

THE  
**ZOO**

**Sample: Prologue + Chapter 1**

**S. M. Black**

Inspired by Real Events

## Prologue

I used to think those times would fade, the way most first jobs do. Just another line on a résumé, a couple of half-funny stories you drag out when the dinner table gets quiet. But they never left.

Even now, something small can pull me back. The hum of a fluorescent light. The bitter smell of burnt coffee. The sound of people arguing over who “owned” what, like animals circling the same carcass. Every time it happens, I remember that floor, and the kid I was when I first walked onto it.

Seventeen. Too green to know better, but too stubborn to quit. That store wasn’t just where I learned to sell a TV, but where I first saw how messy people get when money and pride are on the line. Where I learned that standing your ground matters when someone is trying to test your character, that empathy can close as many doors as it opens, and that sometimes the quietest confidence shouts louder than all the noise.

Not all of those lessons came from the obvious places. Some came from people I didn’t expect at all. One of them isn’t here anymore, but his voice still threads through these memories like he never left. And those memories — those stories — have a way of resurfacing whether I want them to or not.

So I’m telling them now, the best I possibly can. Not because the world needs another “first job memoir,” but because this one was different. This one was a Zoo. And it burned itself into me, leaving me scarred, sharper, carrying stories I still can’t quite believe happened. But they did.

## Chapter 1 – Welcome to the Zoo

*Scarborough, 2006. Kennedy and Lawrence.*

The intersection where dreams went to die and microwave ovens went to be discounted.

If you had been there back then, you'd remember seeing strip malls on every corner, each with a "For Lease" sign that'd been sun-faded since '97. The sidewalks were cracked, as were some of the locals. Bus shelters smelled like piss and pending lawsuits. Everyone was hustling something: bootleg DVDs, prepaid SIM cards, half a pack of Belmonts on a slow day. The hustle wasn't optional. Here, it was the ecosystem.

The whole corner hit you in one breath: stale coffee, cheap cologne, that late August air, hot enough to sweat through your shirt, with a breeze that made you gamble on leaving the jacket at home.

I didn't know it yet, but that block was where I was about to get the worst education I'd ever be grateful for.

It really was a simpler time. Imagine: The first iPhone hadn't dropped. Drake was still rolling around Degrassi in a wheelchair. TikTok wasn't even an app yet, it was just a single sperm swimming around the CCP's sack, waiting to impregnate the Western world with pure, uncut stupidity.

And then there was me. I was seventeen, freshly ejected from high school with exactly zero plan and a name tag in my near future.

\*\*

I sat shotgun in our family beater, a 2001 Nissan Sentra with a faulty ignition and tires balder than my great-grandma, while my dad drove me straight toward something neither of us could fully imagine.

Dad tapped the brakes and eased the Sentra into the cracked parking lot of a large corner strip mall plaza.

“There it is,” he said, nodding toward the bunker in front of us. “Laskin’s Discount Furnishing Emporium,” he looked up, reading the flickering sign mounted on the building, “it’s the flagship location.”

Flagship location. He actually said that. I didn’t know what he thought he meant by that, but what I saw was a place that looked like it had survived at least a few riots and a flood sale. One of the neon letters dangled by a wire on the front of the building, and a paper banner flapped half-detached above the door. On one side of the plaza sat a decrepit old bingo hall that could have doubled as a halfway house; on the other, a Pizza Pizza where teenagers in oversized Dicky’s gear loitered like they were waiting on a call from their parole officer.

My dad was a rep for an electronics company that had supplied Laskin’s for years, so it made sense that he presented the place with more pride than it probably deserved. He leaned back and tried to sound casual. “Barry owes me a favour. Go in, smile, shake hands, say yes to everything. It’s a good place to start.”

I kept staring out the window, motionless. I thought maybe if I didn’t move my dad would forget I was there and just go home. No luck.

“Look,” he persisted, “I’m not gonna force school on you. I never went to college myself, you know that. But you can’t sit around all day

watching Jackass reruns and playing that StarCraft crap. Either you're learnin' or you're earnin'. Otherwise you'll be forty, hanging around Kennedy Station, talking about how the Raptors should've kept Vince."

He'd said that learnin' and earnin' line before, one of those maxims like "No one's gonna pay you to breathe." Half advice, half threat. All Dad.

"I'm still figuring it out," I muttered.

"I know," he said. "So figure it out while earning a bit. You're good with people, Mo. You just don't know it yet. You just gotta let yourself get out there. Trust me."

I nodded with confidence, though my stomach didn't get the memo. The twisting in my gut was hard to ignore. I was shy, yes, but I wasn't afraid to work. I just didn't want to be bad at it. Whatever this place was, I could already feel it didn't have much patience for quiet kids or slow learners.

He put the car in park and cracked his door. "Come on. Let's go see Barry."

I didn't move right away.

I wasn't in a rush to make big decisions. College applications sat unopened at home on the dining room table under piles of pizza flyers and overdue bills. I hadn't ruled school out, I just hadn't ruled anything in yet.

And now here I was, about to be dropped into a sales floor full of grown men in baggy suits and Bluetooth headsets, all fighting for a chance to

sell financing to people who probably shouldn't have been approved for library cards.

My dad cleared his throat. I sighed, then reluctantly grabbed the door handle and followed him out.

\*\*

Inside, the store smelled like the past. Cigarette smoke embedded in drywall, a variety of body odours wafting towards the entrance, a crusty welcome mat that probably hadn't been washed since the '80s. The tile floors had been beige once, I think, now they were worn down to a dull gray matte. Fluorescent tubes buzzed overhead with a soft, sickly flicker that made you feel like you were waiting to be processed. The ceiling was painted black, probably to hide leaks. Plastic "SALE!" signs dangled from every fixture like exclamation points.

Classic Scarborough discount retail. An environment that screamed *if you could fog a mirror, you could probably get financed* — just don't ask about the interest rate.

We spotted Barry Laskin near the front. I recognized him immediately from his obnoxious commercials every morning on CP24 News. He was mid-sentence with a woman gripping a clipboard like a lifeline, but when he clocked us he peeled away from her without apology.

"Seriously?" she muttered, folding her arms, clearly used to being someone's bad idea for the day.

Barry moved toward us with the slow confidence of a man who'd beaten the odds and wasn't impressed by them anymore. He was the son of

Merv Laskin, Toronto's most infamous pitchman turned mayor. Barry inherited the store and the smirk. Picture a Jewish Tony Soprano if he ran a clearance centre and did his own bookkeeping: short, stocky, slicked-back hair. Always in a black V-neck, dark jeans and tiny leather loafers that whispered *I don't do stairs*. The smell of cigarette smoke clung to him as if he'd just finished a pack in his office even though you couldn't smoke indoors anymore. Bylaws were simply an inconvenience in Barry's world, apparently.

"Look who it is," he said, gravelly voice cracking into a slight smirk. "Fucking Schwartzie."

My dad smiled. "Barry."

"You still owe me a steak."

"I thought we were square."

"We're never square."

Then he turned to me. "This the kid?"

"Yup. Mo."

Barry looked me over like I was a floor model missing half the parts.

"Mo, eh. How old?"

"Seventeen."

He grunted. "Good. Baby face. People trust that. They don't think you know how to screw them yet."

He circled me with his eyes. “You ever sold anything, kid?”

“No.”

“You ever lied?”

“Maybe.”

He nodded. “Better than never. You’ll do fine.”

He glanced back toward the woman, now drifting toward the furniture section. “She’ll get approved,” he muttered. “Not for what she wants. Liam’ll handle it.”

Then he raised his voice, calm but sharp. “Liam!”

From the far end of the showroom, a ginger blur broke into a sprint, weaving past sectionals like he was dodging gunfire. He skidded to a stop in front of us, grinning, already way too close.

Liam couldn’t have been more than thirty-five, but he had the posture of a man who’d already been through a few divorces and blamed them all on karmic misalignment. Short, red-headed, shirt unbuttoned one too far, he smelled like weed smoke masked with Axe body spray. He smiled at us like he’d just gotten away with something and was about to do it again.

“You call, boss?” he said, bouncing slightly on his heels.

Barry jerked a thumb at me. “This is Mo. Schwartzie’s kid. Wants to sell TVs or something. Make him a star.”

Liam spun toward me like a mall kiosk worker spotting a mark. “Mo! Love it. Simple. Strong. No silent letters. You Jewish?”

“Yeah.”

“Of course you are. Look at that nose. Perfect. That plays. People love a Jewish kid in electronics. Just don’t talk about Gaza.”

I blinked. He didn’t, fixed on me with wide eyes and a grin to match.

Liam clapped his hands and rubbed them together like he was about to saw a lady in half. “Alright, let’s take the grand tour. You’ll love it. This place is full of psychos. The kind of guys who’d sell you a couch, then offer to deliver it with a cube van they borrowed from Home Depot. You’re not allergic to weird, are you?”

Barry nodded to my dad. “He’s in good hands.”

My dad gave my shoulder a squeeze. “Have fun,” he said, before following Barry toward the offices, probably to talk shop and argue about Blue Jays coaching decisions.

Suddenly I was alone with a man whose energy suggested both cocaine and a restraining order.

Liam leaned in. “You nervous?”

“A bit.”

“Good. That means you’re not a sociopath. Yet.”

He tossed a name tag at me, one of those white plastic rectangles with “MO” scribbled on it in Sharpie.

“Put that on. Customers need to know who to complain about.”

\*\*

“Interview time,” Liam said, leading me toward a dusty glass cabinet full of clearance DVD players. He leaned against it casually.

“You ready? Ever been to prison?”

I looked at him, one eyebrow raised.

“No.”

“Perfect. You’re already ahead of most of the sales staff.” He pointed to a saggy ottoman with a clearance tag stapled to it. “Sit. Let’s make this official.”

I sat down. He plopped onto a low coffee table across from me, hands on his knees like a therapist who moonlighted as a strip club DJ.

“Alright. Let’s get to it for real. You got a pulse?”

“Yeah.”

“You need a job?”

“Yeah.”

“You willing to work weekends and sell your soul for, like, twenty-five bucks more a week?”

I shrugged, still not sure if this was actually the interview. “Do I have a choice?”

He slapped the tabletop. “I like this kid. That’s the attitude. Defeated but still showing up.”

“Real talk,” he said, leaning forward. “This job’s about two things. Hustle, and not quitting in the first week. You can learn the rest. Ever tell a woman her husband’s got great taste and then try to meet him so you can say it to his face?”

“No.”

“You will.” He tilted his head. “Ever talk a grown man out of buying a dishwasher because you could tell he was one argument away from throwing it through a window?”

“Still no.”

“You’ll get there.” He glanced at my beat-up sneakers. “You know anything about electronics like your pops?”

I thought for a second. “PlayStation 2 counts?”

“Perfect. You’re practically a savant! But hey, listen,” he looked me in the eyes, “this ain’t Best Buy. People come here after they get turned down at Best Buy. You don’t need to be an expert, just sound like one. Confidence matters more than wattage.”

He swiveled his head around like he was checking for hidden mics, then leaned in even closer. “As far as I’m concerned, Mo, you’ve got the job.

But this place doesn't rest, so your orientation starts now. Rule number one. The three Cs."

"The three Cs?"

"Confidence, charisma, closing. If you don't have them, fake them. Rule number two. Never eat fish in the breakroom. Last guy who did, the microwave smelled like low tide for a month. People stopped eating lunch. Please leave the gefilte at home."

"I don't even eat gefilte—"

"Rule number three," Liam continued, cutting me off, "if it seems too heavy for one person, call Jerome."

"Who's Jerome?"

"You'll see."

I sat there, trying to take it all in. "Is there, like, an employee handbook I can read or something?" I asked.

"You're looking at it baby," Liam tapped the side of his head, "we do tribal knowledge around here, my man. Paper trails are bad for business in this neck of the woods. You think you were coming to work for Microsoft or some shit?"

He stood up and cracked his neck like we'd just finished something athletic. "Come on. Let's go meet the animals."

\*\*

We walked past rows of mattresses and faux-leather sectionals. The layout didn't make sense, electronics jammed between dining sets and discount ottomans like whoever designed the floor plan gave up halfway and let gravity decide the rest. Handwritten price tags dangled from everything, circled aggressively in red marker. The hum of refrigerators blended with the static hiss of TVs all tuned to different nature documentaries on loop. Somewhere, a baby was crying. Somewhere else, a guy on a flip phone was yelling about how "free delivery" should actually be free.

"First stop: the pit," Liam said, motioning toward a glass-top dining table near the front entrance. Six people sat around it like it was a war council, surrounded by coffee cups, half-eaten muffins, and paperwork that suggested someone once tried to be productive until realizing that was pointless around here.

"This is the Up Board," he said, pointing to a warped piece of painted plywood mounted to the wall, plastic name tags jammed into little grooves. "When a customer walks in, whoever's name is at the top takes them. They're 'up'. Fair system, straight forward, right?"

He smirked. "Wrong! It's fucking Thunderdome. Watch."

As if on cue, the front doors whooshed open and a couple in their seventies shuffled in. They looked confused, cold, and already pissed off. The top name on the board read "Abdul."

A tall, lanky Somali guy in an oversized suit popped up from his chair like a spring-loaded scarecrow, snatched his name tag from the board, tossed it into a wicker basket, and made a beeline toward them.

“See that?” Liam said. “Smooth. Watch this shit.”

Before Abdul could make contact, a heavysset middle-aged Black dude with dress pants sagging halfway down his ass and a gold chain thick enough to tow a Civic cut in front of him.

“Yo Ma! Pops! You looking for appliances? Come get blessed!” His voice carried gravel and malt liquor, steering the couple toward the back showroom, arms already draped around them like they were family.

Abdul froze mid-stride. His jaw tightened as he muttered something in Arabic under his breath.

“That’s Jerome,” Liam whispered. “He thinks he invented swagger. Watch him sell a fridge later, it’s performance art. If you ever need something heavy delivered in a pinch, or a quick gram, he’s your man.”

“A quick gram of what?” I asked.

Liam scanned me up and down. “Don’t act brand new. This is Scarborough, kid. You know what’s up.” He was right. I don’t even know why I asked.

Abdul exhaled and shot me a grin that was half friendly, half threatening.

“What?” Jerome shrugged at him as he walked by with the elderly couple. “Your tag was still in the basket, home boy.”

“They’ll stare each other down for a while,” Liam said, way too enthralled by the unfolding scene. “Sometimes I bring popcorn.”

He nodded toward the rest of the table. “That’s Angela. Four-foot-eleven. Voice like a chainsaw. She runs the Chinese clientele like a syndicate. Don’t get between her and a mahjong tournament.”

Angela glanced up from her Toronto Star and gave me a look that said *don’t waste my time*.

“That’s Abdul, the one Jerome just skated,” Liam went on. “Gentle giant. Moves like Spider-Man. Talks like he’s reciting poetry. Sells like he’s got a quota from God. He’ll tell you camel milk makes your dick hard like steel, then sell you a washer with steam settings. Just smile and nod.”

“Wait, what’s skated?” I asked.

“That’s a lesson for later,” Liam said, brushing it off.

He pointed to a young black guy hunched over a BlackBerry, a Bluetooth headset glued to his ear. “That’s CJ. Closer. He thinks he’s in Boiler Room or Glengary Glen Ross or some shit. Drives a Porsche Cayenne he definitely can’t afford on his salary.”

CJ didn’t look up. He brushed some white residue from his jacket cuff like it was lint. At the time I figured it was baby powder. Later, with what I came to know about CJ, I knew better.

“What’s a closer?” I whispered.

“Remember the three Cs?” Liam said. “Closers are the secret fourth one. The silent C. Like in czar, but more dangerous. We’re the finishers. You

bring us a warm body, we turn it hot. Circle some numbers, fake a discount, nod like a therapist, boom—signed, sealed, financed.”

He added, “But don’t try to close without one of us just yet. Unless you want Barry asking where his money is. He doesn’t ask twice.”

He lowered his voice. “We have a general manager too. Big Mike. You’ll know when he enters. He thinks he’s a motivational speaker trapped in a sales manager’s body.”

As if the timing was choreographed, a side door flew open and a six-foot-four linebacker in a tailored three-piece stormed out like he’d been waiting for someone to give him a reason to yell. Bald, Black, suit tighter than church shoes. His smile said *welcome*, but his eyes said *if you cross me, I will fold you into a futon*.

“You ready to CRUSH IT today?” he roared, clapping his hands once like a gunshot.

“Always,” Liam said, miming a mic drop.

Mike spotted me.

“Who’s the kid? He looks like he should be selling Girl Guide cookies.”

“This is Mo,” Liam said. “Schwartzie’s boy.”

Mike’s eyebrows popped. “Oh, you’re the rep’s kid.” He stepped close and dropped a hand the size of a dinner plate on my shoulder. “You a closer?”

“Not yet,” I managed.

“He will be,” Liam cut in. “We’re gonna mould him.”

Mike gave a quick nod. “Welcome to the Zoo, son. Just remember, if you ain’t closing, you’re just furniture. And around here, we only sit on furniture when we’re signing papers.” That didn’t make much sense, but he didn’t take the time to explain further. He quickly spun and marched toward the mattress section, barking “LET’S GO!” at a stock boy who flinched like he was being drafted.

“Subtle, isn’t he?” Liam murmured.

\*\*

We continued past the Up Board and deeper into the belly of the beast. The layout got more chaotic the further we went, like a clearance sale and a city bus had collided, then someone slapped a 40% off tag on the wreckage and called it a deal.

“Heads up,” Liam muttered. “Geriatrics incoming.”

First came Milty, waddling between two recliners like a penguin with arthritis. His white hair and mustache gave him the look of a retired magician, and his skin had the grainy pallor of someone who’d been defibrillated one too many times. He locked onto Liam with eyes that buzzed like burnt-out halogen bulbs.

“Still styling your hair with axle grease, or did you finally switch to human products?” Milty wheezed. “Smells like a hardware store back here, makes me miss the cigarette days.”

Liam grinned. “Good to see you too, Milty. Still selling that mattress that’s supposed to fix scoliosis?”

Milty smiled like he had insider info that probably wasn’t legal.

Next came Larry Smiley. Yes, real name. Bright white hair styled in a pompadour, suit plaid enough to give you vertigo. He looked like he belonged to a barbershop quartet that was banned for gambling and sexual misconduct.

“Well if it isn’t fresh meat,” Larry said to me, shaking my hand with both of his. “Welcome to the madness, bubelah. Hope you brought a helmet and a fake name.”

Then Jerry Bekker shuffled in behind him, dragging one foot like a zombie who’d outlived his own movie. Randomly blowing raspberries and muttering about property taxes. He looked like Jerry Lewis if he’d done time in a Vegas drunk tank and made it out on a technicality.

“You Jewish?” he asked me.

“Yeah.”

“Good. Keep your receipts. Always. And never buy floor models.”

He quacked, loud and unapologetic, then spun around and wandered off into the mattress section like a cursed Roomba with undiagnosed Tourette’s and nowhere better to be.

Liam leaned toward me. “That was the most coherent he’s been all week. Must be a good omen.”

We rounded the corner to the front counter where a young Filipino guy was quietly restocking pamphlets. Skinny. Clean shaven. Company vest buttoned too tight. His face carried a permanent mid-sigh, like he'd aged ten years in two shifts.

"This here's Manila," Liam said.

The kid didn't look up.

"His real name's Neduardo. He's from Cebu, but everyone calls him Manila, because why bother with accuracy when you can be lazy and mildly racist?" Liam grinned like he'd just landed the joke of the year.

"Or you could just call me Ned..." Neduardo said quietly, before Liam steamrolled right over him.

"He's my brother-in-law. My wife made me hire him after we sponsored him to come to Canada. Quiet little bastard, but he files paperwork faster than anyone else in the building, and somehow always ends up near the top of the sales leaderboard. He's my little Filipino sales Ninja. Just don't get him started on basketball unless you've got the afternoon free."

Ned kept fussing with a stack of flyers, lining them up with obsessive precision.

Liam leaned toward me. "Filipinos, man. Hardest workers in the world. My wife's family makes a five-course meal look like a relay race." He said it with the earnestness of a man who thought this was a compliment.

I blinked.

He winked at me. “Don’t quote me. HR doesn’t know I exist.”

Ned finally glanced up, gave me the smallest nod, then went back to the flyers.

\*\*

We continued across the sales floor until we passed through the breakroom doors. Suddenly I heard the sharp clack of dress shoes on tile. Quick, assertive, predatory.

A tall, light-skinned Jamaican guy strutted toward us in a baggy grey pinstripe suit. His tie looked like it belonged at a clown funeral; black, too wide, too short. A glint caught my eye. Diamonds. Not a grill. They were embedded in his top two front teeth. Actual diamonds.

“Yo,” he said, looking me up and down like I was a counterfeit twenty. “This the new electronics guy?”

“This is Mo,” Liam said.

“Of course it is.” He smirked, ignoring Liam. “Rico Davis. But everyone calls me Diamond Tooth. You will too.” He smiled, but it didn’t come off friendly. It read like a warning.

He stepped in close. I could smell aftershave and cheap cologne. “I run electronics. Always have. Always will. This your first day?”

“Yeah, kinda.”

“Cute.”

He adjusted his collar and shot Liam a look. “You really lettin’ him start in my section without running it by me?”

Liam shrugged. “Didn’t know I needed a permission slip from Scarborough’s answer to Liberace. Chill out Tooth.”

Diamond Tooth tilted his head toward me, voice dropping. “Listen, Mo. I’m the undisputed king of that department, alright? People might sign your paycheques, but I run the floor. You wanna last, you come to me, not him or any of these other fools. I can show you the real tricks of the trade.”

He let it hang for a second, maintaining eye contact, then turned and strolled off like the hallway was already his territory, head high, diamonds flashing.

Liam watched him go, shaking his head. “King of electronics, my ass. He’s just trying to fuck with you. Guy once got fired for stealing satellite boxes out of the warehouse. Barry brought him back because they’re tight. Makes him untouchable, which is why half the store wants to see him get bodied by a delivery truck.”

He grinned at me. “We’re all definitely gonna get along great.”

Then he gave me a look that was equal parts amused and relieved, turned, and started walking.

“C’mon,” he said over his shoulder. “Let’s show you what you’re really signing up for.”

\*\*

He led me through a maze of couches that made less sense than a fever dream. Aisles doubled back on themselves, dead ends that spat you into a completely different department.

Every few steps, another flash of the Zoo's madness:

A woman in a fur coat barking at a cashier like the receipt owed her an apology. Jerome moonwalking behind a couple, whispering, "That sofa was on Cribs. MTV-certified, bitch!" Abdul humming a Somali lullaby while lining up dryer doors with the care of a bedtime ritual. Barry strolling in with a coffee, ignoring the "No outside beverages" sign stuck on the front door. Angela scolding a seven-year-old for touching a coffee table while writing up a bedroom set without breaking stride. A toddler bolting under display tables with his dad chasing him, yelling, "Junior, that TV is six grand!"

I caught myself slowing down, trying to take it in. The noise, the movement—it wasn't just mindless insanity. It carried a rhythm. It felt like there was purpose to it. People cutting each other off, sliding into openings, looping around, like a dance no one admitted to knowing but everyone followed anyway. And it seemed to work. People were selling. People were buying. It felt alive.

"I know it looks like chaos," Liam said, stepping over a tape gun on the floor. "That's because it is. But it's our chaos. You learn to move with it. Watch and you'll see the patterns. Jerome always goes for women under forty-five because he thinks he's Usher. Abdul's got every couple married over twenty years eating out of his hand. Angela gets anyone who speaks

Cantonese, Mandarin, or Fear. And I mostly get the weirdos. The guys who walk in broke and still leave with a fifty-inch they shouldn't own."

Somewhere in all the noise, I wondered if there was space for the quiet kid with a name tag still smelling like fresh Sharpie.

\*\*

We landed back in the electronics section.

"This is you now, buckaroo," Liam said, sweeping his arm across the aisles of tangled cables and display models dotted with finger prints. "No one else wants this shit. Furniture's king. Appliances are queen. Electronics are tolerated."

"Why just tolerated?" I asked.

"Because it's messy," he said. "Margins are tighter, inventory's a nightmare, and nobody understands the tech well enough to bullshit confidently. It scares the lazy and bores the greedy. But if you hustle, you can own this whole section."

He smirked. "Pretend you know what an optical cable is. Hell, I still don't."

\*\*

Around 11:30, a man walked in wearing a velour tracksuit and enough gold jewelry to pay off a Hyundai. "Yo!" he shouted through a playful grin. "I need a 50-inch plasma for my basement and a girl who won't tell my wife."

Liam nudged me. “Go,” he whispered.

I stared at him. “What?”

“Go. Greet him.”

My stomach dropped. I wasn’t supposed to sell today. I wasn’t supposed to talk. I’d barely memorized the difference between plasma and LCD—*plasma has deeper blacks and better contrast, LCDs are lighter and more energy efficient*. I read that on CNET the night before and I’d been repeating it in my head like a prayer all day.

Before I could protest, Liam shoved me forward.

I squared my shoulders, plastered on a smile, and walked up to the man. “Hi, welcome to Laskin’s. Can I help you find anything?”

He looked me up and down. “You? Man, you look like you still got a curfew.”

I cleared my throat. “I do. It’s midnight. But my bedtime doesn’t affect your home theater experience.”

His mouth twitched, somewhere between a laugh and a grimace. “You sell?” he asked.

“I’m in training. But I can show you the difference between plasma and LCD while we wait for one of our closers. Plasma has—”

“Deeper blacks. Better contrast. Yeah, yeah. I’ve been on CNET. Which one’ll look good when I’m watching *The Sopranos* while my kids upstairs watch *SpongeBob*?”

“Probably the plasma,” I said. “But the LCD won’t burn an image into the screen if you forget to turn it off.”

He stared at me, then nodded slowly. “You’re alright. Get me the Black guy with the blue shirt.”

Abdul materialized next to me out of nowhere like a Somali sorcerer. He gave me a nod that felt like passing a test.

Liam clapped my back when I returned. “Not bad. You didn’t throw up. Bonus. See? You can do this.”

“Listen, hang around today. No pay, but good experience. See how we do things.”

He paused, nodded like he’d just made a solid life decision on my behalf, then pointed at me with the energy of a guy drafting a fantasy team.

“Then we’ll start you tomorrow if you’re not traumatized.”

I nodded, still processing the fact that I’d just talked a man in a velour tracksuit out of burning a hole in his plasma screen.

This place was unhinged.

But there was no way I was walking out now.

“Sounds good,” I said, hoping I sounded more confident than I felt.

\*\*

We were still in Electronics when I finally noticed him—not because he made an entrance, but because he’d been there the whole time and I hadn’t clocked him. His name tag read “Sam.”

While Jerome would’ve been moonwalking and Angela would’ve been lecturing in two languages at once, this guy was with a couple in front of a mid-range Samsung, speaking low and steady.

The husband tapped the price tag. “Best Buy’s got one for less.”

Sam nodded casually. “I’m sure they do. It’s TVs, man. There’s always a cheaper one. That’s just how it goes. Hell, I’ll be real with you. Come see me in three weeks, this one will probably be cheaper too. Might be a demo by then, maybe a scratch on the side, but cheaper.”

That got a half-smile from the wife. Sam leaned in a touch, voice calm. “Thing is, it’s not always about price. It’s about the time you’ll spend actually enjoying it. This one? Perfect brightness for your living room. Handles motion better, so the game looks like the game, not a slideshow. Sound’s clean enough you don’t need to crank it just to hear the play-by-play.”

The husband’s grip on the price tag loosened. Sam caught it and slid right in. “So, do you want me to set this up for delivery before the weekend, or do you want to roll the dice on something that might not fit the way you want it to?”

The husband looked at his wife. She nodded. “Let’s do it.”

Sam smiled—not the salesman grin, just a small nod like he’d expected that answer. “Good call. I’ll get it written up.”

He walked them to the counter, printed the invoice, and handed it over without fanfare. Just another job done.

I'd never seen someone make "you can get it cheaper later" sound like the reason to buy now.

Now that I was really looking at him, he couldn't have been more than a year or two older than me. Round, pudgy face that carried its own swagger. Braided hair pulled back neat. Throwback Raptors jersey under a blazer, sleeves pushed up like he meant business—the quiet, dangerous kind. Chinese. Calm, not passive. Smiling like he already knew the punchline.

He gave off an energy that was hard to pin down. Street-smart. Charismatic. Intense. He didn't need flash or noise. Presence was enough.

"Sam," Liam called. "This is Mo. You're training him."

Sam glanced at me and extended a hand.

"Forget everything Liam told you," he said, shaking mine. "This guy's out of his mind."

Liam pouted like a kicked puppy. Sam ignored it.

"Tomorrow's your first shift? Good. Come early. Bring a pen, a clean shirt, and a snack. I don't share."

Then he turned back to the TVs like our interaction had been a commercial break between sales.

Liam clapped me on the back. “That’s Sam. Quiet killer. You’ll see.”

I looked at Sam. Then back toward the rest of the store.

I’d seen the predators. I’d seen the prey. And now I’d witnessed someone who didn’t fit either.

He wasn’t loud. He wasn’t wild. He wasn’t trying to sell me any crazy ideas.

He was calm. Still. Like he knew something the rest of them didn’t.

That scared me more than anything else in the building.

Which said a lot.

\*\*

By three o’clock, my head hurt from the fluorescent lights and the smell of Febreze. My feet ached from standing on the hard tiles all day. My face stung from fake smiling for hours. But there was this buzzing energy in me—part adrenaline, part caffeine, part secondhand weed smoke, I’m pretty sure. It felt somewhere between a circus and a boot camp. It felt like possibility.

Liam walked me out to the parking lot when my dad pulled up. “He did okay,” he said, shaking my dad’s hand. “Didn’t cry. Didn’t throw up. That’s a win around here.”

“He start tomorrow?” Dad asked.

“If he wants. Eight a.m. Wear something you don’t mind sweating in. And bring a lunch or cash. Or both. Actually, bring both. Oh, and tell him to wear good shoes. Steel toes if he has them.”

“Thanks, Liam,” Dad said.

“No problem,” Liam replied. “Just remember, once he joins, he’s one of us. We eat our young, but we also feed them. It’s weird.” He turned to me. “You ready?”

I nodded. “Yeah. I think.”

“Good. Welcome to the Zoo.”

\*\*

As Dad and I drove away, I looked back at the bunker that somehow felt louder now that I was leaving it. Ugly and chaotic, but that undeniable energy was still thumping in my chest.

I didn’t know what kind of job I’d just signed up for, or what the hell I was doing there. But part of me wanted to find out. That place was weird, loud, and probably toxic in seven different ways, but it felt alive. It felt like it might turn me into something. Or break me trying.

Right then, I was just a kid with a name tag and a cheap pair of shoes I was about to ruin. Seventeen. Clueless. A little scared. A little excited. Too dumb to know how deep the pool was before I jumped.

Probably a good thing.

Want to read more? Submit a Request at

[thezoo.sblackbooks.com](http://thezoo.sblackbooks.com)

S.M. BLACK