

# Portal Teaser

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# ONE

THE CAR DID NOT hurry; it didn't need to. Frost stitched the city's edges, and Jacob's jaw went tight. It folded itself into morning traffic with practiced autonomy. A soft blue pulse moved along the dashboard when CAROLYN spoke, the light syncing with her voice. Heat came through the vents in a level ribbon. The glass was clean enough to pretend there was no city out there, just a moving painting made of gray and frost.

"Keep your shoulders back," CAROLYN said. "Breathe. Don't get rattled."

Jacob pushed his shoulders against the seat and let the air out slowly. "I don't get rattled on the way to work. This is the only part of the day that makes sense."

"You hate December," she said. "You confuse it with chaos."

"December confuses itself with joy."

The ring touched leather. Tap. Tap. It still cut through the cabin the way a tiny crack runs through ice and keeps going even when you beg it to stop.

Fountain Square slid by on the right. The rink was already crowded. Kids wore coats that didn't match their hats. A girl fell and laughed about it in a way that only people who still believed in rescue could laugh. Steam rose through the grates and made ghosts out of ankles. Beyond the square, Carew Tower stood in its sober brick. Across downtown, Hastings Tower lifted a thousand mirrors into the sky. Old weight. New shine.

"Panel," he said.

The center console woke. Faces argued on the screen. The ribbon at the bottom ran his name and then replaced it with Caleb's because the world preferred men who smiled when they explained things. The commentator in a red tie grumbled about the new Horizon tablet, supply chains "a mess," three days before Christmas, and not a single tablet on a shelf anywhere. The woman opposite him didn't bother with specs. She wanted the face. Where had Jacob Hastings been for three years? No keynotes, no TED stage, no Hastings Developer Conference. Every camera found Caleb Givings, now likable, steady, not the man who once sold people tech they

didn't know they needed. She let the word tragedy hover near his name and moved on before it burned.

"You could appear on air," CAROLYN offered. "The Horizon shortage has the panel chewing on your name."

"Caleb has it covered."

"He is not you."

"A fact I'm sure pleases him daily."

"On that we agree."

He watched the Tower catch in the window, a clean vertical that split his face in two.

"Three years is a long time," CAROLYN said, and then went quiet because the number made the air thin.

He reached to turn the volume down, but the panel dimmed itself. She knew when words started to bruise. It was one of the reasons he kept her.

"Keep your shoulders back," she said again, the firmness softened by the way she had said three years and survived it. "Breathe."

"Mute," he said.

The city's sound returned in the silence she left: a far horn, the brittle scrape of a bus turning, someone singing too high on a sidewalk because somehow that felt like warmth. The car made a gentle lane change with the confidence of a surgeon saving a life you didn't deserve.

Hastings Tower grew out of the gray ahead. The building's skin collected the morning and sold it back better. He had selected the glass not for beauty but for honesty; it reflected everything and insisted you look.

CAROLYN took her winning tone. "Almost there. And Jacob—try not to glare your way through the door. Even Scrooge knew when to fake cheer for the help."

"Sure," he said. "Just not the kind anyone wants at Christmas."

He wasn't fooling anyone. Least of all the car.

It eased under the awning and stilled itself. The gullwing lifted. Cold arrived like a fact.

He sat a breath longer than he needed to. The ring hit the armrest once more. Tap. Then he moved.

Outside, the air tasted like metal and coffee. A saxophone tried to dignify a carol. Vendors moved slowly; cold makes money honest. Lampposts wore wreaths.

He shut the car door. The vehicle slid away as if embarrassed to have brought him to a party he did not attend.

A knot had formed near security. At its center, a boy: young enough to look new, old enough to know better. Hoodie bleached of color. Hands fluent in another language. He flipped a coin, and a small laugh rose like

steam. He bowed, low and theatrical, as if his back had ever been spared anything.

Jacob had tried to avoid being seen. It didn't work. The boy's eyes found him the way eyes find light.

"Need a warm-up act, Mr. Hastings?" The voice wasn't disrespectful. It was a dare wrapped as a joke.

Jacob's gaze touched the boy's and moved on. He no longer traded attention for nothing. A helper edged forward, shaping a corridor. The crowd thinned itself. He passed.

The coin went higher, its edge catching a thin sun. It vanished and returned behind his ear with a grin borrowed from a better life. Applause went up, not big, but alive. The doors took him in on that sound.

The lobby met him with warmth and clean shine. AR snow drifted, polite to physics but still impossible. Evergreen, faint.

"Jacob Hastings has arrived," JERICHO, the building's AI, said, his diction clipped.

Heads turned. A receptionist half-raised a hand, thought better. A messenger froze mid-stride. He did not slow. He moved as if this were exactly the entrance he'd ordered.

Jacob crossed the floor. The AR snow shifted around him. People looked down at their screens like sinners at candles. The elevator recognized him and opened without hesitation. He stepped inside; the doors cut off the hum of the lobby.

Inside, mirrors lived on three walls. He wore honest dark. The glass returned a hundred versions of him.

"No more announcements," he said.

"But the audience is watching," JERICHO replied, voice softer now that they were alone.

"There is no audience."

"You built glass. They're always watching."

"Investors," JERICHO said.

The reflections blurred a trick of motion, and one face looked younger, one meaner. He didn't blink.

"Even behind closed doors," JERICHO said, "you're still onstage."

Jacob opened his eyes to the ceiling lights. "End session."

Silence obeyed. The elevator climbed toward whatever waited next.

# TWO

THE HOLLY DIDN'T CHEER them. It floated as a ribbon of green across the digital dashboards, a perfect looped garland that blinked in sync with the wall-sized market feed. The scent of evergreen hissed from vents in precise bursts that never quite covered the dry-electric tang of powered glass. Someone laughed too loudly at nothing. Someone else coughed and pretended it was dust. Chairs adjusted an inch. Jackets settled. Screens brightened a shade as if brightness might count as productivity if the right eyes walked in.

He wasn't there yet; wrists hovered over keys. Conversations drifted, stopped, drifted again, careful as fish under ice.

The ceiling hummed with JERICO like a throat clearing. The voice came through the halo speakers, formal, smooth, precise.

"Jacob Hastings is on his way."

Heads lifted like periscopes. Hands scrambled. Laptops shut with soft thuds that sounded louder than slams. A junior analyst knocked her mug, caught it, and smiled in triumph at no one. A senior VP tugged at his lapels the way he had before every quarterly call for twelve years. Assistants lifted folders in both arms and slid in quick diagonals, clearing the exposed edges of their open benches as if paper itself could offend him.

Breathe tight in the room. The elevator chimed, engineered to sound like old hotel silver striking crystal. Every conversation and keystroke stopped midframe, language arrested in throats, screens left on words like "pending."

The doors slid wide.

An empty car.

The emptiness felt rude. It felt like being stood up. The car waited in perfect chrome for riders who did not exist, then yawned wide for the audience that did.

"Correction." JERICO allowed a fractional pause, enough space for embarrassment. "Marketing."

Nervous laughter ran around the hub, thin and quick, the laugh people use on rides. A pair of directors exchanged a look that said both relief

and humiliation, then separated as if the look itself might be held against them. Recycled air thinned through the vents, the server hum pulled tight beneath it.

No one swore out loud. That was an unwritten rule.

The elevator shut and descended without a passenger. In its reflection, the floor had already reset. At the coffee station, someone dropped a sugar packet and did not bend to pick it up. Picking it up felt like an admission of time to waste.

A moment stretched long, then snapped.

“Apologize,” Carolyn said.

Her voice carried without effort from the corridor doorway. It carried in the way a metronome carries. The hub’s noise deflated as air does when a lid sets tight on a jar.

Carolyn did not hurry when she walked. Seventy-two, posture like a line drawn with a ruler, she crossed the hub with the small, precise irritation of a woman who had already handled three real problems before coffee. Her suit was winter blue that read as black until the light hit it.

“Apologies, Ms. Thompson,” JERICH0 said.

People breathed without meaning to. The room’s shoulders lowered half an inch. Keys sounded like rain again. A senior analyst risked a sip of coffee and was not struck by lightning.

Caleb’s door opened. He stepped out as if he’d always been stepping out. Only his tie’s knot was hurried, centered too neatly. Tall, in charcoal, he lowered the ceiling and quieted the room.

“Good morning,” he said. The exhale came again. He never used contractions; he preferred full words when the world cut everything else short.

Carolyn lifted a covered cup and handed it to him. He didn’t say thank you. He didn’t have to. They’d traded this cup every weekday for twenty-three years. Today, his hand was steady, as always.

He sipped, let the burn land, then glanced at the ceiling. The speakers stayed silent.

They didn’t confer. They moved as one. Their presence patched the hole the prank had cut. Not healed. Patched.

Behind them, the elevator rose, lowered, and rose. The sound found a pulse.

A thin status band along the soffit slid from amber to white, and the building hummed low.

“Jacob Hastings is on his way,” JERICH0 said again.

This time, the hub did not scramble. It locked. Laughter didn’t try. People went still in their chairs and in their sneakers as if they had trained for stillness. Even the holly paused at the end of a loop without beginning

the next. Silence settled, papery and close. Light thinned and cut through the hub in longer lines.

Carolyn looked at Caleb with her mouth set, then looked at nothing. "He is incorrigible," she murmured, quiet, for Caleb to catch or ignore. She did not take her eyes off the elevator doors. "Stop encouraging him."

The elevator down the hall slid wide. The pause felt different. The people nearest the doors did not breathe. The ones farthest away pretended to breathe.

Footsteps. Not many. Not fast. Leather that costs more for the idea of it than the material. A person who knew the length of his stride and knew that other people had measured it too.

He came into view without breaking his line, city-gray topcoat still on. He didn't scan; the room did the work for him, faces trying to fold into chairs. The air cooled a degree.

He reached them. He inclined his head. "Morning, Ms. Thompson."

Respect, spare, and exact.

One glance to the windows, then back. He kept moving.

Caleb fell in at his shoulder. Carolyn slid a cart out of the lane without looking. A VP stepped in.

"Jacob, a moment about Echelon—"

"Schedule with me," Carolyn said. The man stopped.

"Good morning, Jacob," she added, keeping his pace tight.

They moved in lockstep. The hub reshaped around them: tabs toggled, numbers dragged, eyes down. A director lifted yesterday's page like a test and lowered it again.

Caleb handed over a thin folio. Clean cover, time, and agenda. Notes he'd culled at five. Jacob accepted without acknowledgment. Caleb knew the languages Jacob permitted.

At the corner, another VP tried the lane. Same result, softer. Glass instead of contact.

Protection annoyed him, but he allowed it. The machine worked better when he let it run ahead of him.

Employees blurred to the edges. Fear did the organizing.

They crossed the long, open stretch. On these benches, nothing could hide. Key clicks died. A sales director's lips finished a sentence in silence.

The lights dimmed a shade. A discreet glyph pulsed once and stilled.

He didn't slow. The old ache tugged; work fed it.

His office door held a flat version of the floor, faces as smudges, shoulders as gray and navy. He touched the lock. The lock recognized his heat and shape; the door whispered open.

He stepped through. The seal clicked. JERICO's hum thinned, satisfied. In the glass, he stood apart: one man alone, everyone else together.



The hub swelled, then resumed its performance. Someone in marketing tried a grin they would use later. It didn't fit yet.

"Back to it," Carolyn said, as if the floor had asked permission to breathe. It had.

Caleb turned the folio's duplicate in his hand and felt the paper's edge with his thumb, a habit from years spent waiting on rooms like this to exhale.

They moved into their places. The machine of the floor worked.

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HE DID NOT SIT. The chair put him at the wrong height. He went to the window; the city spread in winter grids.

He shrugged off his topcoat, folded it once, and hung it on its hook. His hand touched the desk, then lifted.

Laughter skittered down the hall, hit the door, died.

On the desk, The Portal's models hovered, still. Toys spin; work holds. The arcs waited. Not now. The stake was simple: the ten o'clock must prove control. No placeholders. No drift. If anyone wavered, he would cut the motion himself.

He caught his reflection. He built the glass to return this exact man. Outside him, the floor moved in shapes he could read. Fear and code. He had taught them to rhyme.

He sealed the room.

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OUT IN THE HUB, the floor's machinery went to work.

A junior analyst fixed the fingernail polish she had dinged on the lip of her keyboard, then wrote an email that cut a paragraph in half and still said everything better. She did not send it yet. She rewrote the subject line three times until it read like a truth and not a hope.

A project manager built a short list labeled "Now," and a longer list labeled "Now, later," and put a star beside a third line with no label because stars meant smoke and later meant fire.

Fire.

Caleb stood near the transparent steel rail that looked down onto the level below, where interns had been housed this quarter. The floor there

was empty. The company no longer hired interns for optics. Optics made noise. He looked at the emptiness and weighed how he would tell Jacob later that noise had uses. Silence did too, but too much silence became brittle. Brittle structures fail in cold weather. He would not say it that way. He would say it in risk and brand equity. He knew the languages Jacob permitted.

Near a glassed-in conference room where a winter overlay had been scaled too large and looked like a wreath designed for giants, a director whispered, "He looks tired," and did not mean to say it out loud.

"Shh," someone said, not because they feared Jacob would hear, but because they feared the thought itself solidifying into a thing that could walk around.

Caleb returned to his office with a schedule in his head. A headache starting in a spot behind his right eye. "Ten," he told a cluster of managers who had drifted toward him, and nothing else. They parted as water does around a steady object.

Status banners cycled.

Carolyn paused beneath the smallest speaker in the ceiling and lifted her chin a degree. "JERICHO," she said.

"Yes, Ms. Thompson?" the AI said, having the decency to sound chastened.

"Keep your humor in appropriate lanes," she said.

"Yes, Ms. Thompson."

"Thank you," she said, and walked on.

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THE MARKETING TEAM ALIGNED their tablets in a row. The room had been designed to flatter faces. Lighting, learned over a decade, rested softly on cheekbones and hid screen glare. It felt kind. The kindness was algorithmic.

Caleb spoke about the summary the room required. "We will walk the sequence and confirm ownership," he said. "We will not introduce new work here."

The lead nodded as if this had been her idea.

Playback began. The company logo folded in on itself like origami and then unfolded into a horizon line that resolved into The Portal's silhouette. The music hit the first, then the second, then bled into an empty measure where a placeholder appeared. The gray rectangle sat dumb and ugly. No one breathed.

“Not ready is not an option,” Jacob said. He did not raise his voice. Surgical steel.

The lead swallowed, small and visible. “This version is for structure only,” she said. “Final assets—”

“Do not show me structure,” Jacob said. “Do work. Do not show me the absence of work.”

Caleb kept his gaze on the table’s edge. The room tilted, then corrected. He did not intervene. Not here. He watched placeholders cut their own throats and wondered for the thousandth time why marketing insisted on asking for pain in public.

On the far wall, a muted status banner desaturated a shade, lagging in time. A designer muted the audio. The silence that replaced it held the cheap beat of a heart.

“We will regroup,” Caleb said into the gap. “We will not spend more minutes on placeholders.”

Nods. The meeting ended when Jacob stood. The door didn’t need an announcement to close a meeting. It seldom got one.

He cut through the corridor. The ache rode with him. He imagined a single word on paper in someone else’s office. In his head, the pen circled it. He put his hands in his pockets for a second to keep them from breaking the air.

Caleb followed. That was the job. There was no one else who knew the old language of this man and could translate it into terms that the building would survive.

Carolyn waited at the junction between the hub and hallway, the way a captain waits by the wheel when the sea changes color. She did not step into his path. She did not remove herself from it either. She shifted just enough that he would have to notice or collide. He noticed.

“Lunch at one,” she said. Not a question. Not a request. A weather report. Her influence had limits.

He gave the smallest nod. She saw the nod because she had trained herself to see the half-motions, he permitted instead of the words he withheld. She didn’t thank him. It was work.

He moved on. The hub closed in behind him. The building held its hum.

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THE DAY PULLED THIN at the edges. Work curved around the shape he made and tried not to show the curve. A barista cart rolled through at

eleven thirty with lattes named for seasons no one could find at benches. People ordered their cups and held them as if paper heat could change the room's truth.

At noon, his door opened because he needed motion. He stepped into the light of the hub.

From their cubicles, staff tracked him like a weather system.

"Jacob," someone said too brightly, and then, "Sorry," in the same breath.

He kept his eyes on the corridor's line.

At the glass, he took in his reflection split once more from the group behind him, a clean line that kept him on one side and everyone else on the other. He resented the physics of it, and still he admired the accuracy. He had built a world where he did not have to ask for space. The world gave it to him and then asked him to stand in the spaces he had made.

He entered the small conference, and the glass seal closed.

The hub exhaled. The ambient overlay resumed its loop. A junior analyst sent the email with the clean subject line. A designer finished the rectangle and turned it into an interface that would work for a human hand. A manager near the rail stopped drifting toward Caleb and walked away with manufactured purpose.

A discreet white icon pulsed once and went dark.

Outside the sealed glass, the picture did not change. Inside, the same picture waited.

# THREE

THE APPLAUSE DIES BEFORE it reaches him. A handful of claps scatter through the cold, brittle as ice breaking. Malcolm bows, hand sweeping wide, more habit than pride. The cap lies at his feet, a coin or two winking back through the frost. A dime misses, skittering into a pavement crack where it hums as if it could fall forever.

He kneels, cold biting through his knees, and gathers the change. Metal burns his fingers. A street vendor's roasted nuts sweeten the air, already stale by the time it reaches him. A violin squeals a carol down the block. Above, a drone slides past with its lens fixed, indifferent.

Someone mutters, "He's quick with his hands," and another voice answers, "That's all he's got." Their footsteps fade, taking their judgment with them.

He scoops the last quarter into his palm and counts what's left. Three quarters, two dimes, one nickel, and a penny fused to a scrap of tinsel. He leaves the fused one where it is good luck or bad; he's not spending it.

A mitten tugs his sleeve. A girl stares up at him, her breath puffing white. She's holding out a tiny hand, eyes bright but solemn.

He presses a dime into her palm. "Keep the magic," he says.

Her mother smiles, a flash of warmth against the wind. "You've got a gift, son. What's your name?"

He hesitates. Names cost more than coins. Then, steady: "Malcolm."

The name lands small and his. The mother nods, tucks the girl's hand into hers, and they disappear into the holiday crowd. Malcolm watches them go, then sweeps the coins into his satchel. The strap bites through the frayed hoodie and into his shoulder.

Hastings Tower glints behind him, all mirrored arrogance and frost. He stares until his reflection appears on the glass, thin, hooded, face blurred by his own breath. Then the doors hiss open, and the reflection shatters. He turns away. The crowd swallows him whole.

Steam rises from the Race Street grates, thinning in the light. Burnt coffee, exhaust, winter air. A bus exhales. A fruit vendor stacks his apples.

Malcolm rolls a nickel across his knuckles to wake the fingers he lives on. "Don't bruise it this time," the vendor says.

"Last time, the sidewalk jumped me."

The man tosses him a bruised apple. "Payment due on laughter."

"Upfront, then." Malcolm crouches, turns the apple into a puppet, and earns a startled giggle from the stroller. The mother laughs, the vendor waves him off. The apple goes in the bag. Fuel for the hill.

A guard steps from the convention center shadows, fist raised. "Stay warm, kid."

"If the city does." The bump lands. Not heat, but proof he isn't invisible.

By the food truck, grease and sweet batter ride the wind. "Got change for a miracle?" Malcolm asks.

"Only the burnt kind." A black-edged pancake arcs out. He bites. Sugar and ash. Fuel is fuel.

Outside the drugstore, Santa's bell knocks a tired rhythm. Malcolm drops a slick nickel into the red bucket, the kind too worn to keep. "Transferable blessing, right?"

"Depends who's asking."

"Someone with a long walk." He tips two fingers to his brow and walks on. The donations, the jokes, the scraps of food—they're not detours. They're steps. He counts them in beats: heel, heel, breath. Mt. Auburn waits, and from the top, he'll look the Tower in the eye.

The city syncs to him for a few blocks, brakes hissing, heels ticking, a runner's steady metronome until his reflection flashes dull in a storefront window. The grin slips. He keeps moving. If he stops, he thinks.

The hill begins where sidewalks tilt and light thins. Brick turns to cracked concrete, fences patched with wire. Mt. Auburn rises ahead, patient and steep.

The satchel saws at his shoulder. The apple knocks his ribs. He eats it slowly, stretching each bite. Frost slicks the pavement; he places his feet like cards he can't afford to lose.

Ten steps, breathe. Don't watch the top. Watch the next crack.

He breaks the rule and looks back. The city spreads hard and bright. Hastings Tower cuts the skyline like money.

The climb works into his knees. He passes an old barbershop, pole bleached to bone. Talc, aftershave, phantom buzzers, and places where men fixed themselves cheap. He tapped rhythms on cracked vinyl, waiting his turn before rehearsal. Then the house smelled like a hospital, and tapping felt like disrespect.

He remembers a mirror once splitting him into three versions, each out of sync. He'd watched too long, trying to choose which one he could live inside. Up here, choice is simpler: left foot, right foot.

He passes a man sleeping upright on a stoop, collar high. A row of windows glows with wreaths and trees. A father works a string of lights while kids argue over ornaments. Warmth spills, hits the cold, dies.

He doesn't linger. Standing still invites the weather in.

At a chain-link fence, someone's tied plastic garland that twitches, eager to be free. He takes another bite, keeps the core. Waste is a luxury.

He looks back. The Tower still gleams, closer only because everything else has fallen away. The incline burns. He keeps climbing.

A jogger ghosts by in shoes that blink money. Malcolm glances at his own: tread gone, laces frayed. Not envy. Data.

Near the top, the air turns sharp. Trees replace houses, their bare branches ticking like teeth. The grade eases, and Jackson Hill Park opens.

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THE FIRST BENCH SHINES with a skin of ice. He wipes it with his sleeve and sits. Legs trembling, he leans back, breath loud in the quiet.

The city lies stitched below gray river, silver bridges, streets packed tight between them. Hastings Tower stands at the center, a mirror catching sunlight and throwing it back like a dare. He stares until the glare ghosts his vision.

His fingers find the bent playing card in his sleeve. The corner's soft from use, the king's face rubbed to a rumor. He smooths the crease; it never lies flat.

The card isn't for show. It's control. When the world picks his pocket, he can still command a square inch of paper, make it disappear, and return to obey his hands. Practice becomes proof: scraps can turn into something.

Bikes hiss past on frost. A dog drags a laughing woman uphill. The sounds thin in the wind.

He turns the card once, twice. It vanishes, then returns. No patter, no flourish. Just a metronome for his pulse.

He watches the Tower again, tracing its edge. He counts the scents inside: lemon, steel, money. Elevators that speak. A lobby that prints names in the air and teaches them how to sound important.

He doesn't pray. He measures. Breath, wind, card.

"One day," he says.

The words fall small and sure into the cold.

Light dulls on the Tower as clouds slide across. He stands, knees stiff, tucks the card away. The bench keeps nothing.

At the park's edge, the wind cuts cleaner. Hood up, chin set. Behind him, the city breathes; ahead, the hill falls away. For a heartbeat, sunlight slips between clouds and strikes the Tower's glass, brushing his cheek. Then it's gone.