

Preface – A Transition Begins

POSITION SPECIFICATION: PRESIDENT

Boone Packaging — El Paso, Texas

Reports to: Owner / Founder

The Opportunity

Boone Packaging seeks a hands-on, operationally strong President to lead the company into its next phase. What began as a used-equipment supplier has become a vertically integrated packaging platform — equipment design, flexible film, and food co-packing under one roof. The President will own daily leadership, operational performance, customer execution, and the company's long-overdue transition from founder-led stability to professionally led growth.

This is a chance for a proven operator to step into a respected, founder-built business with real market knowledge, established customers, and significant room for improvement across systems, discipline, and execution.

The Company

Chuck Boone founded the company in 1987, buying, refurbishing, and reselling packaging machinery. He became a distributor for international equipment builders in 1990, and by 1994 was engineering and manufacturing baggers under the Boone name. In 2012, the acquisition of Speedway Film added printed poly film — much of it sold to customers Boone already served through equipment. In 2016, co-packing followed, closing the loop: Boone-built machines running Boone-supplied film to ship finished product.

Today the company operates three related lines, all grown from the same instinct — a founder who saw what customers needed before they asked, and built the capability to deliver it.

- **Equipment** — engineering, building, refurbishing, and supporting form-fill-seal baggers and packaging lines.
- **Film** — printing and supplying poly film for food customers.
- **Co-Packing** — bagging, packing, and shipping finished goods on Boone equipment and film.

The Role

The President is the senior operating leader, reporting directly to the owner, responsible for operations, customer performance, financial results, and organizational alignment.

Boone does not need a caretaker. It needs a leader who is comfortable on the plant floor, credible with customers, fluent with financial information, and able to earn the trust of a seasoned team while challenging assumptions that have gone unexamined for years. The right candidate

respects the company's history and has the confidence to press on it — to find the constraints inside existing systems, name the opportunities hidden in plain sight, and move the organization past habits that no longer serve it.

Above all, this person must carry the business from founder-led to professionally led without losing the culture, responsiveness, and customer commitment that built it.

Key Responsibilities

- **Operational leadership** across production, quality, and customer commitments — consistency in execution without smothering the entrepreneurial culture.
- **Financial and operational command** — a working grasp of the drivers behind profitability, service, and investment, and the visibility to act on them.
- **Customer and commercial performance** — deeper relationships built on reliable execution and operational credibility.
- **Leadership development** — building accountability and depth across a team that has carried the company on a small number of shoulders for a long time.
- **Business improvement** — evaluating systems and workflows for efficiency and coordination, and leading change without disrupting the work.
- **Founder transition** — assuming increasing responsibility while preserving the values and relationships that made Boone what it is.

The Ideal Candidate

A seasoned operations leader — manufacturing, packaging, food production, or industrial equipment — comfortable in a founder-led environment and able to bring structure without suffocating it.

- 15+ years of progressive operations leadership.
- Full P&L responsibility strongly preferred.
- Strong plant-floor credibility with supervisors, operators, and technical teams.
- Demonstrated turnaround of operational performance in a complex production environment.
- Bilingual English/Spanish a plus, given the production workforce.

The successful President will be visible and engaged, equally at home in a strategy discussion and on the floor; practical and trusted at every level; disciplined under pressure; respectful of what came before yet unafraid to change it.

Compensation

Competitive executive package — base, performance incentive, benefits, and a long-term incentive structure to be discussed with qualified candidates.

Confidential inquiries welcome. Submit to the retained search partner.

CONFIDENTIAL

Chapter 1

The timing of it hit me first.

Sunday night. *Let's talk tomorrow at 4:30 if that works.*

That was it. No context. No signal.

As I pulled through the gate, cars were already heading in the opposite direction, a steady stream of people calling it a day. No urgency, just that quiet shift into the easy drive home. Windows cracked, brake lights flickering, a couple of quick waves between drivers who'd done this long enough not to think about it. Boone Packaging anchored the head of the little industrial park, low and wide, tan stucco, the same desert color as every building flanking the drive. Ponderosa pines lined the road in, planted tall and thriving in a place where rain was mostly a rumor. Behind all of it the Franklin Mountains rose bare and immediate, and partway up the face a vein of red rock ran through the gray in the rough shape of a thunderbird, wings spread, the kind of thing you stop seeing until an afternoon light like this one makes you look again. BOONE PACKAGING ran in plain block letters above the entrance. No logo. No tagline. Just the name.

I pulled into a visitor spot near the front and shut off the engine. For a minute, I didn't move. I scrolled my phone without really seeing anything, then opened Chuck's text again, as if it might have changed since the last time I looked.

Deep breath.

The process had started three weeks earlier. Two group interviews, then a few hours walking the floor while they watched me, watch them. Chuck and I had spent two hours getting to know each other. That visit was two weeks ago. Long enough to wonder if it had quietly died. Then, out of nowhere, Chuck's text. Another interview? A professional letdown? Or something else entirely? He wasn't showing his hand.

"Okay," I muttered. "It's on. Whatever IT is."

I had already let myself picture it. The bigger chair. The chance to move forward instead of waiting my turn. From everything I'd observed, Chuck wanted out of the day-to-day, and he'd earned it. The question was whether I had earned what came next.

The night before, over dinner, my wife hadn't hesitated. "You've been ready for this for a long time," she said. "Now it's your turn." She said it like it was obvious. Maybe it was. I wasn't short on confidence. I knew how to run things: how to stabilize a plant, how to fix what was broken, how to keep people moving in the same direction. But I had always been one of the guys. The steady hand. The problem solver. The one you call when things start to slide.

Not THE guy.

That was different. If this happened, the wins and the misses would both land at my feet. No more pointing up the org chart, no more "that came from above." The calls would be mine. Chuck had told me that he didn't need a copy of himself, and I didn't want to be one.

I sat up, clapped my hands once, sharper than I meant to, and opened the door.

"Alright," I said, stepping out into the heat. "Let's do this."



On the way to the entrance, I passed the row of reserved parking spots closest to the door. Clean signs, fresh paint, titles stamped like rank. Operations, Mary Sharp. HR, Sandy Haley. Controller, Lynn Casey. CFO, Martin Roberts. And then Chuck. Just Chuck. No title, no

qualifier. Didn't need one.

I let out a quiet breath through my nose, almost a laugh. Operations clearly was at the bottom of this totem pole.

I slowed for a second, looking at the names again. I'd met all of them during the interviews. A smart group. Experienced. The kind of people who had been right often enough to trust their own instincts. The question I hadn't answered yet was whether I fit on that team, or whether I was about to find out I didn't. I didn't stand there long enough to work it out. I just kept walking.



Inside, the lobby held that particular quiet you only get when the workday has ended but the building hasn't fully let go yet. I signed in at the front desk, clipped on my badge, and started toward the offices. The conference room sat off to the right. Every visit before this one, it had been ready and waiting for me, lights on, a chair pulled out, my stopping point before things got started. Today it sat dark and empty. I noticed that.

Not today.

"Come on down," Chuck called from down the hall. "We'll talk in my office."

He stood in the doorway as I approached, one hand in his pocket, the other braced loosely against the frame. He smiled, easy and unhurried, the kind of expression that takes the edge off a room without making a show of it. No handshake, just a solid pat on the shoulder as I came through.

"Make yourself at home."

"Thanks, Mr. Boone."

"Chuck," he said, without missing a beat. "Always Chuck."

He glanced once toward the front of the building, waved at someone heading out, then closed the door behind us and walked to his desk. He picked up an old wire harness along with a notepad and pen. I took a moment to look around. The back wall was covered with family photographs, some black and white, some newer, arranged without any particular system, mixed in with plaques and awards that ranged from worn to freshly polished. A gold-painted ceremonial shovel from some old groundbreaking stood in the corner next to a pair of work boots that had clearly earned their scars. A Dallas Cowboys hard hat sat on the desk beside a reflective vest thrown over the back of the chair. None of it felt staged. It felt accumulated. The kind of office that tells you who a person actually is, not who they're trying to appear to be.

Chuck sat down across from me at the small conference table, not behind his desk. I noticed that. Maybe it meant something, maybe it didn't. I chose to believe it did.

"Well, Roger," he said, settling in. "Thanks for stopping by. Let's get to it."

He turned the harness slowly between his fingers, looking down at it. "Two weeks ago, I was ready to hand this place over to Martin. Fifteen years he's been here. Knows every corner of the building. Would've been the easy choice, and the business would have been fine. Just keep going the way it has."

He set the harness down on the table and looked up at me.

“The problem is, fine isn’t good enough. That’s what we’ve been for a long time.”

His eyes drifted past me for a moment, then came back. “I don’t have the energy anymore to push for a breakthrough.” He leaned back, hands resting on his knees. “My wife has been on this ride with me the whole way. Every year I tell her next year will be different. Every damned year. She just smiles and says, ‘Okay, honey.’” He shook his head, almost to himself. “I never meant to string her along. I really believed I could get us there. But now the timing is right, the opportunity is sitting right in front of me, and I’d be a fool not to take it. She deserves her turn.”

He let that settle, then his eyes came back to me, and something in him shifted, like we’d been circling the thing he’d actually called me in to say and now he was going to say it.

“Let me tell you what I saw,” he said. “The floor walk. Couple weeks back.”

I waited.

“You stopped at the bagging line. Third machine down, the one that’s been giving us fits for two months.” He tapped the loose wires of the harness on the edge of the table. “Laura runs it. You asked her about it. Not the boss question. Not why is this thing down again. You asked her what she’d do if it were hers.” He looked at me. “And then you did the part almost nobody does. You went quiet and let her answer.”

I remembered the machine. I wasn’t sure I remembered it the way he did.

“She talked for five minutes,” Chuck said. “Told you about a workaround she’d rigged on her own, something nobody in the front office had ever bothered to ask her about. I was standing back by the feed table, watching. Watching her face, mostly.” He set the harness down. “I’ve owned this place a long time, Roger. I couldn’t have pulled that out of her. It’s not how I’m built. I’d have asked the machine, not the woman running it.” A short breath that wasn’t quite a laugh. “And Martin would’ve had a repair order written before she finished her first sentence. Never would’ve known she had the answer in her head the whole time.”

He leaned back.

“That’s the thing I can’t teach and can’t buy. Martin’s the safe call. Everybody in that building would’ve nodded along. Fifteen years, knows every line, no surprises. I’d have slept fine.” He let a beat go by. “And we’d have stayed exactly what we are.”

He held my eyes.

“You’re the longer odds. I know that. Outside hire, never sat in the chair before, going to ruffle some feathers.” He tapped the table once. “But I watched you for two hours, and somewhere around that third machine I stopped doing the math like it was a risk. A bet’s only a gamble when you can’t see what you’re putting your money on.” A pause. “I can see it. Bigger payoff, and not nearly the risk many people would think.”

Something in me eased that I hadn’t let myself notice was tight. On the drive over I’d half-talked myself into a smaller version of this: that I was the best of a short list, the available choice and not the chosen one. He’d just taken that off the table without my ever having said it out loud.

A thank-you would’ve been the wrong size for it. So, I gave him something truer instead.

“The machine isn’t the problem on that line,” I said. “It’s that she’s been carrying the fix by herself for two months and nobody picked it up and ran with it. That’s the part I’d want to

change. Not the machine. The fact that her answer never went anywhere.”

Chuck didn’t move much. But something behind his face did. “Yeah,” he said quietly. “That’s it. That’s the whole thing.”

He cleared his throat, glanced toward the door, then back at me. His fingers tapped the table twice.

“So,” he said. “You ready for this?”

There it was. Everything the last twenty minutes had been circling, finally set down in the middle of the table. My chest tightened. I could feel the pulse in my neck. I had thought about this more than I probably should have, but thinking about it and sitting inside it were two entirely different things. This was the top job. My name at the top of the org chart. My decisions. My responsibility. Everything landing on me.

I took a breath. “Yes, sir. I’m ready.”

He studied me for a second, then let out a slow exhale. “Well,” he said, a small smile crossing his face, “I guess that makes this official.” He pushed his chair back and stood. “I’m glad to hear that, Roger, because if you want it…”

He extended his hand.

“...you’ve got the job.”

For a split second the words didn’t fully land. Then they did, all at once.

“Suppose I should get used to saying this,” Chuck said, as I stood and shook it. “Mr. President.”

His grip was firm and deliberate, the kind of handshake that carries weight without trying to. I kept my expression steady, though I’m not sure I completely pulled it off. He held on a second longer than necessary, then released and rested his hand briefly on my shoulder. “You earned this. You are the right man at the right time. Don’t forget that.”

I nodded.

“Now,” he said, shifting gears without ceremony, “how about we grab a steak and raise a glass?”

“Sounds great, Mr. Boo—” I stopped myself. “Chuck.”

He laughed. “Getting there.” He grabbed his jacket, flipped off the lights, and we walked out together into the warm evening air. In the parking lot, he stopped beside his car. “West Texas Steakhouse. You know where it is?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good. Meet you there.”

As I walked to my own car, I heard his phone ring behind me. “Hi, honey. Yeah, it went great. Might be a little late. Love you too.” I paused for just a moment, then got in and shut the door.

On the drive over, the interviews replayed in my head. Chuck’s had been loose and conversational, hours spent talking about the business, about ideas, about what could be different. No trick questions, no scripts. Just a real exchange between two people trying to figure each other out. I knew we’d connected early. I just hadn’t known if that would be enough.

Martin’s was the opposite. Him and Sandy from HR, sitting across from me with what might as

well have been a checklist. No warmth, no signal, just questions asked, notes written, eye contact measured like I was a variable being tracked. It felt like the same process they used for everyone, regardless of the role. Job description, references, body language. Check, check, check. “Thanks for coming in.”

It made me wonder if they actually understood what they were hiring for. A company that had never had a President. Did they have a clear picture of one? Or was I simply the best available option?

I pulled into the half-empty lot at the restaurant and shut off the engine. In the rearview mirror, I caught my reflection and straightened my hair, which made absolutely no sense. Chuck couldn’t care less about my hair. I did it anyway.

I pulled out my phone and texted Amy.

Just got to the restaurant. Good news so far. Love you.

I could have said more. I probably should have. But part of me wasn’t ready to put it all out there yet.

Things could still shift. They always could.

Chapter 2

I had put the phone away and was still sitting there when Chuck’s car swung into the lot. We reached the front door at nearly the same moment. I held it open while he stepped up to the host stand. “Just two of us,” he said. “Something in a corner somewhere. We want someplace quiet.”

West Texas Steakhouse was the kind of place that had been exactly what it was for thirty years and had no interest in being anything else. Dark paneled walls, mounted longhorns above the bar, a neon Lone Star sign throwing red light across the row of barstools where a couple of ranchers in dusty boots were settling in for the evening, their conversation drifting over in easy Spanish. The booths were deep and wide, upholstered in cracked burgundy leather that had absorbed a thousand conversations just like the one we were about to have. The smell of the place hit you at the door, mesquite smoke and cast iron, the kind of smell that doesn’t wash out of the walls. A few tables were still occupied in the main room, whatever dinner rush they might have expected on a Monday evening was already here. The hostess led us past all of it to the far corner, a round booth tucked away from everything, half-lit and unhurried. It was perfect.

We slid in across from each other without opening the menus.

Chuck scanned the room, looking for a server.

“You good with red wine?” he asked.

“Good with that.”

A server appeared with menus in hand. “Good evening, gentlemen. How are you tonight?”

“We’re doing great,” Chuck said. “We’ll start with a bottle of a good red blend. What do you

recommend?”

She smiled. “The Prisoner is excellent. A lot of our regulars come back for it specifically.”

Chuck looked at me. “You good with that, Roger?”

I smiled. “Sounds good. Though I’ll admit I’m a little worried it’s an omen. Not sure what I’m getting myself into here.”

Chuck laughed and looked back at the server. “We’ll take it.”

The wine came quickly. The server uncorked it at the table, poured a taste for Chuck, who waved it through without ceremony, then filled both our glasses and set the bottle between us.

We sat for a minute without much conversation, both of us settling into the quiet of the corner. The restaurant had that early-evening hum, low voices, the occasional clink of glass, a door swinging somewhere in the back. Nothing rushed. Plenty of time.

Chuck leaned back slightly. “So,” he said, casual. “Tell me about your wife.”

“Amy,” I said. “Her name’s Amy.”

He nodded. “You mentioned she’s been a nurse for a while.”

“About fifteen years. Same hospital system the whole time. She’s seen everything.” I paused, turning my wine glass slowly on the table. “She loves helping people, she loves the work, but COVID was different and really tested that.”

Chuck didn’t interrupt.

“She was in it every day,” I continued. “Not just the long hours. The volume of it, the weight of it. Patients coming in terrified, families not allowed through the door, people dying alone. Over and over. It wasn’t just a hard stretch. It changed her.”

I looked down at my hands for a moment, then back up.

“I came home one night and she was already there, sitting at the kitchen table. Hadn’t even changed out of her scrubs. Just sitting there in the quiet. She looked up at me and said, ‘I held three people’s hands today while they died, and none of their families were there.’” I stopped. Across the room, the Lone Star sign hummed softly. One of the ranchers at the bar laughed at something in Spanish, loud and easy, completely separate from where we were sitting. “She didn’t say much after that. Didn’t need to.”

Chuck had set his glass down at some point without me noticing. He was very still.

“But here’s the thing,” I went on. “It didn’t harden her. Didn’t push her away from the work. It did the opposite. If anything, it made her want life more, not just her career but our life. A family.”

Chuck nodded, slow and quiet.

“We’ve been trying for about three years now. IVF twice. No luck.” I exhaled the kind of breath that carries more than air. “You go into it thinking it’s a process. Follow the steps, do what they tell you, and it’ll work. But after a while it starts to wear on you. Not just physically for her, but mentally for both of us.” I turned the glass again, watching the wine catch the light. “You start asking what you’re missing, what you’re not doing right. And there’s no clean answer. Just try again.”

“We have a good life. Solid. Stable. No real complaints.” I set the glass down. “But there’s always this...” I searched for the right word and settled for the honest one. “Gap. Something just out of reach. Like we’re close, but not quite there.”

Chuck had been looking at me steadily the whole time. Not with pity. With recognition.

“Good,” he said quietly. “But not great.”

“Yeah,” I said.

He sat back slowly and let out a long breath. “Surviving. Not thriving.”

I met his eyes. “That’s exactly it.”

Neither of us spoke. The bar noise drifted over from across the room, distant, belonging to a different night entirely. A server moved quietly past our booth without stopping, as if she understood without being told.

“I’ll pray for you both,” Chuck said. He meant it simply, the way some men do, without performance or qualification.

Then he looked down at the table, gathering his own thoughts. “That’s where I’ve been too. The same feeling, just a different version of it. My wife has deserved better, and I’ve kept giving her good. The business is the same story. You hit a level where everything is functioning. Nothing’s on fire. People are doing their jobs. The numbers are fine.”

He shook his head.

“But fine has a way of sticking. You get used to it. You start calling it success when it’s really just maintenance. And the longer you sit in it, the harder it becomes to break out. Not because it’s impossible, but because it’s comfortable enough to justify staying.”

I leaned back slightly. “That’s where we are. At home, in the middle of everything. A good life. Just not the life we thought we’d have by now.”

Chuck gave a knowing nod that needed no elaboration. The weight of what we’d both just set on the table stayed there between us.

Chuck picked up his glass. “Here’s to better.”

I lifted mine. “To better.”

We tapped glasses gently, took a sip, and set them back down almost in unison.

The server hovered just long enough to ask if we were ready to order. Chuck raised a hand without looking at the menu. “Not yet.” He gave her a quick, apologetic smile. “This might be a long evening for you. Sorry.” She nodded and stepped away.

Chuck leaned forward now, forearms on the table, his tone shifting just enough to signal we were getting into it.

“Alright,” he said. “Let’s talk about what you’re walking into.”

I straightened slightly.

“Martin,” Chuck said. “We should start there.”

“I figured.”

Chuck took a breath, choosing his words carefully. "First thing you need to understand. This business wouldn't have survived without him. Not in the early years, and not through some of the harder ones since. He's been a big part of why the doors are still open."

I listened without interrupting.

"He's technically exceptional," Chuck continued. "Knows the numbers cold. Where every dollar comes from, where it goes, where it's supposed to land. You won't outwork him on that side of things." He took a sip of wine, then set the glass down. "But we haven't thrived, either. And if I'm honest with myself, some of why sits with him."

I nodded once, slowly.

"I'm not here to badmouth him. He's given a lot to this company and still does." Chuck turned his glass a quarter turn on the table. "Let me put it to you a different way. Sometime in your first week, you'll be in a meeting, and somebody will float a new idea. Watch Martin when it happens. He won't argue with it. He'll nod, and he'll say, 'Let me take that back and run the numbers.' Polite. Reasonable. Impossible to push back on." He looked at me. "And that's the last anyone ever hears of it. The numbers come back, and the numbers always say no."

I offered a small half-smile. "And after a while, people stop floating ideas."

"Right, that's what most people do," Chuck said. "Why take the bruise. So now you've got a building full of capable people who've quietly agreed not to bring up anything that won't survive a trip through his spreadsheet."

That stayed with me more than a list of his faults would have. I could already picture the meeting.

"And you've allowed it," I said. Not quite a question.

"I have," Chuck said, without hesitation. "My background isn't finance. Never has been. Early on, I leaned on him because I needed somebody strong in that seat, and he was. Over time it got easier to step back and let him drive that part of the business." He paused. "Easier is a trap. By the time you notice, he's not just running the numbers. He's deciding what's possible. I let that go on longer than I should have."

I sat back. "So where does that leave me?"

"It leaves you walking into a business that's stable and going nowhere," Chuck said, direct now. "A finance leader who's smart, capable, and almost entirely convinced he's right. And a choice. You'll have to work with him. You'll have to work around him sometimes. What you can't do is let him set the ceiling on what this place is allowed to try."

I exhaled slowly. "That won't go over quietly."

Chuck allowed himself a slight smile. "No. It won't. But I didn't hire you to keep things quiet. I hired you because you'll push on the things that don't hold up, the things everybody else has already agreed to stop pushing on." He paused. "You're going to have to pick your spots. You won't win every argument, and you don't need to. But you do need to move this business forward, even when the easy thing is to let it ride."

I looked away from Chuck, taking that all in. "That's a significant shift in how this place has operated." My eyes back to him.

"It is," Chuck said. "And it's overdue." He let a moment go by, then continued more quietly. "One thing about Martin. He doesn't respect titles. He respects honesty, and he respects people who know their craft. If you want something to move, make it his. Slower, harder, but it sticks. If Martin believes something was his idea, he'll defend it and build on it. You don't need the credit. You need the movement."

I considered that for a moment. "Small wins first."

"Exactly," Chuck said. "Build momentum. One decision at a time. The team is ready for something new. They won't say it yet, but they feel it. They've been steady for a long time. Maybe too steady. They're also anxious about what happens when I step back, and that's natural. But you'll fill that space faster than you expect. You'll see it in their faces, in the way they start coming to you instead of going around you, in the way they respond when you make a call and hold to it."

He picked up his glass, then set it back down. "That's when you'll know."

I nodded and let the conversation ease off naturally.

We ordered without much discussion, big steaks for both of us, and for a while the only sounds were silverware against plates and the din of a restaurant thinning out. No pressure to fill it. The kind of silence that comes after something important has already been said.

Chuck broke it with the same ease he did everything else. "We've got a customer that's going to need some attention before long," he said, cutting into his steak like the conversation had never paused. "Midwest account. They've been steady, but there's some noise starting. Nothing critical yet."

"I felt something like that when I toured the floor," I said. "A little uncertainty. Things a bit loose at the edges."

"That's it," Chuck said. "They haven't pushed yet, but they will. That'll be one of your first real tests."

I turned that over while I chewed. "Good place to start," I said. "Something concrete."

Chuck gave a small nod. "Always is."

The conversation drifted lighter after that: how long certain customers had been around, who could be counted on, who needed watching. The business was still present, but it wasn't heavy anymore. At some point I realized I was enjoying it, sitting across from Chuck not as a candidate, not as an outsider being evaluated, but as someone who belonged in the conversation. That shift had happened without a clear moment. It was just there.

Chuck leaned back and set his fork down. "My wife's going to be happy," he said, almost to himself. "No more next years."

"Sounds like she's earned it," I said.

He picked up his fork again, then smiled. "She won't believe it right away. I've said it too many times. But this time is different." He looked at me. "You are different."

I held that for a second. "She'll see it soon enough. You won't be able to fake it."

Chuck laughed softly. "No. I won't."

A beat passed. Then: “You follow football?”

I smirked. “Yeah. Just not the right team, according to most people around here.”

“Oh yeah? Who’s yours?”

“Bears.”

Chuck leaned back with a slow whistle. “That’s been a tough road.”

“It has. New coach, new quarterback, new plan. I think we’re actually ready to win this time.”

“Cowboys are looking decent this year,” Chuck offered.

“That’s what you guys say every year.”

He laughed. “Fair enough. Can’t say I’d mind a new plan myself. Same old same old isn’t exactly working for us either.”

A small thing. Not important in the grand scheme. But there it was. Two people from different places, different instincts, different loyalties, now sitting across the same table trying to move the same business forward.

The server returned and glanced at the nearly empty bottle. “Another one for you gentlemen?”

Chuck shook his head. “No thanks. We’ve got an early morning.” He handed her his card without looking at the check.

A few minutes later we were on our feet, both of us stretching a little, loosening up and grabbed our jackets. Chuck gave me another firm pat on the back, the same as earlier. Steady. Familiar. Not for show.

We walked out into the night air together, cooler now, the parking lot nearly empty. For a moment we just stood there, neither of us in any particular hurry.

“See you at seven,” Chuck said.

“Night, Chuck. Thanks for dinner. And for your trust.”

He gave me one last look, smiled, then turned toward his car. I watched him go. He moved like a man who had set something down after carrying it a long time, and the relief in it was real.

I got in my car and sat with the engine off.

The Midwest account. Chuck had mentioned it over the second glass, casually, the way you mention something you’ve stopped worrying about because you’ve decided it isn’t your problem anymore. A customer going quiet. Pricing pressure starting to build. The buyer’s calls going to Brett instead of him. He’d waved it off, moved on to finishing his steak.

I hadn’t moved on.

Chapter 3

The house was dark when I pulled into the driveway, and it was more than just the absence of

light. The whole place had a stillness to it, the kind that settles in late when the day has already wound down and there is nothing left to carry it forward. No television glow through the front window, no movement behind the curtains. Just quiet. I sat with the engine off and my hands still resting on the wheel, not quite ready to go inside. The evening needed a moment to catch up with me before I brought it through the door.

I stepped out and closed the car door with the practiced care of a man who has come home late before. The front door opened and shut just as softly behind me, and I moved through the house without turning on any lights. I knew the layout well enough, the corner of the coffee table, the slight creak in the hallway floor just past the bathroom, and in that moment the darkness felt less like an obstacle than a buffer between what had just happened and whatever came next.

Amy was already asleep. I could hear her breathing from down the hall, steady and even. I set my keys on the counter without a sound and made my way to the bedroom, easing the door open just enough to slip inside. A thin line of streetlight pushed through the gap in the curtains, enough to see by if I moved slowly. I took off my shoes, then my shirt, folding it over the chair in the corner the way she had trained me to do years ago instead of leaving it on the floor.

When I pulled back the covers and started to slide in, her voice came through the dark.

"Hey," she said, soft and thick with sleep.

"Hi, honey." I eased back against the pillow. "Sorry. Go back to sleep."

She shifted onto her side to face me.

"Tell me," she said. "How did it go?"

I let out a breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding. "It went," I started, then reconsidered.

"Actually, it went better than I expected."

She was quiet for just a moment. "Better how?"

"He offered me the job. Right there in his office. No 'we'll be in touch,' no next steps. Just told me it was mine if I wanted it."

A pause. Longer this time.

"Wait," she said, more awake now. "Tonight? He actually said it tonight?"

"First in his office and again at dinner."

She pushed herself up onto one elbow. "Roger." Her voice had dropped into that particular register, not loud, not dramatic, just certain. "That's amazing."

"It is," I said. "It really is."

She reached over and touched my arm and didn't say anything for a second. "So, it's real, then. After all the maybes".

She let out a slow breath that was equal parts relief and something else, something that had been waiting a long while. "I knew it," she said. "I told you."

"You did."

I lay there looking up at the ceiling, letting the quiet of the room hold it for a minute without any noise around it. Outside, a car passed on the street and the thin light shifted briefly across the

wall, then disappeared.

“It happened fast,” I said. “Faster than I expected. I thought there would be another round, more time to prepare. But Chuck was ready. I think he has been for a while.”

“How is he?” she asked. “Really.”

I thought about the office, the accumulated walls, the boots in the corner. “I like him. He’s straightforward, no games. You can tell he’s tired of carrying it the way he has been, but he still cares about the place. He just wants to hand it to someone and trust that it’s going somewhere.”

“That’s your challenge, then,” she said. “He trusts you with it.”

“That’s why he hired me. Not to maintain what’s there, but to push past it.”

She paused for a moment before asking, “So when do you start?”

I hesitated.

“When?” she asked again.

“Tomorrow.”

The word landed in the room.

“Tomorrow,” she repeated. Not a question.

“Seven a.m.”

She stared at me in the dark. I didn’t need to see her face. “You’re serious.”

“I wish I wasn’t.”

She shook her head and let out a quiet laugh, the one she reserved for things that were both absurd and completely inevitable. “Of course it’s tomorrow,” she said. “Of course it is.”

“Yeah.”

She settled back against her pillow, but her mind was moving. I could tell by the silence.

“Okay,” she said finally. “Alright. We can do that.”

And then it hit me.

“Amy.” I turned toward her. “Your appointment.”

She went still.

“The clinic,” I said. “Tomorrow morning.”

A beat of silence, the kind that means someone is deciding something.

“It’s okay,” she said.

“I can reschedule it, or I can come in late and—”

“No.” Quiet, but firm. “Don’t do that.”

“Amy.”

“Roger.” She said my name the way she did when she needed me to actually hear her. “This is your first day. You need to be there.”

"I can be a little late. I can explain it."

"It's our third time through this," she said. "I know the questions they're going to ask. I know the answers I'm going to give, and I know what comes next." She exhaled once, steady. "I'll be okay."

I didn't say anything right away. In the quiet I could hear the hum of the refrigerator from down the hall, the small ordinary sounds of the house settling in the desert air.

"You sure?" I asked.

"I'm sure." A pause. "Go be Mr. President."

I smiled, even though something in my chest didn't quite let go. She was right. She knew the process, she was capable, she didn't need me holding her hand in a waiting room. I knew all of that. And still.

She reached under the covers and found my hand, fingers wrapping around mine the way they always did, and held on without saying anything.

"I'm proud of you," she said after a moment. "Really."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. This is what you've been working toward. What we've been working toward."

I squeezed her hand. "How do you feel about it?"

She considered that for a second longer than I expected. "Excited," she said. "And a little bit terrified. Same as you, probably."

"Mostly ready," I said. "With a side of terrified."

She laughed softly. "Tomorrow's going to be interesting. Walking in as the new guy is always awkward. Doing that as the boss isn't something you've done before."

"Different seat, same process, I hope."

"You'll be fine."

"I know." I shifted slightly. "Doesn't mean it won't be weird for about the first fifteen minutes."

"Fifteen?" she said. "I'd give you five."

"Generous."

She smiled. I could hear it. "Get some sleep," she said. "Big day."

"Yeah."

She leaned in and kissed me, unhurried, the kind that says something without needing words. I kissed her back and held it a moment longer than I might have on an ordinary night. She wrapped one arm around me and pulled me closer, and for a little while everything else receded: the job, the morning, Martin, the Midwest account that was already turning quietly in the back of my mind.

We settled in facing the same direction, her hand finding mine again in the dark.

I lay there after her breathing had gone steady again and listened to the house. The furnace hum.

The tick of something in the walls. Somewhere down the street, a dog barked once and stopped.

Tomorrow she would be sitting in that waiting room alone, answering the same questions for the third time, and I would be six miles away shaking hands and learning where the coffee was. She had told me it was fine. She had meant it, mostly. But I also knew that mostly and completely were two different things, and that some distances don't close just because you don't talk about them.

I closed my eyes.

Tomorrow was already here.

Chapter 4

I left the house before five-thirty.

The drive in was quiet, just the highway and the hum of the engine and the radio I stopped hearing about five minutes out. My mind was already sorting the day's moving parts. I'd never quite learned how to turn that off, and by now I'd stopped trying.

The lot was nearly empty when I pulled in. Maybe ten cars, the early crew that came in ahead of first shift to bring the plant up, air on, lines warmed, the building made ready before the rest of it arrived. I took the spot farthest from the door out of habit, the one that left the closer spaces for people who had been here longer.

I sat there for a moment and looked at Chuck's sign. Just his name on it, the way it had always been. Who's going to change that out for me, I thought, and then caught myself. Not important. Not today.

I got out of the truck.

Inside, the building felt familiar but not comfortable, and I couldn't tell if that was the place or me. Yesterday I had been a visitor, even sitting in Chuck's office hearing the words. Today I wasn't that anymore, but I wasn't fully anything else yet either. I walked down the hallway toward his office and glanced in, expecting to see him in the doorway the way he had been the day before.

He was at his desk instead, leaning forward, turning something slowly in his hands. The wire harness again. He didn't look up when I stopped at the door.

I rested my hand on the frame. "Mornin'."

He turned, unhurried. "Mornin'." Something in his voice was different from the night before. Quieter. More contained.

"Coffee?" he asked, already standing. "Sit, I'll grab us a couple."

He came around the desk and went, and I took a chair at the conference table while the sound of his steps faded down the corridor. It wasn't a big thing. But I felt it. Yesterday he would have made the coffee part of the moment somehow, walked me down there himself, told me a story

the best coffee he'd ever had. Today he went and got it and let me sit, and there was something deliberate in that, a quiet transfer of something that didn't need to be announced.

He was back a couple minutes later with two mugs that didn't match. He set one in front of me and settled into the chair across the table, slower than usual, a notepad already open beside him.

The coffee was strong, the way it gets when someone is building that pot for a long day. I took a sip and didn't mind it.

"Alright," he said, glancing down at the page. "Let's walk through the day."

He took it from there, and as he talked I could hear the structure in it, not just for me but for himself. When people would arrive, how we'd bring the management team together, how he'd handle the announcement, how the morning would unfold. His voice was steady, with small pauses in it, like each word was being chosen a little more carefully than usual.

"I talked to Martin yesterday," he said, glancing up briefly. "He knows."

I nodded and waited.

"Spend some time with him early. Let him walk you through where things stand financially. Good or bad, whatever it is." He paused. "Listen more than you talk. Give him room."

There was something underneath that. Not a warning exactly, but not nothing either. I didn't push it.

"Around nine we'll get everyone together in the cafeteria. I'll handle that one. Keep it simple. You're the President, you're running the business, you're in the driver's seat now." He stopped there, and for the first time since I'd walked in, he leaned back and looked at me directly.

"I'm going to step back right away," he said, quieter now. "I've been saying that for a while. This time I mean it."

I held his gaze. There wasn't anything useful to say, so I didn't try to say it. "I understand," I said.

He nodded once, then pushed his chair back slightly, signaling the moment had passed and we were moving on. "Good," he said. "Let's get after it."

The management team gathered faster than I expected, each of them carrying their own rhythm into the room. Mary came in first, steady and grounded, a firm handshake and a look that said she was ready to see how this played out. Sandy followed with her clipboard already in hand. Martin entered with a measured nod, polite but controlled, the kind of controlled that takes practice. Lynn came in last, moving a little quicker than the others, carrying an energy that stood out the moment she crossed the threshold.

Chuck didn't stretch the moment. He stood at the head of the table and got right to it, calm and direct, no extra words. As he spoke, I watched the room more than I listened. Some people nodded right away. Some leaned back slightly. Some just held still, processing. When he said I would be running the business going forward, the room made a subtle adjustment, not dramatic, just a few degrees of rebalancing, the way a scale settles when the weight shifts.

When it broke, it broke quickly. A few congratulations, brief comments, and then people moved back toward their day. Martin stayed behind and asked if I had a few minutes. I nodded and followed him down the hall.

His office looked exactly like I expected. Clean lines, clear surfaces, everything placed with

intention. No pictures on the walls, no personal items, nothing that didn't serve a purpose. Not cold exactly but controlled in a way that extended past the furniture. He sat down, folded his hands on the desk, and looked at me evenly. "Roger," he said. "First, you have my full support."

He said it cleanly, and I almost missed the pause that followed. Almost.

"I've been here a long time, and I understand how this business operates. Financially, we're stable. There's nothing immediate requiring your attention." He held a measured pace, like a man reading from something he'd already written in his head. "Take your time getting up to speed. There's no need to rush into decisions. We've managed well for a long time." There was ownership in that last line. Subtle, but clear.

"We have a customer call this afternoon," he added. "I can take the lead. It's not something you need to get pulled into right away."

"Which customer?" I asked.

He told me. I recognized the name from my time on the floor.

"The co-pack side," I said.

"Yes."

"What's the situation?"

He leaned back slightly, considering how much to hand me. "A few late shipments. Some cuts. One quality issue recently. Nothing out of the ordinary."

I watched him. "I'd like to be on the call."

A brief pause. "Of course."

We stood, and as we walked out, I had the distinct sense the conversation had been more about positioning than information. Nothing said outright. Nothing denied. Just set.

At about 8:50, the cafeteria began filling quickly, the space opening into rows of tables and clusters of people, voices low but running. When Chuck stepped to the front the room shifted almost at once, conversations dropping, attention narrowing the way it does when the person who built this is about to say something that matters.

He delivered it exactly as he'd said he would. Clear, direct, no extra words. When he said my name, when he said I'd be leading the business, I felt the room move again, some people stepping forward, others settling back. When it ended, a handful of people came toward me with handshakes and quiet welcomes. Another group moved toward Chuck, and I watched as they thanked him, some with quick words, some longer, a few pulling him into a hug. One of them turned away and pressed a hand to his eye before rejoining the crowd.

I stood at the side of the room and watched a man I'd known for a couple of weeks, get hugged by people who'd given him their working lives. Several people came, introduced themselves and congratulated me, but for the most part, the crowd dispersed. Back to work.

I spent the first part of the morning on the floor, and it was nothing like the walk I'd taken during the interview process. Before, I had been observing from the outside, trying to understand equipment and people and rhythm without getting in the way. Now every sound felt different. The film unwinding, the belts moving, the scrape of corrugated cases being staged, the quick hand signals between operators when a line started to struggle. I walked slower this time because

I wasn't looking for impressions anymore. I was trying to understand what I had just inherited.

That was the part that hit harder than I expected. These weren't employees in a plant I was touring. These were people whose paychecks and routines and stability were connected to decisions I hadn't made yet. I watched an operator pull a case from the line, square it up, and send it forward without glancing up, and that simple, practiced movement stayed with me. If I did this right, they had a better chance. If I didn't, the consequences weren't going to stay in a conference room.

I stopped near the first co-pack line with one of the supervisors, and he gave me a practical walkthrough without making it feel like a presentation. Where finished film came in from the print side, where product was staged, where they typically lost time during changeovers, where a line could look busy while still falling behind. A second supervisor joined us partway through and added his own version, not contradicting, just showing how many small truths could live inside the same process. They were careful at first, giving me the safe answers, and after a few minutes they started talking more plainly. The informal version was better. It usually is.

"If we're late on an order," I asked, watching a pallet get pulled from the end of the line, "where does it usually start?"

The first supervisor looked down the line before answering. "Depends on the item. Sometimes product doesn't get released on time. Sometimes film isn't ready. Sometimes we change over and find out we're missing something small that should've been staged the night before."

"Small things that aren't small anymore."

He nodded. "Exactly that."

I put a hand briefly on his shoulder as I moved on, not a big gesture, just enough to let him know I'd heard him. As I kept walking, I could feel eyes following me, some people smiling when I caught them, others looking down quickly. Nobody knew yet what kind of leader I was going to be, and I couldn't blame them for waiting to find out. But I knew right then I'd need to be a presence out here. Not a visitor. Not someone who appeared only when something broke.

My phone buzzed as I was heading back toward the offices. Amy.

all done. they were thorough. i'm okay. talk tonight. love you

I stopped in the hallway and read it twice, then typed back.

so glad. sorry i wasn't there. tonight, everything. love you

I held the phone a second longer than I needed to before I put it away and kept moving.

The one-on-ones started after lunch, in Chuck's office, which was mine now even if it didn't feel like it. They came to me one at a time, and I started with Mary.

She came in without ceremony, sat across from me with both arms resting comfortably on the table, and looked at me the way someone looks when they've decided to give a thing a fair chance before forming an opinion. She had that plant-floor steadiness that doesn't come from a title, the kind built over years of knowing which sounds are normal, which operators are struggling, and which numbers are lying.

We talked for about twenty minutes. She was measured but not guarded, careful but not closed. When I asked what got in the way of the floor performing at its best, she didn't hesitate long.

"The plant feels the confusion first," she said. "When priorities aren't clear up top, we're the ones absorbing it."

I told her I wanted to understand it better. She said I would, if I spent time out there. She meant it as an invitation, not a test, at least that's how I took it. There was more to Mary than twenty minutes was going to show me, and I think we both knew it.

Sandy was next, and the contrast was immediate. She arrived with a folder, sat with clean posture, and squared everything in front of her before saying much. We moved through the onboarding paperwork efficiently. She was well-prepared and didn't waste time, which I appreciated. When the last page was signed and stacked, she seemed ready to wrap up, and I kept her a few minutes longer.

She confirmed the labor market was tight, that certain positions were chronically hard to fill, that retention took constant attention. When I asked what she needed from leadership to do her job better, she said one word before she said anything else.

"Consistency."

Then, almost as an afterthought: "I've had good support from Martin. He understands the importance of structure."

She said it plainly, without editorializing. But it landed, and I filed it away without reacting to it. There would be more to learn about Sandy, and about where she'd learned to stand when things felt uncertain.

Lynn came in moving fast and sat down like she'd been waiting for the conversation. She got to the point quickly, co-pack margins tighter than they appeared, operational costs being absorbed quietly, customer agreements that made more sense when the business was filling capacity than they did now. She talked about the floor using people's names instead of job titles, which told me something. She spoke highly of Mary, which told me more.

When I asked about Martin, her expression shifted, just slightly.

"Martin is thorough," she said. I waited. "You'll figure it out."

I stood and headed to the plant floor feeling better than I'd expected to, not because everything was fine but because there was real talent in this building, and some of it was impatient. That was worth something. Lynn was going to be worth a much longer conversation, and soon.

Chuck caught me in the hallway, jacket over one arm. "Lunch?"

We crossed the street to a sandwich place that had clearly been surviving on regulars and speed for years. We ordered without much deliberation, took a booth by the window, and ate while I walked him through the morning. Mary's steadiness. Sandy's alignment. Lynn's sharpness. Martin's influence running through more than just finance.

Chuck listened without interrupting. Now and then he nodded, or looked out the window, or took a bite and waited. When I finished, he wiped his hands with a napkin and sat back.

"Good," he said. "You're picking up on it."

"That obvious?"

"To me. Not to everyone else."

We walked back in the midday heat without much conversation. Just before we reached the door, Chuck slowed.

"I'm going to clear out after the customer call," he said.

I looked over at him. "Today?"

"Today. You'll need some space."

No drama in it, and it sat with me anyway. He was creating distance on purpose. Not abandonment, not absence, just room to find my own footing in a building that still ran on his.

The customer call was at two o'clock in a small conference room off the main hall. Martin led it, and from the way he opened his laptop, arranged his notes, and positioned himself at the head of the table, it was clear this was his room before anyone said a word. Chuck sat off to the side. I took the chair across from Chuck and settled in.

Then I looked around the room. No Mary. No quality lead. No warehouse manager. No salesperson. Just Martin, Chuck, and me, about to hear a customer describe execution problems without a single person responsible for execution in the room.

The buyer's voice came through the speaker calm. Almost too calm.

"We had another late shipment this week," he said, without warm-up. "That makes the year-to-date trend difficult to defend on our end."

"We're aware of that shipment issue," Martin said.

"It's not just this shipment. Our top item has been cut on three of the last five deliveries. We've had to adjust internally, and at this point it's becoming a planning problem on our side."

"We're working on it. We understand the concern."

"We also discussed the packaging defects on the variety packs last time. We're still seeing inconsistent seals and film tracking issues. We need someone to own the corrective action."

Martin kept his voice even. "We'll get you a plan of action."

Broad words. The kind that sound like accountability without attaching themselves to anything a person would actually do.

The buyer let a beat pass before he replied, and when he did his voice hadn't changed at all. "We need timing, Martin. Not just a plan. We need to know who is working this and when we can expect to see it improve."

"Understood. We'll follow up."

The call ended a few minutes later with polite closing language and nothing resolved. Martin shut his laptop and gathered his notes, Chuck stood, and the two of them moved toward the door without anyone saying what we'd just heard. Nobody asked about the people who should have been in the room. Nobody questioned what "we'll follow up" was supposed to mean.

I stayed. I sat there in the quiet after the door closed and thought about the buyer's voice. He hadn't been angry. He'd been past angry, somewhere on the other side of it, like a man building a file. Martin had called this account less strategic than they used to be. Maybe a customer stops feeling strategic right around the time he gets tired of waiting to feel like he matters.

I rose and went straight to the warehouse.

The warehouse manager looked surprised to see me, but not unhappy about it. I told him I wanted to understand the late shipments and the cuts on Reese Foods, and to his credit he didn't retreat from the question. He walked me through staging, release timing, film availability, and the scramble that happened when production ran late and shipping tried to make it up at the end of the day. None of it sounded like a single failure. It sounded like a system that had learned to run late in pieces, each piece small enough to explain away on its own.

"When an order gets cut," I asked, "who makes that call?"

He rubbed the back of his neck. "Depends."

"That's usually not a good answer."

"No," he said quietly. "It isn't."

We moved from the warehouse back through the packaging lines, and I spent another two hours with supervisors and operators, anyone who could hand me a piece of what I was trying to see. Nobody had the whole picture, but each of them held a corner of it. Late film. Changeovers running long. A machine down. Certain customers getting priority no matter what the schedule said. The more I listened, the less the customer call felt like an isolated complaint and the more it felt like a symptom of something that had been running quietly for a long time.

By the time I looked at the clock it was six, and the day had gone somewhere I couldn't fully account for. My head was carrying a hundred observations and no order to put them in, so I sat down in the production office and worked back through the day in my notepad, getting it down while it was still warm. Mary. Sandy. Lynn. The call. The warehouse. The names of the supervisors and the things they'd said when they stopped giving me the safe answers. I knew there would be pages and pages of this by the end of the week, and I wanted the first ones to be honest.

When I finished, I walked back toward the front of the building slower than I'd walked into the plant that morning. Out on the floor a single line was still running on second shift, the bagger's compressed-air hiss carrying down the empty hallway in a steady rhythm. It was the same building I'd walked into at six-thirty. It didn't sound the same anymore.

Chuck's office door was open when I reached it. The desk had been cleared, the wire harness gone, the scattered notes gone, the Cowboys hard hat gone with him. Just the monitor and the furniture, waiting for someone else. On the corner of the desk sat a brand-new Chicago Bears hard hat, a fresh reflective vest laid neatly across it.

I crossed the room, picked the hard hat up, and turned it once in my hands. It was light, and it still had the new smell to it. I set it back down exactly where Chuck had left it, turned off the light, and headed out the door.