

## FameMakers

Dagan Phillips watched a limo pull past his studio window. He passed a business card through his index, thumb and middle fingers.

Another business card to add to the castle of cards, most likely. The one to topple it perhaps.

Charlie “Chuck” Jude, Founder and CEO

FameMakers, Private Relations

*“They call me Saint Jude,”* the Founder and CEO said the night before.

Dagan was half in the bag when Charlie Chuck Jude offered to buy him a shot. He obliged anyway. He obliged on the two subsequent shots also.

Dagan stumbled home without much of an idea what Charlie was talking about.

Home.

He could barely call this place a home. It was home to undocumented insects. It was a far cry from “home” by comparison. Comparison to both where he grew up in Indiana, and comparison to where he ought to be living by now. Fifteen years of Hollywood dreaming and the conjured up picture of the digs he “would have by now.” A farce.

Another limousine.

What was “private relations” anyway? Wasn’t it supposed to be public relations? Isn’t that how those things worked? Suit guys that exploited careers in the sexiest ways possible. Did damage control for the ones that flew off the handle in a swank motel room.

(310) 991-8919.

A Sunset Boulevard office.

Maybe it was worth a call.

*“Boy what we do is a bit different than your run of the mill PR company,”* Charlie snorted when he laughed. *“I can’t make you call us, but something tells me you will.”*

Charlie licked the Scotch from his moustache the way a cat would lick the cream from its fur. He slammed the glass down. *“When you’re ready,”* he had said.

Dagan picked up the phone.

\*

Lucy Cruz balanced a dirty beverage tray in the palm of her hand. It was effortless by now. She turned the corner right, 'round the brick, shifted martinis slightly left and bore a smile. She could smell olive juice which made her gag, but through a pearly smile you could hardly tell.

A table of two guys beckoned with their eyes and one raised finger. "Shots," she heard them say.

"Just a second fellas," Lucy said.

She brought her tray to her breast and one by one peeled off each martini to the salivating guests.

"Can I get you anything else?"

\*

Inside FameMakers corporate office, the weekly recruitment meeting is being held, closed door.

Charlie Jude leads the meeting.

He used a two foot long stylus-like tool to point at slide one: pie charts. Slide two: a herd of people in Japan. Slide three: four different labels on soup cans in quadrants. Slide four: a newsstand filled with magazines.

The Director of Messaging pipes up after slide four; the Instructional Content Team groans at the same time.

Four limousine drivers wait outside four limousines. Three are on the phone. The drivers are scheduled to leave at 5. It'll be a late night tonight.

The Shoppers are already out; one is at Roberto Cavalli. The other three lost touch. Kitsue is always at Roberto Cavalli (the one at Sunset Plaza) so it's easy not to lose her.

The Line-cutters and corresponding Doormen and Clipboard Checkers leave at ten, sometimes later. It's a decent job. Payday is on Thursday.

\*

Jameson Drake is at the front of the line, the club hasn't even opened yet. Every night the same exact thing.

He looks just as good, if not better, than the next guy. Yet the red velvet rope will be clicked and unclicked from its chrome-plated stanchion dozens of times before the doorman even knows he is there.

Dozens. Who is he kidding?

Jameson has slipped them twenties, Hell, he has even slipped them fifties. He remains invisible and down seventy bucks.

He was never invisible in Boulder.

Captain of the basketball team. Homecoming King. Top of his class.

The doorman comes outside. The club is open. The twiggy girl with the clipboard is front and center.

They look through him. His skin feels translucent.

Two people cut the line and the doorman and the clipboard girl ogle. They can't unclick the rope fast enough. They smile, big. Someone, off to the side, fires a round of pictures.

Jameson lights a cigarette. And waits. For hours.

\*

Dagan blew his audition. Fumbled the first line of his monologue. Pathetic.

His consultation with FameMakers is at 2pm. He has nothing to do until then. It's only 11am. He thinks of a Pilsner. A Pilsner will do until then.

\*

Lucy switched her cash cow of a dinner shift for this sorry lunch shift. She booked a small singing gig for Saturday night and the only way out of her shift was to switch it for this noon to five.

The bar is dead. She tries to look busy with a rag and an empty bottle of cleaner. She makes circular motions whenever her manager looks her way.

The door opens and a guy walks in and orders a Pilsner. At least she'll make one tip today.

She smiles.

He smiles back, but he looks defeated.

Time to upsell.

“Cheer up man, let me buy you a shot,” Lucy offered.

Dagan thinks to himself: *Everywhere I go people buy me drinks, yet I can't book a C-level audition.*

Lucy hums her song for Saturday while she awaits his answer.

“Sure, Dagan began, “I’ll have a...”

\*

Jameson is at work. His nametag reads George. His nametag reads George because that’s how embarrassed he is to work at a print shop on Laurel Canyon. He could only imagine if anyone he knew ever came in to make copies. He’d sooner stick his head inside the Xerox machine.

He wore a cap which pissed his boss off most of the time; but between the cap and faux nametag, he felt safe.

“Clean down the machines George and then you can go,” his boss said.

This is what he moved here for. To clean machines. Sometimes to stack paper or refill staplers. On a really good day, he could separate paper clips.

He lifts the top of the copy machine. Someone left something. They always do. Nearly fifty percent of the people who make copies leave the originals on the glass.

He peels the card from the smudgy glass.

Charlie “Chuck” Jude, Founder and CEO

FameMakers, Private Relations

A limousine slowly drives past.

\*

Lucy empties the check presenter. Pilsner guy left her three dollars. Three. After she bought him a shot of whiskey.

Sigh.

Too bad he also left his wallet. She couldn't help but look. Not to rob him, but just to know if he had hoards of cash and still left her three dollars.

There are only nine singles, one receipt, and a business card for a Charlie Chuck Jude. She ought to call, return the wallet. After all, he can tip three more people with nine dollars.

\*

(Three hours later)

Lucy Cruz, Dagan Phillips and Jameson Drake are sitting at a conference room table. They are all there for a consultation with Fame Makers Private Relations. A receptionist offers them sparkling water.

Dagan is dehydrated.

"Yes please," he said.

Packets were in front of each of them with their names on the covers.

No one has come in the room yet except the receptionist, now twice.

She pours the water.

The room is sterile. Modern. Too modern.

"I feel like we're about to get sold a timeshare," Lucy broke the ice.

Jameson laughed.

"In Tahiti," Dagan added.

Lucy nods.

"It's weird, I only called because I found the card in your wallet," said Lucy.

"I'm sorry I only left you three bucks, it wasn't your service," Dagan answered.

"You two know each other?" Jameson asked.

"Not really," Lucy said.

"We met this afternoon," said Dagan.

"Weird."

"Do you know anything about the company?"

“Not me, I just found a business card in a copy machine where I wo- was making copies.”

\*

Charlie Jude assumed the position. He pulled in a video screen. He clicked a remote. He didn't introduce himself. Dagan recognized him. Vaguely.

“All three of you need a product and I am the only person in town who manufactures it,” Charlie started.

“Tahiti?” Lucy asked.

Charlie Jude didn't even acknowledge the joke.

“I don't need any product man, and I'm broke,” said Dagan.

“Here, here,” said Jameson. He hit Dagan's knuckles with his own.

“I know,” said Charlie Jude.

“You know?”

Charlie Jude clicked to the first slide.

You are all broke.

“Is this some kind of joke?” Lucy asked.

“Everyone in LA is broke,” said Dagan.

“Really Mr. Phillips?” Charlie clicked to the next slide. It was a picture of all three of them at various store check-outs.

“Okay, this is definitely some kind of joke,” Lucy said to herself.

“This is each one of you shopping this week, or at least trying to. Ms. Cruz, I believe this is you at Roberto Cavalli? Charging one item I am guessing you can't afford,” said Charlie Jude.

Lucy was quiet.

“So you've been following us?” asked Jameson.

“Not exactly. Shall we continue?”

Charlie Jude cleared his throat and continued anyway.

“Mr. Phillips, Mr. Drake,” he said, “when you were behind customers with \$3329 and \$2435 tabs respectively, this is a shot of both of your faces.”

Charlie Jude zoomed in to 200% on their sulking, sullen faces.

“What’s your point,” Dagan said. “Does anyone want to be behind that kind of shopper?”

Charlie Jude clicked to the next slide.

It was a red wine bottle.

“Have any of you heard of Malbec wine?”

Lucy nodded.

“When?”

Lucy thought. “Couple years ago I guess. I work in a bar, it’s kind of hard not to.”

“So everyone just always ordered Malbec Ms. Cruz?”

“Well no, when it became trendy they did.”

“And before that?”

“Before that what?”

“What did they order?”

“Merlot? Pinot Grigio?”

“And then it just ‘became trendy,’” said Charlie Jude. “How?”

“How does anything become trendy,” said Jameson.

Charlie Jude clicked ahead.

It showed pie charts with colorful slices.

“We, ladies and gentlemen, are how something becomes trendy. In fact, we were hired directly by Malbec,” Charlie Jude said. “The country of Argentina needed a major export and they needed it to be the ‘next big thing’ so to speak. Most people think there’s no guarantee of that sort of thing.”

Three stumped faces.

Charlie Jude went on to the next slide.

There were crowds of people in Japan pictured in the photo.

“Like every other recruit that comes through our doors, I understand this is difficult to wrap your head around. That trend is not by accident. But I assure you it isn’t. We have been responsible for everything that has gone viral for decades,” Charlie Jude continued. “We have a team of subliminal messaging experts and we paired it with a strategic staff.”

He clicked to the next slide. Four soup can labels.

“On the outside, we are a ‘brand marketing’ firm. Our real business, is creating surefire trend.”

“This is too much,” said Dagan. Still, his eyes did not waver.

“Mr. Phillips, do you really think that overnight success just poof! happens? That a boy from nowhere puts out a video on You Tube and suddenly he is a global phenomenon followed by *millions*?”

Dagan bit his lip. The man had a point.

“When these ‘household names’ become household names, you begin to follow them then and you see they have 3.5 million followers right? Did you see them, did anyone see them, when they had say five?”

“No, but-”

“There is no such thing as accidental trend Mr. Phillips. Nor is there overnight fame. We have offices all over the world and while brands make us more money, celebrities have become our niche,” Charlie Jude said and clicked one more time on his presentation.

The slide showed all three of them on the cover of tabloids.

“Yea, but how did you know we would be interested in this? Just because we live in LA, I mean c’mon that’s pretty cliché,” Jameson said.

“Now here’s the part you may not like. In the same way that we subliminally message the audience and splice in our new trends, we dually subliminally message our recruits. For a very long time.”

“What does that mean exactly?” asked Lucy.

“All three of you wanted fame more than anything in this world, because we made you want fame. For the past oh, say twenty years of your lives, give or take,” Charlie Jude admitted.

“That’s complete B.S., I have always loved acting,” said Dagan.

“You always loved acting, just like you’ve always loved singing, just like you’ve always loved sports,” he said pointing at each of them respectively, “because I made you love those things. Then, little by little I made sure you always saw a limo when you looked out your

windows, or that a shopper with a multi-thousand dollar tab was checking out right before you, someone more important cutting you in line. I am a professional and it is surprisingly easy to manipulate people's subconscious minds."

Lucy got goosebumps. Was this even possible? Her concerts? Her rectials? Her toy microphone? All programmed by a corporation?

Dagan finished his water and crinkled the plastic cup.

Jameson scratched his forehead and ran his palm down his face.

"Open your packets, you'll find out everything you need to know right now. The last page is your contract. An email with further instruction will come tomorrow."

"And what do we have to pay for this, like hundreds of thousands of dollars?"

"You pay nothing Mr. Drake. In fact, for now, we cover all the funding you will need to support lavish lifestyles. Once you begin bringing in your own income, you pay a monthly retainer. A nominal one if you ask me."

"So where's the catch?" asked Lucy.

"All I can tell you in terms of a clause, not so much catch, is that nothing in this world gives as much as fame; dually nothing in this world takes away as much, as fame."

"And the contract? What do we owe you, other than a retainer?" asked Dagan.

"You simply give back to the firm by fulfilling our roles, the roles that perpetuate the cycle. So in other words, I need you to be line-cutters, picture posers, shoppers, occasional

dramatic headline grabbers, that sort of thing. So that my other recruits can be messaged, appropriately.”

“So we’ll be famous but we’ll work for you?”

“Stir up envy really. You can pick one role that you’d like to commit to or you can commit to various. They go in shifts. You clock in here, then go to the club, come back, clock out. Or clock in here, get caught with pot, come back here, clock out. Clock in here, get a tiny DUI, which we take care of, clock out. So on and so forth.”

Charlie Jude turned off the presentation. He placed the clicker on the meeting room table.

“We’ll be in touch.”

\*

Dagan received his email instructions first. Eat lunch at exactly 12:15pm at Blue Jar, outside seating only. Bring any screenplay.

Lucy’s came next. Sing in the elevator of an office building on Burbank Blvd. at 5pm when it is full. Put in ear buds and pretend you are not even aware that anyone is in it. Close your eyes for emphasis.

Jameson’s came last. Drop your basketball down the stairs at 7:13pm in a resident building downtown. When you retrieve it, spin then dribble up the stairs and past anyone who walks down while you head up.

\*

(Two years later)

Lucy Crane, formerly Lucy Cruz, is laying out poolside. Her name was changed for ethnic ambiguity.

She has to take her top off in exactly five minutes. Her stalker is scheduled to arrive in approximately seven.

She hates this part. It's just awkward for everyone, but she hasn't filled a contract role in three weeks and usually when that happens, you get stuck with the harder ones (drug bust, stalker, DUI).

She hears a light rustling in her trees. It's time. She begins to untie the back of her bikini, slightly trembling. She thinks of her Grammy when she does this and all is well.

\*

Jameson Drake is dead. He died of a drug overdose in the Seasons Hotel on Tuesday; an after party at his suite. The most beautiful women in California, all dipped in honey. A floor full of wooden corks, cigarette butts, matchbooks, a lipstick or two. Two untouched plates of fatty cheeses and grapes. Egyptian cotton sheets, 800 thread count and monogrammed.

And another dead star.

"Our hearts are heavy right now," a coach says in an interview on network news.

'Drake dead at 28' is in black and white.

Jameson never fulfilled a contract role since receiving his instructions two years ago Tuesday.

\*

Dagan Phillips parked his car in the parking garage and took the back elevators. The last thing he needed was to be seen right now.

Shooting for his new movie has been all day every day or he would have come down and spoken his mind days ago.

He felt his adrenal gland pumping. He knew that vein above his eye was visible.

He snuck into the garage elevator, careful to avoid being seen.

Sunglasses. Hat. Sweatshirt.

Seventy-two degrees.

He still had a whole block to walk once he got outside of the garage.

“Oh my God, are you Dagan Phillips?” a teenager squealed. She had hair the color of raspberries.

Dagan felt bad pretending he didn't hear her. Kind of.

She started snapping away on her phone regardless. Dagan walked to FameMakers front door. He just had a terrible feeling that he was right all along. Last year when Lucy had forgotten contract role fulfillment for a month or so, her mother died. Dagan himself had forgotten to do them for two weeks and his house was robbed. Jameson's car accident last year nearly paralyzed him. For an athlete, that would have been just like killing him anyway. Six months before that, Jameson was busted for Steroids, a drug Dagan was certain he had never touched.

And now Jameson was dead.

Dagan buzzed the bell, hard.

He knew they would watch him from the cameras so he tilted his face downward. Charlie Jude would know why Dagan was showing up without an appointment obnoxiously buzzing the doorbell.

\*

Dagan waits in the waiting room. He picks up a magazine.

‘Lucy Crane, Leaked Topless Photos!’

He felt bad for Lucy. She had signed up for that headline under false pretenses. It was supposed to be a creepy stalker nabbed in her own backyard headline.

At least she is probably off of contract role fulfillment for at least two weeks.

The new receptionist is staring at him, but pretending she isn't.

“Mr. Phillips, Mr. Jude will see you now.”

\*

Dagan walked the corridor, and counted backwards from ten.

Nine. Eight. Stay Calm. Seven. Six.

At five, the door to Mr. Jude's office swung open. An office he had never once been in.

“To what do I owe the honor Mr. Phillips? Please have a seat. And my condolences for your friend.”

Dagan chewed the inside of his cheek.

“I want out,” is all he could muster.

“Out?” asked Charlie Jude.

“Yes, I want out of this, this whole thing. Too many bad things are happening. My health is on the fritz, Lucy’s mom, Jameson. It’s all just too coincidental. This is jinxed. It’s hexed. It’s—“

“Fame, Mr Phillips,” Charlie Jude finished. “I warned you that nothing gives and takes away as much as fame, didn’t I?”

“Yes but there has to be more to it than that. The timing of things,” Dagan stammered.

“Timing is everything. I’m not sure how many famous people you know that just suddenly went back to anonymity. How do you simply un-know who someone is Mr. Phillips?”

“I thought you guys could do anything. I don’t know. Un-trend me. I don’t want it. I can check myself into a rehab, or an asylum. Isn’t that what people do?”

“Not exactly Mr. Phillips. And your situation is particularly more complicated.”

“How so,” Dagan swallowed a lump in his throat.

“You see, from time to time, someone actually just becomes famous without our help. They never really reach global trend status but nevertheless, it just falls through the cracks of our system.”

“So what are you saying?” asked Dagan

“I’m saying you never sent us back your signed contract.”

“I didn’t?”

Charlie Jude pulled a manila folder from his desk. Dagan’s contract was stapled inside and an empty signature line sat next to an “X.”

“No. Which is a bit unfair on our end because we’ve allowed you to do some ‘pro bono’ work if you will, by fulfilling contract roles that technically you were not contractually obligated to. But we do appreciate it.”

Charlie Jude crossed his legs on top of his desk and picked at a nail.

“So, then—“

“We didn’t make you famous Mr. Phillips. And we can’t get you out.”

\*

