

## Chapter 1

## Chapter 2

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“Delaware Designs, please hold. Delaware Designs, please hold. Good morning, Delaware Designs, how may I direct your call? Wait one minute while I try that extension,” Tracey, the front desk receptionist, recited as she handled the constant flood of calls coming in to the company’s busy switchboard.

The carefully modulated tones that Tracey used on the company phone were a far cry from her normal speaking voice. Xavier remembered the longest conversation that he had had with the receptionist. It had been back in October of the previous year, shortly after Xavier had started with the company. Tracey and Xavier had run into each other while each was getting coffee in the break room early one morning.

“You’re the new guy in Design, aren’t you?” she had asked in her normal voice, a thick Brooklyn accent rounding the vowels and shorting the words. Xavier was shocked at the vast difference between Tracey’s speaking voice and the one she used on the phone. He managed to stammer out an agreement that he was indeed new and in the Design department.

Delaware Property Design and Maintenance, a family owned landscaping and gardening firm in Suffolk county, Long Island, had hired Xavier as assistant to Simon Durant, the company’s chief negotiator for new contracts. Simon was the head of the true head of the Design department, which planned all of the greenery to be planted at the clients’ sites.

Simon had been arguing with Xavier’s boss, Emanuel Gonzales, on a construction site in Nassau county, Long Island, when Xavier came over to talk to Manny about getting some time off to visit to his college in Manhattan.

Xavier had done the well paid but back breaking work uncomplainingly since he started working for the company again, but was looking forward to quitting and getting back to the comparatively easy job of being a full time student and a part time data entry clerk. He had quit the simple office job he had held in Manhattan at the end of the spring semester the year before, in order to take a position working for the construction company that had employed him every summer since he was fifteen years old. Xavier managed to get through the daily grind by telling himself on a daily basis that it was only temporary, until his father found a job or until he, Xavier, started classes again in the fall. ‘Which ever came first,’ he always added during those pep talks to himself.

Frank Moran had had one job or another for most of his life, ever since he had immigrated as a child to America with his uncle, Ryan Bannion, and his cousins Mark and Ian. He delivered newspapers in the Queens, New York neighborhood that they had

settled in, learning the area the hard way, by walking them constantly. He held a number of jobs after that as he was growing up, and worked after and sometimes before school. By the time he was sixteen, Frank had a permanent position at the garage where his uncle worked. He was determined to never have to wander the streets of New York on foot, if he could help it.

So it came as a shock when the garage he had worked for for most of his married life went under and Frank found himself laid off. By April of that year, the Frank's unemployment insurance benefits had been exhausted and the family finances were in such bad shape that Xavier offered to quit school and move home. His parents refused but before the semester ended, Xavier had contacted Manny and arranged to have his old summer job back.

"It's good money," he told his parents.

"I don't want to take money from you, son," Frank started to say.

"It's not a loan and certainly not charity," Xavier told him bluntly. "It's rent. I can live here cheaper than I can in the city so I'll actually be saving money for next semester's expenses. And I can help out around here, watch John Paul for you when you're at work. Whenever you find work," Xavier had added.

Though they hated the necessity, his parents weren't fools, and had accepted the situation as Xavier had outlined it. But then things had gone from bad to worse that summer, and Xavier had seriously considered not going back to school. He meant to talk to his advisor at the college, but couldn't get an appointment early or late enough in the day to also put in a full day of work. He was going to explain his home situation to Manny and was so busy rehearsing what he was going to say that he walked in to the on-site construction office without noticing that Manny had someone with him.

That was when he met Simon Durant. Manny and Simon were arguing about timetables and planting and the argument was just starting to get heated when Xavier walked in. Simon turned to Xavier and asked him a question. Xavier was so startled that he just blurted out an answer without really considering the matter. Fortunately, he thought at the time, his answer seemed to agree with Manny. At least both men had stopped shouting and were now considering Xavier with interested eyes.

"Oh really?" Simon had said. "Why?"

Xavier thought for a moment and then explained his answer, hoping that they didn't see that he was working out what he was saying as he said it. Evidentially it was a well-reasoned argument and both men agreed to Xavier's solution.

"Good," Xavier said in the suddenly jovial atmosphere. "Then you'll give me the time off I need."

"No," Manny said shortly. "Go back to work." With that, he turned back to Simon and started working out the fine details for the solution to the problem that Xavier had just given them.

But Simon ignored Manny and said, "Kid, what's he," he gestured to Manny with his shoulder, "Paying you?"

Xavier answered honestly. It was quite a bit more money than he had been making in Manhattan, though to get him to work for an ass like Manny, it would have to be.

"I'll double it. You want a job? You can come in late or leave early, whatever, on that day you need time off," Simon had said.

"A job?" Xavier had repeated, dumbfounded. "Doing what?"

"Being my assistant," Simon had answered. "Cut through the morass and give me clear sighted solutions when I get bogged down. Keep my appointment calendar, make sure I have all of the information I need when I get to client meetings. That kind of thing. Are you interested?"

Xavier didn't have to think about it. "Yes," he said. "I can start Monday." It was a Tuesday, and Xavier had the meeting with his advisor on Thursday.

"If you can start tomorrow, I'll give you a salary three times what this guy is paying you," Simon had responded. "And you can take the time off you need when you need it, just let me know ahead of time."

"You've got it!" Xavier said, sticking out his hand to shake Simon's. "I quit," he added in Manny's direction. Simon and Xavier turned to leave the construction office, ignoring Manny's protests.

"Where are you going?" Manny cried. "We got a lot of stuff to work out here!"

"Call- what's your name, kid?" Simon said to Xavier where they stood near the door.

"Jun- er, Xavier Moran."

"Okay, Zhay," Simon said. Looking back at Manny where he sat at his desk, he told the construction boss, "Call Zhay here at my office tomorrow morning. We'll get everything squared away, and he can bring the plans over in the afternoon when he comes to pick up his last pay envelope."

Xavier was grateful that Simon put it that way. Manny was notorious for refusing to pay people who quit during a job. He was such a horrible person to work for that there was always at least one worker who refused to put up with his shit and walked out without their last pay envelope.

That had been a little over a year ago. Xavier now worked for Delaware Property Design and Maintenance as the assistant of Simon Durant, the company's chief contract negotiator, a major landscaping and gardening firm. Delaware had been serving clients on Long Island and in New York City for years, and had just started branching out to the neighboring states. The company's recent growth had created the position Xavier now filled. And that growth was all due to Simon.

Not that Xavier had known any of that when he accepted the job. In fact, he had only just begun to suspect it when Tracey had taken him aside in the break room that morning not too long after he started working for Simon. They each continued to fix their respective beverages to their satisfaction as they chatted. After a couple of minutes of small talk, Tracey lowered her voice and asked, "Did anyone tell you about Ralphie?"

Ralphie Delaware was the company owner's son and was also the head of the Design Department. "Tell me what exactly?" he had asked.

"Ralphie likes to walk around in the mornings," Tracey had advised Xavier, keeping her voice low.

At Xavier's puzzled look, the pretty red head had advised Xavier, "Make sure that you're at your desk and at least look like you are already in the middle of something important when he goes past your office. That should be at nine o'clock or so each morning."

"He checks up on people?" Xavier asked in an equally quiet tone.

"Oh, no," Tracey had laughed loudly. "I think he walks around just so that people know that he's in the office. You need to look busy or else he'll bend your ear for hours, talking about his yacht or his boating club or some other fool thing," Tracey had added with a droll grin.

"You work for the man who really runs this place. Be good to Simon," she said, naming Xavier's boss. "Do good work for him and listen to what he had to say and you'll learn a lot about how a business should be run."

Xavier had thanked her for the advice before heading back to his desk. He knew from his previous office experience that the receptionists and administrative assistants always knew what was going on in a company.

Before heading back to her own desk, Tracey had also told Xavier, "Oh, and be sure that you at least know the names of the winning sports teams, whatever teams are playing. Ralphie uses, or I should say, misuses a lot of sports metaphors when he's talking about business, and the only way to stem the tide of his bullshit is to bring up the latest games. He'll still chew your ear off, but a game has to end some time, so there's a limit to how long he can go on for." With that and a grin, Tracey had returned to her spot at the front desk.

It was the longest conversation that the two of them had had before or since, and it was undoubtedly the most useful piece of advice that Xavier had received in his early weeks at Delaware Property Design and Maintenance. Since then, he made sure to listen attentively when the morning radio show went through the list of sports teams' wins and losses. He had had cause to be grateful to Tracey for her information on more than one occasion, using it to free himself of Ralphie Delaware's incessant chatter.

Xavier gave Tracey a little wave as he hurried past her desk, heading toward his own. It was already a quarter to nine o'clock and he should have his computer booted and be at his desk before did Ralphie took his morning constitutional.

## **Chapter 3**