Chapter One

The city hadn’t stirred yet, but I had already gone through the full circle of hope, regret, and everything in between.

I sat by the window, cigarette dangling loosely from my fingers, watching the first traces of daylight seep into my dusty apartment. The smoke curled upwards, fogging the air with everything I couldn’t say out loud. Future, failure, Meesha, joblessness. All of it weighed heavy on my chest.

Thirty-five. Unemployed. Left by my wife. My luck? Nonexistent.

I reached for my battered mobile—its screen shattered like my dreams and barely functional. A quick search: “How to get rich easily.”

Typical me. Meesha used to say I always looked for shortcuts, never the real path. Maybe she was right. She often was.

She said I was toxic. That I left chaos behind wherever I went. Maybe that’s why she left. Like my parents did—though theirs wasn’t a choice.

Loss seemed to follow me like a shadow I couldn’t shake.

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Suddenly, something thudded at the window. I looked up.

An alien. Green, glowing, and very real—at least in the moment. Hovering in a strange robotic craft, looking dead at me.

“Hey, buddy,” it said in a voice like melting metal. “I’m here to fix your life.”

I didn’t even flinch. Why would I? At this point, an alien intervention seemed about right.

“Grab a pen. Write this mantra down. Do exactly as I say.”

I reached for the paper, my heart pounding—until I felt a warm trickle hit my face.

“Ugh! Rusty!”

I bolted upright. My old dog, Rusty, had climbed onto the bed and relieved himself on me.

Another miracle wasted.

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We survived on grocery-store leftovers and instinct. Rusty and I, partners in poverty.

One day, walking down St. Patrick’s Street, I felt a game forming in my head. If I could reach the electric pole before the car trailing behind did, something good would finally happen.

I jogged. Nothing obvious.

But maybe… just maybe.

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My beard had grown feral. My hair could host a bird’s nest. But today was different—I had an interview. My first real shot in months.

Scissors. Trimmer. Shaky hands.

I scrambled through my tiny wardrobe. The blue shirt Meesha once gifted me—creased and stained. Of course. All the other clothes? Worse.

I settled on a wrinkled pink one and ignored the landlord shouting about rent. Left Rusty behind, promising him something better—if this day worked out.

Today, I was going to become the best salesman in the country.

Maybe even in history.

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The interview room was icy.

The man across from me adjusted his specs and asked, “So, why should we hire you?”

I leaned in, nervous but bold.

“I’m honest. I know what it means to lose. I understand humiliation. I can read people, because I’ve lived every broken version of them.”

He blinked slowly.

“Right. But we need charm. Wit. Not philosophy.”

“I am honest,” I repeated.

“That’s exactly our concern.”

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I walked out of the building, my stomach louder than my thoughts.

Past the ice-cream stand. No money to spare. Not today.

At the signal, I noticed a man my age selling handmade toys. Nobody looked. Nobody cared.

Further down, a lottery vendor leaned by the doorway of a cluttered shop. Bright paper tickets in hand. A strange pull stopped me.

One ticket. One hope.

I handed him my bus fare.

He scowled. Maybe he’d seen too many like me. But he took it.

The ticket felt warm in my hand. Numbers stared back at me. Random. Chaotic. Perfect.

I walked home, the city feeling slightly different.

Rusty met me at the door, as usual. Suspicious. Judgy. Loyal.

I rubbed his ears and sat back down by the window. Cigarette in hand.

Tonight felt important.

This ticket—maybe it was more than paper. Maybe it was the beginning of something.

Maybe… it was my turn.