

FRIDAY BLACK

Get to your sections!" Angela screams. Ravenous humans howl. Our gate whines and rattles as they shake and pull, their grubby fingers like worms through the grating. I sit atop a tiny cabin roof made of hard plastic. My legs hang near the windows, and fleeces hang inside of it. I hold my reach, an eight-foot-long metal pole with a small plastic mouth at the end for grabbing hangers off the highest racks. I also use my reach to smack down Friday heads. It's my fourth Black Friday. On my first, a man from Connecticut bit a hole into my tricep. His slobber hot. I left the sales floor for ten minutes so they could patch me up. Now I have a jagged smile on my left arm. A sickle, half circle, my lucky Friday scar. I hear Richard's shoes flopping toward me.

"You ready, big guy?" he asks. I open one eye and look at him. I've never not been ready, so I don't say anything and close my eyes again. "I get it; I get it. Eye of the tiger! I like it," Richard says. I nod slowly. He's nervous. He's a district manager, and this is the Prominent Mall. We're the biggest store in his territory. We're supposed to do a million over the next thirty days. Most of it's on me.

The main gate creaks and groans.

"I saw the SuperShell in the back. What's she wear, medium or large?"

"Large," I say, opening both eyes.

There's a contest: whoever has the most sales gets to take home any coat in the store. When Richard asked me what I was going to do if I won, I told him that *when* I won I was going to give one of the SuperShell parkas to my mother. Richard frowned but said that was honorable. I said that, yeah, it was. The SuperShells are the most expensive coats we have this season: down-filled lofted exterior with a water-repellent finish, zip vents to keep the thing breathable, elastic hem plus faux fur on the hood for a luxurious touch. I know Richard would have me choose literally anything else. That's half of why I chose it. I set it aside in the back. It's the only large we've got due to a shipment glitch. Nobody will touch it because I'm me.

Most of the Friday heads are here for the PoleFace™ stuff. And whose name is lined up with the PoleFace™ section on the daily breakdown each day this weekend? It's not Lance or Michel, that's for sure. It's not the new kid, Duo, either. I look across to denim where Duo is pacing back and forth making sure his piles are neat and folded. He's a pretty good kid. Sometimes he'll actually ask to help with shipments. He wears a T-shirt and skinny jeans like most of our customers his age. Angela tells him to watch me, to learn from me. She says he's my heir apparent. I like him, but he's not like me. He can sound honest, he knows how to see what people want, but he can't do what I can do. Not on Black Friday. But he'll survive denim.

Michel and Lance cover shoes and graphic tees. Michel and Lance might as well be anybody else. Lance is working the broom.

There's a grind and a metallic rumble. Angela is in the front.

She's pushed the button and turned the key. The main gate eats itself up as it rolls into the ceiling.

"Get out of here!" I yell to Richard. He runs to the register where he'll be backup to the backup safe.

Maybe eighty people rush through the gate, clawing and stampeding. Pushing racks and bodies aside. Have you ever seen people run from a fire or gunshots? It's like that, with less fear and more hunger. From my cabin, I see a child, a girl maybe six years old, disappear as the wave of consumer fervor swallows her up. She is sprawled facedown with dirty shoe prints on her pink coat. Lance walks up to the small pink body. He's pulling a pallet jack and holding a huge push broom. He thrusts the broom head into her side and tries to sweep her onto the pallet jack so he can roll her to the section we've designated for bodies. As he touches her, a woman wearing a gray scarf pushes him away and yanks the girl to her feet. I imagine the mother explaining that her tiny daughter isn't dead yet. She pulls the little girl toward me. The girl limps and tries to keep up, and then I have to forget about them.

"Blue! Son! SleekPack!" a man with wild eyes and a bubble vest screams as he grabs my left ankle. White foam drips from his mouth. I use my right foot to stomp his hand, and I feel his fingers crush beneath my boots. He howls, "SleekPack. Son!" while licking his injured hand. I look him in his eyes, deep red around his lids, redder at the corners. I understand him perfectly. What he's saying is this: My son. Loves me most on Christmas. I have him holidays. Me and him. Wants the one thing. Only thing. His mother won't. On me. Need to feel like Father!

Ever since that first time, since the bite, I can speak Black Friday. Or I can understand it, at least. Not fluently, but well

enough. I have some of them in me. I hear the people, the sizes, the model, the make, and the reason. Even if all they're doing is foaming at the mouth. I use my reach and pull a medium-size blue SleekPack PoleFace™ from a face-out rack way up on the wall. "Thanks," he growls when I throw the jacket in his face.

I jump down from the cabin and swing the reach around so none of them can get too close. The long rod whistles in the air. Most of the customers can't speak in real words; the Friday Black has already taken most of their minds. Still, so many of them are the same. I grab two medium fleeces without anyone asking for them because I know somebody wants one. They howl and scream: daughter, son, girlfriend, husband, friend, ME, daughter, son. I throw one of the fleeces toward the registers and one toward the back wall. The crowd splits. Near the registers, a woman in her thirties takes off her heel and smashes a child in the jaw with it just before he can grab the fleece. She inspects the tag, sees it's a medium, then throws it down on top of the boy with a heel-size hole in his cheek. I toss two large fleeces and two medium fleeces into the crowds. Then I deal with the customers who can still speak, who are nudging and pushing around me.

"C-C-COAL BUBBLE. SMALL, ME! COAL!" a man says while beating his chest. I'm the only one at work who doesn't have a Coalmeister! How can I be a senior advisor without? The only one!

I press the end of my reach against his neck to keep his hungry mouth from me. Then, without taking my eyes off him, I grab one of the Coalmeister bubble coats from the rack behind me. And then it's in his hands. He hugs the coat and runs to the register.

"Us? US!" the woman with the gray scarf says. She has large

gold earrings hanging off the sides of her head. The pink-coat child is at her shins. The child's face is bruised, but she isn't crying at all.

"Can't. The Stuy!" Gray scarf's husband says. Family time needs forty-two-inch high-def. The BuyStuy deal is only while supplies last! Can't afford any other day.

Black Friday takes everybody differently. It's rough on families. They can't always hear what I hear.

"Asshole!" the wife seethes. Then she stares back at me.

"PoleFace™. Pink," she says, pointing to her child. "Coal SleekPack," she continues, pointing to her own face. A new kiddie PoleFace™, a new coal SleekPack, a Coalmeister. A family set.

The woman has both the coats she needs in a second, then storms off, dragging her child behind her.

It isn't always like this. This is the Black Weekend. Other times, if somebody dies, at least a clean-up crew comes with a tarp. Last year, the Friday Black took 129 people. "Black Friday is a special case; we are still a hub of customer care and interpersonal cohesiveness," mall management said in a mall-wide memo. As if caring about people is something you can turn on and off.

In the first five hours, I do seven thousand plus. No one has ever sold like that before. Soon I'll have a five-hundred-dollar jacket as proof to my mother that I'll love her forever. When I imagine how her face will look as I give it to her, my heart beats faster.

At five in the morning, the lull comes. The first wave of shoppers is home, or sleeping, or dead in various corners of the mall.

Our store has three bodies in the bodies section. The first came an hour in. A woman climbed the denim wall looking

for a second pair her size. She was screaming and rocking the wooden cubby wall so hard that the whole thing almost fell on Duo and everybody in his section. Duo poked her off the wall with his reach. She fell on her neck. Another woman snatched the SkinnyStretches from her dead hands. Lance came with the pallet jack, his broom, and some paper towels.

My first break is at 5:30 a.m. On my way to clock out, I walk through denim.

"Looks like you've had it pretty crazy," I say to Duo. There are jeans everywhere. None of them folded. Bloodstains all over the floor.

"Yeah," he says. A young man in a white T-shirt staggers toward us. "Grrrrr," he says. He's gnawing on something. I move to sling him one of the SlimStraights in his size—he thinks it'll make him popular at school—but stop because of how quickly Duo tosses the right kind of jeans to the customer, who takes them and limps to the register.

"You understand them?" I ask.

"Now I do," Duo says. He kicks at a tooth that's lying on the ground. Then he shows me a small bloody mark in the space between his thumb and forefinger.

"That's Black Friday."

"This is my first."

"Well, the worst part is done," I say, kind of smiling, trying to see where he's at.

"I don't know," he says.

"Yeah," I say, and continue on toward the register.

"My break is after yours," Duo says. That's retail for Hurry up, I'm hungry.

I punch my username and password into the computer, and Richard bows down to me like I'm to be worshipped. Angela nods at me like a proud mama. While I'm gone, Angela will

take my spot in the PoleFace™ section. It's the lull, so she can handle it.

Outside the store, the Prominent is bloody and broken, so I can tell it's been a great Black Friday. There are people strung out over benches and feet poking out of trash bins. Christmas music you can't escape plays from speakers you cannot see. Christmas is God here.

I'm hungry. My family didn't really do the Thanksgiving thing this year—which felt like a relief except I missed my chance for stuffing. I'd offered to help with some of the shopping. My mom had lost her job. I make \$8.50 an hour, but I saved. Mom, Dad, sister, me. But then we skipped the whole thing because we don't really like one another anymore. That was one of the side effects of lean living. We used to play games together. Now my parents yell about money, and when they aren't doing that, we are quiet. I walk, wondering if there's stuffing anywhere in the mall.

My second Black Friday, our store was doing pretty well, so there was a commission. You got something like 2.5 percent of all of your sales. It was a big deal for us on the floor. That was when Wendy was sales lead. Which meant she had the highest sales goals. That year she'd brought in a pie for everybody. I made sure not to eat any of it because I don't eat anything anybody tries to shove down my throat, and she couldn't stop talking about the pie. "We can have Thanksgiving in the store! It's homemade." Everybody was saying how nice she was, how thoughtful. Then Wendy and I were the only ones who didn't have the shits all day.

Who knows what she put in the pie. I made it my mission to beat her. And I did. I squashed her. Maybe it was because, thanks to her biological warfare, I had shoes, graphic tees, hats, plus denim to cover while she was stuck in PoleFace™.

Maybe it was because winter was warm that year. Maybe it was that I'm the greatest goddamn salesman this store has ever seen and ever will see. But I squashed her. I've been lead ever since. Wendy was gone by New Year's. I put the extra commission money toward some controllers for my GameBox.

I make it to the food court where the smell of food wafts over the stench of the freshly deceased like a muzzle on a rabid dog. There are survivors, champions of the first wave, pulling bags stretched to their capacity. Using the last of their energy to haul their newly purchased happiness home. And there are the dead, everywhere. I get two dollar-menu burgers, a small fry, and a drink from BurgerLand. The man at the cash register has seen so much and had so much caffeine that I have to remind him to take money from me. Even as he takes it, he stares forward, past me, looking at nothing. I sit at one of the white tables in the food court that doesn't have a corpse on it.

I bite into my burger and chew slowly. If I hold a bite in my mouth long enough, it softens into something that feels almost like stuffing. While I eat, a woman drags a television in a box to the table in front of me. She pushes a woman who is lying facedown in a small puddle of red blood out of the chair. Then she sits down. I recognize her from the store. One of her ears looks like it's been mangled by teeth; the other still has a large gold earring. Her gray scarf is gone. But she's wearing her new coat. When I look at her, she hisses and shows her pointy white teeth.

"It's okay," I say. "I helped you." She looks at me, confused. "Um, SleekPack, coal," I say in Black Friday, pointing to myself, then back to her. The creases on her face smooth. She relaxes into her seat and rubs her cheek into the faux fur of the hood.

“Good haul?” I ask. She nods hard and pets the face of the television box. “Family still shopping?” I ask.

The woman dips her pointer finger into the blood puddle in front of her.

“Forty-two inches, high-def,” she says.

This is the only time they can afford it.

With a red finger she makes a small circle, then points two small eyes onto the cardboard box, and drags a smile beneath the eyes. The blood dries out before she gets all the way across the face.

“What?” I ask.

“Dead,” she says. “BuyStuy. Trample.”

“Oh,” I say. “Right.”

“She was weak. He was weak. I am strong,” the woman says as she pets the face on the box. It hardly smears at all. “Weak,” she repeats.

“Got it,” I say.

I finish one burger, then I toss the second to the woman. She catches it, tears the paper away, and eats gleefully. My phone moves in my pocket and I grab it. I still have fifteen minutes, but it’s the store.

“We need you!” Richard screams.

“I just left,” I say, getting up and starting to walk.

“Duo just quit.”

“Oh.”

“He said he needed to go on break, and I said wait a few minutes, and then he just left. He’s gone.”

“I’m coming,” I say.

I get up, walk toward the escalator. I step to the conveyor and float down. Coming up on the opposite escalator is Duo.

“Hungry?” I say.

“I couldn’t do it, man. That shit is sad,” Duo says.

I grunt something because I don’t have the words to tell him that it is sad but it’s all I have.

“It’s a nice coat,” he says. “But that’s it.”

“What?”

“The coat isn’t proof. She knows. You don’t need to, bro,” he says, turning around and rising up the escalator.

“Don’t do that,” I say. “Not to me.”

“Sorry.”

“Yeah,” I say, and then Duo flies away.

My third Black Friday, the company wasn’t doing great. There was no commission and no prize. I still outsold everybody.

Back in the store, there’s a new body in the body pile and in PoleFace™ a young woman is trying to kill Angela. She’s clawing and screaming, and even from the store entrance, I know what she wants. Angela is pinned against the wall where the SuperShells are. It looks like the girl is about to bite Angela’s nose off. Lance is rolling a teen toward the body pile, and Michel is helping a customer in the shoe section. Richard looks at me and points to Angela and the girl. I know what the girl wants.

“Help!” Angela yells, turning to look at me. She has a reach between her and the girl, but she won’t last much longer. I turn and go to the back room. I look up at the only large SuperShell parka hanging there. I pull it off the hanger. I go outside, and the girl can smell it. She looks in my direction and howls like a wolf.

I won’t be alone with this, she’s saying. They’ll like me now.

She rushes toward me. I dangle the coat out to the side like a matador. She runs toward it, and I let go and leap out of the way as she comes crashing through the parka. Then with the coat in her hands, she says, “Thank you,” in a raspy voice.

I watch her at the register. "Have a nice day," Richard says, as he rings her up. She growls, then says, "You, too." I punch back in at the computer. Angela puts a hand on my shoulder. "Thanks," she says.

"Yup," I say, and then I go back to my section.

A herd of shoppers stops in front of the store. They see the PoleFace™ we have left. I climb on top of my cabin. The people stampede. Some bodies fall and get up. Some bodies fall and stay down. They scream and hiss and claw and moan. I grab my reach and watch the blood-messed humans with money in their wallets and the Friday Black in their brains run toward me.

I smile out at the crowd. "How can I help you today?"
They push and point in all directions.

THE LION & THE SPIDER

He yelled and jumped at us, making the long fingers of his left hand Lion's claws that viciously tickled our ribs. "One, two, three rabbit children all swallowed up in one bite," my father roared. We jumped and laughed and screamed. He shook the bed we, the children, shared. But watching way up above us was another character who hid in the fist of his right hand, which opened slowly. Anansi the spider appeared before us. "You silly cat," Anansi said before scurrying to the woods, across the mattress and our heads, his tiny legs quick-moving fingers. He disappeared into the bush searching for something special.

Graduation was two weeks away. My father: gone for months.

The day he'd left, my father had said, "I have some business I need to see to."

"And you're leaving today?" I'd said as evenly as possible. I had become a devotee to a religion of my own creation. Its most integral ritual was maintaining a precise calm especially when angry, when hurt, when terrified. People like my father,