

## Chapter One

“This is a red folder,” I said, holding up a cardboard file folder.

Sharon turned her head in my direction, and then dismissed me with a supercilious look. Sharon, my personal assistant and I had an excellent relationship. There wasn't much she didn't know about me; including my intransigence regarding folder colour.

“What I mean,” I continued, “is that it's not green. I always use green folders.”

“Well Stationery only have red.”

“I don't believe that. They always keep green folders in stock for me. They're just being bloody-minded.”

“Well, they've run out.”

“I need green folders. Sharon, get me my green folders.”

“Simon, you're obsessing,” she said, gathering up some paperwork, and heading for the door of my office.

“I'm not obsessing. It would only be obsessing if it wasn't important.”

I stood up for effect. Sharon had opened the door, and was about to leave, but had to back up as Maddox swung the top half of his body into the room .

“Hiya, buddy,” he said cheerily.

In spite of my mild irritation to Maddox's Americanised and disingenuous *bonhomie*, I liked him. For me, his manipulation of people was so transparent as to be comical. Although, for many, it seemed to make him irresistibly endearing; like a labrador puppy shredding the last of the toilet tissue. Maddox and I often worked together on presentations, and we had a really important one this afternoon.

“Ready for the pitch, buddy?” he said, trying to plant a kiss on Sharon's cheek. Sharon recoiled, pulling the door completely open.

“Let me through, Maddox. I've got work to do.”

She tried to negotiate around him. Maddox sucked his stomach in making room for her to pass, and then caught sight of the red folder in my hand.

“That's a red folder,” he said, playfully.

Sharon, who was now a little way down the corridor, answered him without turning around.

“They've run out of green, for God's sake!”

Richard Maddox and I had been working on an account for Benson's Drinking Chocolate. This would be a big client for our advertising agency, if we could land it. The reason Maddox and I worked well together was that he was a traditional, confident, hard-seller. He was the sort of man who would try to sell you a used car, and the kind of chap from whom you were likely to buy one. I, on the other hand, was soft-sell. I believed in honesty being the best policy. I was of the firm opinion that if something was worth buying, it would sell itself; you just had to get it into public view. Maddox and I often argued.

Maddox was sitting on a chair with his feet on my desk.

“So, buddy boy, do you think we’re going to knock ‘em dead?”

I sat down and threw the red folder onto the desk.

“Can you believe they say they’ve run out of green?”

“Simon, get real. Are you ready for the presentation?”

“Yes, I’ve got everything here.” I pointed to a pile of green folders on my desk.

He stared at them saying nothing. I knew he was unhappy with the approach we had prepared.

“Look,” I said, “We need to go with the traditional, homely image. We’re not the only ad agency in London, Maddox. They’ll go to someone else if we don’t give them what they want. And this is what they want; a classy, honest campaign. The sort of thing I do really well. It may be conservative, but it’s real. You can’t always bullshit your way through life.”

Maddox laughed, and took his feet off the desk.

“When are you going to learn, Simon? It’s not content that wins, it’s context.”

He leant further across the desk in a conspiratorial fashion.

“Benson’s needs a whole new look; something radical. You know I’m right, buddy boy.”

Although I knew him really well, I was never sure if he believed his own crap or if he was aware of how fragile was the fabric of his life. He sometimes appeared to me like a court jester; all confident jokes and jibes in public, but back in the dressing room, all tears and valium.

Sharon put her head around the door.

“Terrance wants to see you two in his office,” she said, and marched off.

Maddox and I made our way past a termite mound of activity. Junior copy-writers, assistant account executives and secretaries, all beavering away at their computers. I had spent many years swimming in that gene pool, before finally evolving into a being with his own office.

Terrance, the agency’s CEO, sat at his large desk.

“Sit down, gentlemen,” he said, indicating two chairs, “All ready for the presentation?”

Terrance smiled at me encouragingly. His attitude towards me had always been avuncular and nurturing. It was Terrance who had recruited me, and it was he that had led me from junior creative to senior account director. He had always been more friend than employer, but lately had seemed less approachable, which I put down simply to the current economic climate. He was under extreme pressure.

“Yeah, we’re up to speed and ready to show,” said Maddox.

“Good,” he sighed, “good...I don’t need to tell you how important this account is, but I’m going to anyway.”

This was both his attempt at humour - which he always did badly - and an indication he was about to become serious - at which he was equally clumsy. He took a large intake of air.

“Things are really tight at the moment,” he paused and perched on the edge of his desk, “Our revenue is forty-percent down on last year, and things are getting really tricky.”

He paused again and looked out of his huge picture window. Outside, on the Thames, boats sailed idyllically under Tower Bridge as if real life could not touch *picture postcard England*.

He inhaled deeply, as if, for the few previous moments, he had forgotten to breathe entirely. He turned back to us. There was a look in his eyes I had not seen before. He looked scared.

“We need this account and, when I say we need this account, I mean, we really need this account. What I’m saying is, without Benson’s...we’ll have to start letting some senior people go. That’s how critical it is.”

His words repeated in my head. I had a distinct feeling of sadness for the poor sods who might soon be *signing-on* at their local job centre.

Terrance walked slowly around to the other side of the desk and sat down.

“There it is,” he said, “Sink or swim.”

Benson’s Drinking Chocolate Limited, was an old family business, and was now headed by Jonathan Benson Jr., the great-great-grandson of the founding Benson. From humble beginnings, alongside other entrepreneurial Quakers like Cadbury, Rowntree and Fry, the company had grown into an international brand, but still made most of its sales in the UK.

Our research had shown that every third cup of drinking chocolate consumed in the UK was Benson’s. The company’s image was as warm and homely as their product, and overflowed with British nostalgia; snow tapping at the window, a man sitting by a roaring coal fire, on the table, a cup of Benson’s with a wisp of steam rising into the toasty atmosphere.

This, in my opinion, was the edge, the image to promote. Maddox wanted to be radical, as usual. He wanted to make Benson’s a food of the new-age, what he loved to call a *superfood*; nutritious and packed with energy, for the fast moving modern life-style of two-thousand-and-eight. I had pointed out, many times, that when the market is depressed, the best move is to enhance what you have. People are staying at home and licking their economic wounds. They are not pursuing a fast moving, modern life-style. What could be better, for a stay-at-home society, than a warming, feel-good cup of Benson’s Drinking Chocolate? After many battles, this time, I got my way.

The boardroom had been carefully laid out by Sharon and me earlier in the day. There was a crescent of chairs around the far end of the long, highly polished conference table and a multimedia whiteboard at the other end. I had placed a single chair on either side of the whiteboard. This was where either Maddox or I would sit when the other was presenting.

I cast a last look around the room and, satisfied that all was ready, made for the toilet and a final pee before the Benson’s people arrived. Terrance had always told me, ‘Nothing defocuses the mind more than a full bladder’. I wasn’t going to let anything get in the way of a perfect pitch.

When I returned, Sharon was greeting the Benson’s team. Although she always wanted to stay for the pitches, something about her always brought out the naughty schoolboy in me. I didn’t have the self control to allow her into the meetings. She frowned, wounded as I sent her away. Maddox made me jump, whispering into my ear.

“Here we go, buddy boy!”

Both Maddox and I saw him the moment we entered the room. Sitting next to Jonathan Benson Jr. was the legendary Calvin Zusman. Zusman, a young, thrusting and sickeningly successful American businessman, had not been out of the business papers for most of the last year. There had been rumours that he was to take over the leadership of an international brand, but no-one had known which one. Maddox and I exchanged ex-sanguinated looks. Had I known of Zusman's appointment, I would not have fought Maddox over our approach to the Benson's campaign. I had been concentrating on a very British theme. Zusman's colonial invasion changed things totally, but there was nothing we could do. We had to go ahead with what we had prepared.

From the moment I opened my mouth, Zusman's hatred of my ideas was visceral. Had he been able to cut me in two with a machete and shout, 'next', he would have done so.

"So, who is this guy with the coal fire?" asked Zusman, leaning back in his chair.

Maddox began to stand up. I put my hand on his shoulder and gently pushed him back into his seat.

"He's Mr Average. He's the typical consumer," I explained.

Zusman looked around the room and sneered with *faux* amusement.

"So, you're relying on this jerk to boost Benson's sales, then?"

My throat was dry. I was dying for a gulp of the San Pellegrino on the table, but didn't want Zusman to see he was getting to me.

"Well, he's just one of the targets," I argued.

"So, what are you suggesting we do?" Zusman tapped an expensive fountain pen on the palm of his manicured hand. "Pay for a dozen campaigns; one for each target?"

"No, you're missing the point."

"You sure it's me that's missing the point?"

Maddox struggled to get up again. I pushed him back down with a sweaty palm. I whispered to him.

"I've got this, Maddox." Then turned squarely to Zusman. "Yes, with respect, you are missing the point. This is a campaign for a traditional British company. Again, with respect, I'm not sure you're as familiar with our culture as American culture."

Zusman looked me straight in the eye. There was not a trace of uncertainty in his expression.

"And you're a bit of a schmuck...with respect."

I was stunned.

"I...I beg your pardon?"

Zusman tossed his Mont Blanc onto the table.

"Oh, I'm sorry, am I not making myself clear. You're a schmuck, a jerk..."

I looked to Maddox for support, but his expression suggested he was not prepared to join me in the hole I was digging. I looked back to Zusman.

"...Or to put it into quaint British terms...a bit of a wanker," Zusman concluded.

"Look, I know people conduct themselves differently in the States, but..."

Zusman cut me off.

“Why the fuck do you think Benson’s hired me? They’re tired of being an anachronistic Victorian joke. They want to join the big boys and play on a world stage, not disappear up their tightly puckered British assholes.”

Jonathan Benson Jr. squirmed on his tightly puckered British arsehole.

“But if you’d just listen...this is a good campaign,” I pleaded.

Zusman was on a roll.

“Yeah, if you want to sell Beatrix Potter by the hundred. But we’re interested in the tens of thousands. We want Benson’s to be seen as a...as a...*superfood*.”

And with that, I realised I was beyond the point of no return.

Moments afterwards, I sat alone in my office feeling...nothing. All the nerves that usually rippled with a multitude of sensations seemed to end in a sensory traffic jam. Directly after the presentation Terrance had taken my arm firmly and stared at me, but said nothing. The look on his face was no longer patriarchal, but accusatory. He had warned of the consequences of messing up and I had let him down. And now it dawned on me. I was part of the firing line he had mentioned earlier, and I may soon be taking the first bullet. My thoughts had nowhere to hide, I had no-one to blame.

The door opened and Sharon stumbled in carrying a large cardboard box.

“Good news!” she called over the top of the box.

Good news, I thought. For a moment my soul was lifted into the wonderful world of miracles. For a brief moment I believed in guardian angels, Santa Claus and fairy tale endings. Sharon plonked the box onto my desk.

“Good news?” I said with a nervous smile, “What good news?”

Sharon looked triumphant, and patted the box as if it contained the lost Arc of the Covenant.

“One-hundred-and-forty-four green file folders,” she said.