

# Chapter 1

## Time To Take A Walk

*Winning requires knowing the rules of games not ruled by chance, and even then, luck plays a role. Aptitude is essential because, without it, some can't even comprehend the rules. However, knowing the rules isn't enough. Willingness and determination are indispensable, for without them, obstacles become insurmountable. There are those, though, born into wealth without aptitude, willingness, or determination who live quite comfortably in the game of life, while others, born into poverty with aptitude, willingness, and determination, walk a much more perilous road. But what of those without aptitude or who've had the willingness and determination stripped from their souls by the devious machinations of the unscrupulous—or, simply put, the greedy? What, if anything, do we owe them?*

— History of Material Values

Jimmy emerged from his home and, looking back, would come to recognize this as the morning after the first day of the rest of his life. And without a doubt, with absolute certainty, if one truth could be told and carved in stone like the faces on Mt. Rushmore, he was lost.

His thoughts were in peril from the second he woke up. Confusion reigned as the side of his face lay trapped against his pillow. Attempts to shake his head were physically successful but did nothing to bring clarity.

The dreams from the night before were just out of reach, and, truth be told, he wasn't certain as to the nature of his consciousness—whether or not he was still dreaming. He needed to get up and go to work, but something didn't register. He was befuddled but recognized that he was not cognizant of something extremely important. Clarity dawned ever so slowly, like the City fog dissipating as the sun performed one of its many tasks.

He was let go yesterday.

*What an odd phrase “let go” is, he thought. What can I hold on to? Where can I go?*

Fear replaced confusion; there was a gaping hole in his safety net.

It took less than a second for his psyche's alarm bell to work its voodoo. It became hard to breathe, his heart started racing, and suddenly, his entire body was covered in sweat as every single pore leaked his anxiety. Without looking, he reached out to his left, seeking the anchor that was his wife, Shelly, but he felt

nothing.

Rolling over and seeing that he was alone in his bed exacerbated his trepidation. Then, he smelled coffee and heard the sounds of cooking in the kitchen. He jumped out of bed, rushed to the bathroom, grabbed a towel, and dried himself off. Half walking, half staggering, he returned to the bedroom and donned a pair of sweats and an undershirt that were lying on the floor by the side of the bed.

Shelly was at the stove scrambling eggs when Jimmy entered the kitchen. He walked up behind her, wrapped her tightly in his arms, pressed his body against hers, kissed her neck, and whispered, “I love you,” in her ear. At that moment, nothing else mattered to him; he was not alone, and together, they would persevere.

Jimmy was not hungry, but he would not negate Shelly’s efforts. He sat at the kitchen table and was immediately joined by Janice, Bill, and Timmy, who were dressed and ready for school. In what could only be described as hogs at a trough, the children inhaled their breakfast, threw on their coats, picked up their lunch bags, kissed their parents goodbye, and were out the door without ever having uttered more than a mumbled word or two. There was a world to experience outside, and they didn’t want to miss a minute of it.

Shelly sat down, facing her husband at the breakfast table. She watched as he picked at his food and slowly sipped his coffee. His normal, voracious appetite seemed to be running at quarter speed. He sat in silence with his elbows on the table; unfocused eyes fixed on a plate he didn’t see.

“There’s no joy in Mudville,” he whispered to himself.

Shelly’s heart broke for all the pain that statement expressed. She needed to be there for him, to let him know that he was heard and that she understood.

She reached across the table and placed one hand atop one of his.

“You were tossing and turning quite a bit last night. Pleasant dreams, I assume,” she said with a half-smile he never saw.

Jimmy’s back prickled. His eyes left the plate to look at Shelly. Then he saw the look of concern on her face—concern for him, not for herself—and he realized her comment was meant to soothe him, not to convey her anxiety. He was not alone. This realization was food for his soul—not a banquet by any means, for he was incapable of seeing one even if it was spread out before him—but it was a piece of bread for a starving man, and he consumed what energy it provided.

“What time did you come to bed last night?” he asked. “I’m sorry if I kept you up.”

“Soon after you. I cleaned up a little and prayed to Grandma Jessie. She always has good advice. And

yes, you did, but I love you anyhow, and I forgive you.” Shelly smiled at that last part and reached out to take both his hands in hers.

“I don’t know what to do right now,” Jimmy said. “Christmas is coming, and I don’t want to spoil it. I’m at a loss.”

“Ah, as it turns out, Grandma Jessie would have a suggestion. You should take a nice long walk today and see what the world has to offer.”

Jimmy was caught off guard by this suggestion and didn’t see how it would help, but he decided to do it anyway.

It was early December. The deep blue sky above San Francisco was clear of clouds, and it was already in the mid-50s—nowhere near as bleak as Jimmy felt. He took a shower but didn’t shave. He barely had enough energy to towel off and get dressed. He pulled boxer shorts, an “I Love San Francisco” T-shirt, and an old pair of blue sweats out of his dresser and quietly put them on, followed by an old but comfortable pair of sneakers he had bought at Costco.

He stood up and conversed with the committee in his head. It wasn’t a debate so much as a numb inability to make a decision. December in the City can be T-shirt weather, and the thought of removing and carrying a coat during his walk was not appealing. He rummaged through his closet and came across a hooded sweatshirt emblazoned with the word “Rome” across the chest. He had borrowed it maybe 30 years earlier from his father but never returned it. His dad had made the purchase in Rome one chilly spring morning and made the mistake of wearing it in Naples a few weeks later. It was never a favorite after that.

Right at that moment, it screamed warmth and comfort, so Jimmy grabbed it, slipped it over his head—still damp from the shower—and walked out the door. He stood there on the sidewalk without a clue as to where he should go.

*Don’t should on yourself*—another Grandma Jessie gem that he heard Shelly whisper in his head—and with that thought, he turned his back to the Pacific Ocean, took one step, and then another. If he had been thinking, or if he had any awareness at the time, he might have realized that he had just started his journey of a thousand miles.

As his meandering began, with his head down and focused on nothing but what was directly under his nose, he saw a sidewalk mosaic composed of cracks, uneven surfaces, dirt and oil stains, smeared dog feces, and assorted garbage carried by the wind that had found a temporary resting place not far from his door. The realization that this was his neighborhood was not a pleasant thought. It was a middle-class district, formerly a run-down, ramshackle neighborhood that had been gentrified 40 years earlier. It was the City’s last refuge of affordable housing—now no longer within the reach of the average worker.

Jimmy was aghast. He forced his head up to look at his surroundings, and for the first time, he noticed

the soot-covered stucco and the peeling paint on the wood trim of many of the homes around him. His mind went to his own home and how he always put off the required maintenance. There never seemed to be enough money or time, with the 60-plus-hour work weeks and inflation dwindling away at his buying power. Over the last few years, he had even reduced his retirement contributions to make ends meet.

Reasons or excuses he couldn't sort them out. He picked up his pace and tried to keep his head up.

Uphill or downhill, nothing much changed. There was a bus so covered in grime and graffiti that the female face adorning the ad space was barely recognizable. *Was it always this way? Perhaps, but it had gotten worse. The City fathers claimed budget cuts were due to a lack of funds, but there was more money now than ever before. Where did it go?*

*Jimmy's anger reappeared. The nickel bus ride my father paid for now costs a buck. That's a big increase over one generation. The elected officials blame it on the cost of labor, but a bus driver used to be able to buy a home in the City and now can't afford one in the suburbs an hour and a half away. They blame it on the cost of fuel and insurance, and that's just another example of the rich slurping up every nickel and dime from the public trough. There's excuse after excuse with a vague relationship to the truth, but these are, in fact, lies of evasion.* And with every thought, his anger swelled.

The strife and grief that accompanied his strides that morning mushroomed through the cracks and shadows of this cityscape like a poisoned delicacy, and it made him want to vomit.

This wasn't the order and structure he expected from a bastion of affluence in the greatest country in the world. He had opinions on why it was so, but he knew he... really... didn't... know. And as his anger slipped into exhaustion, he withdrew. In this state, mentally and emotionally huddled in on himself, he continued on, one foot in front of the other, just barely more than heel to toe.

An odd thing happened, though in retrospect, not so odd and actually quite common. A change in perspective made it odd. He was making more progress than the cars. Traffic was inching along to the background noise of the occasional horn, the less occasional cursing driver, and the music of half a dozen different genres, with deep bass sounds blaring above all others.

At the intersection, he stopped at the red light. Nothing was moving. Cars filled every inch of the intersection, denying access to those with a green light. One car, hood up with steam spewing from its radiator, was abandoned. Whether it was stolen or just the result of someone's last straw was irrelevant. It just added to the mayhem. Those cars in the intersection were breaking the law, but the police couldn't get there to bring order.

The municipal law was clear: don't enter the intersection without room on the other side. However, this could not compete with the law of self-interest when there is competition for that space, and competition is directly proportional to the density of the traffic. The irony that competition added to the density was lost

on most drivers, and those who understood the relationship were rewarded with the sound of a horn and a curse or two or three. A cop on every corner? Perhaps, but then who would mind the store?

He shook his head in response to the paradox this thought evoked. We want to be safe and secure. The police have a duty to serve and protect. And yet, so many civilians view them with fear and trepidation as injustices—real and imagined—committed on both sides of the divide seem to increase exponentially. It's an enigma, he concluded, as his thoughts shifted.

*Traffic would move so much quicker if people weren't so impatient to get through to the other side,* his thoughts continued. *There is a lack of teamwork; it's just a bunch of individuals acting in what they think is their own best interest, getting nowhere fast. Without leadership, everything seems to stall. Where's a cop when you need one?* The irony of that last thought wasn't lost on him.

Jimmy was glad to be on his feet, which is currently a much easier mode of transportation, so he walked through the intersection, followed a path between bumpers, and continued on his journey. By now, there was a little bounce in his step as endorphins did their walk-induced magic.

A half-mile further, with his mind still on the congestion he had left behind, Jimmy experienced another new normal. It was the smell that broke through to his senses: body odor and human feces. Then, he realized what he had drifted into, where the wind, like the garbage in his street, had blown him to, so to speak. The homeless encampment seemed to go on for blocks. There were tents of assorted colors for the lucky, fortunate(?) ones, cardboard boxes for the less fortunate, a cardboard blanket for some, and for so many more, just a place on the pavement where they could sleep the day away in relative warmth because, without a box or tent, there was no sleeping at night.

He hadn't realized that his feet had taken him off the sidewalk and into the street, where he was safer and less likely to trip over an unconscious body. He looked out at a sea of faces that hosted an array of missing teeth, aged with wrinkles as if carved by waves that eroded the body as well as the soul, gradually dragging everything below the surface, leaving behind only a pittance of what existed before, rocks ground into sand.

There was a look of despair on most, anger on some, and predatory determination on a few, the alphas among the lowly. Grungy clothes and stringy, oily hair, covered in part by someone's old, discarded baseball cap, were not a fashion statement but a way of life. Eyes reflected little hope, and the yearning for the next meal, drink, or high was evident everywhere.

Jimmy had never really seen them before, not up close like this, without the protection of a locked door and a rolled-up window. Of course, he saw them at freeway exits—with their handheld signs claiming one entitlement or another. He had always concluded that the signs were marketing ploys. However, in the isolation of his car, he could always look the other way and pretend to change the radio station whatever he had to do to avoid eye contact. Now, he was confused.

*A lot of these people and he caught himself with a sense of discomfort at the words “these people” have mental issues and need institutional help. Others have abuse issues and need a way back. Some made a few mistakes and/or had a few bad breaks and just can’t find a way out. Then there are those few who prefer it this way and don’t want to be imprisoned by the system. But overall, how could we let this happen and let it get so out of hand? No one wants to live like this, other than the few who claim they prefer this life, not the vast majority of the people living here, the citizens of this community. The politicians, each and every one of them, express their empathy or disdain but never seem to act on their convictions, one way or another. This is the most affluent area in the most affluent state in the most affluent country in the history of the world. Why can’t we do better?*

He knew why, and yet he didn’t know well enough to stand up before a jury as an expert witness. The law, all too often, overrode common sense because the people who make the laws, or pay to have them made, maximize their affluence within a very tight range of the status quo. And doing better means making it better for them, certainly not for the 99% and no longer even for the majority. And common sense should make that a crime.

There was a sense of anger coupled with gloom in these thoughts until the fear kicked in, and yesterday’s nightmare reared its ugly head like an angry cobra spitting its venom. His sense of security was wiped away, as if the peeled paint, the grime-coated bus, the broken-down car, and a cardboard blanket were the images of his destiny. Jimmy ran all the way home, the thoughts of yesterday branded in his mind, forcing him to acknowledge a belief that he was less than—but that was not to be his story.

## Chapter 2

### Eighty-Five Years Later

*It was cold and damp in the cave. A fire at its mouth served more to keep predators out than to provide heat for any but the hovering. Nearby, a shaman ground charcoal, dried blood, and berries into a rolled piece of tree bark. Spit and animal fat were added to the mixture, which became the paint he used to inscribe the walls. The renderings were crude, but the tribe understood.*

*Every morning before seeking food and every night before sleep, the awe-inspiring images transfixed those who communed at the wall. There was power there—power to keep them fed and power to keep them safe.*

*As millennia came and went, temples with paintings that were more refined replaced the hovelled cutout. The cave mouth, once protected by fire, was now secured by heavy wooden doors, the fire giving way to candles and windows that cast prisms through stained glass. And the power of the wall became the power of God.*

*As temples outgrew the cave, the shaman fell unto the sage. Then, priests and holy men took a turn, holding great sway over other men's beliefs. And for many a believer, the intensity of their devotion could be measured in the volume of their hallelujahs.*

*While these chants take many forms, they all create a constant drone, reverberating through spaces large or small, open or closed.*

— The History of Transition

*Church bells ring symphonically during the spring equinox in celebration of All-Father Marno the Leveler, whose aspect, among others, is balance. The glory is first heard at the South Pole at the stroke of midnight. The harmonies follow the path of the rising sun along the prime meridian and then west as the world observes the birth of alignment, telling stories of the leveling and how it all began millennia ago. Many different gospels were preached along the way.*

— Sapiens Story - 53rd Edition

The broadcast booth was set up on an elevated stage at the north end of the 15,000-seat arena. Every seat was occupied by enthusiastic fans of all ages. The 2,500 fold-out chairs set up on the arena floor were filled with VIPs.

Three cameras focused on four panelists seated at an arc-shaped table placed at center stage. The seats were arranged so that all could see and communicate directly with each other without obstruction.

They were four very different people, similar only in accomplishments. Each had made their mark in the world—the essential pedigree for participation. Their success in the Philanthropic Games came with insights into the nuanced essentials necessary for good works to thrive. Their faces were prominently displayed on the front of corporate trading cards, with the most recent year and lifetime stats printed on the back. Above all, their comments and opinions made for lively and informative conversation— not always in agreement, but always astute and entertaining.

There was banter, mostly friendly, sometimes just polite. They shared insights into the largesse of the top donors, both individuals and corporations. They provided voice-overs for film clips of public works from around the world made possible with private philanthropic funds. And before the telecast was over, as part of the grand finale, there would be prognostications for the coming year, and the world watched in eagerness.

The telecast was about to begin. The lights gradually dimmed, and the noise of the crowd diminished with it. Over ten billion people around the world were watching. In every major city and in virtually every town and village, where all the inhabitants would gather around the only television set they possessed, they watched.

The arena lights dimmed three times, and then a disembodied voice boomed out across the arena speakers and the airwaves:

“Welcome to the Seventy-fifth celebration of Tax Reform Day and the induction of Jerome Miller, two-time recipient of the MVP McMurphy Award and this year’s sole inductee into the Philanthropic Hall of Fame.”

While billions around the world watched with rapt attention, millions of whom were direct beneficiaries of Jerome Miller’s endowments, the crowd in the arena exploded with cheer as everyone stood and repeated the chant:

“MVP! MVP! MVP!”

MVP, of course, being the Most Valued Philanthropist. The chanting became a frenzy, throats raw from continued cheer.

The proceedings were being telecast on a 30-by-50-foot high-definition screen set up outside the arena, where thousands of fans stood shoulder to shoulder in various stages of elation. All except for one man, who looked on with a body full of knots and a mind consumed by a whirlwind of hate and envy.

As the roar of the crowd began to melt away, the cameras focused on the face of the previously disembodied voice, then zoomed out to display a young man in his 40s, somewhere in the neighborhood of



six feet tall, with a head full of what appeared to be unruly curls but was actually meticulously well-groomed and determined. His face was accented by smile lines that reached his hazel eyes. That smile could light up a room, injecting all those around him with good cheer. His dress was elegant yet simple: a black worsted wool uncollared shirt beneath a gray herringbone wool sport coat, washed-out blue jeans, and a pair of penny loafers sans socks.

“Hello,” he boomed, drawing out the second syllable beyond the lung capacity of a virtuoso, serving as a cue and force to quiet the audience. “And welcome to our celebration. I am Cameron Smart,” though everyone called him Cammy, “and I have the privilege of being your host today.”

As one camera focused on the table situated at center stage, he continued, the telecast now displaying a split screen, his voice still a roar. “It’s my honor to introduce our four panelists today,” and then that well-practiced smile went on full display, “none of whom need an introduction.”

The telecast reoriented to focus solely on the center stage and gradually panned left, landing on the face of the only woman at the table. “Hall of Fame inductee and three-time MVP recipient, Helen Sanchez.” The sound from the crowd exploded.

Helen was currently serving as CEO of Child Care, Inc., one of many companies she had founded during her illustrious career. She was a model at the age of six months when she appeared in an ad for diapers. Some of her detractors snickered that this was her first topless appearance. While her face did not launch a thousand ships, her time served as a pin-up queen, perhaps princess would be more appropriate, had other launching effects. Her career blossomed. Print ads became video ads that led to movie roles and near-immediate stardom. A line of cosmetics, fragrances, and apparel soon followed.

And then came her crowning achievement: Child Care, Inc., an organization that had arguably done more to help children reach their full potential than any other ever. This qualified her for the Philanthropic Hall of Fame. She stood and gave a slight nod to the audience and the camera.

Anyone could do the math. It had been 66 years since that diaper ad appeared, and yet Helen was stunning and radiant. There was no cosmetic surgery; it was all in the genes, and most men loved to ogle at her while she was in a pair. The red silk dress she wore that night fit like a glove over a body that remained toned from her daily workouts. Her only accessories were a pair of pearl earrings and a pearl necklace that no one would call opulent. There was, of course, the ten-carat wedding ring. Everybody knew about that. Widowed for nearly five years now, she would remain forever married in her heart. She smiled and sat back down.

The camera panned to the right and focused on the face of a 60-year-old man who held the exuberance of a child in a candy shop.

There was no mistaking that image. It was round, in contrast to the 6-foot-2-inch frame, whose body fat

levels hadn't quite reached 10%. His close-cropped, kinky hair had moved beyond gray and served as a compliment to the ever-present brilliant white smile that dominated his clean-shaven, chocolate-colored face. The eyebrows above those dark brown eyes, which were scanning everything in front of him, could still be called gray. The broad nose, which, in his youth, supported a ring between both nostrils and made him look like the bull that he was, completed the picture.

This was the image that was projected on the overhead screens in the arena and on the outside jumbotron for everyone in attendance to see. And the crowd went wild the second that face appeared as if their God had come down from above to bless them.

Cammy's resonant voice once again boomed through the arena, "Hall of Fame inductee and four-time MVP, Max Greenwall."

Max had been a star athlete since midway through his first year of T-Ball. He was a natural, and he was fortunate to have coaches who instilled in him a work ethic that survived to this day. He was the only person in sports history to hold records in two professional sports. He was dominant tactically and physically throughout his storied career, and this earned him a plaque in the Hall of Fame for both of these sports.

He had founded an after-school program to get kids off the streets and to give them the gift he was so fortunate to receive—good coaching. These year-round programs transitioned from one sport to another as seasons came and went and now exist in every U.S. city and grammar school in the nation, public or private. He earned his third Hall of Fame induction as Chairman and CEO of Game Potential, Inc.

He stood and bowed as the crowd roared. His ear-to-ear smile was an automatic response to the good cheer he felt, and it never got old.

The camera once again panned right, and Cammy had to reach further into his chest to be heard above the roar of the crowd, "Hall of Famer and reigning MVP, Jonathan Thorogood."

Johnny was the youngest of the four. He was the second child of a career criminal. Through this bloodline, he had an older half-brother whom he hadn't seen in years. His mother suffered from multiple addictions and had given birth to two daughters by two different men prior to Johnny's birth. She was beaten to death on the streets when he was five. This coincided with the time his biological father was in prison.

Johnny became a ward of the state when he was young and nearly became a lost boy as he bounced around the foster care system. He was gifted with an IQ well above 160. He also had what appeared to be "an attitude," which was, in fact, a defense mechanism stemming from his fear of just about everything. He allowed no one in. He could take care of himself, and he never hesitated to let anyone know it.

Until the age of six, his instinct was to punch first and ask questions afterward. That this behavior bounced him from one foster home after another was not a deterrent.

There was a change when he was six. He was shuffled into a childcare program that Helen Sanchez had started two decades earlier and was given an opportunity to explore.

A spark was lit. He couldn't wait to leave school every day and attend the childcare program. He was issued his first patent at 12—a board game that made geometry simple to learn.

The patent that earned him his place in the Philanthropic Hall of Fame was for a machine that condensed and filtered the airborne water molecules that were the byproduct of hydrocarbon engines. Smog had been replaced by insufferable humidity. Anything humanity does on a global level will have some kind of negative impact, but therein lies opportunity.

Johnny gave that technology away for free to any country, municipality, town, or village that requested it. Drinking water became abundant everywhere; dust bowls became fertile. The negative impact of these gifts had yet to be realized, but no one had questioned the benefits.

This gawky young man, just barely out of his teens, stood, obviously embarrassed. A quick glance to his right met Helen's eyes, giving her a nod of gratitude that she acknowledged with a smile in return. They had met a few years earlier and developed a bond—hers around the need to matter and contribute, and his around stability and trust.

As quickly as the exchange occurred, the camera was already focusing on the last member of the panel.

“Hall of Famer, Samuel Hightower.”

The last syllable was drawn out for dramatic effect.

Mr. Hightower was born into privilege from wealth originally created in the late 19th century. His parents were the first generation to be affected by the inheritance revisions of the Tax Reform Act. Still, they had attended the best boarding schools and went to the best university that money could buy. Their friends from school, from the very start, were children of privilege whose parents sat on one board or another of this international corporation or that. These contacts alone gave them a foot in the door to success.

A child's birthday party was a virtual corporate event where CEOs watched these children grow up. Even though their eventual inheritance would be a pittance of the generational wealth that it would have been, they were assured a very comfortable lifestyle and enough income to send their children to the same “very best schools.” In this way, even though inheritance was limited, the social contacts were not, and Samuel Hightower certainly benefited from that.

There was a picture on the wall of his office taken a dozen or so years ago of him and a childhood friend, who was then the President of the United States, as they sat side by side on Air Force One. A score of other photos filled the wall, not the least of which was of a group attending a Jackson Hole Economic Symposium with him standing just behind the Federal Reserve Chairman while flanked by two fraternity brothers. He was extremely well-connected, very social to those from whom he could benefit, and formal to a fault to those of lesser value.

Mr. Hightower, as he insisted on being referred to, had a high level of intelligence and was very cunning. He quickly rose through the ranks of Entronic's Inc., which was a Fortune 500 company at the time of his arrival. During his tenure as CEO, it became the number one entertainment company in the world. Movies, television, music, theme parks, cruise ships, resorts, and casinos—if they provided entertainment, their hands had a chokehold around the profits. His salary, bonus structure, and dividends generated a ten-figure annual income.

Hightower resented that he had to give all but \$5 million of it away, either to the government in the form of income tax or to charities of his choosing. He had access to corporate housing and cars, planes, country club memberships, expensed lunches, dinners, and entertainment paid for by the corporation. Still, he wanted more, and the system closed every loophole as soon as they were discovered or created.

Still, he realized he was much better off than his siblings. None of them made the most of their opportunities. Each and every one of them was always looking for a handout until they received their \$5 million inheritance, the maximum the laws allowed. A generation from now, maybe two, and there would be nothing left for their descendants who would just become part of the huddled masses—except, perhaps, for one of his nieces. Maybe he would mentor her. He made a mental note.

His qualification for the Hall was not so much for what he did but for how much he gave over quite an extensive period of time. There was that and, to a lesser degree but still to be considered a factor, the good old boy network. Hightower didn't have many friends or admirers among the populace, and as he stood to acknowledge the crowd, the clapping was polite. Outside, one onlooker, with fists clenched, turned and walked away.

Helen was the first to speak. "Johnny," she said, "have you set a date yet?"

"I promise that you will be the first to know," he replied. "We are both so busy and drawn to our work that every time we think we have a date in mind, something comes up that requires our time and energy. But we are very committed and want to start a family."

Then, he took an opportunity to change the subject. "Have you been watching the documentaries these last two weeks?"

While the question was directed to Helen, it was Hightower who responded in his somewhat

condescending manner. “Of course, young man, ten billion people have been watching almost non-stop. I, personally, just can’t get enough of Jimmy Martino. He was, without a doubt, the smartest, the bravest, most reasonable man born in the last hundred years, if not longer.”

Actually, Hightower despised Jimmy Martino and everything that followed him. Martino was a disrupter, not just of the one percent but, by association, of everything that was decent and holy. However, appearances were important, and Hightower had political aspirations, of which his career path made him supremely qualified and well-situated.

Traditionally, there was a full two weeks of promotion leading up to the anniversary event. Promotion yielded viewers, more profits, and ultimately, more charitable contributions. Every network and news feed had a journalist in play for the last two weeks. Each major league philanthropist was bombarded with interview requests. Celebrities from every genre actors, athletes, and artists, most of whom were quite philanthropic in their own right, naturally were also relentlessly pursued.

Each night, the lead story of the evening news, whether local or national, would recap the day’s events. Broadcast time was devoted to at least one interview. Interviews could be found on the sports and entertainment networks at almost any time of the day or night. There was never a shortage of documentaries. While the interpretation of the events might vary depending on the perspective of any given journalist, the facts were never in question.

However, inevitably, for any given reporter, editor, or producer, some facts were more important, or at least more heavily focused on, than others. This generated enlivened and exciting debate between well-informed enthusiasts who watched every documentary with a discerning mind to sift fact from interpretation or, heaven forbid, fact from unadulterated bias. The most popular documentaries told the story of the revolt.

The story of how it began was undisputed. The events, the sparks that ignited a wildfire, were lessons that filled children’s books. However, the perfect storm that unfolded over a very short period of time was less specific.

There was no doubt that the smoldering began a decade before Tax Reform Day, but the planning that lay in wait was another story. Year after year, the most viewed show was a docudrama about the life and times of Jimmy Martino. But there was so much more to the story.

## Chapter 3

# Jimmy And Shelly Martino

*What makes a person great? Is it character? Is it an opportunity? If opportunity, must it be created, or can it just be seized? What of achievements made by a few over a lifetime of work, like a poet or an artist? Does greatness require overcoming considerable and substantial obstacles? Can we trust examples of greatness described throughout history since hyperbole is the subtlety of the winning side? Caesar, after all, is still held in high esteem. And what about those who made one person's greatness achievable?*

— The History of Transition

Jimmy Martino was, by all accounts, a person to be trusted. A mid-level manager, he was usually the first to work and generally the last to leave. He earned an MBA. His three children received his undivided attention every night. He was an assistant Little League soccer and baseball coach, a loving and devoted husband, and still found time to help a friend in need. His car was a clunker, but the family SUV was a late-model domestic that was not fiscally prudent. It was purchased with the intention of protecting the family.

Shelly Johnson fell in love the second she laid eyes on Jimmy during her freshman year at university. The memory still conjured up a smile. He was in the library, his go-to place when not in class, and was oblivious to everything except the book under his nose. She watched and waited. He never looked up.

*I could sit here all day and never catch his eye, she thought. Oh, I wish I knew how to flirt. Stop diddling, girl, and do something.*

That last thought was Grandma Jessie, always in her mind at a time of need. She left her chair on the far side of the room and sat down opposite him. He still didn't look up. She cleared her throat. Nothing.

More thoughts: *The decision to ignore the fragrance Mom gave me was a mistake. I'll never use non-scented soap again. Just sit here and read Shell, and an opportunity will arise.*

It didn't, and the start of her next class was fast approaching. Thoughts and feelings raced through her mind as her heart conflicted with her duty to her commitments. Dr. Moorehouse scorned tardiness. She worried this opportunity might never come again, then determined she would haunt the library for as long

as it took to see him again. Time raced by, and her sense of duty prevailed with less than a minute to go.

She got up to leave, turned around for one last look, and saw her heartthrob get up from his chair. She plotted, determined to initiate contact. It was a clumsy endeavor. She entered his space at the precise moment he turned to leave, and they collided. The dropped book was an obvious ploy, one might call it the action of an amateur, which it was. Jimmy, usually incapable of discerning the subtleties of the interpersonal, wasn't fooled, and at that moment, she felt like an idiot, her embarrassment self-evident.

Shelly's face blushed under her mocha-toned skin as she stammered her apologies and, totally mortified, picked her book up in a rush to run away.

In the space of a heartbeat, Jimmy had a multitude of reactions. His pulse quickened, and yet his legs felt weak. His thoughts came in a flurry. *She's gorgeous. Obviously vulnerable. A damsel in distress. Do something, say something!* He thought.

The only word his befuddled mind could conjure up was "wait," which he managed to croak out as he gently reached for her arm. She turned, head bowed, unable to meet his eyes. In an uncharacteristic display of bravado and chivalry, he gently cupped her chin with the side of his right index finger and lifted her head until their eyes met and locked on each other.

And a sense of peace and comfort enveloped them both.

"Please don't go," he said, in a voice neither pleading nor unsure.

"Would you join me for a cup of coffee?"

Shelly was never so sure of anything in her life as she was at that moment about what to say or what the future held. Without hesitation, she agreed.

They both missed class for the rest of the day as they explored the world of their mutual interests and desires. For the next four years, they were inseparable. Marriage came the summer after her graduation.

Jimmy and Shelly both wanted to pursue careers, buy a house in the city, and eventually have children. It was a five-year plan. Three years later, Janice was born. Fortunately, they had saved enough to put a down payment on a three-bedroom house in an area of the city that had been gentrified a generation earlier. The house was smaller than they had hoped, but the schools were excellent, and it was, all things considered, a happy decision. Four years later, they were a family of five.

During the last pregnancy, Jimmy and Shelly discussed at length their best course moving forward. Shelly loved her career and was well paid, if not quite as well as Jimmy. There were two ceilings women of color had to contend with. The numbers were crunched, the emotional needs of every family member were taken into account, and the decision was made. This time, it differed from the one made during the

first two pregnancies.

Shelly would manage the home. Money would be a little tight, but ultimately, that just meant the boys would have to share a room until their dream of building out the attic or basement could be met. They would camp during summer vacations, forgoing the all-inclusive trips, and the weekly date night out would become a monthly tradition. Sharing a bowl of popcorn and streaming a movie would otherwise suffice. It even sounded romantic, they agreed, with a touch of self-effacing humor.

There was contentment, even optimism, with this decision. After all, Jimmy's great-grandmother was a stay-at-home mom without modern conveniences, and his grandparents were even able to afford a summer home.

For the events that were to come, Jimmy Martino got most of the credit. He was, after all, the face, the public figure, the one who spoke up. However, if Jimmy was the face, Shelly was the backbone. When he needed support and courage, she was there. She was his reality check, and at times though they lovingly joked about the definition of "at times" she was the voice of reason.

This particular docudrama started with Jimmy and Shelly sitting at their kitchen table after the children had gone to bed. Shelly tried to console him as he sat there with his head in his hands, trying to understand the events of the day. He should have seen it coming and been more prepared. He believed in his heart that he needed to be strong, keep his fear from showing, and reassure Shelly that all would be okay. However, he was losing that battle. Instead, it was Shelly who showed strength and was reassuring.

He was talking as much to himself as to Shelly, trying to create a spin that didn't hurt so much.

"They were counting on foreign investors who, without notice, just pulled out, like taking candy from a baby. John," the general manager of their division, "said they had been working for months trying to find new investors, but all foreign capital had dried up, and with the economy being what it is, there was no domestic source to cover the balance. Apparently, the board kept this close to the vest, and then, out of nowhere, the bomb was dropped."

Shelly listened patiently as she let Jimmy get it out of his system.

"I watched as half the staff was let go, feeling sick about it, and then, boom, it was my turn. I was told it was me or Tom Whitstaff, a cousin of someone in corporate. Didn't matter that I had eight years of seniority. It was so matter-of-fact. John seemed embarrassed as he stammered, 'Blood is thicker than water, you know.' It could have been a comment about the weather."

Shelly stood up from her chair, walked around the table, and stopped behind Jimmy. With a hand on each shoulder, she gently kneaded the knotted muscles. It didn't take an expert to feel the tension.

After a few minutes, she grabbed his hand and guided him away from the table to the living room



sofa. They sat together as she wrapped her arms around him and placed her head on his shoulder.

“We will get through this,” she said. “Things will be okay they always have been and will continue to be. This will be nothing more than a minor setback. We are not victims, and you have never behaved like one. It’s one of the many reasons why I love you. Tonight, we should just relax. Things will look different in the morning, and then we can plan.”

As Jimmy slept that night, he dreamt about the life and times of those who came before.

## Chapter 4

# I Want To Live In America

*Every morning, awakening from a shivering sleep, the struggle for food began. Some would hunt, and some would gather. Necessity was the force. At day's end, the spoils were divided—the strong and favored first and most, the weakest taking what was left. But the weak persevered, and some became strong or favored. Hope was that force.*

— Sapiens Story - 53rd Edition

Four generations earlier, Francesca and Giuseppe Martino arrived at Ellis Island from the old country. Not much is known of them, little more than bullet points. Their parents were neighbors in the village of their births and, as was customary, arranged the marriage. Both children had just turned thirteen. There would be one less mouth to feed when Francesca left, and Giuseppe, now old enough to make his own way, was apprenticed to a blacksmith in a nearby village. The blacksmith was abusive. If mistakes were made, Giuseppe came home bruised. He didn't complain; penance was a way of life. Francesca took in the wash, and they saved what little they could.

They were young but pragmatic, and they believed that having a mentality of victims was a choice they would not make. In this, they found mutual respect and freely gave each other comfort as they faced their world together.

It wasn't long before Francesca was with child, and they wanted more than the squalor they were forced into. Giuseppe reached out to a cousin who had immigrated to America. A few months later, he received a response along with enough money to buy passage for the two of them. It was a loan, and they would have to pay it back, but there would be a job for him and a place for them to stay. So, with an incredible yet naïve belief that the streets of America were paved with gold, and with Francesca more than halfway through her second trimester, they left for America. This held out the promise and gave them hope.

Giuseppe, always the optimist, thought the voyage would take forty, maybe forty-five, days. It was much closer to seventy. The sun rarely pierced the ocean's cloudy veil, and the winds were more unfavorable than not. They were cramped into quarters with just barely enough space for the two of them. Food was scarce and almost non-existent for the last three days. He gave it all to Francesca. Still, Giuseppe

knew in his heart that they would survive this ordeal. A wonderful life awaited them in the land of opportunity.

Ellis Island was a nightmare. They were separated, examined, quarantined, and essentially ignored by officials who processed them like vermin abandoning ship. In the weeks that followed, Giuseppe got a glimpse of what the future held, but the lesson was lost on his good-natured spirit. He clung to the belief that the streets were lined with gold to be mined with determination and hard work.

While in quarantine, Francesca gave birth to Paolo. He was the first of nine to come. Paolo was immediately taken into the care of the hospital staff. It had been a difficult passage across the Atlantic and through the birth canal. When Francesca and Giuseppe were finally reunited, Paolo was nowhere to be seen. No one seemed to know where he was, and there appeared to be some confusion as to whether there really was a baby.

Their protests were ignored at first and then summarily dismissed as a con worthy of immediate deportation. They weren't sure if the escort off the island was taking them to America or back to Italy. As fate would have it, the barge took them to New Jersey, where they met his cousin. Frantic and helpless, it was with great despair that the story unfolded.

Fortunately, there was a man of influence in Hoboken who was willing to do the Martinos a favor. Less than twenty-four hours later, Paolo was snuggled in his mother's arms. There was never an explanation provided or an excuse given for the "mishap," but they did not question their good fortune.

Their apartment had two rooms. The kitchen came with a wood-burning stove, a table with two chairs, and an icebox. The other room, a bedroom, came with an old musty mattress. The running water was cold, but this was not new or different. This was paradise after the ordeal of the last few months. A neighbor lent them a cradle for little Paolo. They were content, more than content, they were happy.

Giuseppe's apprenticeship as a blacksmith opened the door to a job as an ironworker in a shop a short walk from the apartment. The starting pay was minimal, but he was willing to learn and work hard. But, and there was always a "but" lately, there was never enough money to cover food, rent, and repayment of the loan.

The streets were looking tarnished. His cousin was understanding, but Giuseppe kept falling deeper into debt because, more often than not, he couldn't even cover the interest. His cousin was a reasonable man, however. Giuseppe could earn a little extra—enough to make the loan payments and to put a little something aside—if he would run a few errands in the evenings. This would also make the man of influence happy.

Giuseppe and Francesca reluctantly agreed. She was afraid something terrible would happen, forcing them back to the old country, or worse, Giuseppe would get hurt or, worse yet, killed. However, life became

more comfortable over the course of the next three years. A year earlier, they moved into a larger apartment with a living room and a second bedroom for the children. The loan was paid off. There was even a little nest egg put aside.

However, the nagging fear never left Francesca's mind, and during the course of those three years, she lived with it for almost every moment of every day. Then, when Francesca was pregnant with child number three, she found a way out.

There was no discussion, debate, give and take, or compromise. Francesca was in nesting mode. They were moving to San Francisco, and that was that. Her younger sister and brother-in-law had immigrated a year earlier and were doing well in San Francisco; they would put them up for a month or two. Giuseppe would learn to fish. Their savings would cover the cross-country train trip. Perhaps there would be enough left over to buy a small boat.

Three days later, they were gone, leaving without notice and abandoning everything they had except for their prized possession—the carpet that decorated the living room floor. This was a parting gift to the neighbor who had lent them the cradle.

Pietro, their fifth son and the last of their nine children, was born fifteen years later. To them, he was always Pietro. They held onto the old ways, speaking their native tongue in the house and almost always in the neighborhood. He preferred to call himself Pete and was sure to correct his teachers on the first day of school. His siblings behaved accordingly; they were all Americans now, bilingual perhaps, and devout to their mother's cooking, if not so much to her religion, but they had a need to fit in.

Pete was a curly-haired, good-natured boy a trait he inherited from his father with an award-winning smile that girls found attractive from the time he was in grammar school. He had an olive complexion, darkened by the sun, and with an ultimate height of five foot seven, was the tallest by far of all his family members. He was a good athlete and participated in sports year-round until he was thirteen. That's when he got his first job at the fish market, where his father sold the daily catch. Fishing put food on the table, but a little extra money was always welcome.

City Shellfish occupied a two-story building that was less than thirty feet wide, located halfway between Aquatic Park and the tourist section of Fisherman's Wharf. The company motto was an oxymoron: ***"Take your time, but hurry up."***

It was in this environment that his work ethic developed. Every day after school, he would ride his bike to work, where he would spend the next two hours restacking the freezers and washing the concrete floors. For most men, it was a two-and-a-half-hour job, but his employers wanted it done in two, and Pete made it happen. Appreciation was never expressed beyond a "See you tomorrow" at the end of the day.

During the summer and winter breaks, Pete worked full-time, from six in the morning until three-

thirty in the afternoon. He learned to filet fish, put up orders, load trucks, and make boxes. There was always something more to do, and Pete was always willing to do it.

He was allowed to keep ten percent of what he earned; the rest went to the family. This was his obligation, the same as his brothers. His sisters helped with the chores and babysat at every opportunity. There weren't many opportunities, but every penny counted.

The Depression was taking its toll. The streets were lined, not with gold, but with people waiting at the soup kitchen. However, the entire Martino family was grateful for what they had. There was always food on their table. Francesca tended a vegetable garden in the backyard of their flat. She preserved enough tomatoes to make the daily gravy when tomatoes were out of season. A fish or two from the daily catch went to the produce market to supplement the home garden vegetables and provide fresh fruit.

Pete attended school, got good grades, and continued his education at the local community college. In the middle of his sophomore year, Japan attacked Pearl Harbor. The next day, he, along with three of his brothers, enlisted in the army.

Two brothers didn't come home alive. Another was shot in the leg, the limp a constant reminder for the rest of his life. Pete, also in the infantry, lived through the Battle of the Bulge and cried the day the war was over. He returned home to parents who lost more than their children—their zest, their youthful perspective, their spirit—it was all gone.

The war had taken its toll, as did the treatment of their other children who were rounded up, and detained, and their loyalty questioned. Unlike the Japanese Americans who were subjected to this same treatment, his brothers and sisters were released after twenty-four hours, but the streets started looking more like weathered brass.

Within weeks of his return, both parents passed away, grief taking two more victims. Giuseppe passed first, just faded away, and Francesca joined him three days later.

A cloud hung over Pete while sitting in silence at the funeral parlor, head hanging from his shoulders, vacant eyes gazed unfocused at the floor. The conversations that permeated the empty space were nothing more than background noise, an unceasing drone. No tears escaped his emptiness, and the joys one would expect from life in the years to come were forever subdued.

The next day, Pete went to work as a truck driver delivering meat for a local wholesale butcher. Life must go on, a lamentation, not an act of resilience. His cousin Charlie, the business agent for the local Teamsters union, had secured him this union job.

Charlie was a good old boy who seemed to know everyone and had a way around everything, a local

lad who now wore a suit to work and chain-smoked cigars. Many called him dapper, with his hair combed straight back and tight to his scalp and the pencil-thin mustache he sported. He was definitely about the show.

His wife, Beatrice, couldn't stand the smell of cigar smoke and generally exiled him to their built-out basement that he called his den. This was where he would entertain his friends, associates, and those who required a little back-slapping. Receiving an invitation was a badge of honor.

The room sported a wet bar and a pool table. The radio was tuned to a station that played nothing but big band sounds. When the entertainment went beyond cigar smoke and pool, the get-togethers relocated to a private club Charlie owned in partnership. Many things have changed over the years, but the one thing that has never gone away is the cigar smoke.

Every morning, Charlie got into his Cadillac to "visit", his euphemism for inspecting, the area employers who were signatories to the union. He would shake hands, make small talk with the owners, inquire about their wives and children, and ask how everything was going, all the while scanning the area for non-union employees. He always turned a blind eye to one or two kids who were brought on as part-time workers as long as the part-time job didn't take away from a full-time union job. The owners were openly friendly and always made sure Charlie left with the fruits of their trade. Charlie made it a rule to visit "the perishables" late in the day, but he never took too much. He was political by nature, after all, and would need their support when he threw his hat into the ring.

Pete started driving a ten-foot refrigerated box truck used for local deliveries. However, driving big rigs provided the best pay, and within a year, Pete had a Class A license and a job hauling meat from the slaughterhouse to the wholesaler. Also, during this year, Pete married Rosie, a girl from the neighborhood. His best friend, Michael, was her brother.

Pete and Rosie were in the same classroom throughout grammar school and shared many of the same classes in junior high and high school. They were always friendly, and for a brief time in the sixth grade, they called themselves boyfriend and girlfriend. He even bought her a little heart-shaped necklace as a present for sixth-grade graduation. That relationship didn't last through the summer, but their friendship never wavered.

Pete and Rosie reconnected at a neighborhood social held at the local Lions Club—a crab feed to raise money to buy baseball caps for the ten- and eleven-year-olds who played at the neighborhood park. Gloves and spikes were also provided for those in need. The two of them were immediately back in the sixth grade, holding hands and smiling at each other.

Rosie was cute, but Pete was thunderstruck when he saw her, and at that moment, she was beautiful: five foot two, slender, with a complexion-free face sporting high cheekbones and wavy brown hair that extended past her shoulders. Simply put, she was stunning. She wore little makeup. When their eyes met

for the first time that evening, her smile was a beacon that let Pete know she also felt a spark.

Although they had crossed paths since return, she had even attended his parents' funeral, something happened that night. It happened to both of them, and it was simultaneous. Six weeks later, they were married. Michael was his best man. Pete was as happy as his past allowed him to be.

Ten months later, Anthony was born. The last six weeks proved to be a difficult pregnancy, and Dr. Celestri ordered bed rest for the duration.

The doctor was born in the neighborhood, but his parents moved to the suburbs when he was a toddler. Twenty-four years later, he returned to the city to establish a practice and had been in the same office, around the corner from the Martinos, ever since. Now, in his early 40s, he had developed a little paunch but had the face of someone twenty years younger. The full head of dark brown, slightly yet perpetually disheveled hair contributed to the illusion. He stopped by the flat every other day to check in on her.

Rosie, living just around the corner, was usually his first stop on his daily rounds of house calls made throughout the neighborhood. Her delivery, following over thirty hours of labor, was without incident, and Dr. Celestri achieved sainthood forever after.

Pete worked overtime whenever the opportunity arose, hoping to save enough to buy a home while they raised a family. Rosie got up with Pete every morning and made him breakfast while he got ready for work. During the day, she doted on Anthony, taking him to the beach, the park, or the duck pond. She would take off her shoes at the beach, letting the dry sand run between her toes. She sat with other mothers at the park while their children moved from swings to monkey bars to slides.

She would stop at the bakery along the way to the duck pond and pick up the free, stale French bread the ducks seemed to love. She prepared the evening dinner while Anthony took an afternoon nap and kept it warm in the oven until Pete came home from work.

She was never sure when he would make it home because overtime was random, but this was accepted. It worked. They were committed to their goals. Rosie cleared the table, did the dishes, and then made Pete's lunch for the next day. Pete would take this opportunity to spend time with his son.

Shortly after, it would be bedtime for Anthony. Rosie would put him to bed, tuck him in, and give him a kiss. Without fail, Anthony would call for his dad to read him a story, and every night, he would fall asleep to the soothing words of his father. This was their routine.

The rest of the evening was more of the same catching up on the day's events, maybe playing cards or a board game, or just reading a book before they retired to their full-sized bed, where they more often than not fell asleep in each other's arms.

Saturday night was date night, something they looked forward to all week. They loved the movies.

Rosie preferred musicals loving Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers while Pete favored dramas. He thought Alfred Hitchcock was a genius. Neither would ever miss a chance to see a comedy. But it was the Westerns, where heroes were good guys who won because decency and justice always prevailed, that touched their souls. This was the stuff that made them feel good and filled them with moral authority.

At least once a month, they would invite friends for dinner or accept an invitation out. On special occasions, they would dine at a restaurant.

Big changes occurred in their lives when Anthony was four years old. He was going to be a big brother, and they were moving into a new home they bought. Yet, the change that would have the most profound impact on Anthony's life was the purchase of a television set. It had a 17-inch screen and sat on an end table against the living room wall in their new house. It could receive twelve channels, even though there were only three broadcast networks available.

The house had three bedrooms and two bathrooms, a must, Rosie said, for a home to support a large and growing family, an L-shaped living room, dining room, and a kitchen large enough to accommodate a table for six. Most importantly, for Rosie, anyway, was the full garage under the house, large enough for four cars.

One car would no longer suffice. Rosie insisted they needed a second car. After all, Dr. Celestri was now going to be more than a mile away. Money would be tight, but Pete was counting on the overtime.

Even with the second car, there was plenty of room in the back half of the garage to add more living space. Rosie dreamt of a large room with a full kitchen and family area where the children could play and make "kiddy messes." That way, upstairs would always be neat and tidy for company.

It wasn't a life like Frank Sinatra's, who, even though he was in the 91% tax bracket, lived like a king and could, and did, fly to Europe for dinner on a whim. However, they were grateful and happy for what they had, and the future held out hope.

It was wintertime and dark the day the TV was delivered. Anthony had heard about TV from a playmate and watched with rapt attention as his father rearranged the furniture, moved an end table against the wall, and placed the television on top of it. Next, the antenna was attached and placed on top of the TV.

Everyone stood by as Pete plugged it in. Anthony couldn't wait to watch *Howdy Doody* and *Kukla, Fran, and Ollie*. He had thought of nothing else all day. He watched with eager anticipation as his father finally turned the television on.

Nothing happened. The screen remained dark. His heart sank.

Then, there was a noise he had never heard before. The sound, he would later learn, had a name: it was called static. Finally, the screen lit up, but it looked like large pieces of salt and pepper were all mixed



up.

His dad turned a knob with a thud-like click, and an image appeared, but Anthony couldn't tell what it was. It was like looking out the kitchen window through sheer curtains. Then, there was a sound a man's voice and his parents started to laugh.

His dad adjusted the antenna, moving it around the top of the TV. Suddenly, Anthony saw a man in a suit standing up and talking. He watched and listened while his parents continued to laugh. He didn't get it. He wanted *Howdy Doody* and started to cry.

Rosie picked him up and held him on her lap as both Mom and Dad told him to hush. They didn't want to miss a sound. In so many ways, things would never be the same.

For the next two years, Anthony had thoughts about two things: when he could leave the house in the morning to play with his friends and what was on TV that day. He didn't know it yet, or at least he didn't identify as such, but he was a boomer, which, at the time, meant that there were a lot of kids living within a two-block radius.

At first, Rosie was hesitant to let him go outside without her, but after ten minutes of listening to Anthony cry at the door, she caved. He had shed no tears, so there was nothing to wipe away.

*That was easy*, he thought as he ran from the house.

The adjacent block consisted of homes, flats, and small apartment buildings that framed the perimeter of the block. Driveways on three of the streets provided access to the center of the block, where there was parking for the apartment dwellers.

The homes and the flats all sat above street-level garages. The parking area was a great place to play. Not all of it was paved, so there was a place to dig and look for worms and bugs. A wet piece of cardboard left overnight provided a treasure trove of creepy crawly things.

Backyard fences provided access to the carport roofs—a great place when playing hide and seek or just plain ditch. The fences were all just high enough for Anthony to stand on, and with the support of the carport wall, grab the roof edge and pulled himself up. Every flat had a door on the street level that led to the backyard. These doors were locked on the outside but not on the inside.

From the center of the block, it was a quick hop over a fence, down the tunnel-like enclosure under the first-floor flat and between the garage and the adjoining structure—all housings were built wall to wall for earthquake support—and he would find himself on the sidewalk, safe, at least temporarily, in a game of ditch. It also made the walk home for lunch much more direct. One such exit was directly across the street from his house. He always looked both ways when crossing the street, especially in the middle of the block, but it really didn't matter. Cars drove slowly and would always stop. It wasn't even a question, not even on

a busy street with faster-moving vehicles.

This was life in San Francisco in the 50s.

At noon, everybody disappeared for lunch and was back a half hour later. At five o'clock, everyone went home, most to watch the Mickey Mouse Club. Anthony was in love with Annette but thought Karen was cute, too. At night, he would watch TV with his parents. *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* and *Father Knows Best* were his favorites. Television was having an impact on a generation of children, instilling in them a value system of warmth and kindness that would carry them throughout the years to come. Doing the "right thing" was the ultimate value. Television preached morality and taught values.

In the summer of his seventh year, Anthony became Tony. There was a large park four blocks away, across a major thoroughfare that was part of Highway 101, providing access to the Golden Gate Bridge, and a second commercial street that, running parallel to the thoroughfare, supported city buses. At first, Rosie objected—she didn't like it—but there were stop lights on the thoroughfare and stop signs along the bus route. Anthony was seven, after all.

So, he and his friend Jeff, butterfly nets in hand, went to the park for his first parentless adventure so far from home. They went every day for a week, playing in the bushes, catching butterflies, and putting them in jars for Jeff to take home and mount. At the end of the week, things changed.

Anthony wasn't that interested in catching butterflies, but he liked going to the park. He saw kids playing baseball, and he wanted to play, too. He knew something about baseball. He had gone with his dad to watch the San Francisco Seals play a couple of times, and he thought it would be more fun than chasing butterflies.

There was a man named Joe—one of three park directors who coached the kids. Joe saw him watching and asked if he wanted to play. Anthony was a little scared but nodded yes and was sent to the outfield without a glove.

It wasn't long before a ball was hit in his direction. Anthony chased it down and threw it as far as he could to someone close by. He was thrilled. All of the kids were pretty friendly.

At the end of the game, Joe asked Anthony what his name was. In response to his answer, Joe said, "You looked pretty good out there today, Tony. Come back anytime."

Anthony went home alone later that afternoon. Jeff had left earlier in the day, tired of waiting around.

At dinner that evening, Anthony told his parents about his day—the ball he chased down, his two times at bat when he swung and missed every pitch, and about the other kids shouting encouragement. He also asked his parents to call him Tony.

Pete smiled, ruffled his son's hair, and, remembering his own "name crisis," thought that the apple didn't fall far from the tree. His answer was simple and direct, "You bet, son."

Later that night, down in the basement, Pete found his old baseball glove and yelled out for Tony to join him downstairs.

# Chapter 5

## Those That Were Dragged

*Greed comes in a variety of forms and can be found everywhere. Just look under a rock or in a penthouse. It's like the many-headed Hydra: cut one off, and two more grow. But one thing is certain—greed could not be actualized without the ability to overpower.*

— Sapiens Story - 53rd Edition

Shelly did not fall asleep immediately that night, or so the story says. She lay flat on her back while Jimmy was dreaming, her eyes fixed on a tiny hairline crack in the ceiling just barely visible in the light of the full moon that filtered through the curtains. Her thoughts were on the events of her family history, and she prayed to her grandmother for guidance and strength.

The story she grew up with started sometime after the brutal kidnappings that brought her family tree to the hostile shores of America.

What she knew about that saga, she had learned on the knee of Grandma Jessie. The feelings of anger and outrage drawn from the published accounts and verbal histories from her childhood community were always present to one degree or another. Yet, she was grateful for the life she had with her family.

America assaulted all people of color, but her family story was less so, as far away from 100 as 99. That story began in the early 18th century as slaves on the Hammon Plantation of Virginia, located just south of the Maryland border at a point closest to Pennsylvania. Hanna and Henry were fifth and seventh-generation slaves, respectively. Although never formally married, they “produced” a dozen children.

Both were literate so she could properly contribute to the running of the household, and Henry so he could effectively run errands in town. Three of their children, all female, survived into adulthood. Eight took ill during the frozen winter of 1779 and slowly, one by one succumbed to the bleakness that followed over the next four months. However, it was the murder of their oldest boy that set them on their path north.

He ran away, was captured, punished, and returned to the fields scarred, but his strength would return in time. In the months that followed, he detailed to his parents the path he took and where things went wrong. Most important was what he would do differently next time.

His second flight to freedom lasted only one day longer than the first, and this time, upon his return, he was sold to a neighbor for a bushel of apples. He was picked up, not delivered. When confronted by his new owner, the young man spat in his face. He never got up from the whip of the cane that struck his head with the speed of a venomous snake.

That night, Hanna and Henry grabbed their daughters and initiated the plan they had whispered about for years. They headed north with the information their son had died for. They were across the border into Pennsylvania before the sun rose in the morning.

Just over a month earlier, the Pennsylvania General Assembly passed the Gradual Abolition Act of 1780, and Philadelphia boasted of a school for free Black children. The 180-mile journey to Philadelphia was harsh, but on the fourth day, they reached a farm owned by Samuel Peters, a free Black man. He listened to their story and offered food, shelter, a chance to recuperate, and a map to other farms along the way that would lend support. Most important was a letter of introduction to a Black leader in Philadelphia that would help them get settled.

The journey to Philadelphia took five weeks, traveling from farm to farm, where they were provided rest and provisions to see them on their way. At night, in between sanctuaries, protected by the oak and hickory tree-laden forests of southern Pennsylvania, they huddled together, sharing body heat for warmth. A fire was out of the question.

Along the way, Henry took ill, an illness that lingered through the spring and into the summer months when he passed. With his wife and children at his bedside, he expressed his gratitude for dying a free man before a coughing fit took his life.

Hanna took a position as a teacher at the school her daughters would attend, which provided living quarters and a stipend that covered food and a little more for the frugal.

Hanna lived the rest of her life in Philadelphia, as did each succeeding generation through the early 20th century. She was the first in a long line of educators, but it was Shelly's great-grandmother, Julia Jackson, who set the bar with a Ph.D. in political science from Howard University and became a tenured professor there.

Julia looked frail, bone-thin from head to toe, prematurely gray, and stood nearly five foot two. However, she had the heart of a lioness and the will of a champion. She was a student favorite; her office was always crammed with eager bodies there to participate or just listen to the philosophical debates that ensued. In the 1950s, those discussions became less philosophical and more practical as the racial tensions in the country became less and less tenable.

On September 2, 1945, Julia gave birth to a daughter, Jessica Hanna Jackson. Jessica's birth father was a traveling professor whose post at Howard ended in June and was somewhere out west at the time of her birth. He was dashing and incredibly intelligent, a sweet talker and a smooth operator. It was said he could charm the binding off of a book, and he used that charm indiscriminately. Julia was not the first, nor would she be the last.

So, it was that Jessica became part of academia from the outset of her being. Students would take

turns holding her in their laps while the office discourse ensued. Before she was able to speak in sentences, she had an understanding of what was being said. By four, she was forming her own opinions.

On December 1, 1955, Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a Montgomery bus. The next day, Julia, with Jessica and two of her male graduate students in tow, borrowed a car and began the 800-mile drive from Washington, D.C., to Montgomery, Alabama. They drove straight through, trading driving duty every four to six hours and stopping only for gas. Restroom breaks occurred in the woods, off the side of the road.

The trip took 20 hours, and on December 3, Julia and Jessica walked into the office of the Women's Political Council, a group of Black women devoted to civil rights, and volunteered their services. Pamphlets were distributed announcing a boycott to begin on December 5, and 40,000 Black bus riders participated in the boycott. On that same day, Martin Luther King Jr. was elected president of the Montgomery Improvement Association, and the boycott continued.

Jessica, although only ten years old at the time, understood what was happening, even the subtle nuances, and was charged with a sense of moral authority that would shape her life forever.

Jessica graduated high school at seventeen and was accepted into Howard University. When not in class or the library, she spent most of her free time in her mother's office, thrilled to be back in that room of fond memories.

One day, in 1963, a copy of the Birmingham Manifesto came across her mother's desk, placed there by Jamie Cars, a graduate student and devout proponent of civil rights. Julia, not prone to premonitions, saw in him a future of greatness and profound notoriety.

Jessica had met him on her first day at Howard and was immediately struck by his intelligence, charm, and good looks, and not in that particular order. She spent a lot of time in her mother's office trying to impress him. After reading the manifesto, she decided then and there to spend spring break in Birmingham and participate in the campaign that was launched on April 3.

Jessica was arrested during the first street protest of what became known as the Birmingham Campaign and released on bail within 24 hours with a suggestion that she should return home. It was not a suggestion. There was no mistaking the threat. The experience was unnerving. She left for home the next day.

Her enthrallment with Jamie Cars increased over the years, but she was never able to entice him. She didn't understand and questioned her own self-worth. By all accounts, she was attractive, intelligent, and available, and she knew it. But she couldn't figure out what she was missing. She never became aware of her mother's interference.

Jamie was pulled aside one day with a stern warning to leave Jessica alone. Julia's premonitions of

his life path made her proud, but there was a toll to be paid, and she didn't want Jessica to fall into the same trap that she had. Her mind was clear. Better a stable man who would stay put than someone chasing windmills.

In 1964, Jessica followed Cars to Mississippi and volunteered at the Summer Project that pushed for the registration of Black voters. The connection she hoped to kindle never happened. He was constantly on the road and was hospitalized in Maryland after a chemical gas attack initiated by the National Guard.

While in Mississippi, Jessica was introduced to the Nation of Islam when the first stirrings of what would later be defined as Black Power emerged. She felt victimized in Birmingham and responded by fleeing to the safety of academia. The Maryland gas attack by the National Guard made her sick to her stomach. Something was missing, but the answer eluded her. Black Power was soothing that itch.

The year 1965 was pivotal in Jessica's life. Having decided to follow in her mother's footsteps, her junior year of college was devoted mainly to studies. Then, on February 21, Malcolm X was assassinated. On March 7, less than a month later, during a civil rights march in Selma, Alabama, Bloody Sunday occurred. State troopers beat 50 marchers, 17 of whom were hospitalized. In August, for nearly one week, the establishment was once again pitted against Black citizens, resulting in 34 deaths, over a thousand injuries, and nearly 4,000 arrests.

Jessica was experiencing a sense of helplessness, hopelessness, and growing despair. Her knowledge of history and political science was drawing an inevitable conclusion: the more things changed, the more they stayed the same. She began losing interest in school. Her mother, using the last bit of influence she had, convinced Jessica to finish her studies. There was plenty of time for activism next year if she so chose.

Jessica was aimless after her graduation in June of 1966. There were rumblings of Black Power coming from the West Coast. Some young men had taken up the mantle coined by Jamie Cars, her one-time heartthrob. In addition, and equally important to Jessica, were the community initiatives that captured her attention: free breakfast for children, free ambulance service, free medical clinics, and more. Discussions with her mother led to arguments that were never fully resolved. Julia chided her all through the summer, insisting that Jessica get a job or enroll in graduate school. To avoid further agitation, Jessica agreed to go to school without any intention of following through.

In September, with all of her possessions thrown into a backpack and a canvas duffle bag, she hugged her mother for what seemed like an eternity and gave her a kiss goodbye. During the bus ride to California, she became Jessie to those she met.

Jessie was one of approximately 20 young Black women who settled in California in October 1966 and became part of the newly formed People's Party. Although the men received most of the press, which held them in disrepute, 66% of the members were women who came from every corner of the country.

Upon arrival, she met a man two years her junior who was well-spoken and charismatic—in a word, awe-inspiring. He was addressing a large and growing crowd of passersby on a busy city street. The group responded with nods, chants of agreement, and amens at every third word. The energy of the crowd became palpable. Towards the end of his speech, he expressed a sentiment that made Jessie's blood run cold. She never came to understand why. It was buried too deeply in her DNA. He said, ***"And if the authorities continue to bind us in chains, continue to hold us in disrespect, then I will spit in their faces."***

His name was Bobby Black, and they were married six weeks later. Bobby Jr. was born ten months to the day of their wedding vows. Eight months later, pregnant again and in her second trimester, Bobby Sr. was shot and killed by the police while resisting arrest. Not one witness to the event would agree with the official assessment. They called it cold-blooded murder.

Her hands instinctively came to rest on her swollen belly when the news first filtered in. She looked at the messenger and shook her head in disbelief. *This must be a mistake*, she thought. No one in the room said a word, though two of her sisters moved to comfort her. She had been worried that something like this might happen. Everyone in the Party knew the risks. He wasn't the first to die, and he wouldn't be the last.

A rage began to well up in her body with these thoughts, and in her attempt to quell the fury, she prayed to God it wasn't so. She would do anything, give anything, to see her husband walk through the door. And then she broke down and cried.

The feeling started in her stomach as if the baby sensed a disturbance and needed an outlet for the loss of tranquility it felt—a shift from the comforting warmth the womb had provided. A sound arose from her lungs, traveled through her throat, and erupted from a mouth stretched so wide one would think you could peer down and see the baby from whence it began. It was a keening so sharp and fierce as to shame a banshee for being weak and mild.

When the air ran out, she took a breath and did it again and again until there was nothing left of her but exhaustion. In the days, weeks, and months that followed, she became a shell, hardened by the experience, and committed to the protection of her unborn baby. There was never a thought of returning to her mother and the protection of academia. Her place was here, with the brothers and sisters of the Party. She would devote her life to rectifying the injustice done to her people by the white devils.

Four months later, a baby girl named Kathleen was born in honor of a prominent Party member. With the birth of Kathleen came a sense that something was wrong, like an ill wind that was neither seen nor heard... not even really felt. It was like a disturbance of some unknown force that made her uneasy.

She was over with denial and bargaining. She knew what had happened and what needed to be done. However, she had been fluctuating between anger and depression for months now, and it wasn't getting any better. Almost all of her sisters chalked it up to postpartum depression, and all of the brothers fed her anger. Her instincts told her it was more than that, and she sought help outside the Party.



It took five years of group therapy for Jessie to face the loss of her beloved. Progress was at a snail's pace. She constantly grew impatient and questioned the relevance of the group. Then, one day, it happened.

The event would forever be etched in her mind. It all seemed so random. She was sitting at a small table outside her favorite café, sipping coffee and basking in the warmth of the morning sunshine. A woman pushing a carriage was about to enter the intersection. The walk sign was prominently displayed when a stranger, for no apparent rhyme or reason, grabbed the carriage, preventing further progress.

The woman's protest was overshadowed a moment later when a car ran the red light, causing mayhem and destruction in its path. There were no words the woman could use to express her gratitude. She just wept in relief for her own safety and for the carnage before her.

Jessie often heard an expression of gratitude in her group meetings: *"There but for the grace of God go I."* Jessie looked at the woman, the carriage, the destruction in the street, and the stranger who, for some inexplicable reason, prevented the carriage from entering the intersection. At that moment, she experienced a sense of clarity she had never felt before.

She came to believe in a destiny beyond her knowledge or control. Every event of her life had led her to this precise moment, and this was exactly where she was supposed to be. On that day, she came to accept that Bobby's death was, in some inexplicable way, an integral and essential part of her journey to a destiny yet unfulfilled. She continued in that group, in sickness, and in health, until the final week of her life.

Both Bobby Jr. and Kathleen were essentially raised and educated by the sisters of the Party, where they were taught discipline and pride. Bobby Jr. survived the physical and judicial assault of the American government and remained a part of the Party until its disbandment in 1982. The Sisters continued on and never abandoned their community endeavors.

Bobby Jr. and Kathleen continued to be raised by their mother and, with the help of the Party, went to university, both earning law degrees.

Bobby Jr. married a "sister" he grew up with and became the proud parent of Angel in his second year of law school. Kathleen married a young man she met in a political science class and gave birth to their only child, a daughter they named Shelly, just weeks after her cousin Angel was born.

Twenty years later, it would be popular to say it takes a village. The sisterhood provided that village, and at the center of it, all was their Grandma Jessie.

# Chapter 6

## Evening, Day 2

*“The mind is its own place, and in itself can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven.”*

— John Milton, *Paradise Lost*

*“People see a solid wall that, in the microscopic universe, is mostly empty space. How large must we be to see the cosmos as a solid wall, and how little must we be not to? Perspective is everything.”*

— The Children’s Book of Physics

When he got home, it was dark but not quite 6 o’clock. Dinner was kept warm on the stove. Mealtime was usually set in stone. The family ate together every night at 6. Afterward, the children did their homework, Jimmy finished off the last of his office work, and Shelly cleared the table, did the dishes, and then provided any help the children needed with their schoolwork.

Tonight, Shelly fed the children early and gave them permission to play video games after their homework was done—a rare treat for the boys. Suspicions were aroused but quickly ignored. They understood not to look a gift horse in the mouth. Janice would spend the evening, as always, in her room, video chatting with her girlfriends about all the things teenage girls talked about. The drama was unending.

Shelly had just finished cleaning up, the dish towel still in her hands, when she heard the front door close and immediately shook off the anxious feeling that sound had generated. *I may have tried to set things up for an easy landing, she thought, but I must remember that I’m not in control of anything or anybody but myself. Walk in the direction you want and accept where that road takes you. There is nothing to fear.*

Jimmy was struck by the smell of food that permeated throughout the home. His stomach reacted with a growl and a queasiness that sent mixed messages to his brain. It dawned on him that he hadn’t eaten since he picked his way through breakfast that morning, but the queasiness was winning out. Regardless, he followed his nose into the kitchen, sure in his heart he would find Shelly there.

She was standing with her back to the kitchen sink, drying her hands with the dish towel while facing the doorway that led to the living room. That was the direct route from the front door to the kitchen.

At first sight, what she saw was amusing—and then heartbreaking. A fog had crept in and engulfed the City in a blanket of what was near drizzle. Jimmy was soaked from head to foot, his clothes sagging off his body as if he were a drowning man plucked from a raging sea. He was shivering from the cold and looked exhausted. *My goodness*, she thought, *what could he have gotten into?* Then, she looked closer at his face and saw the fear in his eyes. At that moment, she ached for him.

“Oh, honey, come close,” she whispered as she threw her arms around him with a hug that made them one. “Dinner’s on the stove,” she said. “I made your favorite.”

Before she could say another word, he sat down with his hands folded on the tabletop, his eyes aimlessly cast in the direction of his bowed head. His reply was simple, dull, and flat. “My stomach won’t allow it.”

It was hard to miss that he was not thinking straight, so...she sat opposite him and reached out, enfolding his hands in hers. “I would like to hear everything that happened today, if you would—but first, how about getting out of these wet, clammy clothes and into a nice hot shower?” These words were the kindest thing he had experienced all day.

The chill left his body at some point during the shower, and he felt some of the tension leave his muscles. He lay atop the bed with his hands tucked behind his head, wrapped in a towel, fully dry for what felt like the first time that day. The smell of food still elicited queasiness. The fear was overwhelming and took him back to his ten-year-old self.

He was with his father, standing in line at the theater, waiting to see a new Star Wars movie. They were hugging the theater wall and saw a man sleeping like a cat curled up in the sunshine at the sidewalk’s curb. Jimmy, confused, asked his father why the man was sleeping there. The answer frightened him but left him with a sense of gratitude for having a home. However, that image was fused into Jimmy’s mind, forever associated with a fear of deprivation. Then, he came home to the sight of his wife wringing her hands on a kitchen towel, adding guilt and shame to his fear.

Shelly waited a full fifteen minutes after she heard the shower water turn off before deciding to check in on him. She turned off the stovetop burners, covered the pots and pans, and went to the bedroom. Seeing him there, wrapped in that towel, she knew what he needed. She lay down on her side next to her husband and asked, “Can you tell me what you’re feeling?”

Jimmy looked at her, eyes tearing up as he said, “Shell, I’m so sorry for getting us in this mess. When I came home and saw you wringing your hands on that towel, I was so ashamed for failing you.”

“Oh, Jimmy,” she replied, “that may be what you saw, but that’s not what I was doing. I had just finished the dishes and was drying my hands.”

Jimmy turned his head, looked at her suspiciously, then saw the sincerity on her face. He rolled over to face her, kissed her forehead, and said, “Thank you, sweetheart.”

A big chunk of guilt and shame went away like magic, but the fear was still an uncontrolled monster mouth open wide, ready to eat him and his entire family alive. He proceeded to tell Shelly everything he saw and thought during his walk around the City, leaving no detail out, going back when necessary to fill in something overlooked or forgotten. Shelly listened without saying a word. He didn’t need a solution right now; he just needed to speak. Her time to contribute would come, but now was his time to be heard.

Then, he was done. He had run out of words. All was quiet for a moment. Shelly asked Jimmy, in a voice just above a whisper, to rate his fear on a scale of one to ten. His response was a ten.

Shelly said, “You know what Grandma Jessie would say.” It was not a question. “Grandma Jessie would say that a fear factor of ten is dire, and nothing is dire when the adult is in charge. So, what’s that little boy inside you thinking?”

Jimmy went right to the thoughts of standing in line at the theater, and a little of the queasiness that held dominion over his stomach went away. He knew where he had to take his psyche, where his strength lay, and he was halfway there already. But the reality check Shelly would provide through the strength of their connection was like taking a glass of vitamin-fortified orange juice and converting it into a pitcher of nectar poured by the hand of the gods above.

“And what would Grandma Jessie say about fear itself?”

Shelly cherished these words from her grandmother. They filled her up so many times that they were ingrained in her mind, a part of her soul. It was a way of life, her default reasoning.

“Grandma Jessie would say,” and here she added a little sass to her voice, “that fear is a negative fantasy. Fear is about something that might happen in the future. We don’t fear the past. We only fear the future that past actions might bring. We don’t fear the present—the right now. Right now, we know what to do, and sometimes, all we can do is lie down and take a nap, and we don’t fear taking that nap. We fear what’s coming next after we wake up. And we never know, for sure, what’s coming next. What we do know is that what’s coming next is not going to be as bad as what we fear.

“**Fear** is the worst-case scenario—the 15 on a scale of 1 to 10—and that’s not going to happen. But giving in to fear makes it real in the present. So...instead of experiencing the cold prickly once, when it happens, we experience it in full exaggerated force over and over again. And then, if it does happen, it’s usually a level 3 cold prickly, and it’s never as bad as we imagined. Situations become worse when we react to that exaggerated fear because fear-based solutions are rarely in our best interest.

“So...if I’m going to live in a fantasy, I may as well bet on the lottery or dream of marrying a prince

because I have a choice: I can fool myself happy, or I can fool myself miserable, and I am not going to fool myself miserable. Roosevelt had it right: ‘We have nothing to fear but fear itself.’”

And then, Grandma Jessie would display that ear-to-ear smile as if she had just shared the greatest secret in the world.

They both chuckled and, without prompting, simultaneously added, “Thank you, Grandma Jessie.” They looked at each other and shared another laugh. They were in sync.

Jimmy had a sudden realization. “I’m hungry,” he said.

Shelly returned to the kitchen while he got dressed, reheating their dinner and setting an intimate table for two. Plates, utensils, and cloth napkins sat atop placemats set opposite each other at one end of the table. Two tall, thin candles supported by bronze holders were situated between the settings to the side so as not to impede their view of each other. Wine glasses were filled from a previously opened bottle of Chardonnay that Shelly pulled from the fridge. Jimmy walked in as Shelly was transferring the food from pan to plate, and his stomach let him know that his eyes held no advantage. All his senses were triggered. The aroma made his taste buds salivate, providing a wetness that would pave the way. His eyes beheld a personal and private feast with steam rising from the plates and the flickering of candlelight casting rainbows through the crystal wine glasses.

Shelly then said, “Dinner is served,” but what he heard was, “I love you more than life itself.”

Together, they sat and gave a nod of thanks, their customary prayer, and Shelly raised her glass.

“To whatever tomorrow will bring,” she said, “I believe it will be in our best interest.”

Jimmy involuntarily smiled at these words, knowing in his heart they were true. “Amen” was all he said, all that needed to be said. Halfway through his plate, he realized that he had not said another word, so focused was he on his consumption.

“Time to come up for air.” This was both a statement and a question from Shelly.

They both shared a laugh, and Shelly told him that she had spent the day looking at their finances, created a budget, and, with a little cutting back, they should be able to survive twelve, maybe fourteen, months before the money ran out.

“Thank God,” she said, “that affordable medical care is no longer dependent on having a job.” Then, she asked, “So, what are your thoughts? Where do you want to go from here?”

“I’m not sure,” Jimmy honestly said as he took a sip of his wine. “It’s the beginning of December, and no one is doing any hiring this month. I don’t want this to spoil Christmas. Is that part of your budget?”

“There will be no diamond bracelet for me or that new mountain bike for you, but the children’s lists are essentially covered.”

“Then, tomorrow, first thing, I will make a list of everything I want in a new job. It will be the first day of the rest of my life,” he said. While this was true, he didn’t realize that the plan he thought he was going to develop was not the plan life had in store for him. Men plan, God laughs or so the saying goes. But there would be no immediate laughing.

First, there would be outrage, anger, and hurt, followed by an outcry heard around the world—one that spread as quickly and as easily as social media transmits through the airwaves, like a wildfire in a forest starving for water—as any good idea does when the time is right.

Some say timing is everything, and, no doubt, it is an important factor. The lack of it has contributed to many failures of the well-conceived plans of mice and men. Even a message that resonates, a plan that is meticulous, or an idea that can disrupt the existing order may not find purchase. But what Jimmy didn’t know was that his life would be very different from the one he intended to map out the next day.

The rest of the meal passed in pleasant conversation, mostly about the activities of their children: an overheard conversation about Janice’s boyfriend, Bill being drafted by the City’s traveling soccer team, and Timmy asking for guitar lessons—additional expenses but covered as “contingencies” in Shelly’s budget. With appetites sated, Jimmy helped Shelly clear the table, put the leftovers away, and wash and dry the dishes.

Chores complete, they moved to the sofa, wine glasses in hand, to unwind for the rest of the evening, letting the day’s worries and events dissipate like a morning fog that gradually fades from exposure to the warmth-producing sunshine.

# Chapter 7

## The Posh Party

*“There are a few—very few—but some in every generation who rise to the top. Born with an IQ that makes easy those things that befuddle even the smart and intelligent and nurtured in an environment that can be either supportive or harsh, they succeed. While these individuals can bestow the fruits of their labors to their heirs, the essentials of their success—aptitude, willingness, and determination—are not subordinate to a paper will.”*

— The History of Transition

The *Financial Network News*, Jimmy’s de facto network of choice, popped on the screen. A thumbs-down from both. Jimmy pressed the guide button on the remote and started to scan for something more to their liking. The sound of the *FNN* feed could be heard in the background, and something caught his ear. His finger slid to the exit button, reuniting the video with the audio, and then pressed rewind to restart the segment.

There it was, in high definition and living color, magnified by a fully embracing, almost hero-worshipping voice, describing events of unimaginable decadence. The universally recognizable sound of Alister McGuire’s voice, the premier entertainment reporter, began his narration:

“Jade Whitstaff, accompanied by an entourage of 20 or more, chaperoned”—and here, Alister snickered as if he were letting the viewers in on a little inside joke”—by her brother Tom, celebrated her birthday over the weekend as only an heiress can. It is rumored that on her 18th birthday, she received \$25 million, a quarter of the original \$100 million inheritance put in trust by her grandfather upon his death when she was eight. The value of that trust has more than doubled since then and will double again by the time she reaches 25 and becomes eligible for another \$25 million. At 30, she will receive the full amount, with estimates nearing \$1 billion.

Her brother Tom’s fortunes, ten years older at the time of his grandfather’s death, did not fare as greatly. His ultimate payout at 30 years of age is estimated to be in the four-hundred-million-dollar range. However, tonight was about Jade, and she was celebrating in style at the club known only as *Posh*.”

There was no waiting in the line that circled around the block. The club had been alerted of her

imminent arrival by the security staff assigned to her at birth. The owners heard “cha-ching” and made sure that an adequate VIP space was available. She had been there before, spending “daddy’s money,” and she spent it like a child in a candy store until the auto limit on the card was hit.

That limit never left room for a tip, and while this made her a little uncomfortable, she would sigh, shrug her shoulders, bend her furrowed forehead a little to the left, rationalize to herself, and reflect, *Oh, that’s too bad, but what can I do?* Then, she would flex her knees in a little happy bounce, smile, turn away, and leave the club. Alcohol made her feel good and never left room in her head for guilt. But guilt was never really an issue—except sometimes when she made Daddy mad. Occasionally, her friends would chip in to leave something for the servers, but it was never enough to cover what the IRS would assume and tax.

One of the servers, alerted to their arrival, waited by the door—not for a meet-and-greet but to capture as much video as he could on his phone. *There will be no stiffing tonight.* The media would pay handsomely if history were a guide, enough for all the servers attending her party. The camera focused on the group as they made their way into the club, meandered through the crowd on the entrance-level floor, and followed them up a wide curving staircase leading to a roped-off balcony overlooking the floor below.

A pony wall made of shatterproof glass prevented those looking up from seeing in but did not prevent the occupants from looking down on those below. The server with the camera phone was aware of this but knew of other vantage points throughout the building. Within a half-hour, four phones were set up across the room, strategically located and supported on cellphone stands, zoomed in to capture every detail of every moment, and they were rewarded for their efforts.

The cameras showed a bottle of champagne in everybody’s hand. There was no limit on the credit card tonight. The producers and editors of the home video had done their jobs. Images were enhanced, and the labels were clearly on display as Alister gleefully extolled, “The festivities began with individual bottles of Cristal, and the bar tab’s first entry was over \$50,000.” Alister’s voice increased in pitch and drawl as he uttered the dollar amount, as if in awe or having a reverent religious experience. Jimmy was triggered and disgustingly thought, *Praise be to the almighty dollar.*

Images of Jade, her entourage, and the less fortunate gathered below flashed on the screen as they wasted the night away, absorbing overpriced booze and designer drugs. Bodies were swaying to the music—individuals, couples, or groups—some wearing clothes that cost more than an average man’s monthly wage, others wearing hardly anything at all. A pixelated image showed a couple having sex against a wall in a not-so-hidden, unlit corner, but not all of the images were recorded that evening.

The original price negotiation required additional footage to supplement Jade’s entourage. The sex scene was an added bonus, both for the buyer and the seller. The editors made it look seamless as if it were all happening that night. This was news. This was entertainment. Every image was real, even if just taken out of context. Who did it hurt? Why did it matter? This was how you sold airtime. This was how money was made.



The policies came down from above via periodic memos as if disbursing the word of God, the chiseled stone tablet replaced by data bytes transmitted via the internet. The powers that be were not interested in telling the truth. They believed most viewers were not smart enough to know the difference and would accept anything they saw on the screen as the truth. Their agenda was making money first, swaying public opinion second, and, at a distant third, Walter Cronkite news.

You could fool some of the people all of the time, or so the saying goes in part, and the “some” were enough to keep the herd in line. Television, the modern-day horse-riding cowboy, keeps the cattle moving along the desired path. Nudge them into an open valley to roam, give them something to gaze upon and graze on, and they will kill to believe they are free. It worked—though it was more difficult than tyranny and less efficient in many respects but it was manageable.

Alister provided background on the Whitstaff family as the video continued, beginning with the story of Alexander Whitstaff, the patriarch of the Whitstaff family. He was reputed to be mean and gruff when young—a wildcatter oilman who broke more bones than mended fences. He rarely refrained from speaking his mind and didn’t care who thought what. He knew what he wanted and never let anything get in the way.

Rumor had it that he sold his wife and children to the devil for enough money to buy his first mineral rights lease option. In fact, he risked his life driving a wagon loaded with nitroglycerin, and he became, by all accounts, one of the wealthiest men in America.

It was shortly after the crash of ‘29 that his path once again crossed with Bernard Ellingsworth, an investment banker who was surviving the economic chaos. But the circumstances of these trying times created a pragmatic willingness to entertain the previously unthinkable. As a fourth-generation Who’s Who, he grew up believing what he was taught—that he was better than the unwashed many, the market rabble, as they were referred to in his circle.

He was a man of breeding and education, with a pedigree that traced back to nearly every family of means since the dawn of this country’s founding and, on his mother’s side, to English nobility. But his daughter Simone’s future was in jeopardy. Her fiancé, a young man from a family with a history as long and storied as his, had lost everything in the crash and, rather than face a life of failure and shame, chose a window instead. Prevailing gossip, which placed blame on Simone for a lack of support, was cruel and vicious at a minimum. Simone was being shunned and ostracized by those who knew her well and by those who knew her only by reputation.

Party invitations became nonexistent. Random encounters in the streets were acknowledged with turned backs and criticisms about her—directed to others but loud enough for her to hear. Returning home in tears was becoming more and more frequent. What was a father to do? Then, he remembered Alexander.

A few years earlier, Alexander had a chance meeting with Simone. She knocked on her father’s door—generally open but closed that day—while he was in a business meeting with Alexander. It wasn’t

that this was a secret meeting, but the association with some clientele should be held close to the vest—their presence, for a variety of reasons, not necessarily broadcast.

Simone did not wait for a response as she gently opened the door wide enough for her head to peek through. Alexander was stunned as he beheld the heart-shaped face of an angel. It was mathematically perfect, adorned with a celestial nose that was refined, soft, and narrow, eyes the blue of a hot summer's day, and full lips that managed to smile even while pouting at her father's closed door. All of this was framed with hair that fell to her shoulders in ringlets of gold.

Alexander fought to contain himself, expecting an introduction that never came. Bernard saw the look on Alexander's face and mentally acknowledged the predator he would keep from his daughter's door. *Rich he may be, but he was still an uncouth commoner and generations away from being worthy. Gurdie, Bernard's wife, would make the proper arrangements when the time was right.* He rose from behind his desk and took determined steps to meet his daughter before she entered the room.

He opened the door only slightly more, positioning himself between Simone and Alexander, shooing her back into the hallway with a hand not visible to Alexander, and closing the door behind him. Simone was doing her best to look around her father for a further peek into the office, reluctant to lose sight of the man she saw, but to no avail. The door was closed, and it was obvious that "Father" had little patience for her at this time. In less than a minute, Bernard was back at his desk, uncomfortable for a reason he didn't understand. He was staring at Alexander with a face that displayed not a trace of that inner turmoil.

Alexander understood exactly what had just occurred. He knew what kind of man Bernard Ellingsworth was, had dealt with men like him before, and had never left with anything more than a sour taste in his mouth. The only value he associated with "men of stature" was their ultimate goal of lining their pockets. However, he needed them too if he were to line his. Rich he may be, but the project he had in mind required investors, and the local bank could provide neither enough capital nor contacts to meet his current needs. This was what had brought him East and into the office in which he now sat.

An hour later, they agreed to meet in three days' time, their discussions having reached a point that required further deliberation. Bernard stood first, officially bringing the meeting to its conclusion. He walked around the desk as Alex began to rise and escorted him to the door. They stood before the closed door, facing each other, eye to eye, both smiling. Alex extended his right hand which Bernard took in his own.

"Thank you for your time, Mr. Ellingsworth. I look forward to our next meeting. May I add, what a lovely daughter you have."

Alex saw the involuntary response, just barely noticeable on Bernard's face—a squinting of the eyes, a tightening of the jawline, an ever-so-subtle flush. *His weak spot*, Alex concluded.

“Why yes, she is. Thank you for saying so. She is betrothed to a wonderful young man,” he lied, “and we are very proud of the choice she has made.”

Now, it was Alex who was caught off guard by the lie, producing the inevitable sour taste. Both stood at the door, feeling a little uncomfortable, but the smiles remained as the handshake ended and Alex walked through the door.

After all, they still needed each other.

Over the next two days, Bernard put together a consortium of investors. Some were childhood friends, others fraternity brothers, and some were family members—both by blood and by marriage. They were all men of dignity and influence who had access to funds they managed for others.

“Never risk your own money when you can earn a percentage of your client’s profit,” they would snicker. And while the risks were high yet manageable the profits could be astronomical. Thus endowed, Bernard and his “friends” became partners in Alexander’s venture, the rewards of which were vast.

The profit shares exceeded all expectations, and their cut from their clients’ investments was just icing on the cake. They would meet at their club, drink brandy, smoke cigars, make plans, gossip, and laugh with pride at the good fortune they so richly deserved.

All the while, invisible attendants saw to their wants and overheard it all. Most were grateful to be employed in proximity to such greatness. A few—very few—were grateful to be employed with access to so much information, which, like all commodities, had value on the open market.

A few years passed, and Simone’s prospects diminished further. She became sullen. Gertrude was in near hysterics, and Bernard felt compelled to take matters into his own hands.

Alexander Whitstaff came to mind.

Alexander was never invited to join their club; in fact, he had never been inside its walls. He was not part of the good old boy network and had not received a moment of their time. That was left to the accountants. But Bernard needed arrangements to be made.

There was never a lack of good reasons for the two partners to meet and discuss business, but Bernard fumbled over the right approach. An invitation to supper for someone half a continent away, after such a prolonged period of “snubbing,” would be awkward. Things were going well, so, there was no excuse for bringing Alex east for a meeting. There were plenty of reasons for Bernard to travel west; after all, he had never laid eyes on the infrastructure that contributed so handsomely to his portfolio.

But how would he explain the presence of Simone?

As it turned out, all the thinking and conniving were for naught. Word had come to Bernard that Alexander was in town.

Bernard began to formalize a plan.

Over the years, while the East Coast partners ignored him, Alex kept tabs on them. He had eyes and ears everywhere but made it a point to leave no stone unturned when it came to this East Coast group.

When word of Simone's state of affairs reached his desk, he saw an opportunity—an opening he had been waiting for since this business deal began. He decided a trip east was in order and, after making arrangements for the handling of his immediate affairs, booked passage with Transcontinental Air Transport. The flight would save him a day, and time was, after all, money. It would also offer him the chance to see the airline operation up close. That put a smile on his face.

The plane landed at Teterboro Airport in the early afternoon, and he took a Yellow Cab to the Waldorf Astoria, where he had arranged meetings with various foreign dignitaries. They were essential for his expansion plans. In the meantime, he would wait for Bernard to make his move. He was betting on Bernard's appetite for his daughter's security, and the passing of time, he concluded, would make that hunger unbearable.

The meetings also provided an opportunity to let his whereabouts be known. He made it a point to let them be a poorly kept secret.

Bernard was overjoyed to get a glimpse into Alexander's plans. It was the perfect excuse to extend a dinner invitation and a warm hand of friendship he had never offered before.

*Time to appear humble, he thought. There is much to be gained. Security for Simone's future—she should be grateful for what I'm about to do. And, perhaps, the added bonus of additional expansion. I am his partner, after all.*

Alex's second evening in New York City was spent dining at the Russian Tea Room, followed by a night on the town, culminating in the most exclusive speakeasy the City had to offer.

Somewhere along the line, Alex had acquired company in the manner of a voluptuous redhead. It was late that night when he entered the lobby of the hotel, accompanied by a woman obviously made up for pleasure. He assumed word would get back to Bernard.

Her silk evening gown clung to every inch of her whet body, which seemed stroked to perfection. Every eye in the lobby turned to her and looked on with envy at the man she clung to with a grip tighter than the dress she was wearing.

She knew what she was doing. It was her job to make a man feel important as well as potent. She felt, rather than saw, all the eyes fixed on her, and with that, she turned her head with a smile and a little giggle, giving them all a better look. Although no one would have thought it possible beforehand, the envy factor in the room spiked.

Alex was approached by one of the wide-eyed desk clerks in attendance, who barely kept the drool from his lips. With eyes lowered, he proffered a handwritten message to Alex. Then, gathering up all his courage, he raised his eyes to catch a closer glimpse of this incredibly gorgeous creature. She caught his eye and winked.

His face, flushed with embarrassment, told her all she needed to know. With a little bit of amusement and a little bit of sympathy, she blew him a kiss. As he turned and nearly stumbled away, she was pretty sure who would fill his dreams when he went to bed that night.

Alex read the note and slipped it into his pocket. Bernard Ellingsworth had called and left his phone number with a request for a return call at Alex's convenience.

He turned to his date, took in the beauty of that face, and smiled. *Got him*, he thought.

The envious looked on, believing they knew what the smile was about. Once again, the envy factor hit a new high.

Alex returned Bernard's call the next morning, shortly after breakfast was delivered to his suite. Pleasantries that neither felt were exchanged, and then an invitation was extended for supper at Bernard's home the following evening.

Alex gratuitously accepted the offer with a voice that sounded humble. He ended the call by saying, "I look forward to meeting your wife. I've heard about her work at the museum, and I have been entertaining the thought of donating part of my collection."

Alex knew the whereabouts of Gertrude Ellingsworth. His eyes and ears were working around the clock to keep tabs on everyone while he was in town. There were to be no surprises.

Alex did not have an art collection, but he loved a verbal joust. It was second nature to him to make a mental note of which way and how far his opponents would move or counter. Life was, after all, a game of chess.

There was a slight pause, and Bernard cleared his throat.

"Unfortunately, Mrs. Ellingsworth is attending to a sick sister in the Hamptons and will not be joining us," Bernard informed. "However, Simone, my daughter," he added as if her name required a reference, "has made herself available tomorrow evening and will be our hostess."

In fact, Gertrude would have nothing to do with Alexander Whitstaff or the pawning off of Simone to this despicable upstart. She was mortified at the thought and could not imagine how she would face her friends in polite society if Bernie's plans came to fruition. She had run to her sister for consolation.

Alex was aware of all of this. Servants heard every word that spewed from Gertrude's lips, and the price of particulars from sources such as these was very, very reasonable. Information, like water, was accumulated and reserved for use as needed. Money opened the valve.

Alex's snicker was entirely self-contained. Not a hint was transmitted over the line. "Until tomorrow, then," he said as he hung up the phone.

Alex turned, looked at a pastry still on a plate, and opted for another way to sate an appetite. He entered the bedroom and admired the sleeping form of the naked woman, barely covered by a sheet that hid just half of her lower torso. The stirring he felt assured him that this was the right choice. He removed his robe, slid into the bed, and propped himself up on an elbow as he gently lifted the sheet from the rest of her body.

She stirred, opened one eye that ran down his body, admired his exposed eagerness, smiled, and, with the slightest pressure of her hand, moved him onto his back. She inched closer, lifted her leg, and lowered herself onto his awaiting form. They were both in the mood.

After hanging up the phone, Bernard pondered for a moment as he put his plans in order. He then called his footman to fetch his daughter. She had a role to play in this, and she had better do it right, he concluded. There might not be a second chance. She must act alluringly shy and project a sense of what Alexander could gain if he worked hard enough. She must play a game of cat and mouse with a little bit of chess thrown in.

There was no doubt in Bernard's mind that Simone was sophisticated enough to pull it off. He conveyed all of this and more to her in his study that morning. Simone sat and listened without saying a word. Her response was direct, to the point, and entirely misleading.

"Daddy, what an incredible plan. I know exactly what you want me to do, and I can do it. I don't know how you figured all these things out. I'll do my very best to bring him to our advantage."

Every word was true, and Bernard was very pleased with himself. But while her father spoke, Simone was formulating her own plans.

The chauffeur was summoned, and Simone spent the rest of the day being fitted for the perfect dress. She knew what it took to entice a man. She'd been wrapping men around her little finger to do her bidding for years. She spent the next day at the spa, receiving the full treatment and working out the details of her seduction over and over again during her massage, facial, manicure, and pedicure. She was still working out the finer points while her hair was being styled to perfection, each little curl a perfect ringlet.

What Simone didn't understand was that Alex had nothing in common with her previous conquests.

Alex was right on time, arriving at the Ellingsworth estate in a car with a driver provided by the hotel.

Although a footman was in attendance in the foyer and aware of the guest's imminent arrival, he waited for a knock and then counted to ten. He opened the door and, with a slight nod of his chin, much less than he would for the men who usually frequented the manor, offered to take Alexander's coat and hat.

Alex recognized the slight as a reflection of Ellingsworth's attitude toward him, but he was still impressed with the foyer— even more so when he entered the grand foyer. *I wonder how much of my money paid for this*, he thought. *None*, he concluded. *This hadn't been done in the last few years. This is old money.* And upon closer inspection, he saw the earmarks of age.

The marble floor, while polished to perfection, had telltale signs of traffic, as would a home that harbored a family for generations. *No, Bernie was not the first to live here*, he thought.

The eye was drawn to the bifurcated staircase that branched left and right, climbing 25 feet above the spot where he stood and rising another ten feet beyond that. Made of granite treads and onyx risers that spanned six feet across from stringer to stringer, it was, with the adornment of the dark maple rails, a work of art. The veins in the granite followed their naturally embedded pattern from one tread to the next, indicating that the entire staircase was cut from a single slab.

Alex was flummoxed and felt a deep admiration for the original inhabitant of this masterpiece. *What a worthy opponent he would have been.*

The slightly domed ceiling was coated with light blue and depicted a scattering of pale white clouds and a very faint rainbow that didn't quite reach the walls below. The perimeter was crowned with moldings painted glossy gold. *Into each life, a little rain must fall*, he thought, *but look at the reward. A worthy opponent indeed.*

Alex was led to the drawing room, where Bernard was seated, waiting for his visitor. He rose from the high-backed Queen Anne chair and extended his hand in greeting. Alex took it and then accepted the drink that was offered with the other hand. Bernard gestured to another Queen Anne chair opposite his, and both men sat simultaneously.

Small talk ensued neither at his best when so engaged and soon the topic changed to business. Bernard expressed his and the other investors' pleasure at the returns being generated and wondered if these profits might find their way into funding additional opportunities if additional opportunities existed.

Alex was surprised by Bernard's clumsiness. *His desperation is showing. He was much more subtle years ago. We'll see.*

Before Alex could respond, Simone entered the room, ready to conquer. Both men stood and turned to her as they began to rise.

She faltered, seeing something she did not expect. The glimpse she had of him years before did not

reveal the majestic masculinity she beheld that night. His confidence was palpable. The eyes held secrets. The smile was totally disarming, as if there was a joke only he was aware of.

She realized that the manipulations of her past conquests would be pointless. She felt like she was in over her head—that she was drowning.

Alex saw her meltdown in the seconds it took—from the confident cockiness of her entrance to the look on her face that screamed for help. He knew she had spent the day preparing for tonight. The cost of that information was money well spent.

She still had the face of an angel, but the dress she was wearing was juvenile, designed to draw attention to itself rather than to the body of a temptress armed for a game of seduction. And he expected a seduction. Perhaps he didn't cover his amusement as well as he thought.

He suddenly felt sorry for her maybe even a little protective. He advanced toward her, not waiting for an introduction, took her hand in his, bowed to kiss it, and when fully erect, said, "Miss Ellingsworth, please let me introduce myself. I'm Alexander Whitstaff. My friends call me Alex, and I hope you will, too."

She felt saved. He was a lifebuoy. Her gratitude was immediate and would be held in her heart for the rest of her life. At that moment, she knew that she would do anything for him.

Thus resolved, she tried to recover and put a smile on her face.

"Please call me Simone," she replied, but she became disappointed and lonely when he finally, gradually, let go of her hand.

Dinner was announced a few moments later—too soon for more awkwardness to set in.

The dining table, large enough for thirty, was set just for three at one end, with Bernard at the head, Alex to his right, and Simone to his left—a concession he hoped would not go unnoticed.

The dinner itself was delicious. The food was prepared to perfection, worthy of the impression it was attempting to make. The conversation avoided business of any kind but struggled to find points of common interest until Bernard raised developments in Europe.

This was a veiled attempt to segue discussions intended for later in the evening toward Alexander's expansion plans. But it would serve as a buffer for the uncomfortable silences that had preceded.



Bernard expressed empathy and a certain admiration for the fascists. Mussolini got the trains to run on time, and Hitler seemed to be stabilizing the economic chaos that Germany was experiencing.

Alex noticed Simone wince at some of her father's comments and was intrigued. Most women, especially those of Simone's age, knew little about state affairs, foreign or domestic. It had been more than a decade now, he pondered, since the 19th Amendment was passed.

It seemed that the times were changing.

Cutting Bernard off in the middle of his banality, Alex asked Simone for her thoughts.

At first, Simone struggled to find the words to make Alexander *No, Alex*, she thought, happy. She needed to make a better impression and somehow salvage this wretched night. But every thought that passed through her mind made her feel uncomfortable except, finally, the opinions she truly believed.

Simone's comments were informed, well-ordered, intuitive, nuanced, and subtle. Just as importantly, they aligned with his own. He found himself pleased, and there was a shift in his judgment of her.

The rest of the dinner conversation unfolded in a pleasant give-and-take between the two, essentially ignoring Bernard. Finally, in what seemed like forever to Bernard, the last vestiges of the meal were removed, and the opportunity to re-engage with Alexander presented itself.

Simone, politely excusing herself for the rest of the evening, extended her hand to Alex and thanked him for being such wonderful company. He took her hand, and the kiss he placed upon it sent a chill down her spine. "The pleasure was truly all mine," he replied and he meant it.

As they retired to the study, Bernard's thoughts ran through the evening's events. Simone and Alexander seemed to have formed a connection, and before the evening was done, he would provide a subtle hint as to Simone's availability and his acceptance of further association. However, the opportunity for business was an ever-present consideration and should never be passed up. Alexander was offered cognac and a cigar, which he accepted. While Bernard poured the drinks, he attempted to steer the conversation back to Europe.

Alex did not take the cue that was offered. Instead, he simply stated, in a matter-of-fact tone that would brook no argument, "I want to marry your daughter."

This had been Alex's intention from the start. Before his arrival that evening, it had been strictly for personal gain—a way to shortcut the path his heirs would take along the road to connections and influence among the movers and shakers. Now, perhaps, there could be something more substantial—a true matriarch at his side.

Flustered, Bernard tried to respond with bravado. He stood and put his drink down. "How dare you

come into my house and insult me with such a ridiculous request?"

Alex remained calm in his response. Bernard's face showed anxiety, not anger or insult. The flush was much too mild for the latter. "I know why I was invited here, Bernard," he said—a simple statement of fact, not open for discussion. "I'm familiar with Simone's social life and what she needs to secure her future. I know about your designs on my expansion plans. Let's not waste time with pointless bickering that will put your daughter's future at risk. Let's settle on her dowry."

It was not often that Bernard Ellingsworth was lost for words. Time and again, the retorts that came to mind were halted mid-thought. The longer he went without responding, the weaker his position became until he finally sat down, the look of defeat evident throughout his entire body.

An hour later, Alex was satisfied. The wedding date was set for six months hence. Alex gave way to his original three-month time limit at Bernard's insistence that Mrs. Ellingsworth could not possibly make arrangements any sooner. Bernard had agreed to return all of his partnership rights in their mutual enterprise for a sum equal to the amount due to his clients. In return, Alex agreed to treat Simone with all the respect and dignity due a woman of her station and would not do anything that would embarrass her in public.

They agreed on an allowance that would befit Simone well beyond the limits of Bernard's current abilities. There was a prorated return of the dowry should the union, for any reason, fail, and a windfall for Simone should this be the case. All of this was acceptable to Alex before the evening began, and now, after spending this short time with Simone, he was pleased beyond expectations. Simone might be more than a surrogate for his children's acceptance into the company of the rich and powerful—the captains and kings of industry, commerce, and finance. Without a doubt, the marriage would shortcut this transition by at least two generations. And their connection might go beyond the conception of children, he thought.

Bernard was mentally and emotionally exhausted, and in his haste, he rose as if to call an end to the discussions.

Alex held his seat and said, "There is one more thing."

Bernard, his reluctance showing in his demeanor, sat back down and raised his eyebrows with a look that said, *Now what?*

"I want all of my company back. I will need your help to make this so."

In less time than the previous agreements took to reconcile, a course of action was settled upon. Bernard would provide no assistance until after the wedding. While Alex and Simone were on their honeymoon, Bernard would follow a script devised by Alex so all contracts could be signed upon his return. For his role, Bernard was able to negotiate a fee for his efforts that would end up being a little more than half of the equity he had just given up. This was all in accordance with Alex's overall plan. He wasn't throwing an old dog a bone as much as he was taking care of his family. But nothing in Alex's life was ever

done for just one reason. Life was complicated, and Alex had a mind that thrived on complications.

Over the next 15 years, six healthy children were born—three boys and three girls. Simone suffered two miscarriages and a stillbirth, but Alex was a loving husband, and they faced these tragedies together.

The war brought opportunities that Alex was ever ready to exploit, and upon its end, the rebuilding process provided even more. Many detractors criticized Alex as a war profiteer, but in general, these were sore losers—those who came out on the short end of their business dealings. Alex was ruthless and creative, seeing colors where others saw only black and white.

Thorough planning made calculated risks palatable. Very early in life, he learned that as the unknown became apparent, solutions always presented themselves. With both money and energy at his disposal, he applied them efficiently. He constantly sought out new advantages, and in the whirlwind of his activities, Bernard provided benefits, establishing the organizational hierarchies necessary to manage the chaos.

There came a time when four of their children—two boys and two girls—were in Switzerland, attending boarding school. The two youngest would follow shortly. These were the years when dorm life fostered connections with lifelong friends, comrades, confidants, and associates. Ivy League universities followed, with the girls taking their places among society's endeavors and the boys eventually running and expanding the companies their father had established.

All of the children were given every opportunity in life and ultimately managed well, but none possessed their father's entrepreneurial spirit. They were truly born with a silver spoon, yet they saw only their God-given status—their birthright, what they deserved. Alex and Simone were very proud of their children and found comfort in knowing that their futures were assured.

Their firstborn was named Alexander but was never referred to as Junior. He went by Al. References became even more confused when Alexander III was born. The first word he uttered was "Tres," and that should have been seen for what it was—a lifelong indulgence in self. Tres received all the perks his birth into the one percent provided and was his grandfather's greatest disappointment. Yet, without a doubt, Tres increased his wealth to a level unattainable by his siblings or uncles.

It was the way this was accomplished that irked Alex so much. Tres bought distressed companies when the pieces were worth more than the sum of the parts and eviscerated them. Workers were given notice, and the lives of many were set back beyond full recovery. Pensions were gutted with total disregard for those who had spent their lives working for the benefit of the organization. There was never an attempt to reorganize, rebuild, or manage a fresh start. He was a destroyer, not a builder like his grandfather.

Alex achieved and lived a life of luxury, mostly as an indulgence to his beloved wife. Although he worked hard for all his achievements, with none of the advantages of birth, he never forgot the destitution created by the Depression. Tres' total disregard for the destruction he left in his wake reminded Alex of his

father-in-law and his associates, who saw without seeing him and were convinced that their place above the masses was a birthright.

On his deathbed, with Simone at his side and surrounded by their children, Alexander was at peace. The plan he had formulated so many years ago to buy the acceptance of polite society for the benefit of his children and future generations was a complete success, with the added bonus of finding the love of his life. Then, a bitterness arose from his chest as the ultimate legacy of his life's efforts appeared in his periphery his grandson and namesake, Tres, the embodiment of the undeserving who claimed to stand above. This bitter taste was the last sensation Alexander would experience.

Tres' financial accomplishments were accompanied by three unsuccessful marriages, his fortune protected by prenuptial agreements. He lived his middle years in a life of decadence, setting an example for the two children of his first marriage, Jade Whitstaff and her brother, Tom.

The truth of all this, except for the very most confidential details, could be discovered by biographers or students of economic history. The story that Alister told in the voice-over narration to the video activities at Posh was a publicist's version of a headshot—airbrushed to conceal the blemishes and capped teeth to project the brightest of bright smiles. This was not Photoshop 101. This was an appraiser-proof forgery at its best. Then, the entourage, with Posh at their backs, walked through the exit and hit the streets.

It was cold when Jade left Posh—not bone-chilling, freezing cold, but the kind of cold that frosted your breath and numbed your ears. While some in her entourage wrapped themselves tightly in their own arms or shared the warmth of another, Jade, at the head of the pack, was oblivious to the chill. Her tight-fitting skirt barely reached her naked thighs; the sheer blouse fully exposed her midriff and did next to nothing to conceal her unsupported breasts. The red lambskin biker jacket hung open.

Two things kept Jade's senses from reacting to the world around her. One was the exhilaration of having just signed off on a \$156,000 bar tab. She was only slightly perturbed that the gratuity was included. *I would have left them more*, she lied to herself. The other was a blood alcohol level of over 0.3%.

Thus, with arms outstretched to the world—a clutch full of cash in one hand (Chippendales was an early evening destination plan) and a half-empty bottle of champagne in the other—she spotted a homeless man approaching.

The security detail moved into position, creating a buffer zone, while Jade lifted her head skyward and twirled her body as an expression of delight, a performance for her friends, and an excuse to avoid eye contact with the vagrant. Twirling, alcohol, and stiletto heels are a poorly conceived combination.

Jade went down, though she had just enough cognitive ability to save the champagne.

Tom, only slightly less drunk, was close behind her. The security staff turned to see what was happening.

Jade wobbled a little as Tom lifted her up. As she regained her bearings, the homeless man saw his opportunity, stepped forward, and asked for spare change. She tilted her head back, closed her eyes, and brought the bottle to her lips. One sip was all it took. The first mouthful of vomit went into the bottle while the rest of her stomach emptied onto the sidewalk. She recovered quickly. This wasn't the first time she puked in the street.

She looked at the vagrant, shook her head, and said, "No, no money, but you can have this." She tendered him the bottle after dutifully wiping off the neck.

Dirty hands in filthy, fingerless gloves snagged the bottle, and he guzzled.

Tom, fully aware of what the bottle contained, ran to the curb, bent over, and emptied his stomach.

Both brother and sister were picked up and whisked away by security personnel, who secured them in their bulletproof Mercedes SUV. Three of the servers, hoping for—rather than anticipating—a notable exit, captured multiple angles of the spectacle, including that first mouthful of vomit dispensed into the champagne bottle. They recorded it from two different angles. It is very easy to gloss over the past, to pick and choose the events to portray and the words used to describe them. No matter what is depicted, there is always an audience to adore or vilify. But the present—the *right now*—is another matter, and nothing sells better than gross, juicy gossip... and this was as gross and juicy as it gets.

If a picture is worth a thousand words, this video spoke volumes.

In the background, Alister's voice did not ring. There was no merriment, no exaggerated vibrato just a quiet, almost humble, somewhat quivering "Ohh, ho ho ho," that diminished in volume as it went on, deflating like a balloon with the tiniest of leaks, leaving behind a wrinkled, pale, barely stretched-out mass until he could only just be heard concluding,

"And what a party it must have been."