

THE SECOND MEETING

by Lee Levitt

Chapter One — Four Minutes

Alex Mercer sat in the parking garage for four minutes.

Wasn't prepping. She had done the prep. On the plane back from Denver, in the shower that morning, in the eleven-minute drive from the house while her coffee was still warm on the passenger seat. Dougie, her husband, had handed it to her through the window like he always did on the days he knew she needed it.

She didn't need more prep.

She needed the four minutes.

She put her phone face-down on the passenger seat and looked at the concrete wall in front of her. Thought about a man named Gerald who ran a payroll company out of a strip mall in Akron.

Years earlier, her first year in the field, she had sold him a SaaS payroll application. The demo had gone well. She could feel it going well, the flow of a conversation where the person across from you stops being someone you're selling to — and becomes someone you're actually helping.

After the demo, Gerald wanted to understand the implementation. How it would work. What it would look like when his payroll coordinator sat down to run his first cycle.

She stayed three hours.

Not because someone told her to. Because she sensed that he was nervous, and she didn't want to leave him nervous.

He called six months later. Not with a problem. Just to say the payroll system was working.

She was on the highway. Doing seventy-two in the left lane, late for something she couldn't remember now, and her phone lit up with a number she almost didn't recognize.

She pulled over.

She sat on the shoulder for eleven minutes, listening to Gerald talk about his payroll coordinator — how on the first Friday after they went live she walked into his office and said *Gerald, this is the easiest Friday I've had in a decade.*

She hadn't thought about Gerald in years.

She picked up her phone. Checked the time.

A calendar notification: *Alex Mercer — CFO Review — 9:00am*. VP Sales. Seven months in.

She put the phone in her bag and went inside.

The fluorescent light above the credenza had been flickering for a while. A long while. Weeks.

Alex had mentioned it to facilities twice. She noticed it now the way she noticed it every time she sat in this room — an almost imperceptible strobe at the edge of her vision, like something trying to get her attention.

A course book sat to the left of the legal pad. Wharton. Executive Education. Alex glanced at the title. Carol was always reading something.

She kept her eyes on Carol, her CFO.

"Walk me through Q1," Carol said. Carol Simms was not an unkind person. She was precise. There was a difference, though some people who'd sat across from her hadn't figured that out until it was too late.

"We started the quarter with five commits," Alex said. "Closed two. The other three slipped."

"Slipped to when?"

"Q2. Two of them. The third —" She paused. "The third is less clear."

"Three slipped commits isn't a pipeline problem," Carol said.

"Activity metrics looked strong," Alex continued. "Twenty-eight discovery calls in the quarter. Sixteen demos. Pipeline coverage was 3.4x." "The team was working. Volume was there."

She marked it handled.

Carol looked up. "What changed?"

The question sat in the room the way certain questions do. Not aggressive. Just unanswerable. The fluorescent light flickered.

Alex had been waiting for this question since the deals slipped. She prepared for it on the plane back from Denver, in the parking garage that morning, in the four minutes she sat in the car before coming in.

She walked through each of them.

Market conditions. Q1 softness across the sector. Buying committee expansion, more stakeholders, longer cycles. One rep dealing with a family situation. One prospect reorganized mid-evaluation.

She kept going. The answers kept coming. She could hear herself building the case — more words, more reasons, more data — and somewhere underneath she could feel that none of it was landing. Carol wasn't writing. Wasn't nodding. Just watching her the way you watch someone who doesn't know they're lost yet.

Alex stopped.

"All of it true," she said. "None of it sufficient."

She hadn't meant to say that out loud.

"I'm still working through the full picture," she said.

Carol nodded once. She wrote something else on the legal pad.

The meeting ended at 11:47.

Alex collected her things. She was practiced at this. The composed exit, the measured pace to the elevator, the face that said *this went as expected* even when it hadn't.

The elevator opened on the lobby and Alex stepped out into the quiet of a Wednesday morning — the building half-full, the coffee cart closing up, a man in a gray jacket standing at the window with his phone in his hand, looking at the street.

She almost walked past him.

"Alex Mercer."

She stopped. Turned.

Jack Sullivan looked approximately the same as three years ago. SXSW. Austin. The Marriott elevator at six in the morning, both of them in running shoes, both slightly surprised to find someone else already awake at that hour. They'd ended up at the same conference dinner that night and talked until the restaurant closed. He was older than she remembered. She was probably older than he remembered too.

"Jack." A beat. She found her smile. "What are you doing here?"

"Meeting on four. Finished early." He glanced up at the floors above them, then back to her.
"You?"

"Business review."

His face shifted. Recognition. The look of someone who'd sat in the same kind of room and walked out of the same kind of elevator on the same kind of morning.

"How did you do?" she said.

She considered the full answer. The three slipped commits. Carol's two-word question. The activity metrics she recited like a prayer while knowing somewhere underneath that prayer wasn't going to be enough. The excuses. The bullshit.

"It went," she said.

He laughed. Brief, genuine. "Coffee?"

They walked two blocks to a place Alex had never been — a narrow room with exposed brick and the familiar smell of a coffee shop. Jack seemed to know where he was going. Corner table, near the window. He didn't look at the menu.

He ordered at the counter. While he waited he said something to the person behind the bar — Alex couldn't hear what, but she saw the barista look up from the machine and answer, and Jack listen the way he listened to everything. Like the answer might be interesting.

He came back with two mugs.

"Cream, two sugars?" He set one in front of her.

"You remembered."

"Lucky guess." He sat down.

For a moment they just sat, the way people sit when they have more to say than they know how to start.

"Six months in?" Jack said.

"Seven."

"Inherited the team?"

"Inherited everything. Team, methodology, the whole system." She wrapped both hands around the mug. "Still figuring out the people."

"Tell me about each."

She did. Not the board version. The enterprise deal that had been a commit for two quarters before it quietly stopped being anything. The mid-market deal where the champion went dark two weeks before the expected close date. The deal she personally sponsored. The one she told Carol was less clear. Because it wasn't clear. Because she didn't know what had happened. Because the rep kept telling her it was fine and she kept not believing him and neither of them had said that out loud.

Jack listened. He had a quality she had forgotten — a stillness when someone was talking. Not patience. Something more active than patience. He was actually there.

"What did the buyers say?" he asked. "When the deals slipped."

Alex opened her mouth.

And stopped.

She had the rep's account of what the buyers said. She had the CRM notes, brief, optimistic, written in the language of someone who needed the deal to stay alive. She had the deal reviews, the stage progressions, the close date adjustments that tracked the slow retreat of three opportunities she had believed in and could no longer explain.

She didn't know what the buyers said.

She had never talked with the buyers.

The silence lasted long enough for Jack to see she had found something she hadn't been looking for.

She looked down at her coffee.

"I didn't talk to the buyers," she said.

Outside, a car horn. Two people passing the window deep in a conversation of their own. The coffee shop doing its ordinary Wednesday morning work around them, indifferent to whatever was happening at the corner table.

Alex looked up. "That's the problem, isn't it?"

Jack didn't answer. He picked up his mug. Looked out at the street.

"It's a place to start," he said.

She reached for her jacket.

"Seven months in," he said. "That's a lot of weight."

Not a question. Just — he saw it.

She nodded once. Didn't say anything.

She sat with that.

She thought about the last forty minutes. One question. No solution offered. No next steps prescribed. Just — listened. Actually listened. The way she couldn't remember the last time someone had listened to her. Except Dougie.

The way she couldn't remember the last time she listened to a buyer.

She picked up her mug. Looked out at the street.

For about thirty seconds neither of them said anything. It didn't feel like silence. It felt like something.

Carol had named it in one sentence. Three slipped commits wasn't a pipeline problem. The 3.4x coverage was real. The numbers were real. What the numbers measured wasn't. Volume. Activity. Motion that looked like momentum because she hadn't known what else to look for.

There was a question underneath that one she wasn't ready to deal with yet. Whether the signals had been there — in the data, in the behavioral patterns, in the days between buyer responses — and the system just hadn't been built to find them.

She set it aside. One problem at a time.

She thought about the moment she stopped. The answers had kept coming and she'd kept giving them. More words, more reasons. The same thing she'd watched her reps do on the recordings. She didn't know yet what was underneath the veneer.

She did not have a single conversation with a single buyer about what it had felt like to be on the other end of those thirty-one demos.

The garage was cool and dim, the sounds of the city muffled. She found her car and sat in it without starting it.

She had managed this pipeline for seven months. She had reviewed it every week. She had asked her reps about close dates and next steps and compelling events and champion strength and she had never — not once — asked any of them what the buyer had said when the deal stopped moving.

Not what the rep said the buyer had said. What the buyer had said.

She thought about Carol's question.

What changed?

She started the car.

She didn't know yet. But she knew where she had been looking, and she knew it was the wrong place.

That was something. It wasn't enough. But it was something.
