his shop to be of limited size. The goal? Never to have more than five clients at any one time.

He did this by refusing to be any advertiser's agency of record, preferring to work on a project basis only. Even year-long assignments,

complete campaigns, were billed out as projects. Nick saw it as a form of motivation. If he made the advertiser successful on one project, they'd bring him in on another. If not, they wouldn't. In fact, they shouldn't. Simple as that, really. Good relationships should be based on a *desire* to work together. Not contractual obligations.

Idealistic? Yeah, probably. But it had got him attention from clients and increased their desire to work with him. Clients liked the exclusivity that being only one of five brought them. Almost immediately, Nick found himself having to say no to new clients, the roster was full. Surprisingly, that only made them want him more. He realized that business was in many ways like dating – refusal was seductive. Saying no just made people desire you more.

Which was why part of his pitch to perspective clients was to tell them why they shouldn't hire his agency.

“We’re not very good at doing lunch. Theater tickets are not our specialty. We don’t have box seats at any of the professional sport facilities in the area. Try as we might, we have never been able to figure out how any of that stuff helps to make your brand stronger. All the perks that come with big advertising agencies don’t come with us. Ask yourself, honestly, if that is important. If it is, then you should probably go elsewhere. You see, we’re good at making commercials. But we’re lousy at making reservations.”

And when this was met by quizzical looks, Nick would simplify it even further. “Advertising, at least to us, is about making a product. Not

offering a service. That's what we do. That's who we are. That's what you get."

This sort of honesty was seen, by some, as refreshing. But most didn't quite get it.

He was also honest when asked if he thought advertising still worked.

"In our opinion, no," he would answer.

Not surprisingly, prospective clients would ask why.

"Obviously, it is frightening to admit that the business in which one is employed is no longer effective. But sometimes you have to face facts. And the fact is that there is far too much spent with too few results to come to any other conclusion. Advertising, in general, no longer works."

The dumbfounded stares always amused him. After a pause, he would continue.

"And yet... occasionally, occasionally an ad *will* stand out. Get noticed. Even talked about. Why? That it was crafted in such a way that it treated the consumer with respect, understanding, and, we can only hope, dignity, is a part of it. That it made somebody *feel* something is the other. We seem to forget that besides being consumers, we're all people. We all have hearts as well as heads. If you talk to the head, the heart will not necessarily choose to get involved. But, if you move the heart, then the head has no choice but to follow."

Nick always thought that the ancient Greeks had a way of saying it best – *information is taken in through the heart.*

After a year of running his own shop, one of his clients had asked him to direct the campaign that he had written for them. At first, Nick said no. But the more he thought about it, the more sense it made. After all, seldom did the directors he worked with interpret the script exactly the way he envisioned it. Frustrating as hell. So why not direct myself, he thought? I mean if some director's going to fuck up my work, it may as well be me.

So he had said yes, starting a production company to run alongside his agency. Having both an agency and production company meant that he could not only write the script, but then go out and produce it as well. Start to finish. All under one roof. But even more importantly, all under the control of one guy. One vision.

The result?

He understood the advertising business inside and out. How ad agencies made money over and above the ways that their clients knew about. How production companies padded their estimates so they not only made their 26% mark-up, but a whole lot more. How the good directors could justify their \$30,000 a day rates.

All for creating what? A cure for cancer? Yeah, right. Thirty-second TV commercials for beer and soft drinks and cowboy boots.

Nothing fair about it, Nick thought. But, hell... you have to take what the world gives you.

Or, do you?

It gnawed at Nick, the way the ad business operated. Which is why he decided to do something even more radical. Simply put, Nick didn't believe that failure should be lucrative. Pay me for outcome, not effort, is what he told people. It was difficult to find a client that wanted to argue with that.

What was difficult was trying to narrow down what outcome the clients wanted. Success, certainly. But every client seemed to have a different definition of what success actually meant. Obviously, most thought it meant sales. But with advertisers now having so many different agencies working on their business, it was becoming increasingly difficult to hold any one particular agency accountable for sales.

Granted, advertisers should ultimately hire and fire their multitude of agencies on the basis of how well they helped move their products. But, at the same time, there had to be a way to hold different agencies *individually* accountable for their *individual* role in achieving this ultimate goal.

The research that Nick had come across was unanimous in showing that advertisers were getting fed up with the industry's way of working. The two largest complaints advertisers had with their agencies centered around media inflation – paying more for fewer and fewer viewers – and lack of accountability.

He remembered a media conference he had once attended where a marketer had asked a well-known media agency mucky-muck if there

was any way to eliminate some of the waste in media. Not surprisingly, in this particular marketer's opinion, waste was indicative of failure.

Perhaps the media mucky-muck had been drinking at lunch or maybe it was just a rare moment of candor, but his reply was, "Eliminate waste? Why would we want to do that? I mean, how in the hell do you think we make our money? It's exactly the inexactness of the business that makes it so goddamn profitable for us."

That's the one thing Nick didn't want: for his agency to make money through waste. Or, failure. Only through the success of the creative. The problem was that he had no idea how to actually do that until the digital platform had come into existence. That's when Nick figured out how success could best be defined. And, even more importantly, monetized.

If you asked most people, they'd tell you that Nick had been the one who started The Creative Exiles. Not so. There is a truism about truly creative people. You don't pick them. They pick you. In this case, it was the inefficiencies of the business that had formed the Exiles. Like-minded people seem to find each other in the ad business. They talk together. Drink together. Sometimes, sleep together. And while more often than not, the talk is a form of bitching about the business and dumbass clients, sometimes the conversation would switch to the ever-present existential question.

Especially among the creative types.

What if?

Like what if we got paid based on how good we were? As writers. Art directors. Persuaders. Creators. As it was, a creative person's skills are billed out by an agency at an hourly rate with a mark-up added. Whether the work was brilliant or half-assed, the hourly rate plus mark-up is what the agency made.

"The problem is that 'good' is subjective," Nick would argue back. "Clients don't know shit from Shinola. As for the worth of a commercial, I mean, the question has always been who gets to define worth? The advertiser? The agency? You know as well as I do that advertising is held in higher esteem by those who create it than by those it's created for."

Yeah, but what if good wasn't subjective, they would counter. What if it was definable? Measurable. Quantifiable.

Would clients want to pay on that basis?

Hell, yes.

Would agencies want to be paid on that basis?

Hell, no.

At least, most agencies. They were making way too much under the current system, as unaccountable as it was.

And that's where it sat until the evening when Nick had been sharing drinks at the House of Shields on New Montgomery Street in San Francisco. His drinking partner that night was David Wilkins, a friend who headed up an online video ad network. Around three bourbons in, Wilkins mumbled something about how their digital network had data that told them how long a viewer actually watches a

commercial for.

“Come again?” Nick had said.

“When people opt in to watch a commercial online, the data tells us when they start watching and when they stop watching the commercial.”

“Hard data?”

“All data’s hard data, asshole,” Wilkins said with a smile. “I mean the advertiser may be buying a 30-second impression, but we have the data that says, on average, only five of those thirty seconds are being watched.” Wilkins held up his empty glass. “What do you think? One more?”

Getting the bartender’s attention, Nick held up two fingers and pointed to their empty glasses.

“So let’s say,” Wilkins continued, “that another advertiser buys a 30-second impression, which the data tells us has 25 seconds being watched. Are both impressions, the five-second one and the 25-second one, of equal value to the advertiser?”

This was when the light bulb had gone on. “Of course not,” Nick said. “The 25-second impression is much more valuable to the advertiser.”

“Then,” Wilkins smiled as the drinks were placed down in front of them, “shouldn’t I be able to charge more for that? Before I enjoy this, let me make some room.” He got up and headed for the gents towards the front of the bar, stopping to chat up two women who had just walked

in.

Good, Nick had thought. It would give him time to think.

With broadcast, impressions were the metric used indicating how many *might* be watching the commercial. *Might* being the operative word. Actual viewing time of any individual commercial was an unknown. Advertisers paid for the opportunity to engage a viewer. That's what an impression offered. An *opportunity*. Not actual engagement. On the digital platform, it was different. There was actual data - return path data - that could tell you how long an impression actually lasted for.

Nick had asked the bartender for a pen and started writing down some numbers on the cocktail napkin. If an advertiser runs a 30-second spot in front of one million people online and discovers that, on average, only five of the 30 seconds are viewed, the total time spent with the brand is five million seconds. Now Nick thought, let's say another advertiser runs the same length spot in front of only half as many viewers – 500,000 – but average time spent with the commercial is 25 seconds. Total time spent with the brand in this case would be twelve million, five hundred thousand seconds. In other words, a 150% increase in time spent with the brand for approximately half the media cost. All because of the creative!

Shit, Nick thought to himself. As he started to re-run the numbers, Wilkins had returned and sat back down.

“I'm definitely offering a service with this data,” Wilkins said, “potentially saving the advertiser a huge amount of money. So how do I

get compensated for not only saving them money but improving their brand's performance?"

"Wait a minute," said Nick. "Your platform didn't improve the brand's performance. It was the creative that did that. How much time a viewer spends with the message has nothing to do with you. It has everything to do with the message itself. An advertiser can buy time online. But time spent, that's something that an advertiser has to earn. All your platform did was measure, quantifiably, the brand's... I mean, the creative's performance."

"Yeah, maybe. I keep forgetting that you're one of those so-called creative assholes. So I guess what I gotta do is find a way to sell impressions on a cost-per-thousand basis to media agencies and on a time spent basis to creative agencies."

Perhaps it was the bourbon, but Nick turned to Wilkins and said something he had never thought he would say. "You know, Wilkins, sometimes you're kind of brilliant."

"You finally realized. About fuckin' time."

The two women Wilkins had stopped to chat up earlier sat down at the bar to his right. Late 20's. Tight skirts. Tighter tops. Out for a fun evening, sans boyfriends. Once the two stools next to Wilkins opened up, they wasted no time moving in. Wilkins smiled at them as they sat down. To Nick he whispered, "You don't mind, do you Nick?" before turning all of his attention to the women. "Ladies..."

Good, Nick thought. It would give him a chance to slip out. He left

three twenties on the bar, and patted Wilkins on the back saying, “Be good now, David, be good.”

“Always am, Watson,” Nick heard David say as he got to the door.
“Good I always am.”

Chapter 5

New York – Peninsula Hotel – Conference Room

When she first entered the room, Shelby had to pause. She had known that there would be some higher ups in the meeting but this sort of seniority doesn't usually gather in one place except when that place happens to be Davos.

"Ah, there she is. Shelby, welcome," said Ian Winston, Group Finance Director at Omnicom Group, the world's second largest advertising holding company. "Aren't you looking fantastic."

"I assume that's a rhetorical question, Ian," she replied with a smile, walking over to give him a hug. Shelby had worked with Ian before. Their past was interesting. If he hadn't been married, she knew she would have made a move. As it was, she had somehow found the strength to turn him down late one evening when the interest had been initiated from his direction.

Now, they were just good friends. And the only benefit was financial.

Glancing around the room she found it hard not to be impressed by the decor. It was chic, but also elegant: understated in a warm palate of gold. The room exuded a feeling of power and strength. The kind of

power that can only come from money. Lots and lots of money. While the table could easily hold 25, there were only six of them in the room.

Introductions were made around the table. Shelby knew them all by reputation. They were all from either their holding company's executive committee or C-Suite. Interestingly enough they were all also competitors. Which made a meeting like this highly irregular.

"So let's get right into it," said Ian. "I think everyone either knows Shelby or at least knows of her reputation. Right?" Polite nods all around. "Alright, then. Good. So, thanks again everyone for taking time for this. As you have probably already surmised, I think we may have a bit of a problem on our hands."

"You do so understate things, Ian," said Rebecca Winters – Chief Risk Officer at WPP, the world's largest advertising holding company. "If what we're talking about is what I think we're talking about then this could be an absolute disaster."

Derek Castellano nodded. "Rebecca's right. If it is what I'm hearing it is, then we need to stop it now. Cut it off at the knees." Derek was the Chief Accounting Officer at Interpublic, the world's fourth largest advertising holding company. He looked over at Shelby.

"I mean that's why she's here, right? That's what she does. Decapitates things?"

Surprised, Shelby raised her eyes. While she knew that she had a reputation, she had never heard it described quite that bluntly.

"Ah, yes," said Ian. "Both Simon and I thought that Shelby would

be perfect for this. Right Simon?”

Simon Foster, perhaps the most-quoted media wonk in the business, nodded.

Shelby had also known Simon for some time. This would not be the first time she had been called in to pull his particular ass out of the fire.

“How are you doing, Shelby? It’s been awhile.”

“Good, Simon. You’re a long way from Paris.” Simon worked for Publicis Groupe, the world’s third largest advertising holding company, headquartered in Paris.

“Well, when you hear the problem, you’ll understand why the trip was necessary,” he said.

“Okay,” said Shelby. “Sounds fascinating. But does somebody maybe want to fill me in?”

Ian pushed back in his chair. “Ah, yes. Afraid we’re a bit ahead of you here. The problem is, or I should say could be, is this guy out in San Francisco, Nick Watson, and his group that he calls... Derek, what is it again?”

“The Creative Exiles,” replied Castellano.

“Sounds like a band,” said Adam Connolly, head of finance at Dentsu, the world’s fifth largest advertising holding company. “Kinda like it.”

Rebecca Winters reached out, putting her hand on his like a protective mother. “Trust me, Adam, there’s nothing to like about this.”

“Okay,” Shelby cut in. “Okay, I have a name. What I don’t have is a problem.”

“They want to fuck with the way that we all make our money,” said Derek Castellano.

“Well, potentially, yes Derek, you’re right,” replied Ian. “You see, Shelby, what they have, at least what we think they have, is a system. A system they are calling DAOS.”

“Taos? Like the New Mexico Taos?” asked Adam Connolly.

“DAOS. With a ‘D,’” continued Ian, “In Chinese philosophy, DAO stands for the path, the way, the road, the method. It’s a fundamental concept. Probably why Watson chose it. But in this case, DAO with an S at the end, serves as an acronym. What we think it stands for is Digitally Accountable Operating System. Apparently what this DAOS does is monetize digital data in such a way that agencies can be held accountable and paid according to how good the work is that they create.”

“Fucking disastrous,” bemoaned Castellano, standing up to help himself to some coffee set out at the end of the room. “I mean, you understand that the word that we don’t like here is *accountable*, right?” He directed his question at Shelby as he passed behind her on his way to the coffee.

Yes, she knew, Shelby thought. Accountability was the one thing that agencies never really had to worry much about. Hell, accountability was something the advertising industry paid little heed to, period. And,

up to now, that had worked pretty well. But lately, accountability, or rather the lack of it, had been ticking advertisers off. They've been asking for change. Which meant that if this DAOS thing was legit, if agencies would need to actually start justifying the large amounts of money they made, then yes, that would change things.

In potentially disastrous ways.

After all, the advertising industry, hell, most industries, flourished on one of the most basic unwritten rules of capitalism. It is far more lucrative to be paid for the possibility of success than for the actuality of results.

Rebecca Winters turned to look at Shelby. "Have you heard of the Edge of Chaos concept?" she asked. Shelby shook her head.

"It's when you find yourself at an in-between area where you have a need for order and an imperative to change. Our clients are feeling an existential need for change. They think the entire financial structure of the business is broken. They want us to start justifying our worth. Demanding it, actually. And the truth is, we'd rather not do that. We want to keep things the way they are. I mean, I'm not saying that our clients are wrong. It is true that our industry is built on an infrastructure that today's technology is making obsolete. But it's also true that the current system serves our needs quite well. Financially, I mean."

"And you now feel that you're on this edge of so-called chaos?" asked Shelby.

"Most definitely," replied Rebecca. "And when you find yourself on

an edge, you have one of two options. Fall into the abyss or cross over. Holding companies, well I can only speak for my holding company here, but for us it is not financially to our advantage to cross over. And we sure as hell don't want to fall into any damn abyss."

"It's not to any holding company's advantage," added Derek Castellano. "I mean you do realize how much money we would lose if we were paid based on how good we were? Jesus."

"But Derek," said Adam Connolly, "you have to admit that the advertising industry today is like a giant... giant... what's that game with the pieces that you know, you try to pull out without it falling down?"

"Jenga," replied Simon Foster.

"Yeah, Jenga. Play it with the kids all the time. I mean, our whole financial structure is like that, kind of teetering as we speak."

"No shit," said Castellano. "And I don't want to be the one that allows the wrong piece to be yanked out so the whole thing crumbles."

"So, Shelby," said Ian, "the good news about the Exiles and this DAOS thing is that right now, as far as we know, they're only working with small clients with small budgets. That's how we first heard about them. And small isn't a problem."

"The problem," said Simon Foster, interrupting, "is if a big client, like our friends in Cincinnati..."

"Or, Detroit," interrupted Castellano.

"Yes, or Detroit" said Foster, "if they hear of this and start experimenting, well..."

“Well, that’s what we don’t want to have happen, Shelby,” said Ian. “Which is why we need you to squash this before it goes any further. Figure out what this so-called system is that they have and find a way to disable it or make it go away.”

Shelby sat quietly, taking in the information just shared with her. Slowly she looked at each of the players in the room before glancing down at her notes.

“And this Watson guy, you said that he’s based in San Francisco?”

“That’s right,” said Ian.

“You know, he came and talked to me.”

The room went quiet as everyone turned to the person who said it.

“Who came to talk to you?” asked Simon Foster.

“This Watson guy.” They were now all staring at Castellano. “Around eight months ago. Said that he had a model that would allow us to be paid based on how good we were creatively. Asked if Interpublic’s agencies would be interested in learning how it worked.”

“What did you tell him?” asked Ian.

“I said do you have any idea how we make our money? The amount of people that we put on an account, necessary or not. The number of hours we bill, whether they were actually worked or not. The profit we make. I told him our profit had nothing to do with whether the work was any good or not.”

“What did he say?” asked Foster.

“That’s the thing,” said Castellano. “He didn’t say a damn thing.

Just smiled. Just fucking nodded his head and smiled. Then he said, so I take it you're not interested?

I said, you got that right.”

“And? What did he say to that?” asked Adam Connolly.

“He just said, too bad. Because I have a hunch that your clients might be.”

“And?” asked Rebecca Winters.

“He got up and left.”

A silence came over the room.

“At the time, you see, I thought it was a bluff,” said Castellano.

“Now, hell... now I'm not so sure.”

Chapter 6

Chicago – Michigan Avenue – 14th Floor Conference Room

Ryan Matthews was frustrated. He had been a copywriter in the advertising business for almost 20 years. Awards had been plentiful. Pay raises, new responsibilities and the appropriate titles had followed.

So why, he wondered, did the battle never fucking end? Why was it always so hard? Great ideas that would break through and get noticed were what he was paid to come up with on a consistent basis.

And, that is what he usually delivered.

But these ideas, the truly unusual ones, the ones that would stand out, were not the ones that would normally go to the client. Over the years, it had been research or an overly-cautious account person or something equally unimportant to the big picture that would squash brilliance before it ever left the building. But now it was different. Today great creative had a new executioner.

Digital data.

Presented by some still wet-behind-the-ears hipster with a shaved head and flannel shirt who thought data had replaced creative as advertising's new golden child.

Data is just fucking numbers, Ryan thought. We spend all of our time making magic out of words and pictures and all anybody wants to talk about are digits.

The saddest part was that people actually listened to these kids who had been in the business a year, maybe a year and a half, seldom more. Ryan knew that those who did listen, those who were older, did it only so they wouldn't look like they were too old to "get it". If you're over 40 and say that Instagram is a crock of shit as a branding tool, well, you have lost all credibility.

It wasn't that you were wrong. It was that being right no longer mattered. Being young, that's all that was important. These days it seemed that when it came to experience and age, the more you had of either, the less credibility you had in advertising.

At age 41, Ryan had both of the former and was quickly losing any of the latter, he thought.

He remembered one recent meeting where the data turks and turkettes had been telling him that only short messages worked online. Six seconds was the new 30-second spot, apparently. Ryan could only shake his head at their naivety. Why didn't anyone call them out on this bullshit?

Before that meeting he had read an article about a company that compiled the most shared commercials online over the course of a week. Guess what? Out of the top ten, there were no six-second spots that people thought were worth sharing. Out of the top ten most shared

spots, one might be a thirty. The other nine? All at least ninety seconds. Or, longer. Much longer. Looking closer, he saw that one of the most shared spots had been over six minutes in length.

So he had called the company that had compiled the data and asked for past results from previous weeks.

It was the same.

Week after week, the most shared commercials online were longer. Not shorter.

So he brought it up in the meeting. And the turks and turkettes said it was an anomaly. Maybe, yes, those are the commercials that people share, but the most watched spots are the shorter ones.

“But why do you think anyone would actually share a commercial?” Ryan countered. “Do you think it’s because they enjoyed the story? That it moved them? Made them feel something? Maybe even, God forbid, maybe even feel better about the brand?”

Ryan could see the account people in the room, disparagingly referred to as *suits*, start to fidget in their seats as he got more riled up.

“Who’s to say?” was one of the turkettes answer.

The lead suit sighed deeply as he looked down at the table, rubbing his forehead. He knew Ryan. He knew what was coming. And, he wasn’t wrong.

“Who’s to say?” Ryan responded, insulted, his voice rising. “Who’s to say? I’ll tell you who’s to say. I fucking am. And I just did.”

Which is when the lead suit stepped in looking for peace. Peace?

Peace doesn't create great work. Great work requires sacrifice. And Ryan knew a couple of turks and turkettes that he would gladly sacrifice right about now.

"People won't watch a five or six-minute commercial," one of them said as if he knew this to be a fact.

"My job is to make them want to," Ryan fired back. "That's what I do. That's what creativity is. Every second that is created is created in such a way that it makes people want to watch the next second. And then the second after that until all, say in a four-minute spot, all 240 seconds are consumed."

"Well, just make that 240 second story six seconds long and we're there," one of the turkettes said with a smile, without looking up from the screen in front of her.

Ryan was about to say you're lucky that you're cute because it sure as hell ain't your brain that's going to get you promoted. But he didn't get the chance.

His phone lying in front of him on the the conference room table started to buzz. It was a text from Nick. *Need to talk*, was all it said.

When he looked up, the conversation at the table had already moved on. Now they were talking about how they wanted to create a flash mob in a Safeway store for one of their clients. A mouthwash.

Good God, thought Ryan. He stood up and slipped out of the door behind him. Nobody will care, he thought. Care, hell.

Probably nobody will even notice.

Chapter 7

Uber – South On Hwy 101 – On Way To SFO

Nick was waiting for Ryan to respond.

C'mon, pick up, buddy. When there was no response to his text, he decided to call.

“Hello,” said Ryan, answering his phone.

“You got a second?”

“Yep, saw your text. Just stepped out of a meeting.”

“I’m on my way to Detroit.”

“Ha! Detroit. Wow. One of the big three bit did they?”

“Well, let’s just say they’re fishing.”

“Fishing’s good,” said Ryan. “Gonna tell me which one?”

“Yeah. Ford.”

“Shit. That’s great.”

“Could be.”

“Well, go get ‘em, buddy. And keep me apprised.”

“Copy that.”

“If they want in, you know, I’m there. After the meeting I just walked out of, God, I am so there.”

“Good. You know I’m counting on that.”

Ryan Matthews smiled as he hung up. He had known Nick for over ten years. The first time they had talked about the idea of being paid based on ability they were just two creatives bullshitting over bourbons about everything wrong with the business. They both felt the same – that while agencies, in general, were making a shitload of cash, the handful of truly creative ones were leaving money on the table.

This had been a few years back.

Kentucky. Two-week shoot. Ten commercials.

That's where they had discovered that they each had a love of bourbon. Which worked out well as it just so happened that Kentucky had a lot of bourbon to love.

Louisville. Lexington. Frankfort.

Over the course of two weeks, they had kept throwing down shots as they threw around ideas as to how they could be paid for outcome rather than effort.

They knew the risks. But they also knew their ability. And they were tired of their creative ability being treated as a commodity.

Hell, the only true commodity in this business was the commercials themselves. As such, shouldn't the price of a commercial vary according to its worth compared to other commercials?

It was something they both believed.

They were both told more than once that they were egotistical assholes. It was something that they had agreed they could live with. After all, they were not about to apologize for their ability.

What experience had taught them is that great work frightens people. If it's unique, it is, by definition, something that hasn't been done before. And if it hasn't been done before, then there's no way for others to judge it. You can't argue that it's like this or like that, because it's like nothing. Ever. It's that uniqueness that makes it great. And it's that same uniqueness that ordains its death. All before the consumer even has a chance to see it.

They even talked about putting skin in the game. Being paid on the back end if... if the spot they created worked.

But the agencies that employed them didn't want to be held accountable for sales. Too many outside influences had an impact on sales. To be held accountable for something that you don't have complete control over would be suicidal.

So what could they have complete control over?

They both knew it would have to do with the work itself, but they didn't have a clue as to how to measure - or monetize - something like that.

Until the night when Nick had those three bourbons with David Wilkins.

It was shortly after that that Nick had called Ryan up and said that he was experimenting with something. When Ryan had first heard Nick describe DAOS, he had told him, "Okay, Nick, I never thought I'd say this, but I think maybe it's time to lay off the bourbon."

But the more he thought about it, the more he had come around to

the conclusion that maybe, just maybe, it could work. It was certainly worth a shot.

So he had told Nick, “If you get a big client, I’m in.”

Ford would certainly qualify as big.

What the hell, thought Ryan. What the fucking hell.

Chapter 8

San Francisco – Golden Gate Bridge – 7:10 AM

Katherine (Kat) Thompson was on her way into work. The sun was starting to light up the city as she drove south across what she always considered to be the most beautiful bridge in the world.

On a normal day, the drive from Mill Valley to the office she and Nick shared in the south of Market area took around 20 minutes. The key was to leave before 7:00. If you left early, the commute was a snap.

Kat had known Nick for over a dozen of her 38 years. They had worked together at two different agencies: him as creative director, her as producer. A mutual respect had formed between them over the years. While a producer's main job is to make sure the production comes in on budget, Nick also trusted Kat's creative chops. He looked at her as a creative equal, unusual for a producer.

She had been in the room when she knew that Nick was going to be fired from his last place. At the time, it had been considered the best creative shop in San Francisco. An agency that understood what many agencies didn't – that if you wanted great work, you needed to treat the creatives like adults – letting them do their own thing. The creative process can't be too organized or formalized or structured. Great talent needs the freedom to find its own way of making shit happen. The best

thing is to leave it alone. Don't fuck with it.

But at this particular shop, a new managing director had just come in to run the place. And, of course, he wanted to put his own stamp on things. In other words, to fuck with it.

The day Nick's departure had become evident, they had been in a conference room with twelve others. Nick had been sharing the creative that he was scheduled to present in a few days to one of the agency's largest clients. The media department was there. The account folks. A few people from research. And, the new managing director.

As Nick was presenting, Kat could see that everyone was liking the work. It was provocative. Emotional. It made you think differently about the brand. The only problem was that the new managing director wasn't buying it. Not because it wasn't good. The only thing Kat had been able to figure out was that he didn't like it because it wasn't his.

There hadn't been a lot of respect for this new managing director amongst the creatives. He had wanted to institute a system that he thought delivered the best creative ideas, something he invented called a "kickstart" meeting. In a kickstart meeting, anyone – media, account folks, hell even the janitor – could throw out an idea and the group would have to take time to kick it around and consider it.

As if all ideas carried equal weight.

Nick and all the other creatives knew that wasn't true. Why waste time on shitty ideas?

In the ad business there's a saying, generally spouted by non-

creatives, that a great idea can come from anywhere. Well, sure, it can. But most times it doesn't. Great ideas come from those who know how to create great ideas. That's why some people are writers and art directors, while others are accountants or account executives.

When the new managing director had shit-canned Nick's idea and opened the meeting up to see what others thought they should do instead, Kat had known that it wasn't going to end well.

After all, Nick wasn't one to bite his tongue. If he felt he was being wronged, he would speak up. Kat could usually tell when that was going to happen simply by watching his jaw. He had an irritating habit of clenching his jaw when he got angry. When she saw his jaw tightening she knew that the fireworks wouldn't be far behind. From across the table, she kept watching. And praying. Damn, Nick, don't do it, she had said to herself. For once, just keep your friggin' mouth shut.

Like that was going to happen.

She saw the jaw tighten.

Two days later, Nick was gone.

Three months later, she had decided to partner up with him in the new place he was starting. They'd be equal partners. She'd run the production side of things. He'd handle creative. They would both play the role of account executives.

That had been three years ago.

Their first client was the same one that Nick had the ideas for that the new managing director shit-canned. Apparently, this client - the

country's largest cable provider - hadn't liked the new managing director very much either.

When Nick first starting talking to her about DAOS, Kat was skeptical. It's risky, she had told him, to be held accountable for the work. Nick, countered with one of his stupid sayings. "Risk is just the price you pay for opportunity." Yeah, okay. But risk is also a four-letter word for a reason, she reminded him.

She knew that Nick saw the world in black and white. Right or wrong. Do or don't. It's what made him difficult to work with. But she could usually find a way to slip a little gray into the argument. It's what made them a good team.

Yet, so far, DAOS was kind of working for them. Only their smaller clients wanted to try it, but small clients were good. It gave them a chance to smooth the kinks out of the system. It was only when Nick came back after unsuccessfully trying to sell DAOS to New York mega agencies that he seemed more determined than ever to reach out for larger clients.

And now, one of those large clients had reached out to them.

Detroit will make it interesting, she thought to herself, as she drove through the South of Market area to their office at Mission and Third.

Yes, Ford could indeed change things very quickly.

Chapter 9

Detroit – 1 America Road – Ford Headquarters

The Uber pulled up in front of Ford World Headquarters.

Nick got out and looked up. The sun flickered off the windows that seemed to comprise the entirety of the sleek, glass and steel minimalistic structure. It was easy to see why the 12-story building was nicknamed “The Glass House”. He walked in, showed his ID and was asked to have a seat in the lobby. Most of the others waiting were in suits, making Nick stand out in his jeans and blazer. The majority of creatives were into the hoodie and tennis shoe look. Never felt right to Nick, the need to try and convince people that he was hip by dressing like a techie.

An attractive woman came out of the elevator and walked over to him.

“Hi,” she said. “You must be Mr Watson. I’m Jeffery Bell’s assistant. Would you come with me please?”

Entering the elevator, she pushed the button for the top floor. “How was the flight?” she asked, her weak attempt at making conversation. Their banal chit chat continued until the elevator doors opened. She led him down the hall to the corner office. Knocking once, she opened the door, standing aside to let Nick enter.

Two people were in the office. Both stood up as Nick walked in.

“Nick Watson, I assume,” said the man, walking over to shake his hand. “I’m Jeffery Bell. Thank you so much for taking the time to meet with us.” The woman also came over, putting out her hand to shake Nick’s.

“Amanda Weeks, CMO. Yes, thanks for coming.”

They all sat down around a small, rectangular table, around knee high. The chairs were leather, the tabletop, glass. Coffee was already set out on the table. Three cups, all unused. “Please, help yourself,” Jeffery said, pointing to the coffee. Then, after a quick glance at Amanda, he began.

“You’re probably wondering why we invited you here.”

Nick tried to hide his smile as he helped himself to the coffee. He always got that question. But the fact was that he always knew why he was there. Marketers were not only tired of the high fees they were paying their agencies, but with the lack of any way of measuring whether those fees were actually earned or not.

“We heard about The Creative Exiles,” Amanda interjected, “and we wanted to find out more. None of our other agencies, by the way, know that we are having this meeting.”

“And, of course, we’d like to keep it that way,” added Jeffery.

“Assumed,” said Nick. He knew that Ford’s agencies had previously been J. Walter Thompson, Young & Rubicam and Ogilvy & Mather. They had been agency relationships that dated back to World War II.

But after a recent agency review, Ford had switched to new agencies – BBDO and Wieden+Kennedy. Agency reviews are not uncommon when a new CEO comes on board.

Jeffery Bell had no affiliations with Ford’s agencies from the past. He was coming in with a fresh slate.

And as the new CEO, he wanted fresh thinking.

“So The Creative Exiles,” asked Jeffery, “is that what, your agency’s name?”

“No,” said Nick. “The Exiles are like a SWAT team that get together for certain projects. We’re a group of creative folks from all across the country who believe that advertising can work better and are willing to be paid based on those beliefs.”

“And what we’ve been hearing,” said Amanda, “is that one of those beliefs is that you want to be paid for work based on how good it is. Is that correct?”

“That’s putting it simply, but yes,” replied Nick.

“And by good, you are referring to sales results, I assume?” asked Jeffery.

Nick paused as he slowly took his first sip of coffee. It was the same whenever he explained how the Exiles worked. Ask anyone in marketing what the word *results* means and the answer is always sales. But something has to happen before the sale takes place. And that something is what the Exiles were monetizing.

“Yes, our model is based on ROI,” Nick said. “But in our model,

the ‘I’ stands for *involvement* rather than *investment*.

Jeffery looked at Amanda, somewhat puzzled. “Return on *involvement*?” he said. “Okay. Whose involvement are we talking about here? Yours, I assume.”

“No, not mine,” answered Nick. “Under the current labor-based system employed by most in the industry, the advertiser *is* paying for their agency’s involvement in terms of labor and time. But with the digital platform, it is now possible for advertisers to pay their agency based on the viewers’ involvement in what the agency creates.”

“Not sure what you mean exactly,” said Amanda, “when you say the viewers’ involvement.”

“Completely understandable,” said Nick. “After all, it is a new concept. Let’s say you ask for a two-minute spot to be created for you. How long do you want the viewer to watch that spot for?”

“Is this a trick question?” asked Jeffery.

“Or just a rhetorical one?” said Amanda.

“Neither,” said Nick. “If your agency sells you a two-minute spot to run online, I would argue it’s because they believe that two minutes are necessary to communicate the message effectively. If the agency felt that they could have better communicated the message in sixty seconds or thirty seconds, then they would have recommended those lengths instead. Now let’s say that you run the two-minute spot online and the return path data shows that, on average, only ten seconds are watched by the viewers. Should you still be required to pay full fare for the one

hundred and ten seconds that are not watched? After all, the agency did say that they needed two minutes to make the spot work.”

“Do we have a choice?” asked Amanda. “Production is a fixed cost. So we pretty much have to live with whatever happens.”

Nick looked at Amanda. “Yeah, I know. And that’s how it used to work,” he said. “We do it a bit differently. We look at concept development and a portion of production as a variable cost rather than a fixed cost. The variable is time spent. Not the time that we spend coming up with the commercial and producing it, but rather the time the viewer spends watching it.”

Jeffery looked over at Amanda who was busy taking notes. “I’m sorry, but I’m afraid that I’m still a bit confused,” he said.

Nick nodded as if he wasn’t surprised. “See if this doesn’t help,” he said. “If we create a commercial for you that’s, let’s say, 60 seconds long, this commercial has a beginning and an end – in other words, the commercial’s *opportunity to engage* a viewer is 60 seconds. As an advertiser, you have, at least in our opinion, paid to not only have those 60 seconds created and produced, but also watched. After all, a produced second that is watched, well, obviously it delivers a better return on investment on your creative and production dollars than a produced second that isn’t watched. Would you agree?”

Amanda looked at Jeffery before speaking. “So if I’m hearing you correctly, what you are saying is that an advertiser’s *immediate* return on dollars invested in the production of a commercial is the amount of time

that people spend watching it?”

“Exactly. This is what we refer to as a Return on Involvement. By the way, we define involvement as increasing emotional engagement before purchase. Which is why we have found that the higher the return on involvement, the creative ROI so to speak, the better the sales actually are. I don’t believe that it takes a large leap of faith to agree that the longer a person is exposed to a brand message, the greater the branding impact is likely to be on that individual.

“It doesn’t take a leap of faith at all,” said Jeffery. I mean it’s like one plus one equals two.”

“Yeah, I know,” said Nick. “But I’m afraid not everyone in this business can add very well.”

“Any research to verify your theories?” asked Amanda.

“Actually, yes. The Omnicom Media Group recently did a study on engaged viewers.”

“And?” asked Jeffery.

“What it showed is that one engaged viewer is supposedly worth eight regular viewers. What’s more, their study indicates that involvement in a commercial message increases measurable return on investment by 15 to 20%.”

“That seems substantial,” said Jeffery.

“We actually think it’s low,” said Nick. “At least from our experience.”

He took a sip of coffee to let that sink in. He could tell their interest

was being piqued. He didn't want to lose them now.

“Back to your fixed cost comment, Amanda, regarding production costs, you're right. Most creative and production budgets are looked at as a marketing expense. A fixed cost. But we think these costs should be looked at as an investment. And, if it's going to be a good investment, then it should return interest. In this type of investment, the best return is when time spent equals time created. And the best interest that you can receive is the viewer's.”

Amanda slowly looked up from her notes. Nick could see that she wanted to like it, but wasn't completely sold.

“I sometimes find that it's a bit clearer if we look at it mathematically,” said Nick. “Let's say that we have a 30-second spot in which 300,000 viewers each watch only ten seconds of the commercial. Ten seconds multiplied by 300,000 means the commercial delivered three million seconds of time spent with your brand.”

Nick paused as he saw Amanda do the math on her notepad in front of her.

“That's right,” she said, nodding to Jeffery Bell.

“And your point is...?” asked Jeffery.

“Simply this. If you take a 30-second spot in which 300,000 viewers each watch all 30 seconds you would get nine million seconds of time spent with your brand. Three million seconds versus nine million seconds. Converting seconds to days, that's 34 days versus 104 days spent with your brand.

A low whistle escaped from Jeffery Bell's lips.

"My point," continued Nick, "is that the media cost to run the two spots is the same – they were both 30-second spots. They both had 300,000 viewers. But because of the creative, and only because of the creative, you would get an additional 70 days of time spent with one commercial versus the other. I would say that's valuable, yes."

Jeffery was nodding. And, for the first time, smiling.

"I've always believed that you're paying your agency not just to have a commercial created," said Nick. "What you're actually paying them for is to have it watched."

"But, Nick, c'mon," said Jeffery. "I mean, isn't that just common sense?"

"I guess," Nick smiled. "But before the digital platform, nobody has been willing or able to monetize common sense."

"And how do you propose to get this so-called viewer time spent measured?" asked Jeffery.

"It's already being done. Online. In fact, your media agency probably has these figures in hand. They're just not sharing the data with you."

"And why's that?"

"Because they know that if you knew how little of your commercials are actually being watched, you'd probably stop spending money to run your commercials. And your media agencies wouldn't like that. You see, they kind of enjoy the enormous amounts of dollars that

you pay them.”

“So you’re saying what exactly?” asked Jeffery. “That they know and aren’t telling us? I mean, c’mon Nick, you make it sound like it’s some sort of conspiracy or something.”

Nick nodded. “Some might call it that. But instead of conspiracy, I prefer the term self-preservation. It’s only human nature not to be forthcoming to a client with bad news.”

Silence descended on the room. Nick always liked it when that happened. The silence made the knock on the door sound even louder. The same woman who had brought Nick up to the office entered and walked over to Jeffery. Leaning over, Nick heard her whisper ‘BBDO’s on the phone’. Nodding, Jeffery got up to leave and then stopped. “On second thought, tell them I’ll get back to them in what”... he looked at Nick... “an hour?”

Nick nodded.

“An hour,” Jeffery said to his assistant, sitting back down.

“So, Nick. You have our undivided attention. Please, continue.”

Chapter 10

San Francisco – SOMA – Hotel Zetta

Shelby had found that she still enjoyed going to San Francisco. True, the city had changed, with the techies taking over from the artists and the bohemians and the musicians from the past. But there were still the hills, and a vibe that made San Francisco a city unlike any other.

She checked into the Hotel Zetta. It was an arty hotel, currently in favor among the creative crowd. But that wasn't the sole reason she stayed there. What she liked was its design – a neoclassical-styled building full of reclaimed wood and salvaged antiques. It was all done to her taste, although she did think the pool table in the lobby was trying too hard to appeal to a certain “sort”. She'd have to check, but if she was lucky, the free weekly yoga class would be held on one of the days that she was there. A small perk, but an important one to Shelby.

After all, staying in shape was one of her priorities. Looking the way she did was one of the reasons that she was as successful as she was. She knew it and she wasn't offended. In her opinion, too many women in business were too busy complaining about not being appreciated for their minds. What she had discovered is that if you actually had a mind and you spoke it, men would listen.

If... and yes, it was a big if - but - if you looked as good as she did.

Looking good lets you get away with a lot in life. Over time, she had stopped judging whether it was fair or not. It just is what it is.

A good-looking woman has an advantage for the simple reason that beauty tends to fog a man's mind. And if that attractive woman is at all intelligent, she will use that beauty to allow her to pick the man apart, piece by piece.

To her it was simple. Women had to face facts and stop with the "woe is me" shit. Fact number one is that the entire package is evaluated. Brains and looks. Always. No getting around it. Fact number two is that most business dealings are with men. And men like looking at attractive women. Just like women enjoy looking at attractive men. Which makes attractiveness an asset whether you are a man or a woman. Refusing to use one of your assets is just being stupid. It's like graduating from Harvard and not letting anybody know. Why waste an advantage?

She hadn't always thought this way. She had received her law degree from, yes, Harvard, and had spent ten years working in a law firm whose speciality was corporate law. She had been known to be among the smartest in the firm. Everyone had assumed that becoming a partner was an inevitable part of her future.

Including her.

When it didn't happen she wasn't just stunned. She was pissed. While never told directly, she did weasel it out of a few of her colleagues that the reason she hadn't been named partner was because she was a

woman. Fuck that, she thought.

She quit the next day – vowing to herself that she would never allow the biological fact that she was female to ever hold her back again. Just the opposite actually. Going forward, she was going to use being female to her advantage.

After ten years in corporate law, she knew all about *fixing* things. That's what corporate lawyers did. Make unpleasant things go away. Usually with a settlement of some sort. But she had also learned that most problems could be *fixed* in other ways. Quieter ways. Before the public had a chance to find out about them. And it was this way of fixing things that she decided would become her career. She would get in first, handle the problem and take the money. Before the lawyers did.

And because most issues that needed *fixing* required her to deal with men, she was going to use the fact that she was a woman to the absolute.

It's what made her so dangerous.

Not to mention, successful.

Her reservation at the Zetta was for five nights. Whether she would need them all, she didn't know. She had left Nick Watson a number of voicemails, introducing herself as a reporter for an advertising publication. She had told him she wanted to do a story on the Exiles and the way that they were re-thinking how the industry could work. This was going to be her way in.

The only problem was that he hadn't returned her calls.

So she had made a few investigative inquiries before coming out and had discovered that Watson frequented a certain bar – The House of Shields – close to his office. This was supposedly where he could often be found.

The Hotel Zetta was in SOMA – the South of Market area – on Fifth Street between Market and Mission. Watson’s office was also on Mission, down by Third Street, and the House of Shields, one block from that. The weather was typical San Francisco, warm during the day, but cooling down come evening. Looking in the mirror as she threw a leather jacket on over her teal top and black leggings, she couldn’t help but nod in approval. Her look spoke volumes without her even having to open her mouth.

San Francisco is a walking town. Many think it’s too hilly, but the South of Market area is relatively flat. The biggest problem these days was the homeless. San Francisco had become a town where the techies pay millions for a house – in cash – while the number of homeless seems to increase as quickly as the price of homes. The haves and the have-nots. If civil war is going to break-out in this country, she thought, as she walked around yet another group of homeless tented up on Mission Street, that’s where the dividing line will be.

Not black versus white.

Haves versus have-nots.

Only in America is the callousness so obvious.

And only in San Francisco is it thrown so blatantly in your face.

She rounded the corner on New Montgomery and saw the vertically-shaped, blue neon sign for the House of Shields. Built in 1908, it had once been a speakeasy, and now it was one of the oldest remaining bars in the city. Patrons fondly referred to it as the place where time stands still. There was a reason for this. The bar has never allowed a clock to grace its premises.

In its former life, it had been a gentlemen's club, meaning no women were allowed in, except, of course, for those of ill-repute. Rumor had it that an underground passageway led from behind the bar to the world-renowned Palace Hotel across the street. More than one US President was supposedly familiar with this secret access from the hotel to the bar. But it's President Warren G. Harding who had the most interesting connection with the bar. If you read the history books, they will tell you that President Harding died in the Palace Hotel. But rumor says otherwise, that it had actually been in the House of Shields where he said his final goodbyes to the world, in the company of a woman who hadn't exactly been his wife.

It was around 7:00 when Shelby entered.

The bar was dark, fitting the wood paneling and gold-leaf embellishments that enclosed the room. It smelled of age, but in a good way, not unlike an old wine cellar. No TVs. No food. No clocks. Just booze. And conversation. Truly old-school, she thought. Where business deals get done. Careers made, and, just as often, ruined.

The bar was three-quarters full, a mixture of business types and

hipsters. Hard to find a bar in San Francisco without its share of the latter. What was it, Shelby thought, with hipsters wearing their pretensions on the rolled up sleeves of their flannel shirts? Good God.

She found an empty stool at the bar and ordered a Manhattan. It seemed only right in a place like this – an old-school drink in an old-school bar. Unobtrusively, she started to scan the faces of the patrons. She had Googled Watson and seen pictures of him online and, who knows, perhaps she would get lucky. The two guys to her right were talking digital media. Hell, was there anyone these days not talking digital media? The trouble was that none of what any of them were saying really made any sense.

Of course, that didn't stop them from selling the shit. But Shelby had studied the actual numbers.

The rate of engagement among a brand's fans with a Facebook post is seven in ten thousand.

Over half the display ads paid for by marketers were unviewable.

Only 44% of traffic on the web was even human.

Half of all US online advertising – over \$20 billion a year – was lost to fraud.

Click farms were running 24/7.

Impression fraud was rampant with 13 known ways in which it was committed.

She knew that P&G had recently pulled \$200 million from their digital ad spend and seen no change in their business outcomes. That

Chase Bank had reduced the number of sites that showed its ads from 400,000 to 5,000 and seen no change in business outcomes. No change! Zilch. None. Nada. Sure, there were a lot of people online. But it seemed like the only people that advertising worked for online were the online companies that were selling it.

She took another look around the bar. Nope. No Watson. Perhaps one of the two digital media guys on her right knew him or had heard of him. It was worth a shot.

“Excuse me,” she said, interrupting their conversation. “I couldn’t help but overhear you guys. Sounds like you’re in media.”

The closest one to her turned, and after slowly looking her up and down, smiled broadly. “Indeed,” he said. “You, too?”

His buddy tapped him on the shoulder. “Gotta get going, David.” He smiled at Shelby too. “You be good now,” he said to his friend, patting him on the back on the way out.

“Always am,” he replied. “Good I always am.”

Looking back at Shelby, he put out his hand. “David Wilkins.”

“Shelby Porter.”

“So, Shelby, was I right? You’re in media?”

“In a way, I guess. I’m a reporter.”

“Porter the reporter. I like it. And what may I ask do you report on?”

“Interesting people. Doing interesting things.”

“Well,” Wilkins continued, “I run a video ad network. “And...” he

looked at her almost empty glass... “I’m interested in buying you another drink.”

He signaled the bartender for another round for them both. The bar was starting to fill up even more. Wilkins used it as an excuse to inch his stool a bit closer to Shelby’s.

“So what do you think? Is there a story in me, Shelby Porter?”

Shelby had to smile. Guys were so transparent. “Actually, I’m in town to do an interview with a guy called Nick Watson.”

“Watson? Ha, I know that bastard.”

Two fresh drinks were set down in front of them. “Bastard, huh?” She took a sip before continuing. Somehow the Manhattans here were even better than the ones in the city they were named after.

“How so?” she asked.

“Well, simply because if you had an appointment to interview him, he blew you off. He’s out of town.”

“Oh?”

“Yep. Flew to Detroit. Said a big client wanted to talk to him.”

“Big client. Detroit. Sounds like a car company to me,” Shelby said.

“So right you are, pretty lady. Ford. He was quite excited. Told me that if this worked out, it could open a lot of doors. For the both of us.”

“So you what, you and Watson, you work together?”

“Well, he’s pushing this crazy way to make the digital platform accountable so it will operate better. And I said I’d help him with it.”

“Really? What’s crazy about it?”

Wilkins shook his head. “C’mon, I don’t really want to talk about media and advertising when I have someone as interesting and beautiful as you sitting here.”

Shelby stirred her drink, playing the options out in her head. Should she or shouldn’t she? Wilkins was an attractive enough guy. He wasn’t wearing a wedding ring. And, it did seem like he had some information that she needed. The night was young and hell, Watson wasn’t even in town.

Plus, the second drink was having some effect. You’re here to do a job, Porter, she thought to herself. So fucking do it.

“What the hell,” she muttered under her breath.

“What was that?” said Wilkins, not exactly sure if he had heard her right.

“I said what the hell.”

“One of my favorite sayings,” said Wilkins.

“All right, I’ll share a bit, but...”

“But?”

“...but you do need to reciprocate,” said Shelby.

Now it was Wilkins turn to smile. He caught the bartender’s eye and held up two fingers indicating another round for them both. Turning back to Shelby, he said.

“Believe me, it there’s one thing you’ll find that I do very well, my dear, it’s reciprocate.”

Chapter 11

San Francisco – SOMA – Nick and Kat’s Office

Nick walked out of the Ford meeting with a request to come back with a proposal. Ford wanted to invite a few more people – the brand managers of a few different brands so that they could listen to the proposal and be able to ask their own questions.

“I want you at that meeting,” Nick told Kat over the phone on his way back to the airport. “We’ll explain the way that DAOS works and hopefully, get at least one of the brands to buy in. If they do, next stop will be Cincinnati and P&G.”

“You really want to push this, don’t you?” Kat said. “It’s like you’re pissed off at the entire industry.”

“Eight months ago I sat down with agency heads in New York,” answered Nick. “Ran them through my thinking. Gave them a chance. They in turn threw me out of their offices. Told me to get lost. So yeah, I’m... well I won’t say pissed. Motivated... let’s just say I’m extremely motivated.”

Kat looked around the loft space that was their office. It comprised the entire third floor of a four-story building. Built in 1901, it was now one of the few remaining heritage buildings still standing in San

Francisco. It had survived the 1903 earthquake, the only building on this particular section of Mission Street that did. It was an open floor concept, 4,800 square feet with two of the four walls comprised of floor-to-ceiling windows. The pine floors had been re-sanded and refinished before they moved in. In a word, gorgeous.

When they had first seen it, Nick thought they could partition it off, make ten to twelve offices out of the open space. Kat had convinced him to leave it as it was. In her mind, it was just too beautiful to partition off.

“You trust me, right?” she said.

They agreed on a budget to furnish the place. She did the shopping. Nick did indeed trust her and especially her taste when it came to decorating. Mostly antiques. The big prize being a 10-foot long, hand-carved mahogany bar that they placed in the middle of the floor. It was from 1910, originally built into an old San Francisco hotel that had burned down. The only thing that survived the fire was the bar. It wasn't inexpensive. But to Nick, it was worth every penny.

Now it was where Nick and Kat held their most important meetings.

There was a bottle of 23-year old, Pappy Van Winkle's Family Reserve hidden in a secret compartment of the bar. No bourbon should sell for up to \$5,000 a bottle on the black market, but the 23-year old Pappy Van Winkle did. This, they told each other, would be for the most special of celebrations. Getting Ford to sign up could be reason enough.

Kat remembered the first time that Nick had explained DAOS to

her. She was used to him expounding on his unusual ideas. Since they had been friends for a long time – Nick had been her unofficial photographer at her second wedding – she was now on her third – they were past the phase of being insulted if one of them called the other’s idea stupid.

But when Nick told Kat his thinking on DAOS, she didn’t know if stupid covered it. “Here’s the way I look at it” he said one day over lunch they had brought back from the Korean joint down the street. “People don’t dislike advertising. What people dislike is the way that advertising is marketed to them.”

Kat let that sink in and then said, “What the fuck? Advertising is marketing, Nick.”

“Yeah, I know. I know. But I think people are missing the point. Everyone is complaining how people are trying to avoid commercials, right?”

“Right.”

“But what if they’re wrong? What if it’s not commercials that they are trying to avoid, but rather interruptions to their programming?”

Kat looked at him as if he were a four-year old.

“But those interruptions *are* commercials.”

“I know. And therein lies the problem. But what if commercials weren’t interruptive?”

“Then who in the hell would watch ‘em?” exclaimed Kat. “C’mon, Nick. Get serious.”

“Well, I think I am. We know from that project I did with TIVO a few years back that over 90% of people fast-forward through the commercial breaks on a program that they record on TIVO. The whole commercial break. Press forward and whoosh – all five commercials are gone in seven seconds – and they’re back to watching their program.”

“That’s because with TIVO they could do that.”

“Yeah, I know. The investment a viewer makes when watching a TV program is the time they waste with advertising. TIVO saved people that time. It let them watch a 30-minute program in 20 minutes. I mean if they could get the same return, the program, but with a smaller investment in time, then why wouldn’t they do that?”

“Yeah, okay,” she said. “I mean, I fast-forwarded through the commercials on TIVO. I’m guilty as hell and I’m in the business. But here’s the important question. So?”

“So... what was the industry’s answer?”

Kat’s exasperated look said that she didn’t really care, but that she knew Nick was going to tell her anyway.

“They said that we need to make more relevant commercials,” he continued. “They saw it as a targeting issue. But that didn’t make sense. I mean, with TIVO, people didn’t go through the commercial pod stopping at each commercial to see if it was relevant. No, they just scooted through all four or five as fast as they could to get back to the program.”

“Yep. As I said, guilty as fuck,” said Kat. “But again, so?”

“So, that means that relevancy is not the primary issue. It’s the intrusion factor that’s the biggest problem. I probably told you this, but the average viewer wastes three years of his or her life being bludgeoned by commercials.”

“Yeah, you told me that.”

“And I’ve probably told you that for every two minutes of programming on TV there is now one minute of advertising?”

“Yep, told me that, too.”

Kat had finished her steamed mandu and was starting to clear up her space. “You done with that?” she asked Nick, pointing to his lunch.

“Yeah, thanks.” Nick handed her his plate before continuing. “You know what I found out? I was having drinks with Wilkins...”

“Sleaze-ball,” interrupted Kat.

“...I know, but what he told me is that when people opt in to a commercial on the digital platform the data shows how long the viewer watches the commercial for.”

Kat looked annoyed. “I’m sure that this is leading somewhere.”

“So, what if we monetized that, that time the viewer spends with the commercial?”

Kat laughed as she started to leave. “You keep thinking, Nick. I’m going to go try and keep this agency afloat.”

But what had changed her mind had been the first time Nick introduced the idea to one of their clients – a retailer of men’s tailored clothing, headquartered down the peninsula, south of the city. Nick had

just finished presenting their work – a 90-second, online commercial – and Kat had presented the numbers, based on agency time sheets, etc, all old-school, as to what it would cost to produce the 90-second spot. As this client did a lot of TV advertising, they employed a cost-controller (procurement specialist) who they had invited to the meeting. The fact was that over three quarters of the top 25 advertisers used procurement specialists. Their job is simple. Cut out anything they think is fat in a production budget. In Nick's mind the problem with procurement specialists is like something Oscar Wilde once said. "They know the price of everything and the value of nothing."

The cost-controller had been listening silently throughout the presentation, but when Nick sat down, he stood up, taking center stage. Not surprisingly, he was making the best of it, slicing and dicing their production budget up like a Benihana chef.

Number of people on the job, hours against, size of crew, locations, all being gutted by the cost-controller. Nick and Kat's budget was taking a beating and when the cost-controller finally sat back down, the proposed fee basically lying in tatters, Nick stood back up.

"Agreed," he said.

Kat looked over at Nick with a "what the fuck" sort of expression on her face. The cost-controller too, looked up, equally perplexed. He had expected a far more spirited defense.

"Agency time sheets are an antiquated way to measure our worth," Nick continued. "Not to mention our value to you. So our suggestion is

that you start paying part of our fee based on what the new digital realities offer us – viewer time sheets.”

Kat started to squirm in her seat. Oh, shit, here we go, she thought. The least he could have done was to warn her that he was going to pull this out of his ass, now, at this meeting.

“Viewer time sheets?” asked the cost-controller. “What in the hell is a viewer time sheet?”

Nick responded with a question of his own. “Because this commercial is ninety seconds long, it will only run online and those who are interested will need to opt in to watch, right?”

“Correct,” someone named Matt from the client’s digital division answered from the back of the room, never bothering to look up from the screen in his hand. “Ninety-seconds is too long for a forced pre-roll or in-stream commercial. Shorter is better online. Most people are doing six seconds.”

“Which means,” said Nick, trying to take in the last part of Matt’s statement without getting angry, “that it can’t be a forced view. The viewer will need to press play for the commercial to start. When they do, then we’ll know when they start viewing. But not only that, we’ll also know when they opt out or stop viewing. Isn’t that, right?”

The digital guy still hadn’t look up. “Yeah, that’s right,” he said. “We know everything that happens online. You push a button on your computer, that’s recorded someplace by somebody on the platform. Every keystroke. So you’ll know how many of the 90 seconds of the

commercial were actually used. I mean, viewed. And it won't be much because shorter is better online."

Feeling his jaw starting to tighten, Nick saw that Kat was staring at him. Don't go there, her look said.

Taking a deep breath, he continued. "Well, this digital measurement of viewer time spent with a commercial is what we're calling a viewer time sheet. What we're proposing is that instead of paying us for how long we worked on the commercial, you should pay us based on how long people watch the commercial for."

The head of marketing on the client side, who up to now had been listening to this discussion with a bemused indifference, was suddenly anything but indifferent. "Let me get this right," she said. "What you're saying is that instead of us paying you for your time working on this commercial, you'd be willing to be paid based on the amount of time that viewers watch it for?"

"Yeah, I guess I am." Nick looked at Kat who rolled her eyes.

"And if Matt back there is right," she continued, pointing to the digital guy, "they're not going to watch much."

"Not a chance, chief," said Matt, still not looking up from his screen, refusing to make eye-contact with anything that had a pulse.

"What we're betting on," said Nick, "is that we're good enough, creatively, to come up with something that they *want* to watch. And more of it rather than less."

"And you're willing to take the chance, the chance to make what,

nothing?” said the head of marketing.

Nick paused. He knew that 75% of behavior, including engagement in a commercial, is driven by subconscious responses. These subconscious responses are most directly influenced by elements that are added to a commercial that the cost-controller didn’t understand, and so wanted to cut. If Nick had the ability to make the commercial the way he knew it should be made, then he was willing to take that chance.

“We will make very little if people choose to watch very little. But if they do watch most or even all of it, we’ll make more than we normally would. All we ask is that you don’t tie our hands beforehand with all of this cost-cutting stuff. Let us do what we do well. And if we do - well - then it’s a win-win. If viewers watch, you should be happy. And therefore, you should want to make sure that we are happy.”

The head of marketing was nodding her head. Kat could see that she understood the logic.

“All we’re asking,” said Nick, “is to let the viewer decide if we earned our keep.”

The cost-controller was looking a bit stunned. Kat felt sorry for him as she knew that he was just starting to see the writing on the wall. “But, but, but, but this means that the viewer will be doing my job,” he stammered.

“I’m afraid so,” said Nick, as he slid the tattered proposal off of the table and into the wastebasket. “But we feel that’s better than you trying to do ours.”

The head of marketing stifled a laugh as she stood up and stuck her hand out to Nick. “Okay,” she told Nick and Kat. “Come back to us with that proposal and let’s see if we can make it work. Is next week too soon?”

“No,” said Nick, looking at Kat who nodded her head. “Next week would be just fine.”

Chapter 12

San Francisco – Banking District – Wingtip Club

Shelby finally extricated herself from David Wilkins around 2:30 in the morning.

He was harmless enough, she thought. And since she was visiting, he wanted to show her a little of what made people fondly refer to San Francisco as The City.

This meant a stop at AsiaSF for a drink at the bar, which gave them prime seating for the show. AsiaSf isn't just a bar; it's also a cabaret. All the performers are transgender and Shelby noticed that Wilkins knew most of them by name. Not judging, but she found it curious.

Following that, an Uber across town for a final nightcap at Wingtip, a private club in the original Bank of Italy building, a historic landmark constructed at the turn of the 1900s. Wilkins was a member. He even had his own wine locker from which he had them bring out a bottle of 2014 Verite La Muse.

Interesting choice, thought Shelby, impressed. She knew her wines and she knew about this particular label and year. Wilkins proudly told her that the 2014 vintage is considered by some to be perfect.

“Comparable, if not better than a Petrus. One hundred Parker points.” One sip filled Shelby’s nose with the scent of mulberry, black cherry, licorice and truffle. Intoxicating.

A little more so than she had been finding Wilkins.

He had told her a little bit about himself. How he grew up in a publishing family. His grandfather had started Wilkins Publishing out east. His father had taken over when his granddad passed. David had been seen as the future heir. But he didn’t want it. At least not the way it was.

He and his dad had gotten into a row about the future of publishing. The senior Wilkins still believed in the printed page. David knew the future was online. The tear in their relationship couldn’t be patched. So he left the family business, more or less estranged from the family altogether. Moved out west. Silicon Valley. Started his own publishing company. Online, of course. Had some success. But mostly used his time in Silicon Valley to pick people’s brains. Figured out the pros and cons of online advertising. Where the money was and wasn’t. Realized that rather than being a lone publisher the big money was in creating a video ad network. So he did.

Shelby, of course, had pretended to be interested. All part of the job, she thought. And it gave her a chance to look for openings where she could ask him about Nick Watson.

Wilkins seemed to know him quite well. And he didn’t mind sharing what he knew. Her flirting didn’t seem to hurt. And as the bottle

of what was truly an extraordinary bottle of wine started to empty, he revealed more and more. That if Watson got the Ford job, he would run the commercials on David's video ad network. That's how they would test the work. Watson's creative. Wilkins' data. That Wilkins wanted to use this test as a way to offer his services to yet other advertisers who would also want to start to incorporate his data.

Looking at the time she saw that it was way past late and that the extrication dance would soon begin. Playing it out in her head, she assumed that Wilkins would suggest his place. She would demur. He would then suggest her hotel. She would be more firm about that.

As it was, he was a gentleman and after both of his offers had been rejected, he said the least she could do is let him call her an Uber. This she allowed. As well as a promise of another drink next time she was in town. She acquiesced. He thought it was because she found him charming.

Which she did. Charmingly useful.

The club was thinning out. A few men in suits, a few women eyeing the few men. Last call. Last chance. Everyone deciding if they wanted to go home alone.

The clientele dressed well here, thought Shelby. Obviously, they had money and they weren't afraid to wear it. Wilkins had told her that this tenth floor bar at Wingtip was well-known for having assembled one of the finest collections of whiskey in all of North America. Over 500 different bottles to enjoy.

His goal was to try them all.

Just not in one night, he added with a wry smile.

Well, at least he does have a sense of humor, Shelby thought to herself.

As she avoided Wilkins' attempt at a good night kiss on the lips and headed for the elevator she saw that he wasted little time sauntering up to the bar where two attractive women had been talking for the last fifteen minutes.

Funny, but he seemed to know their names as well.

Chapter 13

Paris – Avenue Kleber – Hotel Raphael

Waking up, Paul Thackery couldn't immediately remember where he was. Or, why his head hurt. The chandelier over the bed brought back a momentary flash of recognition. Why was it that the female stars always got the best rooms, he thought to himself?

If he was right the woman next to him would be named... fuck what was it? Charlotte? Charlie? Chloe? Yeah, that was it, Chloe. Slowly, he stretched out his right leg, hoping it would find nothing but bed. But damn, there it was, another leg, making the body attached to it stir.

"You up, luv?" the body murmured, her voice husky, still half asleep. "You were certainly up last night," she said, giggling slightly, satisfaction in her voice.

Chloe was the big star in the movie Paul had just finished working on. As director of photography, one of his jobs was to make sure that the actors looked good on camera. This was never easy. They all had their own fucking insecurities. Especially the women. Only shoot the left side of my face. Remember to always try to make my boobs look bigger. Never shoot me from this angle or that angle. Some of their silly demands were actually spelled out in their contracts. So while Paul set up

the shots, his second stood close by, constantly reminding him of each of their particular peccadilloes. Nope, can't shoot her from this side. Need to put a soft filter on the lens whenever we shoot the face. Remember, you can only shoot the hooters from the left. And so on and so on.

It was a fucking pain in the ass.

Good thing he was British as that gave Paul a bit of charm in the accent department, allowing him to reassure the female actors, letting them know that, God, they were looking beautiful. He was almost like a therapist, patiently listening as they admitted their insecurities to him. After 30 years in the business, he was known for being a good listener and being able to work with the most demanding, bringing out their best performances.

Not surprising that his crew had nicknamed him "The Shrink".

Unfortunately, or fortunately, depending on how you looked at it, this trait, this ability to listen with compassion, often led to nights like last night.

Fancy restaurant.

Dinner and drinks.

Cast and crew.

End of the shoot.

Wrap party.

Twenty people or so.

Final night in Paris.

Everyone heading back to their respective countries in the a.m.

Defenses down. Going late into the evening. The last time Paul had looked around, it had been just Chloe and him. How in the hell did that happen? Being the proper Englishman, he had no choice but to offer to walk her back to her room.

The trouble is, when you make people look beautiful day in and day out, for weeks at a time, listening to their doubts, their fears, consoling them, telling them they never looked more gorgeous, well, they want to thank you.

And Chloe, after all the champagne and the wine and the after dinner drinks, was in a frightfully thankful mood.

But now, it was the morning after the night before. And he had to graciously extricate himself. Nick Watson had sent him a text in the middle of their partying, saying that he hoped the movie was almost finished because he might have something for him. Potentially something big. Not just for him, but for all the Exiles.

He'd said he'd call at 9:00 a.m., Paris time.

Paul looked at his watch. Shit. It was already 8:30.

Chapter 14

San Francisco – SOMA – Hotel Zetta

““**T**hey’re talking to Ford.”

Ian Winston lowered the phone from his ear to look at the time. Six a.m. in New York.

“Shelby, where are you?”

“San Francisco.”

“Hell, it’s three a.m. your time,” said Ian.

Shelby was about to say that she just got in, but realizing how that could be misinterpreted, decided not to. “I know,” she said. “I couldn’t sleep. Watson is out talking to Ford.”

“Wait. What? Ford? You’re certain?” asked Ian.

“Certainty is why you hire me, remember?”

“Shit. Ford is one of our clients, Shelby. BBDO, I mean that’s us, Omnicom.”

“I know. You and Wieden are their creative agencies.”

“So you’ve talked to Watson then?”

“No. But I’ve talked to one of his media cronies. According to him, this DAOS thing, it’s based on how long viewers stay involved in a commercial. Their argument is that the longer people watch the

commercial for, the more valuable the commercial is for the client. The more valuable to the client, the more Watson and the Exiles make. He's got this whole mathematical formula or algorithm or some damn thing that somehow justifies this thinking."

"Wait. I don't get it. I mean, unless you can prove a direct correlation between time spent watching a commercial and sales, the proposition will have no relevance to clients. Does he have a direct correlation?"

"That I don't know, Ian. But what I do know is that you *can* argue the negative. You can't guarantee that watching a commercial will mean a sale, no, agree with you there. But you can pretty much guarantee that not watching a commercial will not produce a sale. Watson's argument isn't that creative agencies shouldn't be held accountable for sales. It's just that sales shouldn't be the first thing that they are held accountable for. What DAOS basically does is separate the cost of creating the commercial from sales results. Where the cost of creating a commercial is usually a fixed cost, he's making it a variable cost."

"A variable cost? Bullshit. Dependent on what exactly?"

"Dependent on how much time the viewer spends with it."

"And he has this measurement data? I mean, Simon told me that media agencies weren't sharing that data?"

"It's not a media agency. He has a friend who runs an ad network. This friend is sharing the data."

"Damn."

“No shit,” said Shelby. “You know what this means, Ian.”

There was silence on Ian’s end of the phone.

“Ian?”

“Yeah, I know. And I can see why clients might buy into it. I mean, where’s the downside? If the spot is watched, the client is happy and doesn’t mind paying more. If it’s not watched, they pay less. What the hell’s not to like?”

“That’s what I was thinking.”

“Do you know if Ford’s bought in yet?”

“Nope. That’s the one thing I don’t know.”

“Okay, I’m going to get hold of Kirsten Bogarts, CEO of BBDO here in New York. Let ‘em know what’s up. I’m sure that their contract with Ford prohibits them from pursuing this form of compensation.”

“And if it doesn’t?”

“That’s not something I want to think about this early in the morning.”

Shelby heard the click as Ian hung up.

And goodbye to you, too, she thought.

But Ian Winston had already headed to the bathroom to shave. He had a lot to do. And he was afraid that time was short.

Chapter 15

San Francisco – North Beach – The Washbag

When Nick reached out to Al Rainey, asking if he was free for lunch, Al's response was typical Rainey.

“You buying?”

Al Rainey was one of the most heralded creative guys in advertising. Recently, he had sold his shop for millions and was now, for lack of a better term, retired.

Before that, his work had helped to get Presidents re-elected, car companies launched, and down on their luck, brown-bag wineries, respected. All tough things to ask advertising to do.

But Al's work had a way of doing just that.

Others would study his style and try to copy it. On the surface, it seemed so simple. Yet no one could do it the way Al did. Nick knew that was the secret of creating good stuff. The best work is always just one person's expression. Personal. Has to be that way. If the work is going to stand out, a little bit of the creator gets revealed in the work itself. That's why great advertising feels authentic. It's an honesty, an integrity that certain commercials have that viewers can almost smell. They can certainly feel it, viscerally.

Most people don't get this. Or realize that's what it takes.

Probably why really good advertising is so rare. And the people who actually know how to do it, so few.

Rainey suggested a restaurant in North Beach - The Washington Square Bar and Grill - fondly referred to by the locals as The Washbag. Nick knew that Rainey liked the Washbag, that it was a place he frequented often. The waiters knew to bring him a bourbon when he settled into the window table that was more or less, unofficially, reserved for him.

The Washbag was old school – a restaurant where journalists, newspaper reporters, authors, the true craftsmen – enjoyed hanging out. Not the wannabes, but those who understood that words are really pictures made out of letters. And that a sentence can paint a scene even more vividly than oils on canvas.

There was a quote Nick liked, that someone once said of a novelist, “He can, when he wants to, break your heart with a sentence”.

Many people would think that the most important part of that statement was *break your heart with a sentence*. Wrong. The most important part, at least to other writers was, *he can, when he wants to*.

Right there, that was the definition of talent.

There are 26 letters in the English alphabet. When arranged correctly, they can make people laugh or cry or think. Those who frequented the Washbag knew how to do that - to arrange them correctly. Who understood that to be able to reach someone else with

what they were saying, they first had to reach deep inside themselves to know what was true.

Al simply called them word men and word women.

Not surprising he felt at home here.

He was already at his table, in the window, glass of bourbon more than half gone, when Nick arrived.

“You’re late,” was his only greeting.

“Five minutes. Sorry.”

The waiter came by with another bourbon for Al. Turning towards Nick, he waited with eyebrows raised, his way of non-verbally asking “And you?”

“Red wine,” said Nick.

Al took the second bourbon from the waiter and smiled. “You did say you’re buying, right?”

“Yeah, Al. I got it. And thanks, by the way, for agreeing to meet.”

“As long as you’re buying.”

Nick could only shake his head, knowing that Rainey had more money than God.

Nick had worked at Rainey’s shop for five years, moving up through the ranks until he had become one of a handful of Al’s Executive Creative Directors. This would be the first time he’d seen Rainey since leaving his shop and setting up on his own.

“So, what’s up?” Rainey asked.

“Need to pick your brain about something. I’m a bit confused.”

Rainey's look said he wasn't surprised. He more or less thought every creative person, outside of himself, was a bit confused.

"I went to New York and talked to all the top agencies about changing the way they're compensated so that they can be paid based on how good their work is."

Rainey smiled, no doubt at the absurdity of such a quest.

"It was a simple model – the longer viewers stay watching a commercial, the more the agency makes."

Rainey took a slow sip of his bourbon before speaking. "And how did that work out for you?" It was obviously a rhetorical question.

"They all threw me out. Every last one of them."

"And you're surprised?"

"Well, yeah. I mean what agency wouldn't want to be paid based on the quality of their work?"

"Only about all of 'em. C'mon, Watson, agencies know better than anyone that most of the work they do is shit. And they don't care because they get paid anyways – whether the work is good or bad."

"But," Nick countered, "if the work is good, if the work they do is better than another agency's work, and they're not being paid on that basis, then they're leaving money on the table."

"Might be two, three agencies who know that the work they do is good enough to operate under that model. Jeff and Rich here in town. The Wieden shop in Portland. Maybe there's one or two more, I don't know. But the big agencies in New York? The holding company guys?"

Forget about it. Ain't in their DNA."

Nick looked out the window behind Al. North Beach had certainly changed a lot in ten years. Just like everything else. And seldom for the better.

Al continued. "Most big agency execs are a mixture of ignorance and arrogance. Usually the more ignorant, the more arrogant. If you're asking me, it will be easier to find clients who want to work under a model like that then it will be to find agencies."

"Think I got one."

Al looked up from his bourbon and waited.

"Ford."

"H'mph," said Rainey.

As the waiter came back with Nick's wine and the menus, Al waved them away. "The usual, Robert, for me," he said to the waiter. "And he'll have the cannelloni " he said, pointing to Nick. As Robert left with the menus, Al looked at Nick.

"Ford, huh?"

"Yeah," said Nick. "I'm actually looking for someone to write some spots for me."

"Ford paying you any money?"

"I'm going to ask that they cover expenses as we come up with the scripts. If their brand guys like what we come up with, then, according to their CEO, they want to try the model out for the production of the ideas."

“Who’s writing ‘em?” Rainey asked.

Nick shrugged his shoulders. He realized that he still needed to get back to Ryan Matthews.

“How ‘bout me?” Al asked.

Nick paused, looked at Al and smiled. Obviously, he hadn’t explained the compensation model well enough.

“Al, you do realize that if what you write isn’t interesting enough to involve people in the spot, you’re going to make very little money. If any.”

“Oh, I will not not make money,” Al responded confidently. “In fact, I can’t believe that there’s any creative guy worth his salt that wouldn’t want to work under those parameters. You’re just not going to find any agencies that are willing to do it.”

The food arrived and lunch went on for another two bourbons and two more glasses of red. Nick left knowing that, if someone like Rainey was open to joining the Exiles, others would indeed follow.

The tab came to \$101.75

Best C-note I ever spent, thought Nick, as he started the long walk back to his office.

Chapter 16

New York – 1285 Avenue Of The Americas – BBDO Offices

“Bogarts, Winston here.”

“Ian, what an unexpected surprise. And to what do I owe the pleasure of this call?”

Kirsten Bogarts, the President and CEO of BBDO, the largest advertising agency in the US, was in her office on the Avenue of the Americas. It was 10:00 a.m. Already she was five hours into her day. She liked getting up at 5:00 and heading out for a run, usually a half hour. This would give her time to shower and get into her office by 6:30. Not many started that early. Which is why she did. She always found it amazing how much work one could get done without the phone ringing or texts or emails interrupting you. After 10:00, it seemed like all hell broke loose. Nothing but interruptions and distractions.

And now she just received a call from Omnicom’s Chief Finance Director: something that had never happened before. Which meant to Kirsten that it probably wasn’t a harbinger of good news.

“I think you’ve got some problems with Ford,” Ian Winston said. She had heard that he was never one to couch bad news behind small talk.

Ford had been a coup for BBDO. No one ever thought that Ford would leave J. Walter Thompson, their agency for the last century. When Ford had decided to shift most of their billings over to BBDO, it meant huge bonuses for all involved.

Including the largest for Kirsten herself.

If Ian Winston said there were problems, that was disconcerting. And the fact that he knew about them before her, well, that wouldn't look good at bonus time.

"What... I mean... what might make you say that, Ian?"

"I'm hearing that they're talking to other resources for projects."

Bogarts breathed a little easier. She knew that could be true. Marketers have so many needs these days, no one agency, even one as large as BBDO, can possibly do everything. But outside of Wieden and themselves handling the major creative assignments, and J. Walter hanging on to the media portion of the account, she hadn't heard any rumblings.

As she pulled the number of the Executive Account Director on the Ford business up on her computer, she stalled for time by asking, "May I ask where you heard that from, Ian?"

Ignoring her question, Winston continued. "There's a meeting coming up with Ford and a group called The Creative Exiles. We're going to need some ears in that meeting."

Kirsten quickly typed out a text to the Executive Account Director on Ford asking about future meetings. And if he knew anything about a

group called The Creative Exiles.

Her computer pinged as her text was answered immediately.
Nothing scheduled until next month. And no, know nothing about any group called Exiles.

H'mm, curious.

"I'll tell you what, Ian, let me make some further inquiries here and I'll get back to you."

"Yes. Do. Inquire. But do make it a priority would you, Kirsten? This could be serious."

Bogarts heard the click as Ian Winston hung up without saying goodbye. Not very courteous. But then, she had also heard that about Ian.

She looked at the time. 10:08.

Shit.

And here the day had started so nicely.

Chapter 17

Los Angeles – Santa Monica – Restaurant

“I was asked an interesting question the other day,” Nick said while pouring himself another glass of Pinot Noir from the bottle on the table. He was having dinner with a director he had worked a lot with in the past and the production company’s executive producer. They had a private booth in the back of a Santa Monica restaurant that had once fed the hip crowd. The restaurant had gone through some ups and downs, but was now heading back up. In two months, it would be impossible to get a reservation.

They were already on their second bottle of Pinot.

“Yeah, what was that?” said Richard Booth-Palmer. He was an A-list director. They are the ones who truly are the storytellers – movie-makers – who make a little... okay, a lot of money on the side by doing commercials. They can pick and choose the commercials they want to do and when they want to do them. More often than not, it’s when they need to make some easy money to help pay for their most recent divorce.

But Booth-Palmer was truly one of the good ones. You can tell those that are because, not only do they study the script, but they also study the creator of the script, trying to see inside them, to figure out

what makes them tick, how the words on the page relate to what's in the soul of the person who put them there. When they find it, if they find it, then that's what they try to capture on film. Nick knew it was another reason why there are so few really great commercials – there are so few really great directors who know enough to take the time to understand this.

Fortunately, Richard was one of them.

He believed in the craft of making stories, even 30-second ones. Nick often thought that, if Richard liked the script, he would do it for nothing. Great scripts are that rare in this business. “Advertising is either plumbing or poetry,” he had been known to say. “And the only thing I know about plumbing is that it's full of shit.”

Five times Richard had been nominated as a finalist for the Directors Guild Association (DGA) award as the year's best commercial director. Three times he won it. Each of those times, it was one of Nick's scripts that had helped him to win. They went back a long ways. When Nick had started directing, most of his tricks were ones he had stolen from Richard.

“Do you guys mind if we switch to a Cabernet?” asked James Carlisle, the executive producer, as he emptied the last of the Pinot into his glass. “Somehow this bottle's gone bye-bye and I saw they have a Harlan on the wine list. Just under a thousand. Fucking great price for a Harlan. And I've always wanted to try that Cab.”

Carlisle thought of himself as a wine connoisseur. But then, all

executive producers thought of themselves as wine connoisseurs. Maybe it was the unlimited expense accounts that they had to entertain agencies and clients. It's easy, Nick thought, to consider yourself an expert when you have an unlimited budget.

"What the hell, sure," said Richard, before turning back to Nick. "You said something... you were what again? Asked an interesting question, right?"

"Yes. I was talking to this guy I know – Ted Donald – he's the digital guru for Proctor & Gamble, and he asked me why a second of production costs the same whether anybody watches it or not?"

Carlisle coughed, choking on the little bit of wine he still had in his glass.

"You okay there, James?" asked Richard.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm fine," he said trying to clear his throat. "He said what again exactly? I must not have heard it right."

"He wanted to know why a second of production costs the same whether anybody watches it or not."

Shaking his head, James said, "Yeah, okay, guess I did hear it right. Clients sure can be stupid, can't they?"

Seeing the waiter, he waved him over and pointed to the bottle of Harlan on the wine list. The waiter's eyes opened wide, his smile revealing what his mind had already started calculating: the size of his tip.

"Actually, I thought it was a good, well, at least... a fair question,"

said Nick. “But it got me to thinking. Does anybody really know what a second of production actually costs?”

“Depends on a lot of shit,” said James. “You know that.”

“Yeah, I do,” replied Nick. “So I looked up some averages in regards to the cost to produce a 30-second commercial. According to the 4As, if you’re talking a 30-second, national TV spot, the average cost is around \$380,000.”

“So?” chimed in Richard. The waiter had already returned with the wine and three fresh, deep-bowl Riedel glasses.

“So,” continued Nick, “divide \$380,000 by 30 seconds and you get \$12,666 per second.”

“Again,” said Richard, “so?”

He took a look at the bottle that the waiter had handed him. “That is one fucking gorgeous label. Makes you think that there’s a story in the bottle.” He held out one of the Riedel glasses to the waiter who poured in just a taste. Nick and James both watched him take the first sip.

“Whew, James, you’ve outdone yourself.”

Nick was getting a little perturbed that they seemed more interested in the wine than with what he was trying to explain to them.

“Like I was saying...”

“Yeah, twelve thousand something a second. So?” said James as he eagerly watched the wine be poured into his glass.

“So... what if viewers just watch the first ten seconds?”

Richard looked at James. Then they both looked at Nick with

puzzled expressions.

“Yeah, so what if they do watch only the first ten seconds?” said James. “It’s not our problem. And it shouldn’t make any difference in regards to what we are paid. Shit, this is good,” he said, smiling as he enjoyed his first full sip of the Harlan.

“This guy thought otherwise,” said Nick, “and he wanted to know, if that were the case, if viewers did only watch the first ten seconds, then could he get a discount for the 20 seconds not watched?”

“You’re joking, right?” said James. It was apparent that neither James nor Richard were finding Nick’s story funny.

“You do know, don’t you, that on the digital platform, view duration is measurable,” said Nick. “So clients are going to know if viewers watched five out of 30 or 30 out of 30 seconds.”

Neither James or Richard looked too comfortable with that information. Nick was starting to worry that he might be ruining such an expensive bottle of wine for them.

“And here’s the thing,” he continued. “This guy Ted, he’s of the belief that the more time viewers spend with his brands, the more likely they are to buy his products. So when it comes to commercials, he thinks the longer people stay involved, the better. And the better it is for him, the better he’s willing to make it for us. Financially speaking.”

James finally smiled, as if he had just got the joke. “Pretty funny, Nick. You almost had me there. But you know as well as I do that the cost of producing a commercial covers the production company’s direct

costs, their overhead and their profit. We, and by we I mean any production company, wouldn't be able to sustain a business if they gambled with their direct costs and overhead. Now will you please quit talking nonsense and stop ruining this exquisite wine for me?"

And with that, he poured a bit more into his glass.

Nick paused, considering what James had just said. "What about your profit? I mean, would production companies be willing to put their profit into play – payable only after the commercial ran and dependent on how long viewers were engaged in the spot?"

"Nick, Nick, Nick," said Richard, "you know our hands are tied by the quality of the creative. I mean outside of what you used to send me, most of the scripts I get are shit. I can't blame people for not watching. Hell, I won't even watch some of the stuff I direct."

"Yeah, I know. But say it's not 30 seconds, Richard. Say it's two minutes, three minutes. If it runs online it can be as long as we want. Two, three minutes means you actually have time to tell a story. And let's say it's written by a writer you respect and have worked with in the past. Like me. Or, like Al."

"Rainey? Al Rainey?" asked James. "I thought he was retired."

"No," said Nick. "I talked with him. Yes, he is retired. But, he's also interested."

"H'mph." The grunt was Richard's.

"And let's say that after approving the strategy and buying the script, the client was hands off. They're not at the shoot. Not at the edit.

They run what we create. Exactly the way we create it.”

“Well now I know you’re fucking with us,” said James. “I mean what client would ever do something like that?”

Somehow the bottle of Harlan was already more than half gone.

“This guy said he would,” continued Nick.

“Why?” asked Richard.

Nick rubbed his thumb and forefinger together. “Money. As always. If production companies put their profit into play, then up front costs come down 25%. And if you, Richard, put your day rate into play, if the editor puts his day rate into play, the agency puts their creative fee in play, well, the client is potentially saving about 40% of the cost of production up front. All without sacrificing the actual quality of the production itself.”

“And that 40%, I mean, we get that back if we involve the viewer? Right?” asked Richard.

“Precisely. The longer we get viewers to watch, the more everyone makes on the back-end.”

It was clear that Richard was getting interested. “Richard,” said James, “don’t even go there.”

“And if they watch, say, all two minutes?” asked Richard. “How much would I make if they watch all of it?”

“You’d have the chance to double your day rate.”

Richard let out a low whistle. “And you said that we have complete creative freedom? You can guarantee that?”

“You have to bring back the script they okayed. But you saw the script before accepting the job. As far as casting, music, wardrobe, style of shooting, as far as all the creative elements go, you have final say.”

“Richard... I don’t think...” said James. Richard cut him off.

“And the production company profit – is that somewhere between zero and double too?”

Nick nodded. “The longer people watch the more everyone makes on the back end.”

“James,” said Richard, “this isn’t such a crazy idea. I mean if the script is good and the client stays the fuck away, you know I’m going to create something people want to watch.”

“Basically, what you’re doing is betting on yourself. Your talent. On how good you are at telling stories,” said Nick, seeing that Richard’s interest level was hitting the red zone.

“Fuck, yeah,” said Richard.

“Fuck, no,” said James. “You know the risk we’d be taking?”

“The risk you’d be taking is pretty much the same risk a client takes every time they pony up hundreds of thousands of dollars for a commercial without any guarantee that it will be good enough so that people actually watch it,” replied Nick. “Clients don’t mind paying well for success. What they hate doing is paying full fare for failure.”

“So what they are basically doing is shouldering some of the risk on us?” said James.

“Yep,” said Nick. “But where’s the risk if we’re good at what we

do?”

Richard turned to Nick. He was obviously sold on the idea. “Who else have you talked to about this? I mean have you talked to other production companies?”

Nick nodded.

“They all tell you to get fucked?” asked James, as he emptied the bottle of Harlan into all three of their glasses. Nick couldn’t help but notice that a bit more went into Jame’s glass.

“Those with B- and C- level directors did. Sure. But those with A-level directors, storytellers, filmmakers like Richard here, they were all over it.”

“James, we gotta do this,” said Richard.

“What I’m finding,” continued Nick, “is that any good creative person loves this because it allows them to be paid based on how good they are. I mean, if you’re talented, why not let your talent determine your worth? Right?”

“Damn, right,” said Richard.

James was still shaking his head. “Your \$30,000 day rate ain’t nothing to sneeze at Richard. Why gamble it? You realize that you might make nothing?”

“You know it’s not just about the money, James,” said Richard. “It’s about the creative freedom.”

“Bullshit.” said James. “I mean even Nick said it’s *always* about the money. And my job is to make sure that we make some.” He looked

forlornly at the empty bottle of Harlan. “I mean, at least if we’re going to keep enjoying this sort of thing.”

“Does P&G want you to write something?” asked Richard. “I mean, is this for real?”

“No. Not P&G, not yet.”

Richard actually looked a little disappointed.

“But Ford has.”

“Really? Ford?” asked Richard. “Even better.”

“Yeah, I already had one meeting. Going out to present a proposal to a couple of their brand managers next week.”

“And they’re really interested?”

“So it seems. As is Rainey. He wants to write ‘em.”

Richard started to smile. “Okay, if they’re in, we’re in. Right, James?”

James didn’t answer. He just shook his head sadly. Nick didn’t know if it was because the bottle of Harlan was empty, or because the future of production had just changed.

“You and Rainey better come up with something fucking brilliant,” he said to Nick. “I mean, really fucking brilliant.”

Chapter 18

New York – 375 Hudson Street – Publicis Groupe SA Offices

Simon Foster was concerned.

When he had left the meeting with Ian, Shelby and the others, he realized that he had purposely withheld one point. A somewhat key point.

He knew Nick Watson. Quite well, actually.

They had, in fact, once worked together at the same agency. At that time, Nick had been the so-called *golden child* in the creative department. Everything he came up with seemed to sell. Simon had run the media department and had been just as highly regarded. In fact, Simon was the one who was responsible for raising the profile of the media department within agencies for the entire industry.

In the past, media had always played second fiddle to creative. When it came to presentations, clients looked forward to seeing the “crazy creative guys” do their thing and present their ideas. Media was kept until the end. It was considered the boring part of the presentation. Numbers, not ideas. Costs, not fun. Many thought that this is why media often felt envious of the creatives.

But Simon had a way of making media interesting: some would

even say fun. And because he could convince clients that running 60-second spots was more cost-effective than running 30s, he had become a favorite of the creatives as well. They actually thought that he cared about the creative product.

Ha, thought Simon to himself. The only thing he actually cared about was getting noticed and moving up.

Both had happened.

Soon he had relocated to New York to head up one of the best known and largest media buying companies in the world, making a fortune as media buying became its own entity, unbundled from creative.

Nick, shortly after, had also started his own place. When in San Francisco, Simon would occasionally stop in.

It was on one such visit that Nick had explained to Simon his newest idea. “Think of it like the evolution of ROI,” he had said. “But instead of return on investment, I’m calling it return on involvement.”

Simon liked that. And when he asked Nick if he could use the term, giving Nick credit, of course, Nick had said why not? Simon had a larger industry profile and presence than he did, so Nick thought that this might prove to be a good way of getting his thinking out there.

But Simon soon forgot to credit Nick and return on involvement had become his catchphrase, reinterpreting it so that the involvement aspect referred to what media did rather than creative.

That said, Simon never did forget how Nick had initially intended to monetize the digital data that showed how long viewers actually stayed

involved in the commercial.

Simon already knew what that data would show because his company had the view duration numbers. And what they clearly revealed wasn't good. The majority of online commercials were hardly viewed at all. Or, at least not anywhere close to completion.

When advertisers started to ask for this data, media agencies like Simon's would obfuscate the issue. Say they didn't have it. Or that the data was compiled with a lot of other data and would need to be separated out. Or that it was just one of many mitigating factors.

Bullshit. All of it.

If one number was clear, it was view duration. A viewer opted in with a click of a button, and when interest waned, they opted out with another click of a button. All clicks, both in and out, were recorded and tabulated.

What's more, Simon knew that if there was one overriding factor that affected view duration it was creative. And creative only, no matter how much he and his media colleagues would try to spin it otherwise. Sure, media would take credit when view duration was good. But they always made certain to blame the creative when it wasn't.

A conspiracy?

Depends on how you define the word.

If advertisers kept buying what Simon and his colleagues were selling, then it wasn't so much a conspiracy as salesmanship. And ultimately, isn't that what the advertising business is?

Besides, marketing directors didn't really want to know if their commercials were actually being watched or not. They received a certain amount of money to spend and their job was to spend that money. It was in their own best interest to secure the largest possible budgets. If their bosses knew that the commercials weren't being watched, then their budgets would be cut. And if their budgets got cut, their jobs would soon follow. No, if Simon could somehow spin enough bullshit to justify their spend, then their budgets, and jobs, were secure. If the product didn't sell, hell, there were plenty of other factors to blame that on.

So if it was a conspiracy, at least Simon could sleep well knowing that the advertisers themselves were just as much to blame as the media agencies.

As it was, everyone was making a shitload of money. Why rock the fucking boat?

He remembered a story he had heard about the president of Viacom, once one of the largest media conglomerates in the world. Back in 2003, this president had gone to Google – it had just been starting out then – because he had heard that Google had the data that could show which advertising worked and which advertising didn't. Google had been thinking that it would be smart to only charge advertisers for the advertising that worked. The president of Viacom was beside himself. "I'm selling \$25 billion in advertising a year," he said to the Google boys. "Why would I want anyone to know what works or what doesn't?" And then he had the best line that Simon thought he had heard in a long

time. “You’re fucking with the magic.”

Because that’s basically what it was, wasn’t it? Magic. And where the magic resided was in *not* knowing. Not knowing is what was making them all rich. Simon wasn’t sure who came up with the line “share of voice = share of mind = share of market”. But, hell, that line alone kept making the media industry billions. Basically, it said we don’t know how many are actually watching your commercials, but the more you spend in media, the greater the odds that you will increase your brand’s share of market.

Utter bullshit. But it was impossible to disprove. And man, it kept the dollars flowing.

Now Watson was trying to fuck it up.

When Simon had taken the job with Publicis, Proctor & Gamble had been one of their largest clients. Simon knew that Nick had made some inroads at P&G, becoming friends with the guy who was heading up their digital department, Ted Donald.

It was probably why, during his first month on the job with Publicis, Ted Donald had called and asked if Simon had any data on view duration.

Simon had hesitated before answering. “Well, that’s a complicated question, Ted.”

“Complicated? Why’s that? Either you do or you don’t. And if you do and since you work for us, isn’t that data technically ours? I mean, we’re the ones who actually paid for it, right?”

That's the question that every media agency was hoping to avoid. Who owns the data? Technically, the answer is yes. The data is the clients'. But media agencies have a way of packaging the data with other data and presenting it so the results never look as bad as they actually were.

"Could I have the raw data?" Ted had asked.

Raw data? Shit. That's the one thing they didn't want the client to have.

Simon had hemmed and hawed: delayed, and said he'd get back to Ted. Never did. And if Ted knows Nick...

Damn, this was getting serious. The good news is that Shelby was on it. If anyone could stop Nick it would be her.

But just in case, Simon thought it might be a good time to put out a call to Viktor.

Chapter 19

Detroit – 1 American Road – Main Conference Room

When Sydney Robertson, brand director for the Ford Mustang division, headed towards the meeting, she still wasn't exactly sure what it was for. But walking into the conference room and seeing the brand directors from three of Ford's other divisions – EcoSport, Fusion, F-150 – already there, she knew it was what Kirsten Bogarts from BBDO had been hounding her about. Seeing that Jeffery Bell and Amanda Weeks were also present more or less confirmed that. This was going to be an important meeting. No doubt why Kirsten had been pressing her to report back.

The two people she didn't recognize introduced themselves as Nick Watson and Katherine Thompson, who preferred it if you called her Kat. Sydney hated it when women abbreviated their names. If your name is Katherine, own it. What's with the Kat shit? Meow. No one ever dared call her Syd. At least to her face. She was Sydney. Always.

The Watson dude looked like he was in good shape. Crossfit was her guess. Maybe a cyclist. Or, swimmer. Even if he turned out to be boring, at least he would be pleasant enough to look at for an hour.

But when he started to speak, she quickly realized that boring he

wasn't.

"Today, the average 30-second TV spot costs around \$380,000 to produce," Nick said. That seemed ridiculously low to Sydney. A 30-second, branding commercial for Mustang was usually a half million plus.

"When the viewing audience was 30 million, like with a typical TV buy, that fee could be somewhat justified by the number of people who would see the spot," Nick continued. "But let me ask you, would you pay \$380,000 for a commercial that would only be viewed by 20,000?"

Sydney could see her colleagues all shaking their heads no. Involuntarily, she found herself doing the same. The math wouldn't make sense – that much money to create something that would be seen by so few people.

"You see," Nick continued, "the problem is that the current economics of production can only be justified through large audience size and repeat exposures. Neither of which will be prevalent in the digital space. And, as our ability to target becomes even more exact, diminishing online audience size even further, it will become even more difficult for advertisers to justify the production dollars necessary to create the emotionally compelling stories that are required to build brands. In a nutshell, creating great, original, online brand advertising will become unaffordable for advertisers."

"Why does it have to be original?" asked Amanda. "Why not just repurpose the thirties that we have already created for TV and run them

on the digital platform, like we're doing now?"

"Because it is as you said, the digital platform," answered Nick. "And on the digital platform, the viewer is in control. This means that they can stop watching when they want. If it's a spot they've already seen multiple times on TV, chances are they will stop watching quickly. They have better things to do with their time. Research tells us that 37% of people give up sleep because they feel pressed for time. If they are willing to give up sleep, I have to believe that they'll be willing to give up watching a commercial that they've seen many times already. Wouldn't you agree?"

The brand directors all looked at one another. It was obvious that they did.

"And here's the other thing," Nick continued, "you're going to know when viewers do stop watching because the data will tell you. And then you're in trouble."

"Why's that?" one of the brand directors asked. "Why are we in trouble?"

"Because knowledge can be a very dangerous thing. Guess that's where the saying comes from - ignorance is bliss."

When nobody laughed or smiled, Nick continued.

"The problem is that once you know something you cannot *unknow* it or pretend that it doesn't exist."

"And, then you'll be forced to act on it," said Kat as she stood up, taking over from Nick. Gesturing to the large monitor on the wall, she

brought up a commercial for the Ford F-150 on YouTube. “Here is one of your commercials,” she said. “You press play to watch it. And you press stop to leave it. As Nick was saying, on the digital platform, every keystroke is recorded as data. So you will have the data that tells you how many people press play and when they press stop. In other words, you will know how long people watch this commercial for. By the way, do you know what the average view time for this particular 30-second commercial is?”

Everyone shook their heads. Sydney never even knew such a number existed. And from the looks on the others’ faces, she wasn’t alone.

“Seven and a half seconds,” said Kat. The only reason that she had the data is because David Wilkins had given it to them before the meeting. “Our feeling is that once you know something like this, you will be hard-pressed to still want to pay the full fare for the 22, 23 seconds that aren’t being watched.”

Nick stood back up. “So at its simplest, our model is basically this.” He started to play the Ford F-150 commercial again. At seven seconds, he stopped it. Pointing to the time bar at the bottom of the commercial in which the cursor moves from left to right he said, “When this cursor stops moving, you stop paying.”

A single set of hands started clapping at the end of the table.

Sydney guessed who it was and looking to her right confirmed her suspicions. Jeffery Bell.

Jeffery was smiling and looking at Amanda. But she didn't notice. She was too busy focusing on the brand directors in the room, to see if they were taking this in.

How could they not, thought Sydney. If what she had just seen hit them as hard as it had hit her, they couldn't help but be impressed.

Nick talked for another 30 minutes, walking the group through his Digitally Accountable Operating System that he called DAOS.

Crazily, at least to Sydney, it all made sense. It all held up logically. Advertisers currently justify the cost of production by the number of impressions – the spot will be seen by 30 million, three times each. Production is basically a fixed cost amortized out across those impressions. The more people who have the chance to see it, the more a client is willing to pay on production. The high cost of creating Super Bowl commercials was a good example of that.

But according to Watson, as fragmentation of the online viewing audience continued, as targeting became more precise, something besides impressions was going to be needed to justify the cost of original content. While the *width* of impressions – how many – will be decreasing online, the *depth* of an impression – how long – had the ability to scale. In other words, because online spots can be longer than 15 or 30 seconds, the scaleable, and hence more valuable metric, becomes view duration.

“Impressions have always been the currency of media,” said Nick. “And they should be. But the currency of creative is time spent.”

Damn, Sydney thought. The currency of creative. She liked that. But why she wondered? Why would any agency or creative guy want to take that chance if they didn't have to? Unbeknownst to her, she had asked the question out loud.

"Why?" answered Nick, turning towards Sydney.

"Yes," said Sydney, somewhat sheepishly. "Why do you, as a creative guy, want to put skin in the game? Why risk the very generous fees that we are already paying people like you?"

"You mean the fee that we get paid whether people watch or not?" Nick asked. He looked at Kat who smiled. This was the very same question she herself had asked Nick when she first heard of his thinking.

"To create better work," said Nick.

A guffaw slipped out of the mouth of the brand director of EcoSport. "Yeah, right," he murmured under his breath.

Nick had to smile. "I know, I know, it is a little idealistic sounding, isn't it? But, nonetheless, it's true. And remember, I'm going to ask for something in return, as you said, to put skin in the game."

"Ha, here it comes, the fine print," said the brand director of the F-150, throwing his arms up in the air as he settled back in his seat. "Wasn't it Tom Waits who said the large print giveth and the small print taketh away?"

Ignoring the brand director's Waits reference, Jeffery Bell chimed in. "And what, Nick, is it that you will ask from us?"

"You have to trust me as a creative person and let me do what I do

without interfering. In other words, once you approve the strategy, once you sign off on the script, once you sign the production estimate, you stay out of the process. I'm in control. No telling me who to cast, what music to use, how big your logo should be or even how many times you need to see your logo in the spot. I, in turn, will bring back the script that you signed off on. If you allow me that freedom, if you trust me to do what I do well, then we both win. Your spot will be seen, enjoyed and watched which means it should help you sell more and make more money. And as you make more money, I feel that it is only fair that we do as well. In other words, as you succeed, we succeed. Making us partners in the most important sense of the word: financially."

A silence fell over the room. No one was quite sure how to take this new piece of information. Nick waited ten seconds before continuing. "It used to be all about how much attention the agency gave your brand – you paid for the number of hours they worked on it for. What we're saying is that it should be about how much attention the viewer gives your brand – measured as time spent. Think of it this way, instead of a labor-based system regardless of results, we're offering you a results-based system regardless of labor. I mean, if an advertiser values creative brilliance, then why would they not want to let creative brilliance define value?"

The four brand directors looked at one another. Not one of them seemed willing, or able, to offer up a rebuttal.

After another thirty minutes of questions Nick and Kat stood up,

thanked everyone and left.

The brand directors, along with Jeffery and Amanda remained. “Well,” said Amanda, “interesting, wasn’t it? The question now is, who wants them to do something for their brand?”

When no one answered, Jeffery spoke up. “You know why I like Nick?” he asked. “It was something our founder, Henry Ford, said a long time ago. ‘Those who believe they can and those who believe they can’t, are both right.’ Watson believes that he can do this. And damn it, I think he will.”

“He’s passionate, I agree,” said Sydney. “But I don’t know how BBDO would feel about another agency coming in?”

“It will be a project, a one-off, Sydney,” answered Amanda. “We certainly are allowed to bring in independent contractors for projects, are we not?”

“You know, I think Wieden would be all over this,” said the brand director for Ford Fusion. “Not to have someone else do the work, but they would be more than willing to bet on their own creative talent and be paid this way.”

“And, we can introduce the concept to Wieden,” Jeffery said. “After.”

“After what?” asked Sydney.

“After we try it out and see how we can best make it work for our needs. That’s what this is all about really. Getting in on the ground floor, working out the kinks and then instituting it across all of our agencies.

But first, getting it to work. On our terms.”

All heads were turned to Jeffery who smiled.

“Now, who wants in?”

Chapter 20

New York City – Madison Avenue – Between 45th & 50th

Viktor Holl was a hired pen.

Which is to say that he used adjectives and adverbs rather than bullets to assassinate people. As well as ideas.

For the first 20 years of his career, he had been an account executive at Ogilvy and Mather. There had been only one problem that he saw with that job. He never really liked kissing clients' asses. And if you were going to be a good account exec, you had to know how to pucker up.

If he was being honest, he'd tell you that he had always wanted to be one of the creatives. But he had never been that kind of a writer. Or one of the "cool" ones. So as revenge, he had decided that if he was going to be disparagingly called a "suit", he would only wear the best: Armani; Boss; Brioni.

He rather liked the way that pissed the creatives off. They held account execs in about as high a regard as toe fungus. Viktor always smiled when he walked into a creative meeting wearing \$2,000 on his back. He would see the creatives glare, knowing what they were thinking. An ass-kisser. Being paid more than me. What the hell?

When he had left the agency side of the business to write his own online blog, he had felt he would finally be able to exercise some of his creative talents. The digital platform offered him a soapbox from which to comment on the business. As he quickly found out, people were willing to pay a lot of money to lobby one side over another. Now it was his ass being kissed by those who wanted their point of view to be expressed as if it were an actual piece of reporting.

He had no problem with that.

After all, he had a wardrobe to maintain.

He had to laugh at some of the bullshit he had been paid to peddle. This whole brand conversation thing that the online community wanted clients to buy, that was more or less his. And to think he had pulled the phrase “join the conversation” right out of his backside. How could anyone believe that people were going to spend time talking about brands of hemorrhoid treatment online? Join the conversation. Yeah, right. Fuck me.

But for some reason, the industry bought into it. And clients, well, they loved it. In a way he knew he was still kissing asses, telling advertisers that their brands were so precious that people would actually want to talk about them.

Only now he didn’t have to pucker up in person.

As a blogger, he could hide behind his computer screen. He liked that part. And the platforms liked him because his stories brought in eyeballs. The more eyeballs, the more money for the platforms.

Write more, they said. Write more.

Which he did.

And not just for advertisers. Agency heads would also call him. When they had to get something out, whether it was true or not, Viktor was their man.

Simon Foster being one of them.

When Viktor saw it was Simon calling him on his cell, he gladly picked up.

“Mr Foster, long time no hear. What’s shaking, buddy?”

Simon wanted to tell him about the Exiles, but that could wait until they met in person. All he said was *I need you to take somebody down*.

“Anybody I know?”

“Doubt it. But I’ll fill you in more tomorrow. Best explained in private. Do you have time to come by the office?”

Viktor smiled. “Remember that old song, Simon?”

“Song? What the fuck are you talking about, Victor?”

“If you’ve got the money, honey...”

Simon cut him off. “Yeah, I know it. Three work for you?”

Chapter 21

Outside of San Francisco – Marin County – Muir Woods

Nick enjoyed going to Muir Woods for the simple reason that it was his place to get lost.

Not physically lost.

Mentally lost.

The quiet gave him time to think. And Muir Woods was one of the quietest places in all of Marin County. The secret was to get there early. It was only good early, before the crowds showed up. Or late, after everyone had left.

The way Nick liked to do it was to start out in Mill Valley, a small, quaint town just outside of San Francisco. Get a cup of caffeine at one of the popular coffee spots, he preferred the Depot. Sit outside in the town square. Watch all the soccer moms strolling by in their Lululemon tights, trying to convince themselves that they still looked good and were just as desirable now as they were when they were younger.

Mill Valley was suffering from its own set of changes. Nick had called it home for a short time, back when he was married. When he had been there it had been a genuinely authentic place to live: home to writers, musicians, artists, and once ranked among the 20 best small

towns in all of America. But that had been when you could stroll down the small, quiet, hillside streets and see Bonnie Raitt come walking towards you. Or Jerry Garcia. Or Grace Slick. Acting just like regular folks. To them, it had been home, too.

But that was Mill Valley then. Today, those who used to write lyrics or novels had been replaced by those writing code.

The techies had moved in. The pseudo-rich. Pseudo-creative. People who thought that money automatically gave them taste and talent. Slowly sucking the soul out of the town. The stores people actually needed – hardware stores, book stores, drug stores – had all been replaced by the type of retail establishments that only a tourist would step foot in.

It was sad, thought Nick. Of course, many people might not even notice, not having known what it was once like. Mill Valley was still, after all, somewhat charming. People who came to it for the first time still seemed to love it.

But, to Nick, it wasn't what it had been. And never would be again.

That said, it was still the best place to start a hike to Muir Woods. Up the three flights of the Dipsea steps – 671 in total. Then, follow the trail of the Dipsea Race, the second oldest footrace still going in the United States, a race Nick himself had run 19 times. It wasn't an easy race. The course was an up and down affair – up out of Mill Valley, down into Muir Woods, then up and over Mt Tamalpais before heading back down to the finish at Stinson Beach. The total distance was only

around seven miles. But with all the uphill, it felt like 20. Nick had only finished in the top 200 once.

He took the Dipsea Trail as far as Muir Woods.

To the peace and quiet of being amongst the oldest and tallest trees still alive on the planet.

How could one not feel a sense of awe when walking through the redwoods? Upwards of 260 feet high, the tallest topping out at some 777 feet, with a diameter of 22 feet around. They were giants. Old giants, having been on the earth of over a thousand years.

For Nick, Muir Woods served as a reminder that change can indeed be slow. In a strange way, he could relate it to the advertising business. In fact, in his opinion, a redwood forest and the ad industry had a lot in common.

He would explain why he thought this to anyone who was willing to listen. “If you look closely,” he’d say, “you will notice that a redwood forest is actually comprised of a circle of 15 trees here, another circle of 14 to 15 trees over there. And if you’re really paying attention, you will see that within each circle of trees lies the parent redwood, either dead or dying. But what the parent redwood has done before it started to die is drop its spores, encircling itself. These spores have grown up to become trees themselves, surrounding the dying parent. These individual circles of trees then blend together, becoming the forest.”

He found people would either nod their heads, if they were interested. Or, nod off completely. Most, he found, did the latter.

But to Nick, the parent redwood was, in some ways, similar to the traditional advertising business model. Once majestic, a wonder to behold, unconquerable. It was a model that had supported and nourished an industry worth billions and billions of dollars. That this model can now be dead or dying, was the truth that was being denied by many.

The encouraging thing was that, as the traditional advertising model lay dying, new spores had already sprouted, circling the crumbling parent and creating the future. Nick saw DAOS as one of those spores.

Of course, a lot of people couldn't see the big picture, the change that was happening right in front of them.

Just as most people walking through Muir Woods had a hard time seeing the forest for the trees.

The old saying is that you have to see it to believe it. But for many things, Nick found the opposite to be true. Many things in life have to be believed in order to be seen.

That the ad industry was crumbling was easy for the Exiles to see. But then, they were all believers. Outsiders looking in.

Unfortunately, for the agnostics, the non-believers, denial still had a firm grip. That's what needed to change, thought Nick.

Ford was his chance to turn the doubters into believers.

It was time to pry some fingers loose from around what was.

Chapter 22

San Francisco – SOMA – Nick and Kat’s Office

Two Ford brands decided to participate.

Al Rainey wrote the scripts for Ford EcoSport.

Richard Booth-Palmer was clamoring to direct. He kept texting Nick. *Scripts done yet? Send ‘em when you got ‘em. I’m waiting!*

Ryan Matthews wrote the scripts for Ford Mustang. Nick would be the director, Paul Thackery, his cameraman.

Ryan wasn’t quite sure what he was walking into when he told Nick he was ready to come on board, to become an Exile. Yet to have the chance to work on Ford Mustang, an iconic American brand... that intrigued him. And he was more than happy to walk out of his Chicago office for the last time. Hell, it will take them a week to even know I’m gone, he’d thought.

What he quickly found out was that writing in this new way wasn’t easy. Without a set time like 30 seconds to write to, it was difficult to know when to stop. Or, where.

Rainey found the same. In fact, when Rainey called Nick, the first thing out of his mouth was, “Watson, this is fucking hard.”

“Why’s that, Al?” Nick asked, surprised that someone as skilled a

writer as Rainey would admit to such a thing.

“Because I know that when I stop being interesting, I stop making money. So the question I’m fighting with is how long is too long? We never had to worry about that before. The time was set. You had thirty, or if you were lucky, sixty seconds. Now, it’s as long as you keep it interesting.”

“So when do you know when to stop?” asked Nick.

“I guess when the story is finished,” said Al with a wry chuckle.

“Well, as the writer, you know that better than anyone, right?”

“That’s what I figured,” said Al. “But the trouble with most writers is that they don’t know when their shit stinks. They think everything they write is the second coming of Hemingway. They stop being interesting long before they realize it.”

Nick knew that to be true. He often thought back to Elmore Leonard’s tenth rule of writing – *try to leave out the part that readers tend to skip*. Hard to do if you think you are God’s gift to the page. This new way of doing it would quickly thin out the ranks, eliminating the posers.

“In this format, Al, the commercial needs to be as long as it takes to persuasively communicate the message. Not a word longer. I know that’s different. It’s why a lot of so-called writers won’t be comfortable with it.”

“No shit,” said Rainey. “And the problem with most advertising folks these days is that they seem to have forgotten that persuasion is why the business exists. Anyways, I think I got a couple of things that could

work. One's almost three minutes. The other's closer to four. I'll send them over. See what you think. Choose the one that you think is best."

As he read through the scripts, Nick was blown away. They weren't commercials in the way that most commercials are commercials. They were stories, sure. But what made them different is that they were stories that came out of the essence of what the EcoSport meant to people. Or, could mean to people.

Most commercials these days are 27 seconds of something entertaining with a logo slapped on the end. The problem was that almost any logo could work on the end of most of the spots you saw on TV, almost as though the writers had already had the idea and had just slapped it together with the brand they were asked to work on. The way that Al had crafted these scripts, the only logo that could possibly work in the spot was that of the Ford EcoSport. That's why they were as strong as they were. They were grounded in what was the essence of the brand.

Nick liked them both and sent them down to Richard Booth-Palmer.

"Fuck me," is all he said after reading them. "Why in the hell did Rainey ever retire? Nobody writes like this anymore. I mean this, this is what advertising is supposed to be. It's beyond all the shit that passes for commercials these days. I gotta tell you, if I can't get people to watch these, I should become a fucking plumber. Are you sure we can only do one?"

Ryan Matthews did the same with the two Mustang scripts. Stories

that could only make sense with the Mustang brand being a part of it. While Al's stories made you smile with their wry humor, Ryan's stories used emotion in such a way that they made you crave a Mustang. And all four scripts made you want to take a closer look at the cars.

Kat thought the same. But they had to choose just one for each brand. This took some time. They went back and forth, liking one and then the other. When they finally thought they had it, they brought in Ryan and Al. All agreed on the same ones. Reluctantly, of course.

Kat put the numbers together as to what it would cost to produce Ryan's script. James Carlisle worked with her to do the same for Rainey's script.

Kat knew where production companies hid the fat in their budget. As she whittled it out of Carlisle's numbers, he squawked. He always buried a 20% pad in the estimate. He argued that it gave him leverage. He didn't yet understand that the leverage in this new way of working came through the creative itself.

Booth-Palmer wanted to do Rainey's script so badly that he cut his day rate by a third. "I'll make it on the back end, James, trust me," he told his producer.

Kat kept telling Carlisle to keep the numbers low so that the client wouldn't have second thoughts. "Trust your director and the script to deliver your profit. Remember, once the client signs on, they are hands off. The 20% pad you hide in every estimate is there to help you cover client meddling. There is no client here. No client, no meddling. Which

means no pad needed.”

It took a while before Carlisle got it. And even he was surprised at how low the numbers could go when you didn’t have to factor in client interference and never-ending requests.

But he did have an interesting question.

“What if we produce it and the client decides not to run it? I mean, at all. It never airs. Then we have no chance to get the data to see how much we made or didn’t make.”

Nick had thought about that as well. That is why they had decided that each spot would be presented with two estimates. One that showed what the production would cost with normal mark-ups, pad, etc. And one that showed the cost with 40% of the monies in play. If the client decided not to run the spot, then they would pay them the higher production cost. Clients would have to agree to that up front.

“But if they run it, then they get to see if we actually earned our keep or not,” Nick told James. “Let’s say we go into Ford with the budget for the three-minute Mustang spot, under normal costing procedures coming in at \$500,000,” said Nick. “The other estimate for that same spot, same crew, equipment, etc, in other words, no reduction in production values is 40% less, or \$300,000. Yes, Ford could well pay us the \$200,000 afterwards. Or, if we do a bang-up job, up to \$400,000 additional dollars. That said, which estimate do you think they will sign?”

“You’re saying it’s the smaller one.”

“Yep. Every time. The reason is that, if the entire spot is watched, they see it as a win. So they don’t mind paying us a little more. Clients don’t mind paying well for success.”

“They just hate paying full fare for failure,” smiled Carlisle, echoing what Nick had said at their dinner. “Fuck, Watson, now I’m even starting to talk like you.”

Chapter 23

San Francisco – SOMA – Hotel Zetta

Shelby had just finished her yoga class at the Zetta. Yoga was her way to help clear her head as well as release any tension that she had been unknowingly holding in. This class had proved especially fruitful as it had helped her come to the realization of why she was feeling tense. She had been withholding something from Ian.

While she had been sharing the bottle of Verite La Muse with David Wilkins at Wingtip, he let it slip that a few months earlier he had been called in by the head of digital media – Ted Donald – at Proctor and Gamble. “He’s an old drinking buddy,” Wilkins had said.

What a surprise, Shelby thought. It seems all buddies in advertising are drinking buddies.

Apparently P&G was going to be having a high-level creative meeting with one of their many agencies and Ted Donald asked if Wilkins could join them to represent the ad network side.

Since the company would pay his airfare to Cincinnati, Wilkins had thought why not?

“Why are you telling me this, David?” Shelby asked.

“Ted Donald is also a friend of Nick’s.”

“I see. Go on.”

In attendance from the client side were Ted, the CMO and the CFO – Chief Financial Officer. Across the table, representing the agency, sat the agency president and the executive creative director.

Six people. Intimate, Wilkins had thought. The size a meeting should be if things stand a chance in hell of getting done.

The topic of discussion had centered around two words – compensation and creative. Apparently, the CFO had requested the meeting after reading the recent Association of National Advertisers survey on accountability between agencies and marketers. Or, lack thereof.

Wilkins said that the CFO had led off with what he found to be a surprising statement. “Let’s be clear,” he said to the agency president, “we want nothing more than for your agency to make an enormous amount of money from us.” Wilkins said this had made the president for the agency visibly relax. Usually, meetings regarding compensation start off on a much less positive note.

“That said,” the CFO had continued, “we need you to earn it. Not through the amount of effort that you expend. We truly have no interest in how hard you work or how many people you have working on our accounts. Where our interest lies is in how well your work ends up working for us.”

“Obviously, you’re talking about sales,” the agency president said, in anticipation of the answer.

“No, no we are not,” the CMO interjected. “From here on out, I’m accountable for sales. We’ve decided that to hold any one of our agencies accountable for sales when we have so many agencies on each of our brands seems blatantly unfair.”

Wilkins watched as the agency president smiled. It seemed as though he liked where this was going.

Until the CMO continued: “This is not to say that agencies like yours shouldn’t be held accountable. Rather, it’s to suggest that they should be held accountable only for what they have control over – the creative you create for us. It’s why we’ve taken to calling this new form of working Creative 3.0.

For the first time, the executive creative director looked even remotely interested. “Creative 3.0?” he said. “Excellent. You know, we’ve been meaning to talk to you about gaming.”

Ted shook his head. “I think you’re missing the point. Creative 3.0 isn’t about the type of creative that you do. Rather, it’s about how you’re paid for creating the advertising that you create for us.”

Both the president and executive creative director had looked confused.

“There seems to be two schools of thought floating around,” continued the CMO. “The first is that we continue attempting to aggregate eyeballs in the digital space and keep the old compensation models intact. This is our media agency’s answer, right Ted?”

“Yes, that’s exactly what they’re doing,” said Ted. “But we feel

that's a losing proposition. With improved targeting, online audiences are going to get smaller, not larger."

"Which is why we're exploring the idea of trying out new compensation models," said the CMO, jumping back in. "And we're playing around with the theory that these new models should be based less on how many see our advertising and more on how long they spend with it. Our feeling is that the more time people spend with our brands, the more likely they are to buy them. It's just a theory, granted. But it's one we'd like to experiment with."

"In a nutshell" Ted Donald had said, "we think the worth of an ad should ultimately affect its cost. And we're open to letting the viewer determine its worth."

Silence.

"Obviously," the CMO interjected, "we're only talking about the video messaging that you create and that we run on the digital platform. That's why David is here. He runs a video ad network. David tells us that he has view duration metrics that show how long people watch a commercial for."

The agency president had looked over at David warily. He probably already knew what David already knew. That online commercials weren't being watched for very long. If at all.

"Well, if that's the case, it certainly sounds as if gaming would be the way to go," the ECD had piped in, apparently oblivious to the crux of the conversation taking place. "When people start playing a game,

they usually stay involved for a long, long time.”

David had seen the CFO staring at the executive creative director with a look of impatience. As did the agency president.

“Yes, it could be a game,” Ted had replied. “But most likely not. A lot of agencies have started to believe that presence, putting the product in a game, for instance, is the new persuasion. We’re not among those who think that way. We hired you to create involving stories about our brands that persuade people to consider our products. That’s what you are supposed to be good at - creating persuasive stories. We thought you’d be happy if we paid you based on what you’re supposed to be good at.”

“But, but,” the ECD had stammered, “persuasion isn’t, well, it isn’t exactly easy in 30 seconds. Especially if you want us to sell stuff like, well, you know.

“Like what?” The CMO’s temper had clearly been rising. “Like our products? Like laundry detergent and toothpaste?”

Before the president, or God help them, the ECD spoke again, Ted had intervened.

“The good news is that on the digital platform spots can be longer. You can take as long as you think is necessary in order to persuade someone. Isn’t that right, David?”

Wilkins had nodded.

“So, we could take, like, three to four minutes?” asked the president.

“Absolutely,” replied the CMO. “But do please remember that part of your pay will be contingent on how well you maintain a viewer’s interest for those three to four minutes. I suppose that you already know that the average human’s attention span is eight seconds. Which is one second less than a goldfish.”

“Shit,” the president had said, burying his head in his hands.

“Well gaming, I mean, people play games for much longer than eight seconds,” the creative director had said, as clueless as ever.

The CFO could refrain himself no longer. “We know that this might be a game to you. But trust me, it is not a game to us. Not anymore.”

The agency president gave his creative director a cold stare as he tried to unobtrusively run his forefinger across his throat, indicating that he should just shut the fuck up.

“But if you do maintain interest,” the CMO had interjected, “as we mentioned at the start, you will be paid very well indeed. If you don’t, well... then we receive very little value from your efforts, and the same would prove to be true for you.”

“Ouch,” this from the agency president.

“Welcome to the new world of digital realities,” Ted Donald had said with a smile.

“But... but... this is going to change how we create what we create,” the ECD had stammered.

“That’s the first thing you’ve said today that I think anyone here

agrees with,” the CMO had said. “And we certainly hope so. We certainly hope that by changing the way that you are compensated, it will also change the way that you approach the digital space.”

“Which,” the CFO had added, “we thought would be better than us changing agencies. Wouldn’t you agree?”

“Oh, yes,” the agency president had said. “Oh, yes.”

Wilkins had tried not to laugh out loud at the president’s reaction, but hadn’t been able to help himself. As the agency had got up to leave, he had been able to tell just by looking at them that they had no idea how to create something along the lines of what Proctor & Gamble had been asking for. It just wasn’t in their DNA. But he also knew someone who could.

Which is why he had told Watson about the meeting one night when they were having drinks.

“So,” Shelby asked, “did Watson contact the person you both know there, this Ted Donald guy?”

“He was going to. Then Detroit called. But trust me, Ted Donald is on Nick’s to do list. And vice versa.”

And if Watson gets Detroit, then he has something real to sell, thought Shelby. Shit, this was going from bad to worse. It wasn’t just that the Exiles were selling something new. It was that they were selling what clients were already figuring out for themselves was the future. Watson, it seemed, had the only viable answer that was out there.

Now she had to find an answer for Watson.

Somehow.

Something her mother used to tell her flashed through her mind.
“Always remember, Shelby, honey, the only way you get to see a rainbow is by first weathering a storm.”

Chapter 24

Detroit – 1 American Road – Main Conference Room

They met in the same conference room at Ford headquarters to present the scripts and the production estimates.

Script presentations normally come with hiccups. For some reason, clients like to become writers when presented with scripts, trying to suggest changes. Seldom are their so-called improvements actually that. It is easy to imagine that you are a writer when the script is laid out in front of you, Nick thought. But where the hell were they when the page was blank? Production estimates brought their own set of issues. Seldom did they relate to the cost being too low.

But in this case, for the most part, everything went smoothly.

Ford and Nick had earlier agreed to strategies for both brands and Nick made sure that the scripts they were presenting were on strategy. So no difficulties there.

Where the pushback did start to become problematic was when Nick reminded Ford of their part of the deal. That once they signed the production estimates, they'd have to stay away.

Hands off.

That was the hard part.

“I mean, it’s our money,” one of them argued. “And since it’s our money, we should be there to see how well it’s being spent. That’s just the way it works.”

“Yes, it is your money. And, it used to be *only* your money,” Nick replied. “But our side is now putting skin in the game. We talked about this. How this is about you being able to reduce your financial risk going in. And how the only way for advertisers to reduce their financial risk is for agencies and production companies to increase theirs. That’s why 40% of this estimate that you just signed off on is only paid to us if we deliver. Experience has shown that we can deliver better if we do it, well, I guess the word is unencumbered.”

Amanda Weeks stepped in, surprisingly, to defend Nick. “He’s right,” she said. “We did discuss this.”

“We both want the same thing,” continued Nick, “commercials that people want to watch through to completion. Putting skin in the game is our way of buying your trust. And, yes, granted, it’s also a way for us to buy our creative freedom. But that’s the trade-off. You get accountability. We get creative freedom. I mean, you wouldn’t want to hold us accountable for something that we don’t have complete control over. Would you?”

The hell we wouldn’t, thought Sydney, finding herself having to hold back a smile.

“My responsibility is to not only bring back these scripts as written. But also to bring back finished commercials that I know you are

going to be excited to run. In a nutshell, it comes down to trust.”

Right, thought Sydney. Good luck with that.

Kirsten Bogarts had been hounding Sydney ever since she volunteered the Mustang brand to be part of this so-called “experiment”. Bogarts wanted to know everything about how this new model worked. Sydney had been filling her in.

The model was simple in its execution.

Each second viewed would be worth so much to the Exiles. While they were putting 40% into play up front, this 40% would be paid back to them if half the spot was watched by the majority of those opting in to watch. Half the spot is what they had decided on as the break even point, where the Exiles would be paid what they would have normally charged. Of course, if on average, most of those that started watching watched the whole thing, the Exiles would make double what they normally would.

Surprisingly, Jeffery and Amanda seemed to have no problem paying double for success. What they hated, what all marketers hated, was having to pay for something that didn’t work. Nick reiterated the fact that failure, or lack of interest in commercials, was the norm.

What also surprised Sydney was the length of these commercials.

Three minutes for Mustang. Four for EcoSport.

This Watson guy is digging his own grave, she thought. Three minutes means that to break even, Watson would need to get the majority of viewers to spend ninety seconds with the brand. Not easy to

do. And to get them to spend the full three minutes, well, from her experience, that would be damn near impossible.

Which is why Sydney was looking at it as a win/win for her.

If they do get people to watch all of the commercial, great. That's a win. But even if Watson fails to do that, Ford is still going to have some outstanding footage that they can no doubt recut themselves so they will still have something they're happy with for the money spent.

That was reassuring at least.

As for the production budgets, they were surprising too, as they were much lower than expected. The longer the spot, the more it usually costs to produce. Why wasn't that the case here?

Watson explained that part with great precision.

"In the past," he said, "a production company's mark-up was usually around 25% of the cost of production. It suited them to have the production costs be high as their mark-up would follow suit. But under the DAOS model, the mark-up is in play. How much profit the production company makes is dependent on how involving the spot is. So higher production budgets do not necessarily mean more profit for production companies. It's the story, not the size of the crew or the camera package that gets people involved. I think that the production community has forgotten this in their quest for profits. So that helicopter shot that you were told was mandatory before – not needed anymore. No locations in faraway lands. Instead, all the focus is now on how to tell the most involving story in the most efficient way."

Sydney had to respect that.

And the script for her brand was good. No, it was more than good. Watson told her that what they tried to do was to distill a brand down to its unique essence. And then dramatize that essence on film. If that was what they were going for, then hell, they certainly nailed it.

“The thing is,” said Nick, “as creative people, we create for the medium we’re working in. When we create for broadcast TV, an interruptive medium, we create to interrupt. That’s the first thing the spot needs to do. Get attention through interruption. So, we create the spot in such a way as to achieve that.”

Everyone seemed to be nodding their head. So Nick continued.

“But online, well, online is a different animal. Online, people *choose* to opt in, so we don’t need the spot to be intrusive. The viewer has come to us instead of us intruding on them. So rather than creating to interrupt, we create to intrigue and involve. That’s why these spots don’t look, feel or sound like advertising you see on TV. And that’s why repurposing work that you created for TV – work that was designed to interrupt – doesn’t necessarily work as well online. It comes across as overly aggressive.”

The script she had just signed off on was impressive.

And she could see from the smiling faces of the marketing heads of EcoSport that they were thinking along the same lines.

Goddamn, she thought, as she called Kirsten later that evening with an update. So far, these guys are checking off all the boxes.

Chapter 25

San Francisco – SOMA – Nick and Kat’s Office

The first piece from Viktor Holl was up and running online. A friend of Kat’s saw it and brought it to her attention. After reading it, Kat immediately forward it to Nick.

The premise of the piece was simple. Now that digital data allowed media agencies to be more precise with their targeting practices they could create larger online viewing audiences.

“What the...?” thought Nick.

How could more precise targeting create larger viewing audiences? It was an oxymoron, like “jumbo shrimp,” he thought. He read the piece again.

Viktor Holl’s argument, and one had to be kind to call it an argument, was that by focusing only on the interested, more people would be more inclined to watch the commercials, hypothetically creating a larger *viewing* audience.

Nick had to smile when he realized how Viktor was twisting the meaning of the word *viewing*. Basically, Viktor was arguing that media was the reason that people watched commercials, not the creative.

He also found humor in Viktor's argument that, since the audience would be more inclined to view, media agencies would be justified in charging more per set of eyeballs.

Advertisers will love that, thought Nick. Being charged more for a smaller viewing audience. Media inflation – paying more for less – was already advertisers' biggest gripe. Wouldn't this just exacerbate that?

As for the whole accountability issue – advertisers' second largest concern – Holl's article did nothing to address that. And as long as media agencies refused to share the data that showed how low viewer involvement actually was, no one would be the wiser.

Until Nick gave them all a peek by pulling back the kimono.

He had sealed the deal with David Wilkins to run the Ford spots on his video ad network. There were two reasons why Wilkins had said yes. The first was that Nick had convinced Ford to pay him a fee - equal to 10% of the media buy - for the data. So not only would Wilkins be paid by Ford's media agency for running the commercials, but Nick would also pay Wilkins for delivering the time spent data. The second reason is that Nick had convinced Wilkins of the huge upside.

"When this takes off, it will be an additional revenue stream for you, David," Nick had said. "The media agency is already paying you for placement of the spots. That won't change. But going forward, either the creative agency, or the advertisers themselves, will be paying you as well.

"Yeah, but right now we know what the data says. No one's

watching the damn commercials. If I let the advertisers know that nobody is watching, then won't they just stop advertising? And then my big source of income – media dollars – will just dry up.”

“Here's why I don't think so. If the viewing numbers are bad, media agencies will just blame it on the creative. Which will be good.”

“And why will that be good again?”

“Because that's the whole idea, David, to separate media from creative. Right now, an advertiser's return on investment refers to the overall marketing investment. It doesn't break the return down between media and creative. By creating two different ROI's, one for media and one for creative, each can be accountable for what they bring to the party. That's what this new model does. It gives creative a reason to actually want to be held accountable for their part.”

“And it's my data that does that?”

“Exactly. Impressions aren't going away. The opportunity to engage is still necessary. All we're adding is a way to monetize the engagement per opportunity.”

“If... and it's a big if... if they do engage.”

“Well, there is that.”

“I mean, you really think a lot of people will *intentionally* watch commercials?”

“No, not a lot. People are too busy and time is too precious for a lot of people to go opting into commercials. That's why how long they watch is more important than how many watch in this model.”

“But how long only actually scales if the commercials are worth watching.”

“There is that. But they’ll watch if those creating the commercials understand the most important thing.”

“Which is?”

“They will need to start creating content in context of control. The ad industry is continuing on as if they still control the interaction. That’s why they keep bludgeoning the online user with ads. Once you accept the fact that control has shifted, then you will also accept the fact that you need to create your messaging differently. It must be done in context of who is in control.”

Wilkins had only been able to shake his head. “You, my friend, are going to lose your fuckin’ shirt.”

Nick smiled. “Time will tell.”

“No shit.” Wilkins had laughed at the irony of the statement. “Time *will* indeed tell.”

Chapter 26

Downtown Los Angeles – On Location – The Underpass – West 4th Street & S. Grand

Nick looked around, watching his crew as they set up the next shot. No doubt they were feeling it as well, how much easier it was to shoot a commercial when there wasn't a client around. It was a feeling of freedom that is missing when you need to spend most of the shoot explaining to the client why you're doing what you're doing. Without a client peering over your shoulder you could go all Nike and just do it.

The first time he had experienced such a feeling was back when he had still been just a writer and Richard Booth-Palmer was directing. After the client had signed the production estimate, Nick had asked if certain dates would work with the client's schedule for the filming of the commercial. The client had looked puzzled, asking Nick why he even wanted him to be at the shoot. He had told Nick that he didn't know anything about commercial production and he'd just be in the way. All he asked was for Nick to do one thing.

Make it as great as it could be.

Shit. Who does that?

The result? Nick and Richard had never worked so hard on a

production in their lives. They had been trusted to make something great and it was up to them to live up to it.

That's the thing that trust does - it motivates you to work harder. Which is why Nick always thought of trust as being the first, legal, performance-enhancing drug.

This particular project was a three-commercial shoot in Los Angeles. The last commercial was bid as a 12-hour day. By noon, Richard had said, "I think we got it."

"What do you mean, we got it?" Nick had said. "We've only been shooting for three hours."

"I know," said Richard. "I mean, I can have the actors keep going through the motions, but hell, they won't do it any better than what we've already got."

"But it's only lunch. What do I do with the rest of the day?"

"I'd suggest the beach," Richard had said with a smile.

Now if the client had been there, that never would have happened. They would have had to keep shooting.

As it turned out, Richard had been right. He did have it. Shooting any more would not have made it any better.

That's the magic that's allowed to happen, thought Nick, when you trust your director and your client trusts you.

Once Nick started directing himself it became even more obvious how not having a client on set shortened the approval process. On most shoots, the client had to be happy with the shot before moving on to the

next set-up. As director, Nick may have been happy with the shot 30 minutes previously, but then he'd have to keep doing extra takes until the client had what they thought was good. The thing was, the client's take would never make it in the final edit. All that the extra takes accomplished was wasting 30 minutes of the day. And on a production, time is money. It was just one of the reasons why a production estimate always has a pad hidden in it somewhere. To cover the time wasted with a client trying to act like a director.

And then there were the versions. Sometimes ten different versions of one scene. Just in case, you know.

The rationale would always be along the lines of the CEO might like it this way. We'd better cover that for her. All the clients were really covering were their own asses. Everyone knew it. And it just sucked the soul out of a shoot.

On a recent commercial, Nick had had to shoot a scene in an upstairs bathroom. As the crew set up the shot, Nick had discussed it with the client and had it all approved. The bathroom was small, not the easiest space in which to set up the lights and cameras. This meant that the set-up had taken some time, about an hour. The filming itself only took ten minutes. The client was downstairs, watching closely on the monitor in the video village. When Nick had what he knew he needed, he had broken the set and started moving all the gear downstairs. This took another thirty minutes. As Nick was coming down the stairs behind the last of the crew, he saw the client reviewing the different takes on the

monitor. Seeing Nick on the stairs, the client had turned to him and said “Can we shoot that with a different shirt on the guy?”

Really?

Did they have any idea that it would take an hour to get the gear back up and re-light to shoot it again? For a different shirt? A different shirt that wouldn't make any difference in what the scene was communicating.

Nick had looked at his crew and had seen them shrug their shoulders. They'd had all been there before. A few had already started to turn around, knowing how the game was played and that they would be re-setting up the shot.

It was Nick's call.

So he made it.

“No. We got the shot. It works as it is. Switching out shirts won't change the emotional impact of the scene. If you don't like the shirt, we just won't use the scene.”

And with that, he had gone out to start working on the next set-up.

Had Nick been surprised when, shortly after that, he had lost the account? Not really. He had known there would be a good chance of that when he had chosen to apparently answer the wrong way by saying no.

But hell, sometimes the wrong answer is the only right one.

What clients don't realize, thought Nick, is that a shoot either builds momentum or loses it. When it's free-flowing without

interruptions, it's like jazz. Everyone riffing in their own way to the same rhythm. But when it stops and starts, the way it does when a client needs to have a look at everything, or change a fucking shirt, that rhythm never has a chance to develop.

And it always, always, shows in the final result.

Nick watched as Paul Thackery showed the crew where he wanted the lights for the next shot. "Five minutes," he said.

Nick nodded. This would usually be the time he'd be going over the takes with the client. But to not even have a video village – the area off to the side where the clients sit in director's chairs watching a monitor so that they can see every little thing that happens in the camera, all while drinking their lattes, talking on their cell phones and eating their bagels with smoked salmon, brought to them on a platter from craft service - that was liberating.

Hell, not having a client on set will bring the craft service bill down by 200%.

Paul looked over at Nick and gave him a thumbs-up, indicating that he was ready. Nick smiled. He really liked shooting with Paul. The way they worked together had given Nick a reputation for working fast. Crews came on his sets knowing every day would be a track meet.

On a typical shoot, a crew might do three to five set-ups in an average day. On Nick's, they were doing fifteen to twenty.

It was only possible because of Paul. The first day they worked together, Nick had told him that when it came to lighting and creating

the look, feel and framing of the shot, that was all Paul's responsibility. Nick trusted him and wouldn't interfere. This meant Nick could focus totally on the performance. He even chose not to work off a monitor or review different takes as that would only slow things down. Just from watching the actors, feeling their performance, he knew whether he had what he needed.

Sometimes, it would be on the first take. If Nick was satisfied with the performance, he would give Paul a thumbs-up, indicating he had what he wanted. If Paul also responded with a thumbs-up, indicating the look and lighting were good, they would move on. If one of them was a thumbs-down, for any reason, they would do another take, no questions asked. And while it wasn't always the first take, it was seldom more than five.

If the client was there, they would ask for 15 takes, well, just because. Could you get the actor to smile just a bit more? They don't look happy enough. Could they look maybe even happier than that? Why? Well, you know, just because.

The result? Each take would get progressively worse. And the talent would get more and more frustrated as their performances became more forced, sucking the soul right out of the process.

And wasn't that it, really? Wasn't that what separated the great commercials from all of the others?

Soul.

For Nick it all came down to following his instincts as a director. And letting his crew to do what they do. He didn't see it as his job to tell them how to do theirs.

Once again, it was all about trust.

It reminded him of when a mercurial director, a man who wasn't afraid to speak his mind, was invited to fly from London and address the San Francisco Ad Club. The topic: What were the keys to improving the working relationship between clients and agencies, and agencies and production companies?

The talk sold-out in a heartbeat. Everyone wanted to hear what this guy was going to say. Fireworks were expected. He was known for not speaking highly of either agencies or clients.

He demanded to be flown first class and was given the President's Suite at the Ritz in San Francisco.

The auditorium was packed on the day of the talk. A buzz was in the air. When the director walked out on stage, the auditorium went silent.

He tapped the mic to make sure it was on. And then he said this.

"Trust."

And with that, he turned and walked off the stage. A limo was waiting to take him back to airport. A first class seat took him back to London.

The crowd looked perplexed. They were too stunned to speak. What that hell was that? everyone seemed to be thinking. And then all at

all at once, everyone started talking. And talking. And talking well into the night. Because everyone knew he was right. And no one had a clue how to make it happen.

Nick had the client's trust on this shoot but only because he was putting skin in the game. To get Ford's trust, he had basically had to buy it.

But he knew that if the work turned out good, and if Ford was impressed, then trust would be a little more forthcoming next time.

Baby steps, Nick thought. Baby steps.

He watched as the actors took their marks.

"Ready when you are, Nick," said Paul Thackery from behind the camera.

"Okay," Nick said to his assistant director. "Roll camera."

As the cameras started up, Nick turned to the actors and softly smiled.

"Alright," he said. "Let's have some fun. Go when you're ready."

Chapter 27

New York City – 437 Madison Avenue – Omnicom Group Headquarters

Ian had asked Kirsten Bogarts to see if Sydney Robertson would agree to fly to New York to meet with him at Omnicom headquarters. He had also invited Simon Foster, unusual to say the least being that Simon was from a rival holding company.

Simon arrived first. “I take it this is about our friend, Nick Watson?” he said, accepting the cup of coffee handed to him by Ian.

“I’m afraid that it could be even worse than we imagined,” said Ian.

“And you say that why?”

“Watson is talking to Ford.”

Before Simon could respond, Kirsten came into the room, followed by Sydney.

“Ah, Kirsten, thank you so much for coming by. I would like to introduce you to Simon Foster. As you probably know, Simon’s with Publicis.”

Kristen paused. “Yes, I know Simon. I mean, I think that everyone knows Simon. But Publicis, Ian, Publicis is...”

“A competitor, yes. I understand. But I think that what we’re

dealing with here will eventually involve all the holding companies. Simon's already been briefed so he knows the lay of the land. I thought it wise that he, along with us, should find out even more."

"Whatever you think, Ian, of course," said Kirsten. She turned to Sydney. By the way, this is Sydney Robertson, the brand director heading up the Mustang division at Ford."

"Thank you for flying all the way in from Detroit, Sydney," said Ian, shaking her hand. "We are all very glad you're here."

As they took their seats around the conference room table, Ian couldn't help but notice that Kirsten looked as if she hadn't slept for a week.

"It's that bad, is it Kirsten?"

Kirsten smiled feebly. "Define bad," she said. "Sydney was in the meetings with Watson, so I'm going to let her explain everything. Thank God, you have coffee."

As Kirsten poured herself a cup, Sydney took out her notes, laying them in front of her, not sure exactly where to begin. She was a little nervous as she normally didn't interact with holding company bigwigs like Ian Winston and Simon Foster. Noticing her discomfort, Ian smiled.

"Relax, Sydney," he said. "It's just a meeting. But before you get started, I do need to ask you a question. Why exactly are you doing this?"

Sydney and Kirsten looked at one another, surprised at Ian's inquiry. "And by *this*, you mean what exactly, Ian?" asked Kirsten.

“This. Telling us what this Watson character is up to. I mean what he’s doing could end up helping Ford and hurting us. So why is she sharing what she knows with us?”

“I see,” said Kirsten. Looking at Sydney, she nodded. “Go ahead, Sydney. Tell him.”

“Well, the truth is that Kirsten and I go way back. University days,” said Sydney. “She’s always been there for me. In fact, she’s probably the primary reason I have my current position at Ford.”

“I see,” said Ian. “So you look at this – this helping us here today – as what? Some sort of payback?”

“I suppose men might call it that,” said Sydney. “But no. To me it’s more of a way to say thank-you.”

Sydney smiled at Kirsten as Ian looked over at Simon. “Makes sense. Simon, you okay with it?”

Simon nodded. “Yeah, sounds reasonable. I’m good.”

“Okay, then,” said Ian, obviously more relaxed now. “If I may suggest, it might be best to start with what this DAOS thing is that no one seems to be able to fully explain. As far as we know, or at least we think we know, it’s some sort of new creative compensation model.”

Kirsten interrupted. “That’s what I also thought, Ian, until Sydney told me it’s not just about creative compensation, but media as well.”

Ian looked at Simon. He raised his eyes as if to say “told you it was bad”. “Perhaps we should let Sydney explain, Kirsten.”

“Of course, Ian,” said Kirsten. “Sydney.”

Clearing her throat, Sydney began. “Okay, yes, DAOS. As I think you know, it’s an acronym that stands for Digitally Accountable Operating System. Watson said he called it that because it’s a system that makes both creative and media operate accountably on the digital platform.”

“Accountable media,” said Simon. “That’s interesting. Tell me, how exactly does Watson expect to achieve that?”

“Of course, we’ll find out more after we start to run the spots that they’re creating for us,” said Sydney. “But...”

She paused as she started to look for a certain piece of paper in her notes. Finding it, she looked up and continued.

“Sorry, I just wanted to make sure I got it right. So this is the the way that Watson explained it.” She read from the paper. “Right now the entire industry is trying to aggregate small numbers online to make them appear large. Why? Because media agencies are currently being paid by the pound. His words, but I think what he meant was...”

“We know what he means, Sydney,” interrupted Ian. “And, he’s not wrong, is he Simon?”

Ignoring Ian, Simon looked at Sydney. “I’m still interested in how he said this DAOS would accomplish this so-called accountability.”

“Watson says it’s only when size is important to profit that aggregation is an issue. He thinks the advertising business should make profit dependent on talent, not size. So instead of trying to make small numbers big, what DAOS does is make small numbers valuable.”

“Valuable? Valuable for whom exactly?” asked Simon.

“Well, that’s just it. Valuable for everyone. Platform operators. Ad networks. Online publishers. Creative agencies. And, even, yes, media agencies, Mr. Foster.”

“And he says that why?” asked Simon.

“His argument, and I must say, he can make it all sound quite convincing, is that the digital platform’s true strength isn’t size. It’s time. Instead of just focusing on how many viewers are exposed to a message, we should also be focusing on how long they’re involved in the message for.”

“We’ll if he’s saying reach is unimportant, we certainly know how to prove him wrong on that,” said Simon, sounding a bit more confident.

Sydney smiled as she felt her own confidence growing. “He’s not saying that reach is unimportant, Mr Foster. At least, on the TV platform. We all know that TV’s reason for being is not to deliver programs to viewers, but rather to deliver viewers to advertisers. The more the merrier. That’s reach. By the way, he’s not trying to stop or change how media agencies get paid for buying TV advertising. He says we still need TV to deliver short messages to large audiences. But Watson believes the online platform is different. Instead of delivering viewers to advertisers, online is best used to deliver advertisers to viewers. Instead of short messages to large audiences, the best use of online is to deliver long messages to small audiences.”

“You did say delivering advertisers to viewers, right?” asked Ian.

“Kirsten, are you understanding this?”

“I was as confused as you at first. But Sydney’s not done. I think it will make more sense in a moment. Syd.”

Sydney flinched. She would need to remind Kirsten that while she may have been Syd at University, she was now Sydney.

“Yes, the crux of Watson’s argument is that everyone in media is trying to stop viewers from gaining control online. If viewers are in control we assume that they will skip advertising. So we do forced views, automatic plays, pop ups, pop unders, insert ads into every available orifice online so that the number of impressions remains high.”

She could see both Ian and Simon looking at her as if to say “Yeah, so?”

“What Watson believes is that the more we try to force people to see our ads, the less effective the online platform becomes. While in the analog world our job is to find ways to create control over the consumer, in the digital world, the successful ones will be those that understand how best to relinquish control. In other words, the key isn’t in trying to stop people from gaining control online. The key is in knowing how to make money once they do.”

“And his suggestion?” asked Ian.

“To let people have complete control over how, and if, they view ads. The way he put it is, wait, let me get this right.”

Looking through her remaining notes she found the sheet of paper that she was looking for.

“The only way to regain control is to give the viewer complete control.”

Simon started to smile. “If you love them set them free, yeah right. Pretty new-agey bullshit if you ask me,” he said. “But then, he is from San Francisco.”

“My reaction exactly,” said Kirsten. “At first.”

Simon stopped smiling.

“There’s more, Sydney?” asked Ian.

She nodded.

“He said online media buying should work like a mutual fund for advertisers. But rather than buying shares in stocks from an exchange, an advertiser’s investment would buy seconds in DAOS.

Ian and Simon were both locked in now, paying close attention.

“But we buy 30 seconds now,” said Simon, somewhat confused.

“No,” said Sydney. “What you are buying now are impressions. If it’s a \$20 CPM, each impression costs you two cents. They are eyeballs that you are buying, not individual seconds. You’re buying audience. He wants to buy time.”

“By buying individual seconds?” said Simon.

“Right.”

“At how much a second?”

“Twenty to fifty bucks?”

Simon and Ian both both stared at Sydney. And then, both started to laugh. “Good luck with that,” said Ian.

“Hear her out,” said Kirsten, who nodded at Sydney to continue.

“At \$20 a second, a \$100,000 investment in DAOS gives the advertiser 5,000 seconds to invest on the digital platform. These seconds are then invested across a portfolio of publishers and ad formats to see which delivers the best ROI – return on involvement – in the creative.”

“So at \$20 a second, it would cost the client \$600 to get the data that tells how many seconds of a 30-second spot were actually watched?” asked Simon, a bit incredulously.

“That’s pretty much it,” said Sydney.

“And this \$100,000 investment for the time spent data is over and above the cost of buying impressions?” asked Simon.

“That’s correct,” said Sydney.

“And if those seconds aren’t watched, then advertisers lose their incentive to spend millions in media on that spot going forward,” said Simon. “Isn’t that also correct?”

“Projecting out, yeah, I guess,” said Sydney.

“Which is why I think we’re still okay,” continued Simon. “I mean, media agencies aren’t going to sell data that says commercials aren’t being watched, which is what the data will say. They’d be cutting their own throats. And most ad networks, I have to believe, would be of the same mindset.”

“That’s what I thought as well,” said Ian. “But Shelby told me that apparently Watson has a friend who doesn’t mind his throat being sliced. He’s going to run these spots on his network and supply the data. Isn’t

that right, Sydney?”

“It is.”

“And if it works?” asked Simon, looking over at Ian.

“Then I’m afraid we’re fucked,” replied Ian.

Silence came over the room making the rhythmic tapping of Ian’s fingers on the table sound that much louder. He looked over at Simon.

“What are you thinking?”

“I think we have some calls to make.”

“Shelby?” asked Ian.

“Yeah, you make that one,” said Simon.

“And you?” asked Ian.

“Never mind. Just a guy. Don’t think you know him. Viktor Holl?”

Chapter 28

Los Angeles – On Location – Production Trailer

There was usually a bottle of bourbon at the end of any shoot Nick was directing. Paul Thackery brought it this time. Kat, Ryan and Nick were already in the production trailer when Paul walked in and sat down to join them.

“Figured it was my turn,” he said, holding up the bottle with a sly smile.

Kat already had four glasses in front of her. Standing up to take the bottle from Paul, Nick poured three fingers into each glass. “Well, that was different,” he said as he sat back down. They all knew what he meant. This wasn’t something any of them were familiar with.

Kat handed them each a glass. “To you guys,” she said.

“To all of us,” they replied in return.

Exhaustion haunted their faces as they sipped slowly. Two non-stop 14-hour days will do that to you. Ryan was the first to break the silence.

“You know what I found weird? Not having account people to report to.”

“Amen,” said Kat. “No clients, no need for suits to handle the clients.”

Nick smiled. “Maybe what we’ve done is replaced account folks with accountability.”

Ryan nodded. “Think we should have made that trade a long time ago.”

“To me,” said Paul, “this felt more like shooting a movie than any commercial we’ve done together.”

The others all looked at him.

“I mean, all our focus was on the story and the performance, rather than constantly looking over our shoulders, making sure that the client is happy.”

Kat was nodding her head in agreement. “I still can’t believe how much we got done in two days. If the client had been here, that would have been a four-day shoot.”

Ryan held up five fingers.

“Yeah, maybe,” smiled Kat.

Seeing that all of their glasses were emptying quickly, Nick repeated the honors, pouring three more fingers into each. He liked this ritual, sharing a bottle after a shoot with the people he trusted, if not with his life, then at least his reputation. But it did feel different this time.

At the end of most shoots, while everyone felt that they had done the best they could, they also all felt that it could have been better. If they were feeling that after this shoot, the finger would be pointing straight back at them. No one had interfered with what they were doing or how they were doing it. No one had interrupted the flow. If it turned out to

be a failure, the blame would sit squarely on their shoulders.

“You know something, Nick,” murmured Kat. “I have to apologize.” Everyone turned to see where this was headed. Kat wasn’t known to apologize often.

“When you first explained this wacky theory of yours, I thought it was completely nuts. Commercial production is commercial production, it is what it is, never to be changed. What we just did here, this isn’t what it once was. I don’t know what the hell it is yet, but I do know that it’s not the way the world makes advertising.”

“Like I said, it’s as close to movie-making for a brand that I’ve ever been involved with,” added Thackery. “I was even starting to lens it differently.”

“Funny you should say that,” said Nick. “When I was writing scripts, this was before I started directing my own stuff, I would send my scripts out to be bid on by directors. I always sent my scripts to famous film directors who, you know, would occasionally shoot commercials on the side. And the one question that I would always ask them is why commercials never look or feel like films? Even when you use a film director. Even when you use the same crews that are used on the movies. Even when you use all the same equipment. There is just something visceral about a commercial: when you see it on TV you know immediately it isn’t a film.”

“I can answer that, but first,” Paul Thackery held up his yet again empty glass, “shall we?”

Kat emptied most of what was left in the bottle equally between the glasses.

“Always liked you, Kat,” said Thackery, before continuing.

“When you’re on a film, all you can think about is the story. How do I make my part - lighting, lenses, the way I move the camera - how does that make the story better? Everyone involved is doing the same thing in their own area of expertise, thinking the same way. About making the story better. In other words, we approach the film as craftsmen. When you shoot a commercial, your approach is very different. In fact your mindset is different going in. You figure that the client will never let you push the envelope and make it as good as it can possibly fucking be. So you don’t approach the job as a craftsman. Instead you look at it like, I don’t know, a technician... or... or a supplier. To be honest, when you’re shooting commercials, you’re basically just there to make a paycheck.”

“And that shows in the finished product?” asked Kat.

“Impossible for it not to,” replied Paul.

Ryan was nodding in agreement. “I had a similar sort of discussion with a musician friend of mine. We were in his studio, talking about the difference between recording a three-minute song for an album and a 30-second jingle. He told me he hires brilliant musicians to play on the commercial jingle, the same ones he hires for the album, but they seldom really get the chance to be brilliant on the commercial. The guitarist, for example might have four bars to play. Eight seconds. How much genius

can he bring to it if he only has eight seconds to play? But have that guitarist be part of a three-minute song and he approaches it very differently, giving more of himself to it, because, well, hell, there's room for more of himself to come through."

"In one you encourage the creative conscience to come out and play," said Kat. "And in the other, you don't. I mean, it's like 'it don't mean a thing if it ain't got that swing', right?"

Perhaps it was the bourbon, but all three looked over at Kat with smiles on their faces. Nick raised his glass in her direction. "Kat, have I told you recently that I happen to think you're brilliant."

"Nope. Not recently. Not ever, actually, come to think of it. But even if you did, once, as they say, is never enough."

Chapter 29

New York City – Upper East Side – Viktor Holl’s Apartment

The piece ran online and within a half hour had been shared by over half a million.

That made Viktor Holl smile. To get that many shares in that short of time meant that he had struck a nerve. A nerve that he planned to keep mining as long as he could.

At first, he couldn’t decide if he should mention Nick Watson’s name or not. But after talking to Simon, and being filled in on his most recent meeting at Ian’s office with Sydney Robertson, they had come to the same conclusion. The Exiles needed to be stopped.

And that started with stopping Watson.

If Viktor could turn Nick into a pariah through his blog, then why not? It was the fastest way to discourage clients from wanting to work with him.

The argument Viktor was making was simple as it was the one already believed by most in the business.

It’s utter fantasy to think that the same viewers who desperately try to avoid commercials when they watch TV are now going to

voluntarily click-in to watch them online. Those pushing this sort of theory (i.e. Nick Watson and his band of so-called Creative Exiles) and trying to sell this claptrap to marketers are only giving the advertising profession an even worse reputation that it presently holds – which currently sits somewhere below undertakers and used car salesmen. Even politicians, who we all know are having a hard time holding their heads high these days, even politicians can at least hold them higher than advertising professionals. That said, we all know that advertising works. What we don't know exactly is how. Which makes advertising kind of like religion in that sense. Because if believing in a higher power can save your soul, it's the belief in the power of advertising that can save your brand.

Compared to the hundreds of thousands of likes that the article received, the 131 dislikes seemed inconsequential.

Simon's text to Viktor said it best. *Well done, Viktor. You've got some balls equating advertising with religion, but good on you. That should keep the advertisers' dollars flowing our way.*

Indeed it should, thought Viktor.

No, we can't tell you how this advertising shit works. Just that it does. And by the way, guess what? It will work even better with another \$20 million put behind your media spend.

Chapter 30

Los Angeles – Santa Monica – Editing Suite

E diting usually turns out to be a mother-loving bitch.
So many possible options.

So many different ways in which a commercial can be cut. Unless of course, the director is also the script-writer and is involved in the edit. Then things are a lot easier.

At least that's how it worked for Nick. He was constantly editing in his head as he was directing, allowing himself the freedom to alter the way he set up his shots so that the scenes would more seamlessly cut together. There were downsides to working this way. It eliminated possible edit options – in effect, leaving no safety net – making it a more dangerous way to work. And damn near impossible if the director wasn't part of the edit.

The fact is, most of the time directors don't get the chance to edit what they shoot. Instead, the agency takes the footage and goes off and does the edit on their own. Since the agency proceeds without the insights of the director, they often don't know what the director was actually thinking when a certain scene was shot in a certain way.

Do they even bother to ask? Usually not. As for the director, the chances are he or she is unavailable anyways, already off shooting

another commercial. The money for directors is in the shooting. Not the editing.

It's one of the reasons why agencies ask directors to film so many variations of a scene. They need alternatives so that they will have some flexibility in the edit.

To Nick's way of thinking it was the digital editing systems – Avid and Premiere – that help to make this *version hell* a possibility. Back in the day, when he used to cut on a Steenbeck or K-E-M, as it was also called, the editing equipment just wasn't conducive to doing multiple versions. The editor worked with the actual film, rocking it back and forth on the editing table, making edits by cutting the film itself, removing a section that he wanted out, and then splicing the remaining pieces of film back together. With actual tape.

That's why a cut is called a cut. It entailed a physical cutting of the film. The piece edited out would then be put in a bin with all the other pieces that had already been cut out, all hanging from different hooks. The sound tape had to be physically cut as well to match with the edits to the film.

It had been a slow, tactile process that took time.

And it was this time that had actually made the edits better.

Nick always thought that the magic happened when the editor physically turned away from the monitor to put pieces of film into the bin. The mind would need to switch away from editing to focus on hanging the film on the proper hook. Whenever the *aha* moment would

happened in an edit, it would happen then – when the editor had been either hanging up a piece of film or retrieving one from the bin.

Not surprising, thought Nick. After all, that's the way the mind works, requiring a moment to relax, to let its guard down so to speak, to stop focusing, so that genius has the chance to slip in.

Digital fucked all of that up.

With digital editing systems the editor's focus never leaves the monitor. No film needs to be hung up – so there are no distractions from the screen in front of them. Since the mind doesn't have a chance to relax, the aha moment doesn't have the opportunity to slip in.

The emphasis with digital editing is on speed. And because everything can be done faster, agencies use that time to do more versions.

The result?

Instead of everyone's attention being focused on turning out the best single spot, the focus is now on turning out ten slightly different spots. All of them inferior to one good one.

With the loss of flatbed editing tables the advertising business had lost the art of great storytelling. At least that's how Nick saw it.

His hope was that the way the Exiles worked would start to bring that art back. Having your income based on how long you kept the viewer's attention meant all of your focus was on one single, great story. Not on a handful of inferior ones.

Of course, any new way of working also comes with new complications. In this instance, the new devil in the details was how long

is long enough?

Is that shot in there because it actually adds to the communication, driving the story forward? Or, is it just there to massage the director's ego?

Sure, those questions had been asked before in editing suites. But now money would be directly made or lost because of the answers. Making the spot too long could prove to be just as costly as making it too short.

The editor Nick chose to work with on this project had also joined the Exiles, opting to put skin in the game – risking her company's mark-up as well as her day rate.

“Kind of focuses your attention, that, doesn't it?” she said to Nick with a wry smile.

It would become even more difficult when Paul Thackery stopped in to watch. Nick wanted Paul there to help with the look of the film, getting the color just so. But the problem with Paul, as with most DP's, is that they often judge shots based on aesthetics rather than story.

“What about that shot we did at sunset?” Paul would ask. “That was a beauty. You can't leave that out, Nick.”

And when they'd cut it in to take a look, Paul would exclaim, “It's bloody beautiful. Just look at the way the sun glimmers off the side of that building. That was a tough shot to get. Yep, that works.”

“Paul,” Nick would interrupt. “It's all about communication. This isn't about highlighting your talents as a DP. It's about highlighting the

brand.”

“Yeah, I know, mate, but...” and the argument would continue.

Nick found that most creative people in the business think of themselves as artists. And they are. But they can’t forget that they’re also salesmen.

Sure, the business is about selling through sight, sound and motion, through words and pictures. And the goal is to try and be as artistic as possible in the way that salesmanship is crafted.

But in the end, what it all comes down to is whether a commercial made a viewer feel different or better about a brand. If it does that, and if it does it well, then those who do it are still artists. Aren’t they?

To Nick, the answer was yes.

Feeling his phone start to vibrate in his pocket, he pulled it out and looked at the screen.

H’mph. Ted Donald. Interesting.

Chapter 31

San Francisco – The Mission – Wilkins’ Condominium

““What you’re asking me to do is to sabotage a friend,” said David Wilkins. “You know, you’ve sure got a lot of balls for a woman.”

Shelby found that a bit ironic since she was lying next to him, naked, in his bed.

“C’m on now, David,” she said laughing. “The way that you’ve been exploring this body, I think you’ve figured out that balls are the one thing I don’t have.”

Wilkins couldn’t help but laugh as well. “Okay, okay, you’ve got a point.” As he rolled over to embrace her once again, she squirmed out of his grasp. “And by the way, I don’t think sabotage is the appropriate word. I’m gonna go pee.”

As she headed to the bathroom, she had to wonder how it had come to this, her decision to sleep with Wilkins. It had been her call. She knew that. And while she made it with some trepidation, she also knew that Ian was desperate. This Watson character was truly fucking with the magic. And because she was being paid big bucks to stop him, she had resorted to what she considered to be Plan B.

Fucking Wilkins.

Would others judge her? Probably. Did she care? Not really. The only person's judgement she really respected was her own. And in her mind it wasn't sex, or intimacy, or love, or anything like that. No, in her mind it was purely business. A transaction. A negotiation. But instead of happening over a conference room table, the setting was a bed.

In which, to her surprise, Wilkins seemed to know how to handle himself quite well, thank you very much.

C'mon, Porter, grow up, she said to herself in the bathroom mirror. If business isn't screwing over the other guy, then what the fuck is it?

She had come up with an idea which to her was quite brilliant in its simplicity. She would convince Wilkins to adjust the numbers on the Ford work that Nick was going to run on his video ad network. If Wilkins reported them as being lower than they actually were, then Watson would have done all of this work for nothing. Ford would, in turn, consider the whole exercise to be a failure and hopefully, forget this whole notion of accountable creative.

Of course, Wilkins hesitated. At first. Until Shelby asked him a simple question. "Do you really think an industry as large as the ad biz is going to let two nobodies out in San Francisco fuck the entire thing up? C'mon, David. Stop being so naive. I mean, hell, your biggest risk is that you are actually successful. Because if you are, there will be no end to the shit you are going to face. Trust me. I know these guys."

That kind of got his attention.

As Shelby crawled back into bed, David held up his thumb and forefinger, rubbing them together. “So how much are we talking about again?”

Shelby smiled. It was true. Everyone has a price.

“He’s going to pay you twenty bucks a second, right?”

“That’s what he said, yeah.”

“Per insertion. Per publisher.”

“Yeah, right.”

“Until he’s spent what, a hundred thousand with you?”

“Yeah. So?”

“So what I’m able to offer you is five thousand a second. Not per insertion. But one time. Five thousand dollars per second.”

“For each spot?” Wilkins asked.

“Right. For each spot,” she said.

Wilkins did the math again in his head. Five thousand bucks a second for a three-minute spot – 180 seconds – would be \$900,000. A four-minute spot, 240 seconds, would be \$1.2 million.

Total, a little over two million. Versus the hundred grand Watkins was offering.

“Guaranteed money?” asked David.

“You know it, babe,” replied Shelby.

There was only one problem. Shelby was bluffing. She hadn’t run any figures by Ian Winston yet. The money she was offering Wilkins

hadn't been approved. What she was betting on was the holding companies' lack of options. They needed Watson 'fixed'. And when it came to 'fixing' things, Shelby knew that there was only thing that was sexier than money.

Stroking David's chest as he lay next to her, she asked, "Do you remember the night we went to the Wingtip Club and enjoyed that very fine bottle of Verite La Muse?"

"The first night I met you? How could I forget? You completely captivated me."

"Yeah. Well, the question of reciprocation came up that night."

"I remember."

"And what did you say?"

"I said I was good at it."

"That's right," said Shelby as she slowly started to crawl back on top of him. Pinning his arms down by his sides, she smiled. "And the way I see it, when I'm done doing what I'm about to do to you, you're going to be needing to reciprocate me big time."

Chapter 32

Cincinnati – 1 Proctor & Gamble Plaza – P&G Headquarters

Ted Donald smiled as he hung up the phone.

His talk with Nick had been informative. Ted had mentioned that he was having a hard time getting viewing time data from his media agency. Wanted to know if Nick had a way to get it.

Nick had said he did. But what he had said after that is what had most intrigued Ted: that he was doing a project with Ford. And that, as part of the project, he would not only be getting the view duration data, but monetizing it.

“It’s what you and I have been talking about, Ted. Making creative accountable. I think P&G would find it interesting.”

“As a matter of fact, your timing couldn’t be better, Nick. We were recently talking to one of our agencies about that very thing. Ran some of the thinking you and I have been talking about – paying based on viewer time spent. From the looks on their faces, they didn’t have a clue as to what we wanted them to do. Or any idea as to how to do it.”

Nick admitted that he wasn’t surprised.

“So why don’t we do this?” said Nick. “I’m flying out to Detroit next week to show Ford the finished spots. I could swing by Cincinnati

on the return.”

Ted took a look at his calendar. The following week looked good. But he wanted to run it by some other people first.

“Let me get back to you,” he told Nick. “Need to get some okays on this end. But, yes. I think it’s time to try and make a meeting happen.”

Chapter 33

Detroit – 1 American Road – Main Conference Room

Everyone was already gathered in the conference room for Nick's big presentation when Sydney made her appearance.

She apologized for being late.

She also found that she was a little more on edge than she normally would be for a showing of finished commercials. Being on set, or on location during the shoot, meant that she would see what was being filmed so she could pretty much visualize what the finished spots were going to look like. Seldom was she far off.

But this... this was completely new territory. Not being part of the production meant that she would be seeing the finished spots just as a consumer would. She couldn't ask about a certain shot that hadn't been used because she didn't even know what the different shots were.

Which is just what Nick was explaining to everyone when she walked in and sat down.

"You will be seeing these commercials for the first time just as the viewer will. Now remember, this isn't a viewer whose attention is elsewhere. We didn't just interrupt his or her program so that right now all they're thinking about is when will this damn commercial be over. No,

this is a consumer who has chosen, for whatever reason, to find out more about either the EcoSport or the Mustang. They have made the conscious decision to spend some time with it by voluntarily clicking play. So these aren't forced views of an intrusive nature. This is about them coming to us. Which means that we are now on their time. They are no longer on ours."

"Could you tell us again why that is important?" asked the brand manager for EcoSport.

Nick smiled. "Yes. It all comes down to control and who has it. When you, the advertiser, attempt to force your commercials on consumers through interruption, then our job, as creators, is to first get the viewer's attention. Once we have their attention, then we need to somehow capture their interest. And then, finally, before we're done, we need to also persuade them of something. Or, at least try to. Attention. Interest. Persuasion. All within the 30 seconds allowed us."

"And we wonder why most advertising is ineffective," chimed in Jeffery Bell.

"Exactly," said Nick. "Some commercials are good at getting attention. But they fall off when it comes to maintaining interest and actually persuading. In this scenario, we don't need to get attention because the consumer is basically knocking on our door saying tell me more. Which gives us the opportunity to focus completely on creating interest and persuasion."

Sydney piped in. "But because they have control, they can leave at

any time?”

“That’s right.”

“So the only reason they would stay, is because you have made it interesting enough so that they *want* to stay.”

“Right, again. Control *does* give people the opportunity to opt out. That’s why most advertisers are frightened of relinquishing it. But what they’re forgetting is that being able to opt out also gives the viewer the freedom to opt in in the first place.”

There were a few puzzled looks in the room.

“Here’s the thing that I think everyone always forgets,” said Nick. “People don’t mind investing time if they can control the time invested.”

“I’m afraid you lost me with that one,” said Amanda Weeks.

“It’s like this,” said Nick. “Say your spouse wants to go to a party. You say you don’t want to go to any party. Your spouse promises that the two of you will leave when *you* say so. You. In other words, you have the control over how long you’re at the party. You say okay, that doesn’t sound too bad. We can leave when I want. So you go, thinking you’ll stay for maybe a half hour. And what happens? You end being the last one there. You, who didn’t want to go in the first place. Explain that. Human nature works in mysterious ways. And one of those ways is that people are more inclined to start something when they have the control to stop it when they want. Our job is make sure they don’t want to.”

“And you say the longer you keep them there, the more cars we’ll sell,” said Amanda.

Nick nodded. “Yes, that’s right.”

“But there’s no proof of that, is there?” countered Amanda. “I mean, I have been doing some research and as far as I have been able to tell, there has never been a direct correlation between time spent with a commercial and sales of that product.”

“You’re right, Amanda. There is no direct correlation. At least one that has been researched. Yet. But what we do know is that there is an average amount of time that humans spend in researching a category – any category – before purchasing. For example, before buying a new home, the average buyer will have spent 39 hours of research, going to open houses, comparing prices, and so on. For a computer, the time spent is much less. The average amount of time spent researching computers between deciding that you need a new computer and that new computer being ultimately plugged in on your desk is four hours. If you’re buying a television, the amount of time spent considering which one to buy is two hours.”

“And what is it for cars?” asked Jeffery.

“Including showroom visits? Eight hours,” said Nick.

Sydney saw everyone in the room look at each other. Obviously, none of them knew this. Which she found to be rather surprising.

“Now,” continued Nick, “time is finite. There are only 24 hours in a day. Most people say that if there is one thing that they don’t have enough of, it is time. The logic is that the more time that we can get the consumer to spend with your brand, the less time they will have to spend

with your competitor's brand. Now this hasn't been proven. It's kind of a new field. But it makes sense. The fact that time is finite. The fact that we can't do more than one thing – with attention – at a time. It makes spending time with one brand versus another a trade-off. People don't give more time to the purchase decision overall, because no one has that extra time to give. So the role of advertising in this new format is to make sure that the time they do have goes to your brand and not to your competitor's. It's why we think that time spent can actually become a competitive advantage for your brand.”

To Sydney, this made sense. And seeing the heads nodding around the room, it seemed that it was making sense to everyone else as well.

It also explained why you would want to do longer spots. If you view the purpose of advertising as creating more time with your brand, than you would obviously want to make your commercials longer rather than shorter. And because the viewer has the control to leave when they want, the difference between getting a lot of time versus a little time spent with your brand would be the creative.

“So, Nick,” smiled Jeffery. “Are you going to actually show us something? Or just use up all of our so-called valuable time talking?”

Chapter 34

New York – 1285 Avenue Of The Americas – BBDO Office

Kirsten had texted Sydney during the presentation of the spots.
Done yet?!!! Call me after. Immediately after!

She answered on the first ring.

“Sydney. So tell me. Tell me. Tell me.”

Sydney wasn't quite sure how to respond. After all, it wasn't quite advertising that she had just seen. Yes, it was advertising in the sense that it was paid for by a brand. But it wasn't advertising as advertising is thought of by most.

“Is it good, Sydney?” Kirsten was getting impatient.

“No...”

“Ha! I knew it,” said Kirsten. “I knew it was all just a crock of shit that this Watson dude was selling. So now we can get back to...”

“It was brilliant.”

“Wha... what? But you said it wasn't good. You said...”

“It wasn't good. It was beyond good. It's like a new genre, and I think it's going to work. I mean really, really, really well.”

“And Jeffery... Jeffery Bell, he was on board?”

“I've never seen Jeffery so enthused after a creative presentation.”

“Why? What did he say?”

“Again.”

“Again? What do you mean again?”

“Again, as in play it again. And then he said again, again. And then once more. Only then did he stand up, go over to Watson and shake his hand.”

“And then what?”

“He walked over to the door, looked back at Amanda and said, ‘Run them.’ And walked out.”

“That’s it?”

“Kirsten, they really are that good.”

“Shit. Now what?”

“We’ll run them online, on the video ad network that Watson is recommending.”

“Which means they still could fail. I mean, people might tune out quickly.”

“No. They won’t.”

“What the hell do you mean they won’t? It’s advertising, Sydney.”

“No, it’s not. At least not the way you and I know it, Kirsten.”

Chapter 35

San Francisco – SOMA – Hotel Zetta

Shelby's phone rang.

She answered on the first ring. "Ian, I was expecting your call. The presentation was today, wasn't it?"

"Yeah. Just got off the phone with Kirsten Bogarts. It's good. The work is good."

"Damn."

"Jeffery Bell wants it up immediately."

"And people will watch?"

"So I'm told. Which means we're fucked."

"Unless..."

"Unless what?"

"The viewing numbers aren't good."

"But that's up to the viewers. We don't have any say in that."

"Ian, I'm always surprised how you seem to forget why you hire me."

There was a pause on Ian's side of the line.

"Ian, you still there?"

"Yeah. But I don't know, legally, if I want to hear what you're

about to tell me, Shelby.”

“Then let’s do this. I won’t say any more. Except, I need to ask you a question. Is there a limit on the budget for this?”

“Spend what it takes.”

“That’s what I was hoping you’d say, Ian.”

A feeling of relief washed over her. She had rationalized to herself that \$2 million wasn’t that much when divided by five holding companies. Hell, \$400,000 was a rounding error for them. But she had taken a chance promising that much before she had approval.

“You should know what I’ve been up to shortly.”

“And how will I know that?” asked Ian.

“You’ll have access to the viewing results, right?”

“Through Kirsten Bogarts, yeah. Why?”

“Call me after you see them, Ian. You can thank me then.”

Ian heard the click as Shelby hung up.

No good-byes. Just a click.

Just like I’d do, Ian thought to himself. He had to laugh. Damn, the girl’s getting to be just like me.

Chapter 36

Cincinnati – 1 Proctor & Gamble Plaza – P&G Headquarters

On his way back to San Francisco from Detroit, Nick made a slight detour to Cincinnati. An Uber ride to 1 Proctor and Gamble Plaza and he was shown up to Ted Donald's office.

"Thanks for taking the time," said Ted as he offered his hand. "And I must say that you're looking quite pleased with yourself."

Nick smiled. "I feel pretty good. I mean, it could not have gone much better with Ford."

"I take it they liked the work."

"That's putting it lightly."

"So they're going to run it?"

Nick nodded. "Then we'll be able to see how and if this model works."

"And, if you make any money," laughed Ted.

"There is that."

"About this testing, Nick. The video ad network that you're running it on, it gives you time spent data, right?"

"That's actually what you're buying, Ted. Ford's media agency still buys the media and places the spots. They still deal in impressions.

Monetizing time spent doesn't affect their job or the amount of money they make. The deal I worked out is that the client pays the network provider a little extra for the time spent data, something like 10% of the media buy. I'm afraid that you need to pay extra for it, Ted, otherwise..."

"I'll never see it, I know," said Ted Donald, finishing Nick's thought. "That's what's happening now. And it's starting to really piss me off."

"It should."

"I assume that if this works, word will get out?"

"We've got our fingers crossed. We actually want word to get out as that will lead to more work for the Exiles."

"Starting with us, I hope."

Nick looked at him quizzically.

"We'd like to try out the model, Nick. Hiring you and your team to do something for us. On a project basis only."

"That's all we do, Ted. Projects."

"But here's the question. We're P&G, not Ford. Cars are one thing, but I mean, does this model work for package goods?"

Nick didn't know. Obviously, the inherent interest in a car is much greater than a tube of toothpaste or a deodorant. But that didn't mean it was impossible.

"How many products you thinking of Ted?"

"Two. Maybe three. If you're game, you can leave with the briefs."

“And your higher ups are good with this?”

“They’re the reason I initially called. As I mentioned on the phone, we met with our current agencies and we don’t feel that they understand how much the digital platform has changed the way that advertising works. I think you and your team do. We thought we could wait. But if your Ford work is successful and we want in on the ground floor, I have a feeling that we need to go now.”

Nick didn’t answer. He had been really looking forward to some time off before starting another project. He was exhausted, having been going non-stop for almost four months. And hell, the testing for Ford wasn’t even done. But it was P&G. The golden goose. If they bought in, the whole industry would have no choice but to follow.

“Well?” Ted asked.

Nick shrugged his shoulders.

“Why don’t you let me have a look at those briefs.”

Chapter 37

San Francisco – SOMA – The House of Shields

The media agency for Ford had agreed to spend \$1 million testing both spots across a wide range of publishers available on David's video ad network. David would compile the time spent data.

All Shelby needed Wilkins to do was to screw over his friend by reporting the numbers as much lower than what they actually were.

Unless, of course, no one did really pay any attention to the spots.

Wilkins knew that would be unlikely. Nick had shared the finished commercials with him. And Wilkins had to agree, once someone opted in to watch, more – rather than less – of the spots would be consumed. They were, in his opinion, that good. The question now was, how could he fudge the numbers so that Nick wouldn't get suspicious?

On the night when Nick had been walking Wilkins through the numbers at the House of Shields, David had only been listening half-heartedly. He was tired of Nick's irritating habit of reiterating what he thought was important.

“Assuming an average opt-in rate of 1% over 50 million impressions, it would mean 500,000 would start to watch the spots. If the average viewing time was 2 minutes, that would be 60 million seconds of

time spent. Or, one million minutes. Or, 16,666 hours. Do you know how many days there are in 16,666 hours, David?”

“No, Nick, I don’t. And no, Nick, I don’t really give a fuck.”

“Six hundred and ninety-four.”

“Six hundred and ninety-four what again?”

“Days spent with the two brands.”

That got Wilkins’ attention. “Wait. Are you saying that a million dollar media buy can achieve almost 700 days of time spent with the two brands?”

“With the right creative, yeah. Now the question to you, David, is this. Which do you think is more motivating to the client? Telling them that a million bucks buys them fifty million impressions? Or, that one million buys them almost seven hundred days of time spent with their brands?”

“Well, that’s a no-brainer, isn’t it?” said Wilkins.

“A no-brainer that we’re going to test, you and me, partner.”

“Yeah, right,” said Wilkins, with a little less enthusiasm than Watson had been expecting.

“It’s why I keep telling you, David, selling view duration data is going to make you a shitload of money.”

Wilkins nodded as he smiled at the irony. It sure as hell was going to make him a shitload of money. Just not the way Watson was envisioning.

“And what’s the only thing that determines time spent?” asked

Watson, elbowing Wilkins in the side.

“You keep saying the *creative*,” he said in a disparaging tone.

Watson smiled. “Yep. Just want to hear you say it, David. Just wanted to hear the word *creative* pass through those lovely lips of yours. I know how hard that is for a media guy.”

Wilkins grimaced. The only lips he was thinking about were Shelby’s. Her arguments had convinced him that whatever it took, Watson was going to be shut down. The advertising industry was bigger and more important than one man. “Get a grip, David,” she said. “The only difference in the long run is that you make a ton of money now.”

“Or never?”

Shelby nodded. “Up to you, babe.”

“Still... hate to do it to a friend,” David had countered.

Shelby had snuggled in close when she heard him say that. “And what am I, huh? Let me put it this way, David. When it comes to friends, I think I offer some rather interesting fringe benefits that Watson might have a hard time matching.”

Chapter 38

Outside of San Francisco – Marin County – The Headlands

Cycling across the Golden Gate Bridge and up into the Marin Headlands served as Nick's main form of release. Which is why he counted it as one of his go-tos early in the morning.

Getting out of San Francisco on a bike was fairly easy. The trick was to leave as the sun came up.

From his condo in Pacific Heights, the most convenient way out was through the Presidio. Quiet streets. Lots of Victorians. Very few cars. Not to mention, a beautiful part of the city to ride through.

The Golden Gate Bridge was located on one edge of the Presidio. Most of the time, cyclists were required to ride on the western side of the bridge. The eastern side was for pedestrians only. Since the western side was two-way and the riding area was narrow, it required slowing down when a cyclist was approaching or if you wanted to pass someone. Tourists who rented bikes to ride over the Golden Gate were the biggest problem. Mostly families with kids – constantly looking at everything except what was right in front of them – they were an accident waiting to happen.

Except around sunrise. At that time, the western side was closed to

cyclists, so everyone – cyclists and pedestrians both – used the eastern side. But there were no tourists cycling at sunrise. And no foot traffic to speak of. Which is why Nick rode early. Six-thirty early.

Today was the day, he thought, as he came off the bridge on the Marin side and circled under the highway to start the first uphill section of the Headlands. Today was the day when he would get the numbers.

Was he nervous? Shit, yes. Not because of what the numbers would say. He knew that the spots were good – that if people started watching, they would keep watching. It's just human nature to stay involved if it's something of interest. Pretty simple when you think about it.

The problem was that it seemed as if no one ever took the time to think about it. Instead advertisers continued buying the false premise that forced views are the only way that people will watch a commercial online. Even though everyone knows that when you force a commercial on someone all their attention goes to the little counter in the lower right corner of the screen – *You can skip this ad in 4...3...2...* until the word *skip* comes up so they can see what they actually want to see.

Again, human nature at work, plain and simple.

No, the spots will work, thought Nick, as he finished the initial steep ascent which leveled off at the first lookout point, the lower lookout. That wasn't what was worrying him. What was worrying him was the shit-storm it would create in the industry.

The way that advertising used to operate would be gone. Holding companies would lose money. People would lose jobs. That was

inevitable. As was the fact that if he didn't pursue it, if a new industry model wasn't soon developed, then the old one would simply collapse. And then, even more people would be out of work.

Change, as the saying goes, is the only constant. And the competitive advantage, as always, lies in how quickly one reacts to change. He was ahead of the curve, granted, but too far ahead? That he didn't know.

He was into the steepest part of the climb now. It was a deceptive section. The top looked like it was right in front of the rider, right there, so close. What the rider didn't see was that the road curved around to the right, concealing a longer section that was all up.

Good, Nick thought.

He was unusual in that way, in the fact that he liked uphill. He found that climbing was what separated the good riders from the weekend pretenders. He rode the uphill aggressively, getting up and out of the saddle and cranking. Like a piston is how someone once described his riding style. One leg after the other. Left. Right. Left. Right. Never changing cadence. Not fast. Not slow. Steady. Left, up. Right, up. Left, up. Right, up. Until, hell, there it was. The top.

This was it – the view that people came from around the world to see. San Francisco in the distance. The Golden Gate in front. The fog, a wispy, white blanket fingering its way in under the bridge from the west. It's the view that everyone is familiar with from postcards or movies. And never once had it failed to make Nick smile.

There were two ways down. The shorter route was simply to turn around and go back the way he came up. The longer route was down the backside – past the defensive batteries which had housed the large artillery guns that protected the bay during the Second World War – and then out through the Golden Gate National Recreation Area.

Nick liked the longer route better. The descent was steep, the road one way and narrow. If the fog was heavy, the asphalt would be too slick, too wet. On those sorts of days, the road would be shut down. Too often a cyclist had been going too fast, missed a turn and had been hurt. Or, worse.

But this morning the fog was cooperating and the road down the backside was open. And since he was waiting for a call from Wilkins, he thought why not take the long way home, even head into Sausalito first, grab a coffee, hell, maybe even some pancakes at Fred's, one of his favorite breakfast restaurants. If there was ever a pancake poll in the Bay Area, Fred's would no doubt be at the top of the list.

He started down, his mouth watering, thinking of flapjacks. The wind was blowing stronger on this side, the water-facing side, requiring an increased focus on the road. His phone started to vibrate in the pocket on the back of his jersey. There it is, he thought. The future.

Well, he was going too fast to answer it now. This road needed all of his concentration.

The future would have to wait until Fred's.

Chapter 39

San Francisco – The Mission – Wilkins’ Condominium

The media buy was for one week.

That week was over. Wilkins was sitting at his computer, looking at the results as they were coming in. Surprised he wasn’t.

Depending on which publisher’s site the spots ran on, the opt-in rate was anywhere from under a half of a percent to over three percent. Not unexpected. That was about the national average for people opting in to watch a commercial. But the view time was nothing close to average. While it varied by publisher, overall it was almost 85%.

For both spots.

Running the spots on different publisher’s sites was part of the DAOS model. The information received from the different sites would let the advertisers know the site for which they were getting the best return on involvement in their spots. Finding the right audience for the brand would continue to be the media agency’s role. Keep finding the demo that would be more likely to opt in. And then run the spots on those publishers that most appealed to that demo. In other words, targeting.

It wasn’t *all* about the creative, Wilkins thought, no matter how

much Watson liked to push that trope.

Until the viewer actually opted in, it was still all about media.

Now, the big question, thought Wilkins, was what he was going to tell Watson. If it was the truth, he'd be out \$2 million. But if he could shade the truth. The question was, by how much?

"If you're gonna lie, go big. Lie your sweet ass off," is how Shelby put it. "I need the numbers to bury him."

That meant he had to go low. Ridiculously so. He wouldn't have to lie about the opt-in rates. Everyone knew that opt-in rates were always low.

But as for the time spent part...

If he could keep the max at around 15%, then he could add in a range beneath that.

Would Watson believe it?

That's where it got tricky. If Watson asked to see the granular, log-level data, Wilkins knew he would have to find a way to stall. He could send him some bogus top-line info, but the raw data, no.

The raw data would reveal the truth.

The fact that Ford knew the media buy was only for a week was in his favor. They were chomping at the bit to know the results. As hard as the numbers would be to swallow, he knew Watson would have no choice. He wouldn't have the time to wait for the truth. And as Shelby kept reminding him, if the lie gets out there first, the truth seldom has a chance to catch up.

Plus, there was one other thing. Watson trusted him. Wilkins was counting on that.

“Trust is a weapon,” Shelby had told him one night over dinner. “You want to always use it to your advantage. I mean, if you find someone who is stupid enough to trust you, then hell, you’d be stupid not to use that against them.”

Assuming that she was joking, David looked up, expecting to see her smiling. He found it disconcerting to see that she wasn’t.

The hardest part would be this phone call. He had to strike a tone between convincing and conciliatory. After all, if this worked, it was going to have been a money-maker for him as well. So he had to come across as if he, too, was disappointed.

He heard Watson’s phone ring. And ring. Voicemail. Thank, God. Not going to leave one, Wilkins thought. Just try again later. It would buy him a little more time.

#

As Nick continued his ride into Sausalito, he couldn’t help but think about how it had all come to this.

The Creative Exiles had found each other out of a sense of frustration. A feeling that had only grown deeper as they watched advertising change for the worse – going from an art to a science.

To Nick, advertising was always about art serving commerce. The

aesthetics of information is how a colleague of his put it. Nick liked that. So much so, he started to use it as his own.

But that was then. Today, advertising was all about data serving commerce. Art had been erased from the equation. All the new turks and turkettes were proclaiming that data was the new creative – implying that data was now the cool thing. Which would make them the new cool ones.

The only problem was that they had it backwards. It wasn't that data was the new creative. It was that *creative was the new data*. And that data, the god they all seemed to worship, could turn creative from something subjective into a measurable and objective result. If, of course, advertisers bought the argument that a commercial that was watched offered more value than a commercial that wasn't.

Most did. All one had to do was quote Bill Bernbach who famously said "*You cannot sell a man who isn't listening*."

And today, that was the problem. No one was listening. Especially when it came to brand advertising. It seems as if everyone had forgotten that the job of brand advertising was to create emotional equity in the brand. Not to create a sale today, or this week. But down the road. Over time. Say in three months.

There are many different definitions of what a brand is. Some complicated. Some not. Nick's was simply this: a brand is the trust people have in the product. And trust – whether in products or people – is not just given. It has to be earned. That takes time. People seldom buy

from strangers, after all.

That's why the opportunity to do a four-minute commercial offered a greater *branding* opportunity than a 30-second commercial. More time could be spent between the viewer and the brand, offering a greater chance for trust to grow.

The problem with creating four-minute spots was the cost required to produce them. Couldn't they produce something just as good for less? That's the question clients never failed to ask. And, to a point, yes they could. But experience had taught Nick that, while lower prices would always be appreciated up front, the bitterness of poor quality remained long after the sweetness of that low price disappeared.

Quality costs money. Simple as that. Great ideas are expensive, if only because they are so hard to come by. It's why one advertising guru once described creating great advertising as akin to trying to grow flowers in hell.

And that's all the Exiles were doing. Trying to crawl their way out of advertising hell by asking to be held accountable. They understood the fear that accountability put into most in the business. But they also understood the facts. And the facts were irrefutable. Everything today is measurable. And to clients, what is measurable is pleasurable. Meaning that accountability was inevitable. Which left only one way out.

To somehow make the inevitable, invaluable.

Ford coming on board had offered the chance to do just that. It wasn't just the fact that Ford spent a lot on advertising – year in and year

out they were one of the top ten spenders in the country – that was important, sure. But the real key in Nick’s mind was that Ford had multiple brands with multiple agencies. If one of their agencies agreed to be paid based on their creative abilities, what would that say about the other agencies if they refused to play the same way? What would it say about the people who worked at those agencies? And, about their creative abilities?

No, if one agency does it, they’ll all have to. Their egos would demand it. Which meant that many would need to start incorporating a model like DAOS. Perhaps even reaching out to Nick to help set it up for them. That’s why this Ford test was so important. That’s why Nick was out on this bike ride, to help calm his nerves while waiting for the results.

He couldn’t wait to talk to Wilkins.

Flying down the steep descent into Sausalito, he cycled along Bridgeway, through the touristy part of Sausalito. Fred’s was toward the north end of town, up on the left.

This is it, he thought, as he set his bike up against one of the restaurant’s many large windows, allowing him to keep an eye on it from the inside.

Time to see if Wilkins’ news was as good as he hoped.

Chapter 40

Sausalito – 1917 Bridgeway – Fred’s Restaurant

Nick ordered the pancakes as soon as he sat down, even before looking to see who the message was from.

Once he did, he was disappointed.

It wasn’t Wilkins after all.

It was a text from Ryan Matthews. *Any news?* Everyone knew the media run had ended yesterday. And now Ryan, Kat, Al Rainey, Richard Booth Palmer, James Carlisle, they had all called or sent a text.

Not surprising, what with them all having skin in the game. Usually when a production was finished, everyone moved right on to the next, without giving a second thought to the one they had just completed. No one really worried if the commercial actually worked or not. They had their money. They had done what was asked of them. Next.

Nick had noticed how this was changing during the filming of the Mustang spot. Normally, the crew would be looking at their phones during a break, trying to line up their next gig.

But on this shoot, Nick hadn’t seen a single phone come out between set-ups. Instead, everyone had been focused on how to do what they were doing even a little bit better. All because their actual income

for what they had been doing right then, right there, was still up in the air. It all depended on how good they were still able to make it. Which put all their focus on what was right in front of them. This job. Not the next one. He often wanted to instill a no cell phone policy while on production, but hell, everyone in the production business was an independent contractor. They all needed to make a living.

Eliminating cell phones would cut off their lifeline.

But if it was self-imposed, that would make it different, wouldn't it?

Where the heck was Wilkins with the numbers? He checked the list of recent calls on his phone. Wait. There was one he had missed. Yep. Wilkins. Wonder why he hadn't left a message.

His pancakes arrived. He didn't know if it was the batter they used or what, but my God, they were the best. He couldn't wait to dig in. But first.

He hit Wilkins number under Recents. Wilkins answered on the first ring.

"Nick..."

"David. Tell me. How did we do?"

There was a pause on Wilkins' side of the line.

That phenomenal, thought Nick to himself. I mean Wilkins was clearly speechless.

"Not... I'm afraid... not like we were hoping, Nick."

"By not, you mean not 100%. I wasn't expecting 100%..."

"Try closer to 10%."

Now the silence was on Watson's end of the line.

"No, David, that can't be... I mean..."

"Sometimes 15%. But as far as view time goes, you averaged around 12%.

"Which spot? Surely..."

"Both."

"No, no, David, you've gotta be reading the numbers wrong, I mean..."

Nick noticed that everyone was turning to stare. Unbeknownst to him, his voice had been steadily rising. He stood up and went outside.

"David, are you sure that your data, that your platform, I mean was it working properly? Could it be that the data is off?"

"Double checked it twice. Then twice more. Sorry, buddy. I mean we were both going to make a lot of money on this..."

"Fuck the money, David. It's not the money. It's, it's..."

"I know."

"No. Bullshit. You don't, David. You're a media guy. You don't know, you don't understand how creative, how that's what makes the difference in advertising. It's not the media. That's what this was all about. About proving the importance of creative."

"Maybe you did that."

"How? What?"

"Maybe what you've proved is that it's not as important as you think."

“Fuck you, David!”

Wilkins kept quiet. Nothing he could say now would help. He just had to wait for Nick to continue. When he did, he was more resigned.

“You’re totally sure, David? I mean about the numbers?”

“I’m sure. I mean, we’re friends, right Nick? Why would I lie? I could send you the top lines, or the log-level data. Just know that the log-level stuff will take some time and I’m kind of guessing that Ford is anxious to hear. What do you think?”

“Ford is expecting me to call them tomorrow with the results. Fuck. Send me the top lines.”

“On it.”

Nick heard the click as Wilkins hung up.

Chapter 41

San Francisco – SOMA – Nick and Kat's Office

Kat took the news hard.
“It’s just not possible,” she said, “that people would not be interested in those spots.”

Nick was looking at their bottle of 23-year-old Pappy Van Winkle which Kat had sat out on the bar in their office, assuming that the news would be different and that they would be celebrating.

“Looks like we can put this away for now,” he said. Opening the door to the cabinet under the bar, Nick slid the bottle of bourbon way into the back.

“You don’t think Wilkins was lying, do you? I mean as you know, I’ve never trusted the guy.”

“What reason would he have to lie, Kat? Remember, if this worked, then he was in line to make a lot of money going forward as well.”

Nick’s cell phone started to buzz. James Carlisle.

“Hello, James.”

“What the hell happened, Nick?”

“You heard, huh?”

“Richard told me.”

“Can’t explain it, James. I mean, we all thought the spots were great.”

“Twelve percent view rate. That means I lost a lot of money, Nick. As did you.”

“As did everyone, James.”

“Hell, 12% means that we practically worked for nothing.”

“How is Richard taking the news?”

“I don’t think he has stopped drinking since he heard.”

“And you?”

“I’m about to start.”

“Funny.”

“What’s not funny, Nick, is that this P&G project you mentioned you had. I know Richard said he’d do it, but I can’t let that happen. Not through this production company. We’re not in the business to lose money. You understand?”

“I get it.”

“Sorry, mate, but once burned, you know?”

“Yeah, I know.”

“Later. Okay? And if you have any jobs paying the old-fashioned way, give us a call. Always here for you.”

Chapter 42

New York City – 437 Madison Avenue – Omnicom Group Headquarters

Ian Winston had invited both Kirsten Bogarts and Sydney Robertson back to Omnicom Group headquarters.

Sydney had just walked him through the top line numbers that Nick had shared with Ford. Ian couldn't stop looking at the sheet of paper Sydney had handed him and although he tried to keep it from showing, a smile slipped out.

"And how did Jeffery Bell take these numbers, Sydney?"

"Disappointed. But he said, you know, we tried and that's the thing. And we need to keep trying to find a way to make advertising work better. Because the status quo just isn't cutting it anymore."

"And the commercials? What's he going to do with the commercials?" asked Ian.

"He wants to run them on the EcoStar and Mustang websites," chimed in Kirsten. "No media cost to put them on their own sites and Bell still likes them. Just can't understand why they scored so low."

"At the same time," added Sydney, "we're going to give the footage for the spots to our agencies to see if they can find a way to make a thirty

or two out of them. If so, we can run them on TV and further amortize the cost of production out over impressions.”

“Makes sense. And what do you think happens to this Watson guy, he just goes away?” asked Ian.

“That’s likely,” said Kirsten. “I mean, he’s tainted now.”

“Well, I’m relieved,” said Ian, nodding at Sydney. “You know, Kirsten shared the spots with me. Damn impressive. And I know everyone that I shared them with thought that the results would be good. At least way better than 12%.”

He handed the paper with the numbers on it back to Sydney.

“Job well done, Kirsten. And Sydney, I know that you didn’t have to do this, so thank you again. I think it’s safe to say that we can all relax now.”

As they got up to leave, Ian’s phone buzzed. Seeing Shelby’s name on his screen, he remembered that she needed to know the date of the meeting he had set up with the other holding company members, to discuss the results.

As Kirsten and Sydney shut the door behind them, he called her back.

“Porter,” she answered.

“Shelby, I don’t want to know how the fuck you did it, but I’m sure as hell glad you did.”

Chapter 43

San Francisco – North Beach – The Washbag

They had agreed to meet for lunch at the Washbag.

Nick had asked Ryan Matthews to join them. Ryan had never met Al Rainey before, but had always idolized him. That happens with the icons in the business.

Al was already at his table in the window, half empty glass of bourbon resting in front of him. He nodded as Nick and Ryan sat down to join him. “You buying?” he asked Nick.

“Guess I have to since we made fuck all, right?”

“More or less how I see it,” said Al.

Robert, the waiter, came by for drink orders. “I usually have wine at lunch,” said Nick, pointing to Al’s bourbon, “but I think one of those is called for.”

Ryan held up two fingers, indicating that he’d have the same. Robert nodded and left.

“In the long run, you’re probably lucky it failed,” Al said.

“Why’s that?”

“You were about to ruin a financial model that makes a lot of people a lot of money. If those people were the Mafia, you’d be dead.”

Ryan let out a chuckle. Comparing the holding companies to the Mafia struck him as funny. Probably because it was more true than not.

Robert brought their bourbons and was about to hand out the menus when Al stopped him.

“You know what I want, Robert, the usual.”

Robert nodded.

Nick also refused the menus. “Cannelloni, for the both of us,” he said, indicating Ryan and himself.

As Robert left, Ryan spoke up. “So what’s everyone going to do now?”

“Well, I was thinking of buying a Mustang,” smiled Al. “Hell of a spot you wrote, Matthews.”

“Aren’t you still driving the Bentley, Al?” asked Nick.

“I am. But I’ve always believed that good advertising should be supported,” he replied.

Nick knew what that would mean to Ryan. Rainey was tight on compliments, especially in regards to creative. When Nick had worked for him, the highest praise you could expect from Rainey about one of your scripts was, “Might work”. Most scripts got at best a disparaging grunt.

That said, he had learned a lot from Rainey. Like if a commercial’s production is close to perfect, then people will find it easier to think the same about the product being advertised. That whatever you create has to have a respect for the viewer. If your work shows a respect for them,

they will in turn show a respect for the work. Also, he had learned that execution is content. You can't separate what you are saying from how you say it. Which is why getting more money for production was usually better than getting less.

But perhaps the biggest thing he had learned was that it is more important to sell 10% of the people 100% of the way than it is to try and sell 100% of the people 10% of the way. It's actually damn near impossible to sell anything to everyone: a fact backed by research showing that only 10% of a viewing audience may be interested in a particular product at any particular time.

Did everyone in the business know this?

Of course.

Yet media agencies were still making advertisers pay for 100% of the audience to reach that 10%. In the process, annoying 90% of the viewers that aren't going to be interested at the time.

And there was the conundrum, Nick thought. It's that 90% annoyance factor that keeps the house of cards that is the advertising business actually standing. Or, at least it had. Until the online platform put control in the hands of the user. Letting them start to mitigate the never-ending assault of ads.

"So what was the final percent again, of viewer time spent?" Rainey asked, somewhat sarcastically. Rainey knew the number already. He just wanted to twist the knife a bit deeper.

"Twelve percent."

“My spot or his?” asked Rainey, nodding in Ryan’s direction.

“Both,” replied Nick.

“Surprising,” Rainey said.

“Yes,” said Nick. “Yes, it is.”

Rainey shook his head. “And the most I would have been able to make on the project, if for example we had 100% viewer time spent?”

“Top side was \$60,000” replied Nick. He looked at Ryan. “Both of you would have gotten sixty grand.”

“And if I have this right, 12% means that I only make 12% of that.”

“\$7,200, right,” replied Nick.

Al looked at Ryan. “Guess I won’t be buying that Mustang after all, Matthews.”

Robert came back to check in on their drinks. Al signaled him to bring another round for the table. Pointing to Nick, he said, “And Robert, he’s buying.”

“Seventy-two hundred,” Al said again. “Shit. Ford got a hell of a spot for seventy-two hundred dollars. Thought I taught you that original ideas are supposed to be expensive, Nick?”

Nick nodded. “You did.”

“You know, the Irish have a proverb,” said Ryan.

“I believe they have more than one, Matthews,” said Rainey as he finished the bourbon in his glass.

“Yeah, but I always liked this one. There are many ways to achieve

failure. But not taking a chance is the most successful.”

“I’ll drink to that,” said Nick, as Robert arrived with a fresh round. “Fact is, right about now, I’d probably drink to anything.”

Al looked up at Robert as he set the three fresh bourbons down in front of them. “Per usual Robert,” said Rainey, with a smile, “your timing is exquisite.”

Chapter 44

New York – Peninsula Hotel – Conference Room

They were all present.

Once again, Ian asked for the meeting to be held at the Peninsula Hotel. To make it more convenient, Shelby had booked a week's stay at the Peninsula when she flew back to New York from San Francisco. A suite, no less. Embarrassingly expensive. But after the rabbit that she had just pulled out the hat, she felt that she deserved it.

David Wilkins had mentioned something about wanting to come to New York with her. No way in hell Shelby was going to let that happen. She had gotten what she wanted from Wilkins. He had been paid well for his service. Now that the job was done her only desire was to get as far away from him as possible. On her way to the airport, he had called suggesting drinks that evening at his place. She had said sure. See him at seven. Hell, at seven, she would be somewhere over Iowa halfway to New York. That had been a week ago. Wilkins had not stopped texting and calling. She had not replied once.

He'll tire soon, she thought. They always do.

When she walked into the conference room everyone was already helping themselves to coffee. Seeing her enter, Ian smiled and asked

everyone to find their seats.

“So let’s get started, shall we? Again, thanks everyone for taking the time today.”

“Are we still in trouble?” asked Derek Castellano, obviously wanting to cut to the chase.

Ian smiled. “I think I have some good news on that front. Well, not me exactly, but Shelby. So why don’t I turn it over to her?”

Shelby looked around the room. Anxious faces stared back. A lot was riding on this.

“As I think you all know,” she began, “Ford did a project with Watson and his cronies, the Exiles. Two Ford brands participated, Mustang and EcoSport. A spot was done for each. The Mustang spot was three minutes long, the EcoSport spot, four minutes. The spots were then aired on a video ad platform that a friend of Watsons runs. This friend also collected the view duration data for the spots.”

“Well, that would bias the results, no?” asked Castellano. “Running the spots on a friend’s platform.”

“I suggest that we let Shelby finish, Derek,” said Ian. He nodded to Shelby to continue.

“The media test was to measure the average viewer time spent with the spots over one week. Did those viewers who opted in watch 10% of the spots or 100% of the spots? Of course, the higher the percentage, the more successful Ford would consider the spots to be and the more money they would pay the Exiles.”

“And...” asked Rebecca Winters, impatiently.

But Shelby didn't mind leaving them in suspense. The truth was, she was kind of enjoying this, seeing such high ranking advertising bigwigs squirming in their seats.

“Everyone who saw the spots assumed that the viewer time spent figures would be huge. Ian can share the spots with you later, if you like. I mean, they were that good. But where they actually came out was...”

“Damn it, Shelby, c'mon,” said Derek Castellano. “Out with it.”

“Twelve percent.”

Shelby could see all the heads in the room snap around to look at one another, before settling on Ian, grinning like a Cheshire Cat. As was Simon. Obviously, Ian had already shared the results with Simon.

“Love that number,” said Ian. “Twelve percent. Which meant that the entire exercise was a failure.”

Shelby could physically feel the tension seeping out of the room not unlike heat escaping a warm house through an open window on a cold day.

“And, Ford?” asked Rebecca. “How did they take the news, Ian? Are they moving on?”

“I've talked to the Brand Director on the Mustang business and she says Ford feels like they took a shot with this and it didn't work. They're comfortable for the time being to play by our rules.”

“Hallelujah,” said Adam Connolly.

“Yes, indeed,” agreed Rebecca.

Smiles were now on the faces that earlier wore frowns. Apparently, the world wasn't going to end after all.

"So, Shelby," asked Simon, "you were closest to all of this. Why do you think it was such a failure? I mean I saw the spots, Ian saw them, we both thought they were great."

Shelby looked at Ian.

She didn't know if she was supposed to tell the truth. Hell, Ian didn't even know the truth. At least, not yet. But he nodded to her as if to say go ahead.

"Well, the truth is, Simon, it wasn't."

"Wasn't? Wasn't what?" asked Adam Connolly, his smile quickly disappearing.

"A failure."

The silence that came over the room was abrupt. The only noise was Simon Foster's coffee cup being set back down on the table.

"What do you mean, Shelby," Ian asked cautiously. It was obvious that this surprised him as much as the others. "I mean you said the numbers were..."

"...false," said Shelby, finishing Ian's sentence. "The actual viewer time spent percentage was not 12%. It was higher."

"Are we talking a little or a lot higher?" asked Derek Castellano, hesitantly, as if he really didn't want to know.

"A lot higher," said Shelby. "Eighty-five percent."

"Jesus," muttered Rebeca Winters as Dereck Castellano buried his

head in his hands.

“But, Shelby,” asked Simon, now obviously confused. “If the actual figure was 85%, why was Ford told the number was twelve percent?”

Shelby looked at Ian wondering if she should continue.

Ian shook his head no as he jumped to his feet. “Wait, wait, wait, wait,” he said. “I think we need to take a moment here. Before you answer that Shelby, let me ask the group and especially Rebecca, who as a risk officer knows better than the rest of us, do we really want to know? I’m only asking because won’t that make us culpable if we have to address this down the road? Legally, I mean.”

“You’re right, Ian,” said Rebecca. “From a risk perspective we’re all better off not knowing the details. Let’s just say it’s safer for us if it stays under our own little... well... veil of silence. Ford bought it. Let’s be thankful and let it go at that. My advice is to let it lie. Let it die.”

Shelby saw heads nodding all around.

“But to help bury it, Rebecca,” added Ian, “I’m going to ask that Simon contact his friend, Viktor Holl, and see if maybe he can’t help us write the obituary to make sure that this way of thinking stays six feet under. Simon, what do you think?”

“Well, Viktor did say he’s always willing to help, however we need it.”

“I second that,” said Adam Connolly. “The deeper we can bury this the better.”

“Alright, let’s do that,” said Ian. “And everyone else, let’s be clear.

This meeting never happened. Agreed?”

“What meeting?” said Adam Connolly.

“Exactly,” said Ian. “Oh, and one more thing,” Ian turned to look at Shelby, who like everyone else, was starting to gather her stuff.

“Hell of a job, Shelby. Whatever the fuck it was you did, hell of a job.”

“Yes,” said Rebecca, as Derek Castellano and Adam Connolly nodded in agreement.

Ian stood up, envelope in hand. He handed it to Shelby. “I think you’ll see that our appreciation is reflected in your compensation. There’s a bit more there than we agreed to. I’m assuming that’s all right with everyone here?”

Nobody seemed to have a problem with that. After all, none of them as much as blinked when Ian had told them it would cost them each \$400,000 to make The Exiles go away.

Shelby smiled to herself as she accepted the envelope.

Damn, she thought.

Guess I should have gotten the suite for two weeks.

Chapter 45

Page 5 – Advertising Age – First Column

Viktor Holl's piece ran the next week.

Well, well, well.

The results are apparently in and as I predicted earlier, people are not voluntarily choosing to spend time with commercials. A major brand, one of our country's largest advertisers, has run a test which would allow viewers to opt in to commercials online.

No forced views. No in-stream placements. Nope.

If you want to watch the commercials, you need to choose to do so.

I know.

Fairly difficult to believe, right?

Giving the viewer the option to opt in to a commercial and thinking that they will actually do it.

But wait, that's not all.

Not only did they want people to opt in, but the group creating the spots, opted to be paid based on how

long the spots held the viewers' interest. The longer viewers watched for, the more the creators would make. That takes somechutzpah. Thinking that they are clever enough to create a commercial that people would actually want to spend time with. Most people don't want to spend time with their relatives. And those are people they supposedly love. According to my sources, the results were dismal. Of those that did opt in, and I personally believe that most of those were by accident, but those that supposedly chose to opt in watched, on average, 12% of the spots. I think that's because it took them that long just to figure out how to turn the damn thing off. By only watching 12%, it means that they chose not to watch 88% of the spot. Now I'm not a mathematical genius, but even I can figure out that this is not a good use of advertising dollars. The creative group that was behind this debacle, that thought that they alone were good enough to change the way that advertising works, were called The Creative Exiles, headed by a chap named Nick Watson. All I can imagine is that after this disaster, this so-called bunch of creatives will indeed be exiled. In talking with Simon Foster, our favorite media guru at Publicis, he explained it to me this way. We all know

*that advertising works on a tried and true method of
interruption which helps create share of voice which
leads to share of mind which then creates share of market.
The more an advertiser spends on media, the greater their
share of voice, and the better their return for the brand.
As my readers all know, I've quoted Mr Foster many
times in the past. Seldom have I found him to be wrong.
There is only one way that advertising works.
And as this little experiment has just plainly shown,
there is only one way it always will.*

Chapter 46

San Francisco – SOMA – The House of Shields

It had been a bad week for Nick Watson.

His phone hadn't stopped ringing for days. Apparently there was no one in the business who hadn't read Viktor Holl's piece.

Kat had told him not to answer any calls. Period. Most were from reporters, asking him to comment. Those were easy to ignore. But some were from friends, mostly asking how he was holding up.

Those he took.

Well, some.

One was from Ted Donald. Nick took that call.

"Rough week, I bet," begin Ted

"You could say that," replied Nick.

"I wish that I could make it better."

"Does that mean what I think it means?"

"It's not that I don't want to proceed, Nick, I do," said Ted. "But the powers that be, you know."

"Yeah, I know all about the powers that be."

"Maybe when all this blows over, maybe then we can talk some more. I mean, I think you're really on to something here. You're just a

little bit ahead of the curve.”

“You’re not the first to say that, Ted.”

“Stay positive, Nick.”

“Yeah, sure, Ted. No problem. We’ll catch up later.”

What are you supposed to do, thought Nick as he hung up, when something you know is right, turns out to be wrong?

To take his mind off of it, he had been on his bike a lot more. It was a way to leave his phone behind and avoid the calls.

And, he was drinking. Heavily. Another way to escape. Not so much the calls. But the doubt in his mind that kept creeping in. Had he ever been truly right about this? About creative being the driving force behind successful advertising. He didn’t like questioning that. It was too much like questioning his own existence.

He would stay at the office after Kat and everyone else had left. Pour a bourbon. Then another. Crank the music. It would help. For awhile. Until he would start to feel sorry for himself. And lonely.

Then, he’d wander.

There were numerous bars close to the office. But tonight, like most nights, felt like a House of Shields night.

It was around seven when he walked in. As usual, it was dark. That’s what he liked about the place. The darkness. Not only did it fit his mood but he could hide himself here.

Finding an empty stool at the long bar, he sat down and ordered a bourbon. Just one more, he told himself. Before it even arrived, he knew

one more wouldn't be enough.

He took a quick glance around. The place was already fairly full for a Wednesday night. Nope. Don't know anybody. Good, he thought.

Wait. He watched as one guy stumbled back to his place at the bar from the gents.

David Wilkins. What the hell?

Grabbing his glass from the bar, Nick walked down to the one empty stool next to Wilkins. "David."

Wilkins didn't move. He didn't even look up. From the looks of it, he had been there awhile.

"You been here long?" he asked.

"Since they opened."

"They open at two, David."

"Sounds 'bout right."

"What's the occasion?" asked Nick, trying to lighten the mood.

"Getting fucked over by a broad," replied Wilkins. Nick had heard something about Wilkins having a new girl. Apparently, it hadn't worked out.

"I'm guessing that this is about what's her name... Shirley?"

"Shelby."

"That's it. Right. How come you never introduced me, Wilkins?"

David Wilkins finally looked up, staring straight at Nick with eyes that couldn't hide the fact that they'd been crying. Then he shook his head.

“You’re the fucking reason I met her, asshole,” said Wilkins.

Now it was Nick’s turn to stare. Finishing his bourbon, he got the bartender’s attention and gestured to his empty glass. When the bartender pointed to Wilkins’ almost empty glass, Watson shook his head no.

“David, I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Wilkins started to laugh. “That’s just it,” he said. “You have no fucking idea, do you? Period. You got played, buddy.”

“Played? What do you mean I got... I mean, by who?”

“Me. The powers that be. The holding companies. Big media. Shelby... I could go on... you want more?”

Nick’s bourbon was placed on the bar in front of him. “Yeah, Wilkins, I want more,” he said.

“And so do I,” said David, finishing what was left in his glass. The bartender looked at Nick for direction. Nick nodded. “One more, David. Then I’m getting you home.”

“Naw, you’re not taking me home. Fuck, you’re not taking me anywhere. If I tell you any more, the only place you’ll want to take me is straight to hell.”

Nick waited for David’s drink to arrive. “So you’re upset about this girl, I get that. What I don’t get...”

“She just walked out, Nick. She won’t return my texts. My calls. I thought, what the... and then I finally, I mean, man, I finally figured it out. She was just fucking me so that I’d fuck you.”

Nick looked around the room to see if anyone was listening. Then he leaned in closer to Wilkins and whispered. “And how exactly did you fuck me, David?”

David Wilkins slowly turned to look at Nick. He held his stare so long that it started to make Nick feel uncomfortable.

“It was 85, man.”

“What was eighty-five?” asked Nick, confused. “Eighty-five what?”

“The percentage. The fucking percentage wasn’t 12. It was 85. The average time spent with the spots was 85%.”

Now it was Nick’s turn to stare. “Wilkins, how drunk are you?”

“Drunk enough to finally have the balls to tell you the truth.”

“Eighty-five percent. And you have the raw data for that?”

“Yeah. Of course.”

“But, why?”

“Why what? Why me? Or, why the holding companies? C’mon, Nick. The holding companies weren’t going to let you win. Shelby was working with them... the holding companies. She’s the one who convinced me that you didn’t have a chance. So she paid me a shitload of money to stab you in the back. A fucking shitload. You really have no idea.”

Reaching for his bourbon, David could feel Nick’s temper rising. Defensively, he put his hand up to block any punches Nick might throw.

Reaching around his raised hand, Nick grabbed Wilkins by his shirt collar and yanked him off his stool. But before he could throw a punch,

David's legs gave out, sprawling him out on the floor.

"Get up, Wilkins," Nick yelled. "God damn you, get up."

There was no way that was going to happen. At least, not without help.

Looking around, Nick saw that others in the bar were staring at them.

"It's all right," he said to those looking over at them, trying to calm himself down at the same time. "My buddy's just had a bit too much to drink."

Grabbing Wilkins under his arms, he hoisted him back up on his stool.

"Wilkins... David... can you still hear me?"

Wilkins nodded. He hadn't passed out. Yet.

"Just let me say, Nick, I mean, you have every right to punch me out. But, but before you do, I mean, I gotta say, it wasn't just about the money. You probably won't believe that. Just like you probably won't believe this. But deep down a part of me wanted to believe that I actually finally found someone who loved me."

#

Nick stepped outside. He needed some air to clear his head. Taking out his phone, he called Kat.

"I told you Wilkins was a sleaze-ball," she said, after Nick relayed

what Wilkins had told him.

“He says he was in love.”

“The man doesn’t know what love is, Nick, unless he’s looking in the mirror.”

“But what he does know is the right number. And he has the raw data to prove it. He’s going to get us that data tomorrow.”

“If he’s not too hungover to remember, you mean.”

“Now what?” said Nick. “I mean, what do I... what do *we* do with the numbers, Kat? Ford has moved on. They’ve written us off.”

Kat smiled. She liked this part of Nick. The vulnerable, needy part. With most people he couldn’t be that way. With most people he put up a false front, always coming across as being sure of himself. Always having to have the right answer. The perfect solution. But she knew it was all an act. He was just as confused as every other sucker on the planet.

But now, now he needed her. And yeah, she liked that. A lot, actually.

“You fight, Nick. Once you have the raw data, you fight. Starting with that Viktor Holl asshole. Tomorrow, you’re going to write a response that drills him a fucking new one.”

Chapter 47

Advertising Publications – Multiple

Nick's response ran in all the trade pubs the next week.

Well, well, well.

I don't know Viktor Holl. And, I'm not sure that I even want to.

But what I do know is advertising. And what I do know is that when it comes to advertising, creative is more important than media.

Mr Holl was quite disparaging in his remarks regarding the ability of not only myself, but of all creative people in advertising, to be able to produce the type of work that viewers would actually want to spend time with. That anyone would have enough – chutzpah was the word he used – to think that they could create a story about a brand that could entertain, seduce, captivate and hold the attention of a viewer, was pure folly.

And I will have to admit that there is indeed folly involved.

But in this particular situation, it pertains to the number that Mr Holl used to defend his position.

12%.

Apparently, this number represented the average view time

of the commercials in question. But what has recently been disclosed is that this was a number invented by the holding companies to guarantee that this experiment failed.

Am I saying that 12% is a bogus number?

As a matter of fact, I am. And the reason that I am is because I have the raw data that shows a very different number for average view time.

Why did the holding companies not want anyone to see the real number? That would be a good question for Simon Foster, the Publicis media wonk and high up mucky-muck in one of the aforementioned holding companies.

Mr Foster likes to sell the idea that share of voice equals share of mind which then creates share of market. Why does he like to sell this? It means that advertisers need to spend a lot of money on media to create that share of voice.

And where is the big money in advertising these days?

Yep. In buying media.

But today's digital realities offer a new way for advertising to work. Instead of share of voice, we can now create share of time to create share of mind and ultimately, share of market.

The more time a consumer spends with the brand, the greater the possibility of a sale. Which means that share of market is no longer based solely on the amount of media that runs.

It's also the creative that makes the difference.

In fact, on the digital platform, I would argue that it's the sharper nail that is more effective than the heavier hammer.

If Mr Foster would like to stop hiding behind Viktor Holl's skirts and talk about this, man to man, I would be happy to oblige.

But it should, should it not, be a conversation shared?

Name the place, Mr Foster. Name the date. And let's have at it.

I know that Mr Holl has said that he has seldom found you to be wrong.

Isn't it time to see how right he actually is?

Chapter 48

New York City – Bemelmans Bar – The Carlyle Hotel

“This could not have turned out better, Simon,” said Viktor.

They were sharing drinks at Bemelmans, the Upper East Side bar located in the Carlyle Hotel, talking about Nick’s rebuttal in the press.

Viktor particularly enjoyed Bemelmans because it was frequented by socialites, politicians, movie stars and moguls. People with money. Shitloads of money. Making them potential clients, one and all.

“What do you mean it could not have turned out better?” said Simon. “I mean, c’mon, Viktor, he wants a fucking confrontation.”

“Yep. And we’re going to give him one.”

“But he wants it in public.”

“And I’ve got just the venue,” said Viktor. “Advertising Week. I’ve already talked to those who are putting it on and suggested that I be the moderator between you and Watson. After all the attention Watson’s post got, they love the idea.”

“You want us to square off at Advertising Week? Like up on a stage or something?”

“Exactly. Think about it, Simon. We’ll set it up like the WWE. A

main event kind of match. Advertising Week thinks it will sell out in a heartbeat.”

“You’re crazy, Viktor.”

“Yep. Like a fox. ‘Cause here’s the thing. If I’m the moderator, I can skew the questions your way. It will be two against one.”

Simon was shaking his head. The only thing he wanted was for the whole thing to go away.

“I don’t want to square off. Period. I know Watson. He’s good with words.”

“I don’t see where you have much choice, buddy. He called you out. Publicly. And besides, this isn’t about words, Simon. It’s about numbers. And those my friend, are what you’re good at. This gives you the chance to put this away for good. And if you do, well, when leadership changes at Publicis, guess who will be in prime position for the top job?”

“You think so? Why? Have you heard something?”

“According to my sources, Publicis Groupe is open to a change at the top. Your timing couldn’t be better.”

“When is this fucking Advertising Week thing?”

“In ten days. Right here in NYC.”

“And you’re sure you can moderate? I mean, I need you in my corner with this.”

“Like I said, two against one. C’mon, Simon. He’s a fucking creative guy. Once you start talking media and numbers, you’ll play him

like a banjo.”

“Fiddle.”

“Pardon me.”

“Fiddle. It’s an idiom. You play someone like a fiddle...not a...”

“Simon! Focus. This is going to be good for you. Trust me.”

“Alright. Alright. Sorry. Go ahead. Set it up, I guess. But Viktor, I want all the questions beforehand. You got to promise me that.”

“Shouldn’t be a problem, my friend. I mean, hell, you’re the one who’s gonna write ‘em.”

Chapter 49

San Francisco – SOMA – Nick and Kat’s Office

Word spread fast as the battle royale drew nearer. Advertising Week was promoting it as *Media versus Creative, Which Will Control Our Digital Future?*

Interest was so high that the event sold out overnight. Viktor Holl floated the idea of making it into a pay per view event. Advertising Week agreed. Of course, this meant that Viktor would take a little off the top.

Market Rate, the highly-rated, cable news program, had even reached out to Viktor, seeing if he wouldn’t mind being a guest on their program, maybe even a long-standing gig to talk about the advertising business.

Nope, in Viktor’s mind, it really couldn’t have turned out any better.

In Nick’s mind, it was a little different.

All of the Exiles had already contacted him, offering him words of encouragement. Most also had ideas and advice. All well intentioned, but it was starting to overwhelm him. He knew that there was a lot riding on this. On him. It wasn’t just about righting a wrong anymore. No. It had turned into something much bigger. Now it was about the future of

creativity in advertising.

In panic mode, he turned to Kat. They held mock versions as to how they envisioned the confrontation unfolding. Kat would play the role of Simon Foster. Nick would find himself constantly correcting her. “I know Simon. I worked with him. He’s a take no prisoners type of guy. You need to be meaner, Kat. If there’s a jugular exposed, he’s going to cut it.”

So Kat would turn it up a notch. And then she’d crank it one higher. Until she would finally manage to make Nick tell her to “fuck off”. That’s when she knew she had touched on his creative insecurities, which were surprisingly fragile at the best of times.

“You’re weak, Watson,” she’d say. “If you can’t handle this, Foster is going to slice and dice you like a deli sandwich.”

They’d take a break for an hour. Then they’d hit it again. During one of their breaks, David Wilkins stopped in.

“Look who’s here,” said Kat. “Mr Two-Face.”

“Kat, you’re looking well,” replied David.

“Shut the fuck up, Wilkins,” said Kat, getting up to leave. She usually refused to even be in the same room with David Wilkins.

“Fair enough. Guess I deserve that.”

As Kat headed for the door, David sat down. “Just stopped by to see if I could help, Nick. You’re going to need to be up to speed on all the digital data stuff. That’s my bailiwick.”

“I don’t know why you think I should listen to you, David? You

fucked me over. Why in God's name do you think I would want to trust you now?"

"Revenge, maybe," said Wilkins.

Nick shook his head. It was too late. He was past the revenge stage.

"Not for you, asshole. For me," said Wilkins. "And not just against Shelby. Against the whole thing, the whole fucking system. I mean, I gave you the fake numbers that got you into this mess. And I'm the only one that can give you the real numbers that can get you out of it. But I understand. I'll leave. Just thought I'd offer."

As David stood up, Nick looked over to see Kat standing in the doorway. She had remained just outside the door, listening to the whole thing. She knew Nick needed help and she knew she couldn't give him as much input as Wilkins could. Shrugging her shoulders, she nodded okay.

"David," said Nick. "Wait. Okay. You're right. If you think you can help, I can probably use it."

"You sure?" he said, turning around and sitting back down.

Nick nodded.

So replacing Kat as Simon Foster, David started asking questions, throwing out numbers, challenging Nick on his answers until Nick got up and walked away out of frustration.

Once he calmed down and returned to the room, David would start again. "You have to prepare for this like a trial, Nick. I know it's not a court of law, but it is a court of public opinion. They're going to come after you, you know that. The holding companies want you dead and

buried and you should be looking at Foster as their undertaker. He's just going to try to get you to dig your own grave before tossing you in it."

"So you think it was wrong to publicly challenge him?" asked Nick.

"Not wrong. I mean, you did what you thought was right. But just because you did what was right doesn't automatically mean you're going to win. The cosmic universe doesn't always play fair."

"So? What do I do?"

"Have you forgotten what you've always told me about advertising?"

Nick looked at Wilkins waiting for him to go on.

"That it's not just about substance. It's also about style."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning it's not just what you say, but how you say it. The more you can wrap your arguments up in a story, the better off you're going to be. Isn't that your strength? Storytelling. I mean, c'mon Nick. You're the one who's always telling me that stories are 22 times more memorable than facts alone."

"Yeah, so?"

"So tell fucking stories. Don't try to debate numbers. This will be just like with most anything in life, people will decide emotionally. I mean fuck, emotion is 90% of the reason anyone buys anything?"

"Let me say it again, so?"

"So... if that's actually true, then why in the hell would this be any different?"

Nick shrugged his shoulders. He still wasn't sure. Seeing that Kat had come back into the room, he asked her.

“Thoughts?”

“Sounds about right,” said Kat. “But just in case, I'd feel a hell of a lot better if we had a back-up plan.”

Chapter 50

New York City – Upper East Side – Viktor Holl’s Apartment

Viktor Holl was going through the suits in his closet.

Where was that Armani he saved for special occasions? The one with the perfect drape. He needed to find it as he knew it would make him look spectacular on TV.

What a coup, he thought. Two months ago he had just been an online blogger and now look. He was on the verge of becoming a contributor on *Market Rate*.

Apparently, they would be sending two of their reporters to cover the event, live. No surprise there. The combined revenue for the five top holding companies was in the neighborhood of \$50-\$60 billion. If that stood a chance of being reduced even a little, it would have wide financial repercussions for the entire industry and beyond.

Viktor reminded himself to make sure to stop by and shoot the shit with them before the event started. Another reason that he needed to look good. Another reason for the Armani.

As for the event itself, Simon had crafted a list of questions that he wanted Viktor to ask. Questions that he knew only a media person would have the answers to. Which meant Simon would have to do most

of the talking, basically shutting Nick out of the discussion. Not surprisingly, the answers would justify spending enormous amounts of money on media.

As well as providing proof that it worked.

Ah, there it was. The Armani. Dark blue. He'd pair it up with a double-monk strap, cognac-colored pair of shoes. Yep, he would be sharp. TV-ready.

Advertising Week was getting more and more excited about the confrontation too. They had even agreed that because this was also now a pay per view event, the discussion shouldn't just be an hour, but 90 minutes. Fine with Viktor.

The longer the better as far as he was concerned. Longer meant more airtime, more face time.

More Viktor time.

And really, wasn't that what this was truly all about?

Chapter 51

New York City – Advertising Week – Backstage

The stage was set.

Three chairs sat in front of a wall-size screen showing two boxing gloves facing off. One glove had the word “Media” on it. The other, “Creative.”

Shaking his head, Nick could only smile. And to think that media and creative used to consider themselves partners when it came to solving advertising problems.

He was told that once they got going, the screen behind them would become a live feed, showing questions asked by the audience in real time. Also, thumbs up or thumbs down emojis could be sent to the screen from the audience as they reacted to things that either he or Simon were saying.

Cute, thought Nick, as he peered out at the large crowd from backstage. They really are promoting this as a battle royale. Every seat was full, but people were still crowding in. It was standing room only, literally. There were cameras set up around the room, as well as a mobile cameraman down in front. No doubt there to catch a close-up of the sweat which will be rolling down my face, thought Nick.

He had seen Viktor Holl walk by backstage, dressed in what Nick assumed was Armani. Nick had never been an Armani guy. He figured that his jeans and blazer had got him here, go with what you know.

Two people he vaguely recognized came up to talk to Viktor. Wait, aren't they cable TV reporters? What the hell? Obviously, it's not me they want to talk to, he thought.

Seeing Kat take her seat in the front row, he smiled. Good. He needed her to be in his eye-line the entire time. He was hoping that if he faltered, she'd be able to mouth him the answer. Yeah, like that is gonna work.

A tap on his shoulder made him turn around.

"Nick, it's been a while, hasn't it?"

Simon Foster was standing there. Also in a suit. He put out his hand.

Nick looked first at the hand and then at Simon. "Let's not pretend that we're friends, alright?"

Simon smiled as he slowly brought his hand back down. "Sorry it had to come to this, Nick. But as I recall, you were the one who asked for a public confrontation."

"There's public and then there's this shitshow," said Nick, gesturing to the crowd that awaited them. "You really want to embarrass me, don't you?"

"Naw. I always found that you were pretty good at doing that to yourself," replied Simon, a smug grin appearing on his face.

Wilkins was right, thought Nick. They really do want to bury me. Simon shrugged. "Alright then. See you out there."

As Simon turned to leave, Nick spoke up. "Mind if I ask you a question, Simon? I mean, here, in private, just between us?"

"No, I suppose not. Go ahead. Shoot."

"Is lying an innate trait with people in media? Or is it something that you need to practice to get good at?"

"Very cute," said Simon. "Good to see that you haven't changed, Nick. Still as sarcastic about media as always. But as we both know, media is just numbers. That's all I deal with. Numbers. And the nice thing about numbers, Nick, is, well, numbers don't lie. They are what they are. Your problem is that you just refuse to accept the numbers for what they are. Facts. See you out there, buddy. And by the way, I have a suggestion for you."

"Yeah, what's that?"

"Bring your A game."

Numbers, thought Nick, as he watched Simon walk away.

You're right, Simon, numbers don't lie.

But the people that rely on them usually do.

Chapter 52

New York City – Advertising Week – Main Stage

“Well, well, well, aren’t we a big, beautiful group of important people?”

Viktor Holl was already up on stage addressing the crowd as Nick and Simon walked out and took their respective seats.

“I want to thank Advertising Week for putting this event on and all of you for helping to make it happen. As you probably know, interest has been so high for this little discussion that we also have today’s confrontation being simultaneously broadcast as a pay-per-view event.”

As the audience applauded themselves for being lucky enough to attend in person, Viktor mugged for the roving cameraman closest to the stage before pointing to the large screen behind him.

“Now we’re hoping that all of you will join in and be active participants because this screen behind me here is actually an interactive device. Download the app on your phone and you can react in real time with thumbs up or thumbs down emojis as we discuss today – media versus creative. Which will control our digital future?”

Again, the crowd cheered. Already some thumbs-up emojis were showing up on the screen.

“Also, you can send any questions you have, at any time, directly to the screen. Immediately a question appeared. *Nice suit, Viktor. Armani?*”

Viktor couldn’t help but smile when he saw it. “As a matter of fact...” As more thumbs up emojis appeared, Viktor took a bow. Settling the crowd down, he continued.

“Now, how many from media here in the audience?” The screen quickly filled with thumbs up emojis. “And, creative?” asked Viktor. A smattering of thumbs up emojis. And, even a few thumbs down emojis.

Viktor turned to Nick. “Ouch. Nick, it doesn’t appear as if you’re playing in front of a home crowd today. So sorry.”

Yeah, right, thought Nick.

Turning back to the audience, Viktor continued. “And to answer that media versus creative question for us, we really couldn’t have two better representatives. From the media side, a person who needs no introduction. A person who I think we all believe is perhaps the most respected name in media today.”

A small chant started to build in the crowd. “Simon, Simon, Simon, Simon...”

Viktor raised his voice to be heard over the crowd. “From the Publicis Groupe, and while he normally works out of Paris, he has most graciously agreed to join us today, the one and the only, Mr Simon Foster.”

Nick looked on in amazement. The crowd was actually standing and cheering. Jesus, he thought. That wasn’t so much an introduction as

it was an endorsement. He's setting it up just like the fucking WWE.

Viktor waited for the crowd to quiet down and return to their seats before continuing. "And representing the creative side of the argument is, of course, Nick Watson, the owner of a small agency in San Francisco and leader of a group called..."

Viktor paused, apparently having trouble remembering what he was going to say.

"Wait, I have it here somewhere. Just give me a moment..."

Reaching into his suit jacket pocket he pulled out a slip of paper.

"Ah, yes. Here it is. The Creative Exiles."

Cute, thought Nick.

One set of hands clapped in the audience. Nick looked over at Kat and smiled.

"Interesting name, Nick," said Viktor. "I may call you Nick, correct?"

Nick looked up at Viktor, holding his gaze. Not just for a second or two, but long enough to make everyone watching start to feel a little uncomfortable. He was told later that it had been almost 15 seconds. Finally he spoke. "You know, my friends call me Nick. So, Viktor, why don't you stick to Mr Watson."

Boos filled the room. Thumbs down emojis quickly populated the screen. Well, they were certainly getting into this, thought Nick.

"Okay then," continued Viktor, looking hurt, playing to the crowd. "But the name Exiles... ah, Mr Watson... could you explain that? I

mean usually exile means expulsion from something or someone banished. Then again, perhaps you were just a big fan of the tune *Give Me One More Chance* by the band Exile.”

The audience laughed and applauded, lapping it up.

“Well, it does appear as if we are going to *give you one more chance*, Mr Watson. Right here and right now. What do you say, should we get this show on the road?”

The crowd cheered wildly. Thumbs up across the screen.

Fuck me, thought Nick.

Chapter 53

New York City – 437 Madison Avenue – Omnicom Group Headquarters

Shelby had been invited to watch the event with Ian Winston and Rebecca Winters in Ian's spacious office at Omnicom's New York headquarters.

She had ended up spending three weeks in her suite at the Peninsula Hotel just so that she could stay in New York and be with Ian on the day of the event. As it turned out, it didn't even feel like a splurge, thanks to the holding companies's so-called *extra appreciation* that she had discovered in the envelope that Ian had handed her.

"Kind of a spiffy office, Ian," said Rebecca as she took a seat on one end of the couch, rubbing her hand across the soft leather. "I guess Finance Directors score higher than Risk Officers."

"It's only tenure, Rebecca, I assure you. As we all know, I'm much, much older. Hang around long enough and they feel that they have no choice but to treat you with a better than average office."

Shelby could only look around the room with awe. Better than average is one thing. But this office looked like it had come straight off a movie set. Jesus, look at that TV. It took up almost the entire wall. I've

been in smaller movie theaters, she thought.

Ian smiled sheepishly, somewhat embarrassed, as he turned the TV on. “It’s a tad oversized, I realize. But I’m told that we *are* in the entertainment business, right? Now let’s just hope that this is as entertaining as we all think it’s going to be.”

“So, Shelby, what actually happened?” asked Rebecca, as Ian fiddled with the remote trying to navigate his way to the pay-per-view channel. “When we last met at the Peninsula Hotel, you implied that it was all taken care of. We left it at that, not wanting to get into any of the details. But maybe now, you know, just between us, perhaps the details would be beneficial. I mean, I for one would like to know what I paid \$400,000 for.”

Shelby hesitated. “I guessed wrong,” she said. “I thought two million bucks would guarantee loyalty. Generally, it does. This time, it didn’t.”

“No honor among thieves, Shelby,” said Ian. “We almost got away with it. No, let me rephrase that. We did get away with it.”

“Why do you say that, Ian?” asked Rebecca.

“Because I have faith in Simon,” he said, pointing to the screen. “And it doesn’t hurt that I helped him write the questions that Viktor Holl will be asking.”

Rebecca took a deep breath. “I see,” she said, looking a little uncomfortable with Ian’s last statement.

“You know it’s funny but the research company, Ipsos – they

recently completed a study. Of the 18 professions they examined, ad executives were ranked the lowest of the non-political occupations. Think about that for a moment. Here we are, the industry that is supposed to be the experts in enhancing the reputations of the world's biggest and best brands, and yet we, ourselves, have one of the lowest reputations of the world's businesses."

Shaking her head, she continued. "I guess with what we're doing here, now, with you, Ian, helping to write the questions, well, I guess it's not surprising that we're ranked as low as we are, huh?"

Shelby could understand the pain that Rebecca was expressing. She had once agonized over the lack of integrity in the advertising business too. But she had found the best way to get over it was to get paid to defend it. After all, it was this so-called lack of integrity that usually got the ad biz into the problems that Shelby was hired to extricate them from. Something that had proven to be quite lucrative for her.

Ian, on the other hand, had missed everything Rebecca was saying. He was more focused with what was happening on the screen. "Here we go," Ian said, pointing to the TV where Viktor was addressing the crowd and Nick and Simon were taking their seats. "It's starting."

Watson looks pretty uncomfortable, thought Shelby. Up to now, she had only seen his photo online. H'mph. Somehow he looked better in pictures.

David Wilkins flashed through her mind. It was the first time she

had thought of him in weeks. Ever since she got paid. Funny that, huh?

He had finally stopped texting. That made her feel a little better. Not that she had any real regrets. Hell, she had warned him that she used trust as a weapon. Why is it, she thought, that when you tell people that you can't be trusted, they always refuse to believe you?

"Simon does looks sharp," said Rebecca. "I never liked Viktor Holl. But that's neither here nor there I guess. As for Nick Watson, well, to be honest, after today, I hope I never hear that guy's name again."

Chapter 54

New York City – Advertising Week – Main Stage

“So, gentlemen, media versus creative,” Viktor began. “Simon, it appears as if you and Nick... oops...”

Viktor paused, feigning sincerity. “I’m so sorry, Mr Watson here...”

The audience laughed right along with him.

“...have a slight difference of opinion as to how advertising best works online. Simon, you say that share of voice is necessary to create share of market. Mr Watson disagrees, saying it’s what, share of time? Sorry for my confusion, but I always thought those two things were actually one and the same. I mean, isn’t share of voice how one actually goes about buying share of time?”

“Well, that’s right, Viktor,” answered Simon. “All of our studies have shown that to make an impact, whether online or off, the greater a brand’s voice in the marketplace, in other words the more money spent on media, the more exposure that your advertising gets, the more your sales get lifted. That’s basically Media 101.”

Nick could see that most of the heads in the audience were nodding in agreement. Turning to look at the screen behind him, he saw it filling up with thumbs-up emojis.

“And Mr Watson, what do you have to say to that, if anything?”

asked Viktor, somewhat smugly, thought Nick.

“I’d have to say that Simon is right,” replied Nick. “It is Media 101.”

Simon looked a bit perplexed. He had been expecting a more spirited defense. When he saw it wasn’t coming, he continued.

“I mean Viktor, as you are probably aware, digital ad revenues surged into the triple digits in 2018, reaching \$107 billion in the US alone. That was up 22% from the year before. Every year, year after year, digital ad revenues are going up. Which means that advertisers are not only seeing value in spending more online but that they also truly understand the one basic rule of advertising.”

“Which is?” asked Viktor.

“That they need to spend money on their brands to be able to make money off of their brands.”

Thumbs up quickly filled the screen.

Glancing at the screen, Viktor couldn’t help but smile. This could not have been going better.

“According to the audience’s reaction, it seems as if Simon has a good point here, Mr Watson,” said Viktor. “Consumers are spending more and more time online. Last I read, the average American now spends four hours a day online. That’s not an inconsequential number. So it’s difficult to argue that advertisers shouldn’t be buying more and more time online as well. After all, if that’s where the people are, shouldn’t that be where the advertisers are advertising? I mean, as Willie

Sutton, the famous bank robber said when asked why he robs banks - 'Because that's where the money is'."

Lots of thumbs up filled the screen as laughter filled the auditorium. "So Simon," he continued, "do you have some examples that you can share with us about advertisers who increased their share of spend online and also increased their share of market?"

"As a matter of fact I do," said Simon. "Thanks for asking."

And, as if on cue, off he went.

#

Kat was watching Nick closely. She knew that her role was to act as his cornerman, evaluating how he was taking the punches. Offering moral support if nothing else.

It didn't surprise her that the crowd was heavily on the side of media. Advertising conferences were mostly attended by media and technology types. They liked having platforms from which they could spout off in their trendy jargon about what technological changes the future will bring. They knew that no one can actually be wrong forecasting the future because once the future arrived, everyone had already forgotten what bullshit anyone had been predicting in the first place.

But *acting* as if they knew something about tomorrow let them charge a lot more today.

What a crock, Kat thought. They were all mistaking technology for advertising. The two aren't the same. Advertising is about understanding human beings, not technological platforms. It's about understanding the reasons people buy.

What motivates them. The *why* of the sale.

Period.

But go to any advertising conference today and all you'll hear about are ways to use new technology. Mostly regarding how it can help advertising intrude in people's lives in an even more irritating fashion. It's as if that's all advertising was to these media grunts – an intrusion. So much time was spent trying to figure out new ways to get advertising in front of people that no one had any time left to figure out how to communicate with them if they ever decided to pay attention.

She knew the numbers. More than 62% of consumers read product reviews online with eight in ten saying that their purchase decision is influenced by these reviews. While advertising still had a role in consumers' decision-making, that role had changed. Advertising had been downgraded to being at best an *opinion*. Just one of many opinions that consumers considered before buying the product. What's more, consumers think of advertising as a *biased* opinion because it's paid for by the advertiser. At least more biased than the opinions offered by actual users of the product.

If that doesn't change how you approach people with advertising, then Kat didn't know what would. Who doesn't research a \$200 product

online before they buy, she thought. And it's not just the expensive items anymore – cameras, cars, or washing machines. Hell, today 70% of consumers do internet searches on everyday grocery items. Like researching potato chips for up to 30 minutes. Why? Because it's *their* initiative. It's *their* time. It's *their* choice. And because it's their choice, they can choose to spend their time the way that *they* want. It really is as simple as that. People are looking for advantage. For truth. For honesty. They're actively searching for answers. If they want to spend 30 minutes researching potato chips, fine. It's *their* 30 minutes.

And that's what the industry seemed to be mis-reading about the online platform. The fact that they were no longer in control.

The tech gurus ignored this by pushing the old media models gussied up in new clothes. But strip their so-called *new* models down and what do you find? The same old reach and frequency story. Hit 'em once, twice, twenty times. The more the better. Batter the consumer into submission. And as consumers complained and took action – increasing the total number of devices around the world with ad blockers from 142 million to some 615 million over the course of one year – the media strategy was what? Simply to increase their marketing efforts in an attempt to overcome any added consumer resistance.

It was a twisted logic. Not unlike a prison warden arguing that the beatings will stop when the morale improves.

But if you're not in control, the battering, the attempts at domination, no longer work. Which was why the belief that advertising

can still sell anybody anything online was starting to become an antiquated one at best.

That was the one thing that Nick had drilled into her. That online, marketers no longer sell. People buy.

When he had first discussed this with her, Kat balked. “What do you mean we no longer sell shit. You’re crazy, Watson. It’s advertising. Advertising sells shit. That’s what advertising does.”

“Listen, Kat, it’s not me who first said this. It was Tim Berners-Lee.”

“Okay, enlighten me, Mr Wikipedia,” said Kat. “Who’s this Berners-Lee guy?”

“Inventor of the World Wide Web. Time Magazine labeled him one of the 100 most important people of the 20th century. He’s the one who is quoted as saying “The internet is not a selling medium. It’s a buying medium.”

“Really? The creator of the internet said that?”

“Afraid so. And that’s what people aren’t getting yet. Power has shifted. Irreversibly so. Instead of trying to circumvent control, we should be focusing on how to cultivate it. We should not be looking at control shifting as a problem to overcome but rather as a solution to be embraced.”

She had been monitoring the live Twitter reactions on her phone. None were positive regarding Nick’s performance. There was even an ad hoc Twitter committee, a bunch of advertising wonks who were working

as so-called unbiased judges, scoring the debate in real time. If there wasn't a clear-cut knock-out, they themselves would deliver a decision and declare a winner. Nobody seemed to mind that this ad hoc committee was being sponsored by big media.

Yeah, like that was going to be fair.

C'mon, Watson, throw a punch, will ya?

I know you're an Ali fan, but it's time to cut it with all this rope-a-dope shit.

#

The *Market Rate* TV reporters were live-streaming their take on the confrontation from the makeshift studio they had set-up in the back of the auditorium.

They realized the importance of this little debate. The total revenue of the top five holding companies was in the neighborhood of \$50 billion. Start messing with that and shares would undoubtedly take a beating. From a purely financial perspective, it would be best if things stayed as they were.

But there was something interesting about the “earning your keep” philosophy that Watson was suggesting. As there was in seeing someone actually stand up and challenge the big boys. What was it John Houseman used to say in those old Smith Barney commercials? “They make money the old-fashioned way. They earn it.”

So while part of them shuddered at the thought of watching an

entire industry come tumbling down, another part was actually rooting for Nick. Rooting for the underdog.

#

Simon had just finished sharing another example about yet another advertiser who was shifting millions in media from broadcast to digital. The way he phrased it, he sure made it seem as if every smart advertiser in the world was doing the same.

The thumbs up emojis enveloping the screen indicated that the audience agreed.

“Well, Simon,” said Viktor, “those certainly appear to be some convincing arguments as to why share of time does indeed lead to share of market. Nick... oh, so sorry, I mean, Mr Watson... would you like to comment?”

“Well, if you don’t mind, I would like to share a story of my own,” said Nick. “If that’s okay with everyone?”

Viktor looked over at Simon who nodded.

“By all means,” Viktor said.

“I had a client who wanted to run a longer-form commercial online. This particular commercial was two minutes and twenty seconds in length. We ran it online for six days on one site only. Because of the length of the spot, a viewer would have to opt in to watch it. In other words, the user would have to initiate the interaction with the

commercial by pressing play. Over six days, 1,542 people started to watch it by doing just that – pressing play. If Simon was buying impressions, a number that low would be insignificant. Not considered important. Too small to matter. Am I right about that, Simon?”

“Ah, yeah, you’re right,” laughed Simon, at the obviousness of his answer. As did most everyone in the audience.

Nick nodded and continued. “During the one week that it ran, the average time spent with this two minute and twenty second spot was one minute and fifty seconds. This advertiser then did the math – average time spent multiplied by number of viewers – and said it looks like I got close to 170,000 seconds of time spent with the brand. Or, in other words, 47 hours worth.”

Nick saw Simon glance over at Viktor. They both looked puzzled as to where this was heading.

“To be honest,” Nick continued, “I had never looked at it that way before. I, not unlike everyone else, always just counted impressions, not how much time an impression garnered. Then this client asked me a question. A question that has forever changed the way I look at how advertising works and can be accounted for. She said, ‘Nick, the media cost to run this for six days on this one site was \$3,000. In your experience, how much would it normally cost in media to get 47 hours of time spent with a brand?’”

Nick looked at the audience, just in case one of them wanted to offer an answer. No one did.

He then looked over at Simon. “I couldn’t answer that question, Simon. Would you have been able to?”

Simon looked at Nick with a quizzical expression. He was obviously curious as to where this was all going. “No,” he said, cautiously.

“I didn’t think so. And I don’t think anybody could,” said Nick. “You see, it’s not the type of question that we’ve ever been asked before in this business. And before the digital platform, before return path data which shows how long people actually spend watching a commercial, it’s not the type of question that we could have even attempted to answer. But then this client, I mean, God bless her, she went even further. She said – ‘So if \$3,000 got me 47 hours of time spent with my brand, can I not extrapolate this out and say if I then spend a million bucks I would get’ – and she did the math, right there in front of me – ‘over 15,000 hours? Or in other words, 625 days of time spent with my brand.’”

There was a stunned silence in the auditorium. The audience knew this was an impressive number, but they had no idea as to whether this information deserved a thumbs up or a thumbs down.

“And it got me thinking, Simon. Don’t you think that a marketing manager would be interested in knowing that for a million dollars in media, they can not only get so many impressions, but that they can get 625 days of time spent with their brand?”

When Simon didn’t answer, Nick turned to the audience.

“How about you? Would you, if you were a marketing manager, be interested in knowing something like this?”

The answer appeared on the screen behind them.

All thumbs up.

Chapter 55

Detroit – 1 America Road – Ford Headquarters

“I sure as hell would,” said Jeffery Bell, answering Nick’s question as if he were in the crowd.

He and Amanda Weeks were watching from Jeffery’s office.

“Watson’s doing well,” said Amanda.

Jeffery nodded.

“Do you think it’s true?” asked Amanda.

“Is what true?”

“What Watson is claiming. Do you think it was a conspiracy? By the holding companies, I mean?” she asked.

“You mean did they purposely suppress the numbers?”

“Yeah.”

“I don’t know. We may never know. But what I do know is that the industry’s current compensation models are broken. Sure, they once worked. But that’s because the old models supported the infrastructure upon which the industry had been built. But then isn’t now. It’s a different time. And I dare say, a different industry. Unfortunately, just renovating the model won’t be enough. A complete teardown and rebuild is required. Agencies will need to let go of what they know and start thinking from a new direction. This includes both structural and,

I'm afraid, foundational change. Daunting to say the least. I don't know of any industry that takes on that kind of change willingly."

"But if a new model isn't developed, won't the old one simply collapse?" asked Amanda. "I mean, we're seeing signs of that. The cracks are starting to show. Ad agencies may not like change, but if they don't change, aren't they going to like irrelevance even less?"

Jeffery Bell nodded. "But that doesn't mean that we can just stop advertising until the industry changes. We can't. You know it was Henry Ford himself who said, 'A man who stops advertising to save money is like a man who stops a clock to save time.' No, we need to keep putting our brands out there. And the industry knows that."

"So what do you think is going to happen?"

"They're going to have to find a way to incorporate a new model that doesn't penalize the agencies for changing the way they operate. That's the Holy Grail, isn't it? Finding a way to monetize the transition from business models based on size to business models based on time. And to somehow achieve this transition without losing their shirts in the process."

"I thought that's what Watson was offering," said Amanda.

"He is. But it requires two things. The first is trust between the agency and the client. I mean, trust is the coin of the realm in this case. But as you know, it's also about as rare a commodity in this business as faithfulness is in a marriage."

Amanda winced. She was still in the first year of her first marriage.
“And the second thing?”

“The second thing is actually the harder of the two. It requires an agency being brave enough to bet on themselves. On their talent. Their ability. The problem is that outside of Watson and his Exiles, everyone’s afraid. It’s kind of like the old saying about the afterlife.”

Amanda looked puzzled. “I’m afraid I was never very religious.”

Jeffery looked at her and smiled. “Everybody wants to go to heaven. But no one wants to die.”

Chapter 56

New York City – Advertising Week – Main Stage

Simon had been watching the thumbs-up for Nick quickly filling the screen. This didn't seem to be going the way that Viktor had promised him. But the look on Viktor's face told him that he had no idea how to pull it back either. No, Simon thought, if it was going to happen, it would be up to him.

"That's a very fine story, Nick," said Simon. "I always knew that you were a good storyteller. But then, you are one of those creative types. And what I have found through my many years in the business is that creative people never truly understand how media works. Actually, you minimize it, never taking the time to study how size and scale, reach and frequency drive the advertising business forward. How in fact, without size and scale, there wouldn't be an advertising business."

Seeing where Simon was going and thankful for a chance to regain control of the narrative, Viktor jumped in. "You know, I think it might help everyone here if you could expound on that a bit more, Simon."

"I can and I will. Thank you, Viktor," said Simon with a conspiratorial smile. "As we all know, advertising is all about opportunity. Opportunity to get your product out in front of people. Lots and lots of

people. That's why the phrase mass media has the word *mass* in it. The objective of good advertising is to create fame for your product. The more people who see it and hear about it, the more famous your product has the chance to become. The more famous it becomes, the more likely people are to recognize it when they are in the store and want to buy it. So yes, we reach out to the largest possible audience, which in media we call share of voice. The larger your share of voice, the more people know about your brand, the larger your share of mind. That's why it's share of voice that leads to share of market. That's how advertising works. Always has. Always will. I really don't see how you can argue with that, Nick."

"Well the fact is, Simon, I can't argue with anything you just said."

Simon looked at him, a bit confused. "Well then, good."

"If..." Nick continued... "if you're only talking about television. Everything you just said pertains to buying television advertising. And I'm not trying to change the way that you buy television. The thing about television is that we don't really know if anyone has actually watched the commercials. True, we know some do. And we convince ourselves that it's more than it probably is. We run our spots in front of 10 million in the hope that maybe what, 100,000 will actually pay attention to the commercial? I mean there's a reason why it's affectionately called the spray and pray method."

A few giggles were heard emanating from the audience.

"There is some waste, granted," said Simon. "I can't argue with

you there. Nature of the beast. Unavoidable.”

“I would, in fact, go even further and argue that on TV, the waste is actually necessary,” said Nick.

Now it was Viktor’s turn to look confused. “You would? Why?”

“Because Simon is right. Brands need a cultural awareness to achieve fame. And cultural awareness can only be obtained through size and scale. That’s what TV offers. Size and scale. It’s a large public venue. It comes with some waste, okay. But without that waste, an advertiser’s brand runs the risk of being invisible. And if you are invisible, you can’t be famous. The fact is, you will never increase your market share solely by targeting existing users. So, my argument isn’t with how Simon and the media industry buys television. My argument is that we are now bringing the same rules and practices that served us so well on broadcast to a completely different platform, the digital platform, and trying to make them work there. And what has become apparent, at least to some of us, is that the old rules and practices that we have adopted from television aren’t working online and next generation models need to be implemented.”

“But they are working,” said Simon. “That’s what you don’t seem to accept.”

“For whom, exactly?” replied Nick. “I mean, I agree, they are working for you. They are working for media agencies and platform providers. They are working because you’re making tons of money by retaining the old practices. Who they are not working for are those filling

your coffers - the advertisers.”

Simon could only shake his head. “And this is why creative people shouldn’t talk about media,” he said to laughter from the audience.

Nick forced a smile as well. But Kat had seen that kind of smile before. She knew what it meant.

“You know, Simon,” said Nick, “you mentioned that advertising is all about opportunity. I agree with you. I mean that’s what an impression is, isn’t it? An *opportunity* to involve someone in a commercial. On TV, we don’t know if that opportunity is ever acted on, if people actually do watch. But online, we do have the ability to know. Not only can we measure the impressions, or opportunities to involve the viewer, but online we can also measure something even more important – the actual involvement per opportunity.”

“Yes, but the only way to do that is to by being willing to let people opt in, or *choose* to watch the commercials,” said Simon. “And that scares advertisers. Justifiably so. I mean, the number that opt in, as you just indicated with your story, is, what exactly is the right word? Minuscule?”

“It is,” replied Nick. “You’re right. The number that choose to opt in at any particular time will always be low and difficult to scale up. But what we’re forgetting is that if we don’t intrude or interrupt, then we’re not limited to 15- or 30-second commercials. When you give the consumer the control to choose how much time they want to spend with a commercial, then the commercial can be as long as it is interesting. What truly scales in this new model is not the number who opt in, but

rather the amount of time viewers spend once they do. All we're bringing to the party is a way to start monetizing how long people watch the spots for. That's why I say online, it's share of time, not share of voice that leads to share of mind, and ultimately, share of market."

A smattering of thumbs up appeared on the screen. And then a few more. Viktor noticed first. Clearing his throat, he got Simon's attention. Looking at the screen, Simon nodded in a reassuring way to Viktor. He had this.

"Creative people," he said, smiling as he shook his head, apparently at the naivety of people like Nick in regards to how the ad business works. "I love you guys, but..."

The crowd started to laugh.

"...but if you think you'll make money monetizing time spent, I've got some news for you and your type, Nick. Media agencies already have the time spent data that you say is so valuable. And you know what it reveals?"

"I do have some experience with that, yes, but I'm not sure that the audience does," said Nick. He gestured for Simon to continue.

Viktor turned sharply to look at Simon, concerned where this was going. He tried to get Simon's attention, but this time Simon didn't notice. He was too intent on proving not only the fallacy of Nick's theory, but the inferiority of the creative contribution to the process. "What the data reveals is, and I'm sorry to say this as I'm sure that we all want to believe in the power of your brilliance, but what the data reveals

is that very few people are in fact actually choosing to watch much of any commercial online.”

Viktor’s head dropped. A hush came over the auditorium.

And then a question appeared.

Is this true?

Quickly followed by others.

How bad is it?

What the f...?

Am I out of a job?

Kat could only smile as she pushed the thumbs up emoji on her phone.

Chapter 57

New York City – 437 Madison Avenue – Omnicom Group Headquarters

““What the hell?” said Ian, jumping to his feet and pointing at the screen. “What the fucking hell just happened?”

“I think Simon just said what nobody in media is supposed to say out loud - that nobody really watches commercials online,” said Shelby.

“I know what he said, Shelby. The question is why in the hell would he say it?”

“Because it’s the truth?” said Rebecca, somewhat despondently.

Oh, shit, thought Shelby. There’s that word again. Truth. Highly overrated, in her opinion.

“C’mon, Ian,” said Rebecca. “You know the numbers as well as anybody. And what they tell us is that people aren’t watching the commercials we run online. Hell, most don’t get a chance to even see the damn commercials we run. My God, to count as an impression, the video player needs to be only 50% onscreen for two seconds. Two seconds. Do we still charge the full 30-second price for a two-second impression? Oh, shit yeah.”

Ian looked at Rebecca, but didn’t answer. His silence said all that

needed to be said.

“I mean, for every dollar spent in digital media, Ian, only six cents, six cents goes towards showing ads that are viewable to real people in the desired target audience. The rest of the money? That goes to the middlemen and, of course, us.”

Ian was shaking his head. He knew the numbers. But it was obvious that he didn’t care.

“And what exactly is it, Rebecca, that you don’t like about making money?” he asked.

“I like making money as well as the next person. But I’m starting to have trouble sleeping trying to justify how the hell we make it.”

“Waste has always been a part of the media business. You know that, Rebecca. And our clients accept that with broadcast. Online isn’t any different.”

“But it is, Ian. That’s the problem. It is. You can rationalize it until hell freezes over. But online *is* different. Why? Because it enables us to fucking *know*. We have the data that tells us what is actually happening. With broadcast, sure, we knew that the waste was there, but we could justify that it was the necessary cost of reaching those that we wanted to reach. There were no return path numbers staring us in the face, telling us how badly we were actually robbing our clients. With digital we have those numbers, Ian. You’ve seen them. I’ve seen them. They’re bad. They’re bad because creative is no longer considered important. We no longer put any time or effort into the creative product. The big money is

in running the spots. Not in whether the spots are any good or not. Or even watched or not. You know that as well as I. So are we sharing the numbers with our clients, showing them how little of their advertising is actually being consumed? Of course not.”

“And we won’t, will we, Rebecca?” said Ian. “We won’t because we have houses to pay for, kids we want to keep in their private schools, vacations we want to take. We won’t because it’s only advertising, after all. We’re not hurting anyone. It’s not a crime that we are committing. We won’t because marketing directors don’t *really* want to know that their stuff isn’t working. They live in a world of denial on purpose. They like big marketing budgets because big budgets lead to big titles. Big titles lead to big salaries. Big salaries means they can put their kids in the same schools as ours and pay off their multi-million dollar mortgages. No, they don’t really care if the shit works, Rebecca. And, by the way, neither do I.”

Shelby herself was a bit more pragmatic about the whole thing. “You know the way I look at,” she said, “if you don’t sell your clients what they want, someone else is certainly going to.”

“Exactly,” said Ian, pointing at Shelby. “She’s exactly fucking right. It’s the business we’re in, Rebecca. And I suggest that if you want to stay in it, you understand that in this business, silence is golden.”

Shelby couldn’t help but smile at the irony of Ian’s statement. That’s for sure, she thought. Golden as in billions and billions of dollars in the holding company’s coffers.

Of which she always made sure to get her share.

Because unlike Rebecca, Shelby had accepted the realities of people behaving badly. She knew from experience that when a ship, or in this case, an industry, starts sinking, no one takes the time to act ethically. The only instinct is to survive. Justice, and right and wrong, no longer matter. The smart ones ride the sinking ship as long as they can. Then they jump off just in the nick of time, making sure that they get out while the getting is still good.

But making sure that they damn well get it good before they get out.

Chapter 58

New York City – Advertising Week – Main Stage

Viktor watched with horror as the comments continued to pop up on the screen, questioning the validity of online advertising. He realized that what Simon just revealed had to be amended.

Somehow.

“Simon,” he began, “I think what you meant with that last statement about people not watching online commercials... I think what you *meant* to say is that it’s difficult to actually hold anyone *accountable* for how long people watch the commercials for. That there are just too many factors that influence view duration.”

But before Simon could reply, Nick jumped in.

“Well, actually Viktor, that’s a good point.

Viktor turned to look at Nick, surprised that the man they were trying to bury would be complimenting him.

“Because in reality, there aren’t.”

“What? Aren’t what?” replied Viktor.

“Aren’t that many factors that influence view duration.”

“Really... but...”

“In fact, there’s only one.”

“And that one isn’t media,” said Simon. “You can’t go trying to make media accountable for the length of time that people watch, or don’t watch, a commercial, Nick.”

“Nor should media be held accountable,” said Nick. “I mean, people don’t pay attention to a picture in an art gallery because of the gallery. It’s because of the art itself. The way it’s created. Designed. Painted. Drawn.”

A few thumbs up were popping up on the screen. At least the audience understood the analogy.

“What media *is* accountable for is what happens *outside* the commercial,” continued Nick. “Once people opt in to watch the commercial, accountability transfers to the creative. The creative and only the creative is accountable for what happens *inside* the commercial. Your job, Simon, the job of media in general, is to get people to the commercial – impressions. The job of creative is to keep them there – involvement.”

Nick could see that Simon was cautiously nodding his head, but still looking wary.

Viktor cut in. “But the click rate, I mean, even on paid search ads, the rate at which people choose to click in is at like only one to two percent.”

“As of now, yes. That’s correct. But that should get somewhat better with the more precise targeting practices that people like Simon will soon be incorporating. Would you agree with that, Simon?”

“In theory. Yes. The hope is that highly personalized, precise targeting will be far more capable of allowing ads to perform successfully because they will better reach the right person at the right time at the right place. Dog food ads only to dog food owners, for example.”

“Makes perfect sense,” said Nick.

“It’s nice to see you agreeing with media for once, Nick.”

“And yet...”

“Oh, oh, here we go,” said Simon, laughing along with the crowd.

“And yet... by definition, won’t more precise targeting also reduce the size of the audience?” asked Nick.

“By definition, more precise would mean smaller, yes,” agreed Simon, turning to wink at the audience. Slowly he was feeling as if he was reestablishing his footing.

“So as impressions become fewer, through your excellent targeting capabilities, what choice do we have Simon, except to try and make these impressions deeper?”

“And by deeper you mean longer?”

“I do.”

“Through view duration?”

Nick nodded.

“Well, if you want to be held accountable for creating this so-called view duration, I have only two words of advice for you.”

“I’m afraid to ask.”

“Good luck.”

Not able to help themselves, the audience started to laugh. But this time, Nick didn't join them.

"You know, luck to me has always been over-rated."

"Really?" said Simon. "I'm surprised as I heard that you weren't very lucky when it came to the work you did for, who was it again? Oh, yes, it was Ford, wasn't it? And what was the view duration for those spots again, Nick?"

When Nick didn't respond, Simon continued.

"I believe it was something like 12%, correct? Only 12% of the spots you produced were watched. What was that Nick? Just bad luck probably, right? You see that's the thing you creative types will never accept. As good as you think you are, you aren't. I'm sorry, Nick, I truly am, but numbers don't lie."

#

Kat knew that was her cue.

The back-up plan.

Now she just had to execute it.

Give me a minute, Nick, she said to herself as she tried to find what she was looking for on her phone. Just give me a fucking minute.

#

Viktor was frantically reading the room. And what he was sensing was that if he and Simon wanted to get out with a victory, now was the time to wrap this up.

“Well, well, well,” he said as he got to his feet and turned to the audience. “I must say that this has been very interesting, wouldn’t you all agree?”

A few hands started to applaud. Quickly they were joined by more.

“As we wrap this up,” continued Viktor, “I was wondering if there were any closing comments that either Simon or, of course, Mr Watson, would like to share with us?”

“Well, thank you, Viktor,” said Simon, deciding to stand up and make his final statements even more dramatic by walking around the stage.

“I think,” he begin, “that we all need to understand something. Ad writers, like our good friend Nick here, aren’t novelists or screenwriters or even journalists. What they are are people whose job is to write about things like toothpaste and laundry detergent, potato chips and pickles. To try and make these things interesting to the uninterested for what? Fifteen seconds, thirty seconds. That’s all we ask from people like Nick. And it doesn’t sound so hard, does it? Thirty little seconds of something that someone may find enjoyable to watch. I mean, everyone in the audience probably does that on their iPhone on a daily basis.”

As thumbs up appeared on the screen, Simon looked over at Nick who had barely moved since Simon had stood up.

“But what do we get? What do we get from people like Nick? The kind of advertising that you don’t want to spend two seconds with much less 30. You see, Nick, that’s why we need to run as much advertising as we do. I mean that’s the only way we’ve found that we can maybe... maybe... get people to watch what you create. Sorry... but those are the facts.”

Simon looked over at Viktor who gave him a nod and a thumbs-up, encouraging him to continue.

“To be perfectly honest, Nick, and I think most people here would agree with me, it’s us, media, that make people like you look good, that keep you employed, that keep your families fed. Because it’s not really about creative versus media or however Advertising Week decided to promote this so-called debate. There really is no debate. We all know the winner. It is media and media alone that keeps this industry afloat. And the reason that share of voice leads to share of market is simply because we don’t have an equal share of talent on the creative side to make anything worth watching.”

As Simon sat down, many in the audience leaped to their feet, applauding.

Nick, who had remained expressionless throughout Simon’s little sermon, turned to look at Kat.

She held up two fingers as she mouthed the words, two minutes.

Viktor was also on his feet, trying to get the audience to sit back down as they continued to cheer for Simon.

“Now wait, wait, wait, it would be very unfair of us... c’mon everybody, sit down, sit down please... it would be quite unfair of us if we didn’t give Mr Watson at least a chance to give his response. If, of course, he has one.”

As the audience settled back into their seats, all eyes turned towards Nick.

“You’ve heard of Bill Bernbach, I imagine, right Simon?”

Simon turned towards Nick, his look saying but of course, who hasn’t?

A question appeared on the screen behind them.

Who’s Bill Bernbach?

And then another.

Isn’t he on Instagram?

And another.

Can I follow him on Twitter?

Nick could only smile. Pointing to the questions on the screen he said, “You see, Simon, right there is one of the problems with advertising today.”

“Here we go,” said Simon, “here we go. How come every creative in the business always goes back to quote the great Bernbach? C’mon,

Nick, Bill Bernbach's time was in the '60s. That's half a century ago. And by the way, creative *was* quite brilliant then. Which is why, not surprisingly, it needed a lot less media to get noticed. No, I'm afraid if you go quoting Bernbach on creativity, you're only going to support my argument."

"Actually," said Nick, "It wasn't a quote about creativity."

"No?"

"No. It was something he liked to say about a discussion not unlike this, where two people with opposing views couldn't agree. What he said is that there are three sides to every story. Your side. My side. And, the truth. I think, Simon, it's time for the truth."

"Yours? Or mine?" said Simon with a wry smile as the audience laughed.

"Yours," said Nick. "A truthful answer to one question."

"Doesn't sound too hard. Whatcha got?"

"Do you believe that all media behavior is voluntary?"

"Voluntary? And by voluntary you mean...?"

"That you can't force people to watch a commercial?"

"People have free will," said Simon. "They can watch if they want to."

"I agree. But what makes them want to?"

"I'm afraid I'm not Freud and neither are you."

A smattering of laughter from the audience.

Nick had to smile as well. "You've got me there, Simon. So let me

ask it in a different way. What makes them stop watching?”

“Besides the creative being terrible, who the hell knows? Maybe they have to go to the bathroom.”

“Yes, that could be,” said Nick, “that could be. But it’s not the media that makes them stop watching, is it?”

“No, that I do know. You can’t blame media for that,” said Simon, somewhat triumphantly.

“But outside of a small bladder, those are the two options, right?” said Nick. “Media and creative. And it sounds like you’re saying that while media wants to take some credit for people *watching* the commercials, dog food spots to dog food owners for example, it wants to take no responsibility whatsoever for when they stop watching.”

“Once they start to watch, media’s job is done,” said Simon.

Nick smiled. “Now that wasn’t so hard, was it?”

“What?” said Simon.

“Telling the truth. That once a viewer starts to watch, media’s job is done. Meaning that it is up to the creative to keep them watching.”

“And, as I’ve said, it’s not a job that you’re doing very well.”

“You know what Frank Lloyd Wright said, don’t you Simon?”

Simon could only shake his head, demonstrating his surprise that Nick was still somehow trying to win this argument.

“What Mr Wright said was, ‘Early in life, I had to choose between honest arrogance and hypocritical humility. I choose honest arrogance’.”

Simon nodded. “And as we can all clearly see, you too have chosen

arrogance.” The audience was laughing. They were with him again.

Once they calmed down, he continued. “That said, Nick, you are not Wright.”

“No, no, I’m not Wright,” Nick said with a sly smile. “But then neither am I wrong. My argument isn’t so much creative versus media. My argument is that creativity, artistry, talent, should not be hidden from the light, under the demands of a holding company. It should flourish, to survive or die only on the merits of its value.

“Because you’re right, Simon, I am arrogant. Arrogant enough not to care if you, or others, feel insecure around me. So I’m afraid that if you want me to apologize for being talented, then you are on the wrong stage. Why should I want to work for people who want to pay me less than I am worth? Even more, why should I let these people determine my worth? All I want is for the market to decide my value. There are customers for every commercial. If they want to invest in my commercial with their time, then I want advertisers to invest in me accordingly. You’re right in thinking that a man should not overvalue his ability. But then, neither should he undervalue it. Because to undersell your talent is not only doing yourself a disservice. It is denying the world your brilliance.”

“Brilliance! Yes, speaking of your so-called brilliance,” said Simon sarcastically, “isn’t that the one thing that we have determined to be lacking from people like you Nick? Or must I once again remind you of that 12% number?”

As before, Simon turned to acknowledge the appreciation from the audience. But their attention was elsewhere. On the screen behind Simon, a chart had appeared. An audible gasp could be heard throughout the auditorium as they started taking in what they were seeing.

Nick didn't have to look. He knew what had their attention.

Glancing over at Kat, he saw her flash him a thumbs up.

David Wilkins' numbers were there for all to see, laid out in a simplified, easy-to-read chart revealing the results of the Ford test. Name and length of the spots, the publishers' sites on which they ran, number of opt ins, average length of view. On the bottom, the average view duration across all the sites was tabulated and highlighted in yellow, showing very clearly that it was around 85%. For both spots.

Nick stood up and started explaining what the chart revealed as he walked over to the screen. "This is the actual raw data direct from the ad network on which we ran the two Ford spots. As you can see, Simon, average view duration for both spots is not 12% as you mentioned, but around 85%. Actual numbers, Simon. And, as I believe you so elegantly put it earlier, the nice thing about numbers is that they don't lie."

"So what are you implying, Nick? That I do?"

"I prefer to believe that you have been purposely misinformed. And I can understand why. There's a lot of money at stake. If those in media started to give creative any credit, some of that money would

disappear. Today in our industry, the creative product is treated like an afterthought. Whether the creative is great or lousy doesn't really enter into your calculations. Even though we both know that the better crafted the commercial, the more attention it gets, the less it needs to run."

"It's good to see you expressing your feelings, Nick," said Simon. "Very healthy. But feelings aren't facts. And the fact is, spending more money in media builds a brand's share."

"With inferior creative, perhaps. But when the creative has the freedom to be great, everything changes. We both know, Simon, that media has access to the same research that I do. Research that has consistently proven that creative is four times as important as media weight in driving ad effectiveness. And yet, we keep increasing the barrage of messaging that assaults us all. Claiming that people won't watch unless we do.

"But look, Simon," Nick was pointing at the numbers on the screen, "look... people do watch when it is on their terms. When they control the interaction. But instead of believing this, we as an industry do everything in our power to stop the online user from having control. Why? Because advertisers equate losing control with being powerless. But the reality is that as control shifts to the viewer, advertisers will have more power than ever before. Not over the consumer, no. But over their agencies that create and run the advertising. When advertisers give control to the consumer they gain knowledge in the form of data that allows them to hold their agencies, both media and creative,

accountable. And it's this accountability that has the industry frightened. Isn't that true, Simon?"

Nick paused to look at Simon to see how he was taking it in. His head was down as if he was deep in thought. Or, defeated.

Viktor saw it as well and used the pause to intervene.

"Well, well, well, thank you, Mr Watson for that wonderfully impassioned..."

"I wasn't done," said Nick.

"Excuse me."

"I wasn't done."

On the screen behind them a three-word sentence appeared.

Let him finish.

Looking at Kat, Nick saw that she was the one who sent it. Thumbs up emojis quickly started to populate the screen. Nick turned back to the audience.

"It's not losing control that's the problem here. It's fear. A fear that our industry has that advertisers will find out the truth about how their money is being wasted.

"Right now we are at a time and place where how much we spend in media has less effect than ever before. And yet, we keep applying our old rules to this new platform, in effect, slowing down progress. As Marshall McLuhan famously said, 'It's like marching backward into the future.'

"Why do we do this? Why do we keep handcuffing a digital future

that has the chance to be a golden age for advertising? A chance for us to not just fill 30 seconds of time, but each and every viewer's imagination.

"Today advertising is 99% interruption and 1% inspiration. Reduce the interruption by half and we have no choice but to increase inspiration by the same amount. How can this not make advertising better? But instead we keep trying to convince ourselves that producing commercials that people hate will somehow create brands that people love.

"I'm sorry, but it just doesn't make sense to me." Nick turned to the audience. "Does it makes sense to you?"

Kat turned around in her seat to look at the audience behind her. Inadvertently, they were shaking their heads no.

"It is said that people want an end to advertising. I disagree. People are smart enough to know that the answer to a flood isn't a drought. What people do want is more say in how advertising can better fit into their lives.

"It starts with us. With us no longer trying to prevent the viewer from having control. As Princess Leia said to Grand Moff Tarkin, 'The more you tighten your grip, the more star systems will trickle through your fingers.'

"So let's do this. Let's loosen our grip. Let's stop relying on yesterday's tools to do today's job. Data is not the new creative. Creative is the new data. And it's this data – those numbers that you say never lie Simon – it's those numbers that can set us free. If we are not afraid to

believe in our talent. If we are not afraid of seeing the truth. I am willing to live and die by the truth. The only question left, Simon, is this.

“Are you?”

And with that, Nick sat back down.

Chapter 59

New York City – Advertising Week – Back Stage

The Market Rate cable news team was live streaming their conclusions before the auditorium even had a chance to empty out.

“What we have just heard today has the chance to flip the ad industry on its head. But will it? We do have our doubts. And here’s why.

“We’re talking about a \$600 billion dollar global industry. That’s a big battleship to turn around. Oh sure, one or two advertisers might try to work in the rogue way that Nick Watson was espousing. But for most, we just don’t see it happening.

“One reason we feel confident in saying this is that there is just not enough creative talent who will be willing to let it ride. Bet it all on black, so to speak. Have their income be determined by a toss of the dice. As for most advertisers, well, as idealistically moving as Nick’s speech was, advertisers are realists. They all have sales and shareholders to worry about. Upset the advertising ecosystem and you upset sales. Which upsets shareholders. And that’s how CEOs get fired. Which is why it is our guess that the status quo will remain what it is for some time.”

A piece of paper is set down in front of one of the Market Rate

reporters. Picking it up, the reporter continued.

“It looks as if we have the results here from the Twitter panel of judges that were scoring the debate. As to the question regarding whether media or creative will control the digital future, they scored it 85 to 15 in favor of... well it looks like they too, agree with us... media.

“So there you have it.

“Granted, Nick Watson gave a heartfelt argument as to why we should let creative go free. But let’s remember, Nick’s a creative guy and this is a business. If he wants complete creative freedom, he should go into the arts and leave commerce to the rest of us.

“On another note, next week we’ll be joined by our new guest commentator, Viktor Holl, who you just watched moderate this debate. He’ll be sharing with us the ins and outs of the business and how media will be driving advertising’s future forward. Be sure to join us, won’t you?”

Chapter 60

New York – JFK – On Runway

Shelby was on the first flight out the very next day.

Her destination? London. She was being called in to try and ‘fix’ a fraud charge against a media agency before the charge became public.

How surprising, she thought, somewhat sarcastically. Online ad fraud was slowly reaching the scale of credit card fraud even though the size of the online ad business was ten times smaller. It did indeed look like work would be plentiful going forward.

What she wasn’t happy with was the feeling she had when she left Ian’s office after watching the Simon and Nick show. It was a feeling she wasn’t familiar with. A feeling of failure. Her job was to stop the truth from getting out and she didn’t do that. Sure, according to most who watched the debate, Watson lost his argument against Simon Foster. But she couldn’t help feeling that she had lost even more. Her reputation.

“I think you owe me, Shelby,” said Ian as she was saying her good-byes.

“Why do you say that, Ian? You won. I mean, listen to the pundits. The industry’s not changing.”

“You know what I mean, Shelby.”

And that was the problem. She did. She was a perfectionist. And this time, perfect she wasn't. Now she had to figure out how she could make it up to Ian.

Settling into her business class window seat, she heard a charming voice coming up from behind her. It was a British accent. She had always had a soft spot for that accent. As she heard it come closer, she looked up. Wonderful blue eyes were staring back, taking her in.

"I'm sorry," she said, captivated by the eyes. "Were you talking to me?"

His smile was beguiling. His outfit – chambray shirt, blue jeans, and boots that would be most at home in stirrups – made him look more cowboy than Brit.

"I was saying that sometimes the luck of the draw smiles on me," he said, sitting down next to her in the aisle seat. Looking over, he continued. "I must tell you, the sun coming through that window is creating just the perfect rim light to accent such a beautiful face. My, my."

Shelby felt a slight flush move up her neck and found herself a little embarrassed by it. A flirtatious remark by a man on a plane. Usually, she slammed that door immediately. It's been a while, she thought, since I've been knocked off balance like this.

"Paul's the name," he said, putting out his hand.

"Shelby," she replied, taking it. She held it slightly longer than she normally would, wondering if he would notice.

His eyes indicated that he did. A man who didn't miss much. She liked that.

As the plane started to taxi down the runway he turned to her and asked, "So, business or pleasure?"

"I'm sorry, what?"

"Your reason for London."

"Ah, business. Unfortunately. You?"

"Home. Fortunately," he said with a smile.

"What part of London?"

"Just outside, actually."

Shelby nodded. "Gone long?"

"Long enough. Job. Eight weeks."

"That is a long time. Hopefully it all went well."

"Spectacularly, really. Gonna change the world I think, what we did."

Now it was Shelby's turn to smile. "Don't hear that everyday. Change the world. What did you do? Find a cure for stupidity?"

He laughed.

Shelby smiled. A sense of humor, too. Damn.

"You will probably find this ironic, but it was a commercial of all things," he said.

"Somehow I have a hard time believing that a commercial is going to change the world."

"Yeah, I know. But I didn't mean the commercial so much as the

process.”

“Meaning?”

“How we did it, got paid for it, you know, that kind of thing.”

Shelby looked at him more closely. Her sixth sense had started to tingle.

“No, I don’t know about that kind of thing. But would love to. Would you mind if I asked who the commercial was for?”

“Now you’re really going to laugh. Ford.”

“The car company? Or, the designer?”

“The former.”

“Really?”

“I know, go figure, right.”

“And you were what for this commercial? The star? The director?”

“Not THE director, but a director I guess. Director of photography. My buddy Nick was the actual director.”

Shelby had to look away as she swallowed hard, trying not to show her excitement. Stay charming, she said to herself. Stay charming.

“And this other person... your friend... I’m sorry, you said his name was...”

“Nick. Nick Watson.”

Bingo, thought Shelby.

“And may I ask,” she continued, trying to strike the perfect balance between flirtation and innocence, “I mean what does this Nick do that you don’t? He can’t be more important than you, I bet.”

“Ah, ‘fraid he is. But we’ve worked together a long time. Nick handles the performances while my job is to use light to make sure people and things look, well, beautiful.”

Pointing to the light coming in the window, he smiled at her. “Case in point.”

She blushed. She felt herself actually blush. That’s been awhile, she thought.

“But listen... it is Shelby, right? Like the car.”

“Like the car. Exactly.”

“Shelby, I don’t want to bore you. I mean, I’m sure that we can find something more interesting to talk about then shooting a commercial.”

Shelby looked at him, smiling as she held his gaze. Somehow her hand had found his leg. She gave it a slight squeeze. “You’d be surprised, but you know, advertising is the one topic that I’ve always found myself getting really excited about.”

“Is that so? Well then... I mean, if you don’t actually mind.”

“And it is Paul, right?” she asked. “Like the disciple?”

“In name, yes. But no, I’m afraid in demeanor, you’ll find that I’m far from being a disciple.”

“Relieved to hear that, Paul,” said Shelby, as she noticed the flight attendant starting down the aisle with the drink cart.

“And why’s that?” he asked, also trying to strike the perfect balance between flirtation and innocence.

“Because I was just about to order myself a cocktail. And I’m hoping that you will join me.”

“I’d like nothing better.”

“Fantastic,” smiled Shelby. “And then please, do tell me the story, Paul. I mean, it’s a long flight, we have lots of time, so don’t leave out any of the details.”

Chapter 61

San Francisco – SOMA – Nick and Kat’s Office

When Nick walked into the office, Kat was already there. And to his surprise, so was David Wilkins.

“Kat, you okay?” Nick asked, looking over at Wilkins.

“Yeah. I invited him. I mean, he might be a sleazeball, but he’s our sleazeball,” she said, throwing a quick smile in Wilkins’ direction. She was setting up three glasses on the bar. The bottle of 23-year old Pappy Van Winkle was already out.

“If it’s any consolation, I thought you won, Nick,” said David.

“Thanks, David. But I remember you saying something about the cosmic universe, about it not always playing fair.”

“Nothing cosmic about it,” chimed in Kat. “It’s all about money. And in this business, the money is in media. There’s no way they could afford to let Nick win. I mean, what he was saying was considered heretical to them. And heretics, as we all know, usually end up burned at the stake.

“Or, in my case, on the stage at Advertising Week,” Nick said with a whimsical smile.

“But at least it’s not all bad news,” said David. “I mean, Kat told

me that Jeffery Bell at Ford called.”

“It was a text, actually. Before I even got off the stage. It said *Appears as if I owe you some money.*”

“He must have been watching on pay-per-view,” said David.

“From the number of calls I’m getting,” said Kat, “it seems everyone was watching on pay-per-view.”

“But Kat also said he mentioned something about licensing DAOS,” said Wilkins.

“Yep. He said that Wieden wants in. Said that they couldn’t wait to be paid based on their talent. And once BBDO heard that Wieden wanted in, they had no choice but to follow suit. So Ford asked if they could license the DAOS model from us for their agencies to try out.”

“Sweet.”

“Yeah. By the way, speaking about owing money, there’s still the hundred grand I said I’d pay you for the test run of the spots.”

“I think we can forget about that,” said David. “As I believe I mentioned the night that you were going to punch me out at The House of Shields, the holding companies compensated me just fine.”

“Like I said, he’s our sleazeball,” said Kat as she opened the bottle of Pappies.

“I would think that the holding companies would want their money back,” said Nick. “I mean, after you helped us reveal the actual numbers. They at least must have asked.”

“Well, I did get a call from a guy, Ian Winston. You probably know

him.”

“Nope.”

“Said he was representing the holding companies and that since I hadn’t live up to my part of the agreement, they wanted their money back.”

“What did you say?”

“I said, fine. But here’s the deal. I’ll only return it in person. And, only in the presence of reporters from each of the major ad publications.”

“What did he say to that?” asked Kat.

“He paused for a long time. And then he said, you know, on second thought, just keep it.”

“No shit,” said Nick.

“Yep. And so I will. I believe that it was just the five largest holding companies, so it’s only around \$400,000 per. C’mon, we’re talking lunch money for those guys.”

Nick smiled. “I can imagine that they just want it all to go away.”

“Speaking of going away,” chimed in Kat, “any word from that so-called girlfriend of yours, Wilkins?”

“Ouch,” said Wilkins, looking hurt. “But no. I would guess the chances of me hearing from Shelby are about as good as Nick hearing from Simon Foster.”

“Funny you should say that,” said Nick, “because the chances of that might be better than you think.”

“What are you talking about?” asked Kat as she poured two fingers of Pappies into each of the glasses.

“Ted Donald called.”

“P&G Ted?” asked Wilkins.

“Yep. Said the powers that be at P&G had a meeting and we are back on.”

“Holy shit,” said Kat. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“It was just this morning.”

“That’s rich,” said Wilkins. “I mean, doesn’t Foster’s company buy media for P&G?”

“They do.”

“Which means Simon’s going to have to answer to you?” asked Kat.

“In a way, yeah.”

“If that’s not worth breaking out a bottle of \$5,000 bourbon, I don’t know what is,” she said, handing them each a glass.

“Twenty-three years old,” said Nick, holding the amber-colored liquid in his glass up to the light. “That was the same age I was when I started in this business.”

“And with what I’m hearing from creative people, you might have just changed the business for any 23-year-old starting out in it today,” said Kat.

“I don’t know,” Nick said, shaking his head. “I mean, I wish we lived in that kind of a world, you know, where right beats might. But

unfortunately, it is what it is. One or two other advertisers might try it, sure, but hell, seriously? Changing the entire industry? With all the money at stake? Not gonna happen. At one time, I thought maybe. But I'm afraid it's over. It's too late. Math men have replaced mad men. Creative people have lost the art of believing in themselves. In believing in their talent. In their ability. It's been beaten out of them. The business is no longer about ideas. About creativity. About brilliance. It's just not."

Nick looked up. Kat and David were quiet, heads down, staring into their glasses.

Nick broke the silence. "But..."

Both Kat and David looked back up at him.

"We had to try, didn't we? I mean, what would it say about us if we didn't at least try?"

Nick held up his glass for a toast. Kat and David did the same.

"So... here's to trying," he said with a dejected smile.

"Damn straight," said Kat.

"Amen," said David.

Slowly, they each took their first sip.

"Whoa!" said Nick.

Kat's face wore a big smile. "You know, never thought I'd say this, but five grand for a bottle this good might actually be cheap."

David was unusually quiet.

"Well, Wilkins, what do you think?" asked Nick.

"Always liked 23-year olds," answered David.

“Oh, is that so?” said Nick, surprised that Wilkins may have previously indulged in any whiskey equally as old.

Or, as good.

But Kat wasn’t buying it. “Remember, Wilkins, we’re talking about bourbon now.”

“Oh, right,” he said with a sly smile. “In that case, never mind.”

About The Creative Exiles

The Creative Exiles exist in more than just the author's imagination. In reality, they are a small group of creative professionals, who, tired of working under advertising's archaic rules, believe that good work should be worth more than bad work.

And, not surprisingly, are willing to be paid accordingly.

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