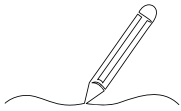
See what you notice

A NOVEL

RICHARD
TAGLIARINO



CHAPTER 1

THIS PLACE IS THE PROBLEM

It took eleven days to lose almost everything I thought I'd finally earned. Everyone around me had seen it coming. I was the only one who hadn't.

Monday, July 29th

I told Mike before I told anyone.

He was in Receiving, cutting down a stack of empty boxes, and he knew something was up before I said a word—ten years will do that. He just looked at me, box cutter still in his hand, and waited.

"I got it," I said. "Buffalo. Assistant manager."

He set the cutter down. "You son of a bitch."

Then he was grinning, and so was I.

"When?"

"Twelfth. Two weeks."

Something passed over his face—there and gone, the math of it. Ten years on the same floor, and now one of us was leaving. He covered it fast. "About time they figured out one of us was worth a damn."

"Just took 'em a decade."

"They'll figure out it was the wrong one eventually." He clapped me on the shoulder, hard, the way he had since we were kids. "I'm happy for you, man. I mean it."

And he did. That was the thing about Mike. He meant it.

Trent's office didn't have a window. None of them did—just four walls and a door that closed on a room the size of a supply closet. He was in his chair when I knocked, phone in his hand, and he didn't put it down right away.

"Got a minute?" I said.

"Sure." He set the phone face down on the desk, which I took for giving me his attention.

"Wanted you to hear it from me. I got the Buffalo job. Assistant manager. Start the twelfth."

"Yeah, I heard." He smiled. "Congratulations."

I waited for the rest of it—the part where he said something about the ten years, or the department, or what he'd seen in me. It didn't come. He just held the smile, and I figured that was Trent. He'd always let me run my own department, never breathed down my neck about it. I'd taken that as trust.

"I wanted to make sure the twelfth works on your end," I said. "Joe gave me the date, but I didn't want to leave you short without saying anything."

"It's fine." He picked the phone back up, turned it over in his hand. "We'll figure it out."

"Appreciate it."

I walked out feeling good. He'd seemed glad for me, in his way. I finished my shift and drove home thinking about Buffalo—the new store, the bigger title. Two weeks, and I'd finally be somewhere.

Sunday, August 4th

Cassidy stood by the door with a duffel bag over her shoulder—not packed for a trip, just packed. She'd done it while I was at work, which meant she'd been planning it longer than I wanted to think about.

"So that's it?" I said. "You're just leaving?"

"I've been leaving for six months, Alex. You just weren't paying attention."

"That's not fair. I've been working my ass off for this promotion. You know how much pressure I've been under."

"I know." Her voice was flat. Tired. "That's all I know anymore. The pressure you're under. The bills you won't talk about."

"I'm handling the bills."

"You're not handling anything. You're reacting to everything." She shifted the bag on her shoulder. "Everything lands on you like a personal attack, and I'm supposed to just—absorb it. Every night. Every weekend."

She didn't understand. She'd never worked retail. Never had a district manager breathing down her neck while collection agencies lit up her phone.

"I don't do that."

"You're doing it right now. You're standing there building your case." She paused, and something in her face shifted—not anger anymore, just resignation. "But you're not here. Not really. I don't think you know how to be."

I wanted to argue. The words were already forming—how unfair this was, how I was doing all of this for us.

But she was already opening the door.

"I hope Buffalo is everything you need it to be," she said. "I really do."

The door clicked shut behind her.

I waited for something to rise up—grief, maybe, or the urge to chase her down the hallway. Nothing came. Just the faint smell of her shampoo still hanging in the air.

I didn't know what to do with a room that had no problem to solve, so I turned on the TV and let the noise fill the space where she used to be.

Monday, August 5th

The mail had been piling up for a week.

I'd walked past it every day—the stack on the kitchen counter, envelopes multiplying like evidence of something I didn't want to face. Most of them had windows. None of them were good news.

Monday morning, coffee in hand, I finally sat down with it.

The first envelope was a second notice on the car payment. Ninety-three days past due. I'd been telling myself sixty, but the paper didn't lie.

The second was a credit card statement. Minimum payment due: $175. Balance: $8,241. Interest rate: 24.99%. I didn't remember it being that high.

The third was a funeral bill—$1,847 for services rendered to Robert Turner. My father's name. A charge I'd thought was settled, somehow still finding its way to me three months after the funeral.

I pulled out my phone and opened the bank app.

Checking: $1,438.62.

I did the math. Then I did it again, hoping the numbers would rearrange themselves.

Rent: $1,200, due in ten days. Car payment (past due): $1,161 to get current. Credit card minimum: $175. Funeral bill: $1,847.

Total: $4,383.

Available: $1,438.

I could cover rent. Or I could catch up on the car. Not both.

My phone buzzed. A voicemail notification from a number I recognized. The collection agency that had been calling for two weeks. I silenced it without listening.

The promotion came with a raise. $4,200 a year, which worked out to about $160 extra per paycheck after taxes. Not enough to fix this. But enough to stop the bleeding, if I could just get there.

If.

I gathered the bills into a pile and shoved them into a drawer. Out of sight.

Then I grabbed my keys and walked outside.

The parking spot was empty.

I stood on the sidewalk, coffee going cold in my hand, staring at the space where my car should have been.

For a moment, I thought I'd parked somewhere else. Maybe down the block. Maybe in the back lot.

But I hadn't. I knew exactly where I'd parked.

The car was gone.

It came back to me then—the repo notice I'd thrown away without reading. Saturday's mail, the envelope with the red stripe. I'd told myself I'd deal with it later.

Later was now an empty parking spot.

The shame climbed up my neck. I thought about Cassidy's voice last night: *You're not handling anything. You're reacting to everything.*

And now I was standing on a sidewalk in yesterday's clothes, holding cold coffee, with no car and no idea how to get to work.

I called Mike.

"Little early for you," he said. "Everything okay?"

"I need a ride."

A pause. "Car trouble?"

"Something like that."

"I'll be there in twenty."

I hung up before he could ask anything else.

The ride to work was quiet. Mike didn't push. He knew me well enough to read the silence, and whatever he saw in my face, he let it be.

At the store, I moved through my shift. Smiling when required. Answering questions. Hitting my marks.

Nobody noticed. Or if they did, they didn't say.

During my lunch break, I sat in the backroom and stared at my phone. The number I needed to call sat in my contacts, untouched for weeks.

My mother.

I'd been avoiding her since the funeral. Not because I didn't love her—I did. But every conversation circled back to Dad, and I didn't know how to hold her grief when I hadn't figured out what to do with my own.

Now I had no choice.

She answered on the second ring.

"Alex? Is everything okay?"

"Yeah, Mom. Everything's fine. I just—" The words stuck. I forced them out. "I need some help."

"What kind of help?"

I told her. Not everything—not Cassidy, not the full weight of the debt—but enough. The car. The repo. The fact that I was moving to a new apartment next week and had no way to get my stuff there—or myself to work every day.

She didn't lecture me. Didn't ask how I'd let it get this bad.

She just said: "Your father's car is sitting in the driveway. It hasn't moved since March."

I closed my eyes. "Mom, I can't take Dad's car."

"It's not doing anyone any good just sitting there. He'd want you to have it."

The BMW. The 530i he'd bought two years ago—white, pristine, the nicest thing he'd ever owned. "Treat yourself," Mom had told him after he'd retired. He'd taken her advice exactly once.

"I'll pay you back," I said. "Once I get settled in Buffalo—"

"Alex," she said. "Come get the car. That's all I'm asking."

Mike drove me to her house after work. Neither of us talked much on the way.

When we pulled into the driveway, she was already standing on the porch. She looked smaller than I remembered. Or maybe I hadn't looked closely enough in a while.

The white BMW sat in the driveway, freshly washed, late afternoon light pooling on the hood. Worth more than everything I owned and owed combined.

"She called ahead," Mike said, nodding toward the car. "Wanted it to look nice for you."

I didn't trust my voice, so I just nodded.

She met me halfway across the lawn and pressed the keys into my hand. Her fingers were warm and thin, and she held on a moment longer than necessary.

"He believed in you," she said. "Even when you didn't."

I looked at the car. At her. At the house where I'd grown up, where my father had taught me to change a tire in the garage, where I'd learned to mow the lawn in rows because he said it looked more professional.

He used to say something when I'd get frustrated—when a project went sideways or a game didn't go my way. *It's all just information, Alex. Don't react to pieces. Wait for the picture.*

He said it to everyone—me, my brother Danny, the guy next door who couldn't get his mower started. Same tone every time.

I never understood what he meant. Patience felt like losing.

"Thanks, Mom."

"Call me when you get settled. Let me know you're okay."

"I will."

I slid into the driver's seat. The leather was soft—too soft. The cabin was so quiet I could hear my own breathing. I was $16,737 in debt, sitting in a car worth three times that. My father had earned this. I was just borrowing it from a dead man.

The seat was adjusted for someone taller. The rearview mirror angled for eyes that would never use it again.

I didn't move either.

The glove compartment was slightly ajar. I reached over and opened it—registration, insurance card, a pen, and a small notebook. Soft-covered. Worn at the edges. The kind you could slip into a pocket without thinking about it.

I didn't know my father kept a notebook.

For a second, I stared at it. Not because it looked important. Because it didn't. It looked ordinary in that specific way things do when they've

been sitting quietly in the right place the whole time, waiting for someone else to notice.

I flipped it open. His handwriting—familiar but strange, like hearing his voice in a dream. Near the middle, several pages had been torn out, rough edges still visible against the binding. Whatever he'd written there, he'd decided to take it with him.

On the next intact page, something different. Not a list. Not a measurement.

February 22

Alex called. Same thing again.

Wish I knew how to reach him. Never have.

He's got so much in him. Can't see it. Too busy fighting.

Love him. Don't know how to say it right.

Maybe not my job to fix. Just trust he'll find his way.

Hope I'm here when he does.

My throat tightened. The words blurred.

Too busy fighting.

Cassidy's voice surfaced before I could stop it: *You're not handling anything. You're reacting to everything.*

I closed the notebook and put it back in the glove compartment.

I didn't know what to do with it.

The engine turned over without a sound—nothing like the rattle I was used to. I backed out of the driveway, watching my mother wave from the porch until she disappeared around the corner.

Mike followed in his own car for a few blocks, then honked twice and peeled off toward his place.

I drove the rest of the way home alone, hands on my father's steering wheel, surrounded by the faint ghost of his cologne. The cabin closed in around me, too expensive, too quiet.

Wednesday, August 7th

Two more days.

The store didn't feel broken—just unattended, like no one had their hands on the wheel. Then I turned the corner near Lawn & Garden and saw him. Gavin Hale. District manager.

Mike appeared beside me. "Did you know he was coming?"

"No."

"Trent?"

We both knew.

Ten minutes later, Gavin had the management team packed into the back office. "Your store manager, Trent Holloway, is no longer with the company," he said. "I walked your store. Conditions are unacceptable. Leadership is absent. I'll be back Friday. I expect to see a different store."

I caught him near the vestibule. "My transfer to Buffalo starts Monday. Friday's my last day."

He didn't miss a beat. "I'm aware. I approved it." Then he paused—just long enough to make sure I'd heard it. "Today didn't inspire confidence, Alex. We'll see what Friday looks like."

The doors hissed shut behind him.

Friday, August 9th

The promotion I'd waited ten years for suddenly felt like it could be pulled back without warning—and with it, the raise I was counting on to stop the bleeding.

We worked like the place was on fire.

Gavin walked the floor like he was reading a report only he could see. When he gathered us, the silence felt surgical.

"There's progress," he said.

I waited for approval.

It didn't come.

He looked straight at me. "Alex, you're scheduled for Buffalo on Monday."

Hands went still.

"Joe vouched for you."

Joe Abbott. My future boss.

Gavin didn't soften. "Buffalo's a bigger stage. I expect more."

Then he was gone.

He hadn't approved my promotion. He'd simply chosen not to kill it.

It felt like parole.

I ended up in the breakroom, staring at the vending machine's glowing keypad.

B6 or not B6.

The same choice I'd made a thousand times.

My finger hovered, like it was waiting for permission.

"Don't tell me you're actually considering something different."

Mike leaned against the doorframe, grinning.

"You survived. It's your last day. Might as well shock your system."

"Old habits die hard," I said.

Mike grinned. "Then do something out of character."

I hated how hard it was to press anything else.

"Ready for Buffalo?" he asked.

"Guess so."

"You hear the rumor? Joe might be on his way out. Health stuff."

A new job was one thing. A vacuum was another.

Mike's voice softened. "Change isn't always bad."

I pressed C4.

The machine dropped a granola bar.

"Well, I'll be damned," Mike said. "Alex Turner in uncharted snack territory."

"New snack, new store."

The bar felt wrong in my hand—too light, too empty. The first bite tasted off. I kept chewing anyway.

"You'll be fine," Mike said, squeezing my shoulder.

"Sure."

After he left, I stood there waiting for certainty to come back. My phone lit up. A text from Joe Abbott: "Big changes on the management team. We'll talk Monday."

I read it twice. Started typing. Stopped. Let the screen go dark.

That night, I loaded the BMW with everything I owned, which wasn't much. Two suitcases. A box of books. A lamp I'd had since college.

Cassidy's things were already gone. The apartment looked like a motel room. Stripped of anything that proved someone had actually lived here. The lease was up at the end of the month anyway. I'd found a smaller place closer to the Buffalo store.

Fresh start. That's what I kept telling myself.

I sat on the edge of the bed and stared at the wall.

My father's car was parked outside—white and pristine, worth more than my entire life on paper—waiting to carry me across town to a new apartment, a new store I'd never worked in, and a boss I'd never met. One who might already be dying.

$16,737 in debt. No girlfriend. No safety net. And a car I hadn't earned.

And Gavin's voice, still echoing: *Today didn't inspire confidence.*

I thought about calling my mother. Thought about calling Mike. Thought about calling Cassidy, even though I knew she wouldn't answer.

Instead, I turned off the light and lay in the dark.

This place is the problem. New city, new store, new start—and everything will settle.

My father's words surfaced unbidden: *It's all just information. Don't react to pieces. Wait for the picture.*

I still didn't understand what he meant.

Monday was coming.

Ready or not.

Chapter 1 of

SEE WHAT YOU NOTICE

a novel by Richard Tagliarino

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