

Emily's Game

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Part I

“All Things want to fly.
Only *we* are weighted down
by desire, caught in our selves
and enthralled with
our heaviness....”

—Rainer Maria Rilke

Chapter 1

Emily was a good person, really. I stand by that. She had a spark, a light that even her friends saw. It wasn't just me. No one knows why she did what she did. One can guess, but in the end, guesses lead back to nowhere.

Emily came into my life in a most sensuous and alluring way. We met in a town known for its curvy streets. From above, one might think it was a sculpture of a cement woman dancing with her hands folded above her head. A town in the shape of a seductress.

This was a town with a lake held between its hands. Little worn metal signs on back roads commemorating some long forgotten war. Farms spreading out in monochromatic green lanes. The perimeters of the town were smoky, full of factories and freeways. The lake sat exalted, honored, but not clean enough to swim in anymore. Main Street, of course, hosted the dreary cement-burdened city hall. But then there was the university, at the heart of things, pulsing, pumping out wide-eyed adrenaline from its dorm rooms and classrooms and sparkling new library. It was the one vibrant thing in the town, besides the lake itself, that kept growing and rebirthing endlessly throughout the seasons.

We met in a café, like so many students do in a college town. Kids studying at little round tables that mocked life in Paris in the days of Anaïs Nin. Most of us were pretending to study. The real studying would be done in our rooms, just before a test, or in a library in the middle of the afternoon before mid-terms or finals. Studying in a café is like trying to eat in a swimming pool. The water is cool, too enticing. The swimmers – look around – young girls in immodest swim suits with sparkling skin. Showing so much normally reserved for lovers...how can one eat? Why? Why study when the room is filled with dim light and small talk and the buzzing of anticipation? Something was always expected to happen, even if it rarely involved you.

There were many things we didn't know yet. In particular, we didn't know how oppressive it was to have too little money – the wrenching heat bursting in your stomach when you accidentally let your mind slip back into that reality. Or spending idle minutes comparing yourself to the way the others live – the privileged ones. We didn't know that kind of despair, or envy, or the humiliation of not being able to provide for those we love.

Emily was sitting with a group of serious girls. It was a rare night away from her books. I knew one of the girls at her table. We shared a few classes together. I went over to

say hello to her before leaving. I had an 8 a.m. philosophy class with the dreaded boring professor Hollister. Some sort of stimulant would be required no matter how much sleep I got.

“Hey, Julie, how's your history paper coming?” I said it casually. I had no motive other than to say hello and goodnight. I didn't even bother to sit down.

“Finished it yesterday, thank God.” Then added, “The Greeks are so boring.”

The Greeks are so boring. This is like saying life is just a nap in some cosmic back alley. Stars are little dead gray pins. Of course, I didn't say that. I just nodded.

Emily looked up at me briefly, then glanced away, looking embarrassed for her friend. I waved goodbye, pretending to be too tired to stay another instant, though when you're nineteen it can take days before sleep demands anything serious of you, unless you're sitting in Hollister's class. My determined departure came off with just the right shade of aloofness.

And that was it; that was the first meeting.

The second time I met Emily, was on a bus heading to class. When I recognized her she waved shyly, as if to say “hi, but don't sit with me.” Two strangely misplaced middle-aged men sat across from her, glancing over at her

from time to time. I pretended her wave had been friendlier than it was and sat down next to her, full of energy with my college backpack thrown down into the aisle. The men looked a bit pissed off. They probably assumed we'd had mad sex a thousand times. Papers around here have all sorts of exciting stories about the university, none of which I have ever experienced, sadly.

She looked at me briefly, but before a word came out of her mouth she dropped her book on my foot. Awkward. But as she bent across my legs to pick it up I caught her scent, a faint aroma like iris. It was not some perfume she wore, but something, I felt sure, only I could smell. It made me feel drunk and a little off-balance. I looked away. The two men also looked away when I accidentally met their eyes.

Her hair casually brushed across my arm as she rose with the book in her hand. After a short uncomfortable silence she asked me what I was studying? How else would college students begin a conversation, other than what's your favorite way to get high? And she wasn't that kind of girl.

It was one of those seminal moments when I suddenly realized what a waste of time it was to study something as pedantic and pragmatically worthless as math, and I immediately promised myself that I would change my major

to something more sensual and alluring. But I couldn't think of any sensual and alluring majors. Maybe I would drop out and elope with her? Because when you find someone who smells like iris but no one else smells it except you, you don't just ignore it and get off the bus.

Chapter 2

College had meant nothing to me up until the time I met her. I was good at taking tests, but I couldn't find any enthusiasm for the work. It wasn't that the classes were bad or the teachers weren't trying to reach me. I just questioned why I was studying mathematics when what I really needed was someone or something to fill me in, decode me, make the equations come alive. I would rush around from class to class, feeling the weather get colder by the day.

The town had forgotten the charm and beauty of fall. Even the leaves of the trees lining the roads went directly from green to barren. I think they had been over-sprayed. It was late October, usually a time of red and gold collages and tolerable weather perfect for co-ed tag football. That was what I had always fantasized college autumns to be like. Where did all the leaves go after they dropped? I would hear the trucks coming early in the morning sweeping them all up mechanically. What kind of town would pay to do that? I would feel especially lonely on mornings when the trucks were out. The air felt even colder. My hands would slip under the sleeves of my coat.

I thought about dropping out at one point but I had no idea what I would do, where I would go. So many of my classmates were driven – by money, or by a family business to be welcomed into, or by a social or political cause that burned in them. I was only driven to leave. And even that drive was just an echo of what I felt. I wasn't quite sure of anything.

But studying with Emily began to change all that. Math came alive for me again. I began to see the mystical interplay of equations and shapes, as I did when I was in high school.

It helped that Emily was studying political science while I was studying math. There was no competition. No way to "teach" each other, or to see one or the other as superior. Math was as far away from politics as the dark side of the moon. In fact. I could measure the distance to the dark side of the moon, whereas, she could only consider who would own the moon some day, after winning "The Moon War." And who would own it next after "Moon War II."

It was a study night in early December. Her roommate had decided to sleep at her new boyfriend's apartment. Emily's two-person dorm room had been decorated by the school in what I would call modern artificial Norwegian. Wooden furniture that was too hard to sit on, with the couch and bed lifted just high enough off the floor to squeeze a

vacuum under, though few students ever took that opportunity. The beds were as hard as desks. The overhead lighting went from bright to brighter. The night stands were plain teak boxes, each with a rickety drawer so hard to open that if you weren't careful it would pull the night stand over – a face plant, Norwegian style.

Emily was lying on her stomach on the bed reading. I stole a long glance at her, as I had secretly done so many times before on similar nights. She possessed light hazel eyes that looked otherworldly at times because of how they contrasted with her auburn hair. Auburn is like a chameleon brown, since it turns luminous red in the sunlight.

She had a thin but shapely body, athletic, but with round hips. She usually wore simple clothes. Her jeans seemed comfortably loose on her when she laid across her bed. Her plain white blouse was untucked, with bra straps fashionably revealing themselves above her shoulders. She looked up at me and caught me staring. She furled her eyebrows as if to say, "You're not studying." But her smile as she looked back down at her book may have said something else. And then she bit her lip for a second. I wondered what that meant.

Her personality was usually upbeat and lighthearted. She didn't seem to come with a lot of family baggage. The

product of one of those rare non-dysfunctional suburban homes, I imagined. Yet she never mentioned her parents. It seemed to be an unwanted topic.

I had just completed a chapter on spherical trigonometry. She was reading about Nixon. Don't get me started. The man was a pig. Neither of us were really put into a romantic "mood" reading about a guy like that.

It was raining outside, a sideways rain, the kind where pigeons couldn't hide under eaves, nor could students protect themselves beneath an umbrella. It was shooting across the campus like a fire hose. The windows were being invaded. Rain drops sounded more like pellets hitting her window. We were half expecting the glass to crack into a thousand fragments at any moment.

She shut her book rather loudly. "Well, this isn't going to be a fun walk back to your room," she said.

"I could drown if I fall down out there. Or I could blow away and end up in the lake. But, hey, don't worry about it." I began to reach for my coat.

"You can stay," she said. "I don't want your demise on my conscience. You can sleep in McKenzie's bed."

"Thanks," I said. Then I mumbled, "But I don't want to sleep in McKenzie's bed."

"What does that mean?" She looked at me quizzically.

"Well, I don't like McKenzie like that! I don't want to sleep with McKenzie."

She waited for me to say more. When I didn't she said, "Well, McKenzie's heart will be broken."

Leaving my words hanging in the air like a frozen streak of lightening she simply got up and walked into the tiny bathroom. She began washing her face. She turned around to look back at me with her face full of soap. We both laughed. Then I watched her noisily brush her teeth, then floss, then brush her soft hair straight, until a few tiny knots were vanquished.

When she was done she invited me to use the sink and then shut the door behind me. When I came out she was in her bed wearing a pajama shirt, slightly unbuttoned at the top. It was far too revealing to signal me over into McKenzie's bed.

"What are you doing?" she said. I was standing above her looking helpless.

"Before I make the long journey all the way over to McKenzie's bed...what is that laying on top of it?"

"What's what?"

I pointed.

"What does it look like? It's her stuffed bear. Her ratty stuffed bear from the dark ages when she was six...."

"I'd rather kiss you goodnight than that thing. Would that be okay?"

"Do you always kiss your roommates goodnight?"

"You mean Allan the Dork? Not every night, no. Only after sad movies."

I moved closer without her responding and kissed her on the lips, keeping my body politely away from hers. She returned my kiss with no hint of acceptance or rejection. So I sat down next to her and kissed her tentatively again, but this time with my eyes closed.

I smelled that iris scent invading me. What was that?

I pulled back, wanting to see what was in her eyes. We had become momentary strangers due to the awkward circumstances. We were tottering on the brink of two potential outcomes. We would either feel too strange to ever want to see each other again, or become far closer.

I gathered myself. There was another course I could take. A more cautious and calculated course, which was my way. My intentions had become known. Maybe she needed things to slow down. I decided to make my way over to McKenzie's bed.

But before I could rise up fully, she pulled me down to her. She allowed me under the covers. She wasn't wearing

pajama bottoms. Her skin was warm from having been under the blankets on this chilly night.

The cold rain outside got louder, jealous, banging on the windows for me to stop, get my hands off of her. We became quiet, listening for a moment. Words were not in the place we went. By the time the rain stopped, we'd fallen asleep.

In the morning the streets were still wet, in fact they had turned treacherously icy as we made our way through the zig zag paths. Emily and I hadn't said much after we awoke. We both needed to rush off to our early classes. As we got to a crossroads between the two separate buildings we were heading towards she said, "Well, that was...interesting."

I touched her shoulder, padded with winter clothing, "It wasn't just interesting to me. In fact, I hate this feeling."

"What feeling?" she said, looking concerned.

"This helpless kind of stomach fluttering feeling." I felt like someone looking over an abyss as the words parted from me, "I think I'm hopelessly in love with you."

She smiled and clapped her hands together in quick patters, "Good!" She kissed me. "That's a good thing," she whispered. "You'll see."

Being just a kid, and wanting so much to believe her, of course I did.

Chapter 3

The beauty and innocence of children cannot be denied, watching them swinging on tree branches together, leaping down from a height that would no doubt break the ankle of any adult, rolling on the grass in the shady circle the tree forms, sticking their bare legs up against each other in a play fight. No-mind fantasy, timeless. This is what we have to learn.

They regroup and begin to huddle together, apparently making up some sort of play. From what we could tell it consisted of two animals, a hunter, and an animal policeman whose job it was to save the animals from the hunters.

Emily watched them intently as we walked through the park near the great lake of the town. I watched her face at times like this more than I watched the children. Was she thinking of having children some day? Did that scare me or excite me? I had no particular affinity for children at twenty.

We had now been together as a couple for four months. My studies were getting more intense, but I was doing well. I knew I would graduate, which is something I wasn't sure

of before I met her. I didn't have the will or inspiration. Now each one synergized the other.

The weather had turned warmer, everyone's winter coats were finally thrown in the backs of closets. Em and I were making plans to see each other over the summer break.

When we got back to her room that afternoon we saw a note from McKenzie: "Over at Billy's for the weekend. Have a good time....☺"

Emily was reading the note on her bed, written in McKenzie's small scribbly hand writing. I stood behind her as she read it aloud, mocking a school teacher's voice. "What does 'good time' mean?" the stuffy old teacher wondered. Her short skirt had lifted up slightly as she bent over to read McKenzie's awful hand writing. I brushed the top of her leg with my hand, just above the back of her knee. She moved her leg closer to my touch, pretending to bend further towards the scribbled paper. I gently pushed my body up against hers and she went down with my weight, pretending to fall, leaning over the bed with her arms propping her up. She was still pretending to read the note. She turned it upside down to see if it was secretly coded when reading it like that. I lifted the back of her skirt up further and pushed against her. I pulled her shirt up and kissed her back.

Nothing seemed wildly eventful about it. Nothing

seemed unreasonable or perverse. We were lovers now. We were at play, using a university dorm as our private club house, studying how to be all grown up some day.

Chapter 4

I grew up in Westbury, Long Island, amidst a matrix of counties that crowded the outskirts of New York City. We were all New York City wannabes. Very few of us growing up were proud to be from Lon-*gi*-land, as most of the natives called it. We were middle class hicks looking enviously through our naïve windows to New York City, with its energy and danger and sparkling lights that burned out the stars in the night sky. In fact, some of us had to live with the ignominious mark of being directly from “Hicksville.” Those who actually lived in Hicksville were scarred for life.

My mom and dad were kind to each other, at least in front of me. My mom told me later, before she died, that she and my father would go out for a drive and scream their heads off whenever they had a disagreement, so that I would be out of ear shot. I was left at home for an hour watching TV with a big bowl of ice cream during these little country drive conversations of theirs.

So I grew up hardly knowing what an argument was. When my first girlfriend yelled at me the first time I thought she had gone insane. I literally started thumbing through the phone book looking up “mental institutions” while I cast a

wary eye on her, as if she were rabid. The absurdity began to hit me when I found "Mental Health Services," listed right under "Men's Hairstyles." It made everything, even insanity, seem so normal. A mental health listing called "Project Oasis" looked the most interesting, but I never ended up calling them because she felt so bad for frightening me that she made love to me before I could dial. I therefore learned a valuable lesson about the upside of arguing, and playing victim. There was no doubt in my mind that she was sane by the time we were putting our clothes back on.

My father was the president of my grandfather's thermometer factory. My Uncle Ed, an electrical engineer by trade, had been the president before my dad was, but he embezzled my grandfather out of a few hundred thousand dollars, a great deal of money back in the day, and ran off to South America, leaving my Aunt and my niece and nephew to hide in shame in their little ranch house in Massapequa. Neighbors gossip. Even their dog (who loved Ed) ran away. Their life was quite messy for a long time after that. Even after they got a new dog.

My father came to my grandfather's rescue at my mom's insistence. He quit his job as vice president of sales (one of hundreds of vice presidents of sales, but still...) of a textile company in the city to save her father's company. Or

try to. He knew nothing about thermometers at the time, and said so to everyone the day he arrived. But he was a quick study. God had blessed him with an innate knowledge of how thermometers worked, and how to sell them. God gets a kick out of thermometers I guess, and wanted everyone to have at least one.

We had gone from being a middle class family to a lower-middle class family while he accepted a big pay cut and took on my grandfather's mortgage. I was ten. But by the time I went to college the company was thriving and my dad was a hero. He wanted me to come into the business and be a partner after I graduated, but I wanted no part of it. I hated Long Island and thermometers, and math really didn't have as much in common with thermometers as the existence of numbers on the little glass cylinders might indicate.

That's pretty much a highlight reel of my entire life until college. It was mostly boring, except for the first time I made love when I was sixteen, and a three-day cruise to Bermuda with my parents when I was twelve. I remember fondly riding on the back of the moped my dad had rented. We were circling around the island. My dad dropped me off near an emerald green golf course while he went to fill the bike up with gas across the street. At a certain point I lost

sight of him and the bike and started to panic. But then I told myself it was irrational to believe he had abandoned me there forever. So I just closed my eyes and waited, trying to be patient. Of course, he came back. He was fine.... That image sticks with me to this day.

Chapter 5

I told my story to Emily one day, thinking she might also share her story of growing up with me. But that general subject was waved off. All she ever said were things like, "My parents are just normal people. I grew up normal. I'm still normal. That's really all there is to say."

I knew she was born and raised in a town "near San Francisco." No siblings, she mentioned another time.

Once in a sensitive moment I asked her if her parents had been mean to her, or had gotten divorced. She just laughed and insisted they were "just fine, and still together."

Her auburn hair, which she kept just short enough to expose the sexiest part of the back of her neck, and her pale skin sometimes gave people an impression of shyness, meekness, but actually Emily was very outspoken, outgoing, and absolutely driven. Driven to study politics, and this semester, business too.

In class she was very unreserved with her thoughts. Outside of class she had a lot of friends. But even among these friends she would never discuss anything about her past, except to occasionally mention some "dumb boyfriend" she once had.

The other odd thing about Emily, which I actually found more intriguing than odd at the time, was that even though she was studying political science, she didn't seem to have any particular affiliation to the left or right, Democrat or Republican. No specific ideology. No cause. She told me she wanted to understand and study people. But she was less interested in taking sides unless it was about a specific issue that moved her.

After finals, Junior year, Emily came up with a plan for the coming summer.

The first summer of our relationship she had gone home to California, I had gone home to New York. We called each other almost every night, and yearned for September when we could be together again. But now we had been together another year. There was no way we could be apart for an entire summer break.

So she decided, and I agreed, that after a short trip home to our respective parents, she would come join me in New York for a few days and then we would go to Italy. Yes, Italy! She said she had saved up a few thousand dollars from having worked summers through high school and she wanted to spend it on us.

I told her I could borrow air fare from my parents, and also would work for a few weeks in my dad's factory before we left. She sounded happy about that.

I picked Emily up from JFK after not having seen her for three weeks. She was wearing a white silk skirt, a thin pink sweatshirt, and a brand new rather expensive looking handbag. At baggage claim I noticed her suitcases were beautiful and brand new: Louis Vuitton. I mentioned that her luggage looked pretty fancy. "A gift from my Uncle," she said. "We can use it for both of us!" She leaned over to kiss me, cool soft lips, quickly bringing us back into our little bubble. That's what we had created together, a little bubble of time and space that we seemed to live inside while everyone else wandered around outside.

When we reached the door of my parents' house I became very nervous. I knew they would like her, but what if she didn't like them? What if she thought they were too judgmental, which they certainly tended to be? Or not classy enough, with my dad having spent too many years working in a thermometer factory, and my mom constantly worrying about whether I was growing a beard, or had just forgotten to shave, because "only bums had beards." And do we want another glass of Tropicana orange juice? Because there's a

lot of vitamins in Tropicana. And the roast beef won't be ready for another half an hour.

But the funny thing is, Emily totally got them from the first minute they met. She thought they were sweet. She related to them as if they were old neighbors from her childhood. She insisted on helping in the kitchen. She made little jokes that made my mom laugh. I was proud of her, proud to show her off.

After three days of hectic sightseeing in New York, going into the city by train each morning, returning by dinner time, we were now ready for the big trip.

Chapter 6

We landed in Rome jet lagged, fought through customs and made it to our hotel near the Spanish Steps. Once we entered our room Emily did something she had never done before.

Usually her undressing was demur, shy. She would come out of the bathroom in pajamas, or a robe, or occasionally a sexy nightgown. But this time, due to the summer heat and the almost drunken way we felt with the time change, she came out of the bathroom completely naked. I was sitting on the bed trying to regroup from the long flight. She turned and looked at herself in the mirror, turning sideways, touching her perfectly rounded breasts, then smoothing the light reddish brown patch of hair between her legs. She held a glass of champagne in her hand, a fine welcome from the hotel. The bottle stood in a bucket of ice by the armoire.

She put three fingers in the glass and sprinkled the champagne on her skin, then laid down on the bed and spread her legs slightly, closing her eyes. "Come on," she whispered. She flashed a look of joy, her steely eyes turning soft, ready.

I began licking the drops of champagne until she pulled me fiercely into her. She grabbed my hair, kissing my face forcefully. She began to cry, then laugh. I couldn't read her. We were both emotionally wasted. The openness with which she gave herself was a bit staggering, so out of character. We fell asleep mid-day and slept until it was time for dinner.

We were able to walk to the restaurant Emily had in mind. She had evidently done quite a lot of research ahead of time. We passed beautiful clothing shops, men in suits on motor bikes, women in heels as tall and thin as pencils (both the heels and the women), some wearing the shortest skirts imaginable, some walking arm in arm with tall men in black pants and black short sleeve shirts, unshaven for days, with cigarettes hanging from their mouths.

Emily was very different from these European women. And she was also a different person than the one I had known at school, or at my parents' house. She seemed older, more sophisticated. She knew her way around somehow. In fact, she seemed to be more comfortable here than back home in some way. I was amazed at how happy and in her element she was.

After a stunning meal at a small intimate restaurant that she said her friend had told her about – although later I found out she had been there before – we headed back to

our room. It was close to midnight. But our bodies weren't ready to sleep. We wanted to adjust to the time change by morning and knew it would be smart to try to go to bed soon. But we were wide awake, even after having shared a bottle of wine.

"Jack."

"Yeah," I said dreamily. I was sitting in a rocking chair with my eyes closed after taking off my dress shoes.

"You know why I like you?"

She was a little drunk so I figured this was going to be interesting. "Okay, why?"

"I like the way you look at me. I can tell when you look at me that I can trust you. Really trust you. You're a good guy."

"I trust you too, Em..."

"Well *don't*" she said in a concerned voice. "You can't."

The words frightened me.

"Why not?"

She came closer to me, I thought, perversely, she might kiss me and then confess to me she was seeing someone else.

"You can trust me to be loyal," she said as if reading my mind. "I won't cheat on you. But there are other things. Things I can't reveal," she laughed in a drunken, almost girlish way. But she seemed sad at the same time.

"A secret," she whispered.

"Well, tell me then!" I said, half pleading, but trying to stay light-hearted. Not wanting to darken the conversation. "I hate secrets. Even Santa Claus kind of pissed me off."

"No. Not yet. I can't. But I can say this. It's a question, actually: What would you think if I told you that after I've spent this money I brought with me, that I will be totally broke? Penniless. And that if I want to finish my senior year, I'll have to get a job to pay for the tuition?"

"Then I'll get a job too. I'll help you," I said seriously. "We'll make it work." Or was she wanting some other answer? She knew I didn't have enough money for both of us.

I even wondered, is that why she made love to me with such abandon this afternoon? To get me to help her pay for school? Because I was really shaken up by the encounter. Was her mind somewhere else?

But my fear about her motives didn't make sense. She didn't ask me to pay for her way here. She seemed to like spending her own money, and treated me to dinner.

"You would help me, wouldn't you?" she laughed. "You'd work at some little record store or something and study your math books in between customers while listening to "The Sundays."

I had a confused look on my face.

She smiled, and I smiled back. But I couldn't read her.

"You're innocent. You know that?" she continued. We were both drunk. But obviously she was more drunk than I was. "You're just too innocent. Maybe even for your own good. What do you know of the world? You're a Democrat, a raging liberal! You want to save the world instead of conquer it. Rome conquered. It didn't bother saving anything or anyone. But you...you're just too sweet. Too good."

Then she added, "Are you even real?" She never talked like this. "You know, I slept with a few other guys before I met you." She blurted this out as if finally coming to some point.

"Yeah, I know, Emily. So what? It's not like I was around! If you want to tell me something about your past, fine. Who were they? And why did you break up?"

"Why we broke up was...because, they weren't like you," she said quietly. "They were fakes. They were leeches, really. They wanted other things, they wanted more than me. More than love. They thought I couldn't see through them."

I had no idea what she was talking about. I thought she was about to go on and finally get to "the secret."

"We could have a repeat performance."

"You mean I could turn into them?"

"No, silly! You couldn't be like them if you tried! A repeat of...of...this afternoon."

She looked at me mischievously. "We could just pretend someone rewound the tape, and that it hadn't happened yet. So we could just start the scene from the beginning."

Her eyes were sparkling now, beautiful even when they glistened from too much wine and a lack of proper sleep. Her blue dress was coming half way off her shoulders by the time I had a chance to respond.

"Lay down on the bed, just like before," she commanded playfully. "No, your socks were off, remember? And you weren't wearing a jacket."

She went into the bathroom with a refilled glass of champagne and quietly closed the door behind her. And then, as if by magic, the tape rewound.

Chapter 7

We took the fast train to Venice. We had lunch at a hundred twenty miles an hour, with cows blurring by, with thousands of acres of farmland tumbling past us.

We entered the city, of course, by boat. Venice looked like a painting on the water, ancient, sparkling, multi-colored, multi-faceted.

In St. Marks Square I took a photograph of Emily running, dispersing a flock of pigeons into the air with her arms wide apart. I snapped the picture just as the birds began to scatter and take flight. We walked and walked, past gondolas, fountains, fish markets, fruit stands, and outdoor restaurants resting on the canal.

Our hotel was opulent but not in a touristy way. I was amazed she had found the perfect place to stay in, again, as she had in Rome, although I began to assume maybe every hotel was perfect in a place like this.

We walked upstairs on plush red carpet until we came to our room on the third floor. When we entered we saw that the house keepers had put everything back together from our chaotic morning. They had even put Emily's skin cream back in her travel kit, wrapped in a thin tissue with a silver

colored bow placed on top. A small square of chocolate lay on each of our pillows. Blue sky sparkled against the window as the sun began to find its way below the water.

"Chocolate is just about my favorite thing," I admitted.

"So I've noticed," she said, as she put her sun glasses on the dresser. "You've eaten chocolate for every desert since we've met. In fact, you were eating chocolate that night I first met you at the café. I noticed you were eating 'Polar Ice Caps' one at a time from a box in your pocket."

"Wow, you noticed that? And remembered?" I was amazed she would pick up on such a subtle thing, even before we had been introduced. They were popular chocolate mint nuggets that I had grown addicted to. They sold them at the café. How did she remember that?

"What else have you noticed about me?" I felt a bit like a British Prince, Emily was the ever present paparazzi.

"Well, I notice everything." She nodded slowly. "I'm a spy."

"Oh, you are!" I laughed. "Is that your secret?"

"Perhaps. But spies don't tell. Unless they're not. Or pretending they're not."

"Well, if this is the way spies act in your country, I surrender. In fact, I want asylum."

She ignored my comment and began to inspect a chess board with beautiful, hand carved marble pieces. She ran her fingers across the smooth carvings. The board sat fully prepared for the guests, laying handsomely upon an antique wooden table with two big chairs facing each other. Each chair had a blue and white striped seat cushion. You would only see such a thing in Italy. It was so perfect.

“Do you know how to play?” she asked.

“I'm not a grand master, but I've dabbled.”

“Well, dabble with me then.”

She sat down in one of the chairs and motioned to me with her eyes. I made my way over. She'd taken white.

With her first move I noticed the delicate beauty of her wrist and hand and fingers. No rings, no bracelet. No jewelry anywhere. Not even a trinket around her neck. No ear rings. She obviously couldn't afford even imitation diamonds. Or maybe she just didn't care for such things?

She surprised me with how good she was at the game. Her mind was very complex; she led me to think she was planning one direction of attack, only to attack me from another angle. But after so much aggression against my barely capable defense, she got too confident and exposed her queen and I trapped her.

She looked at the board for a long time, then looked up at me. "I need to distract you," she said.

"Yes, you do," I nodded.

She got up from her chair and took me by the hand and led me to the big white framed window overlooking the streets of Campo Santa Margherita and opened it wide. Even though we were on the third floor there was no screen. I could see straight down into the plaza if I leaned my head out just a few inches. I could smell dampness in the air. White birds flew past in a small flock. She was somewhere behind me. I wondered if she was going back to the chess board to move some pieces around without me looking. Or maybe she intended to push me out? She was a spy after all. She was hired to get rid of liberals one by one.

But instead she pressed lightly against me and put her hands under my shirt. I felt her soft hands probing, feeling my skin slowly, outlining my ribs as she circled her hands across my chest.

I was getting excited, but I refused to show it. I kept my attention on the scene below, and the birds gliding around the adjoining buildings.

She began to unbuckle my belt. I didn't move. Her hands moved down and found out I was anything but disinterested in the game. She let my clothes drop to the

floor and then I heard her undressing behind me. Slowly, barely audibly, her blouse lifted over her head. I heard her skirt fall down to her bare feet. She stepped out of her circle of clothes. Now I felt her warm skin push hard against me from behind. Then she got down on her knees and crawled through my legs, rising up in front of me.

The passersby and beautiful random images beyond my vision ceased. The time I had wasted staring at strangers ended. Her bare back faced the sky. Her mouth covered mine. She blocked out the world, nothing else existed but her. We made love in front of the window for a while, and then floated over to the bed.

She pushed me down and began unwrapping a piece of chocolate that was on her pillow. My mouth began to salivate thinking she was going to feed me before we continued. But instead she laid down on her back, crumbled the chocolate in her hands and put the melting pieces on her thighs and near her belly, then closed her eyes. It was the best meal I had during our time in Italy.

When we got up to bathe and dress for dinner she went over to the chess board and looked over the game. "You won," she smiled. "Another spy bites the dust."

Chapter 8

After that day our relationship shifted. She seemed to care even more about who I really was, what I thought about things, and what I meant to her future. She began to deepen her loyalties. Suddenly we were both making certain quiet assumptions. And those assumptions and hopes rarely wavered.

One of the things that struck me about Emily is that she rarely showed anger toward me, and rarely bickered about little things. Her mood was steady. Her optimism and sense of fun was a constant. She was emotionally charged with bigger issues, and never got bogged down in the day to day. She wanted to become something special some day. She wanted to work hard and take in all the information she could from every class back at school. One night I told her that I thought she would become either a well known political writer or a famous business person. Her response was, "Well, we'll see." But I could see in her eyes she was pleased to think about the possibilities.

During our senior year, not a day would go by without us seeing each other. But we were both extremely busy. She was still living in the dorm – a rare thing for a senior.

Affordability was the issue. She also worked at an organization two days a week that was really more of a combination of companies, from what I could decipher. She was an apprentice, she said, doing whatever they asked, getting involved in various projects. When I asked where she was getting the rest of the money to pay for school (a part-time job wasn't going to pay for all of it) she would tell me she was scrambling to make it day to day, but didn't need my help, then would change the subject.

As Christmas break approached I decided to move forward with the biggest decision of my life. I had no idea whether she would accept the ring I bought her, because even though I knew our relationship was serious, timing was an issue. Our after college life was completely unsettled – we were still thinking about what part of the country to live in, where and how we would find work. Maybe she would want to live together before deciding? But I was determined to at least show her how serious and committed I was to her. I didn't see a downside other than my feelings getting a bit hurt. What I knew for sure was I wanted her. She was the one.

There was an art museum in town. I took her there, not so subtly to remind her of our summer trip. I had a particular place in the museum in mind. While standing in

front of an oil painting of Venice, a scene of a building on the canal with a single white window open to the sky, I showed her the ring.

She became very serious. "I've been thinking about this too since the summer, Jack. But you don't know everything about me. There are things you need to know...Like, what if I came from the poorest family, the least classiest parents, imaginable? What if I couldn't make it on my own? What if we had a child and I didn't want to work, or couldn't? Would you be ready to support me and a little screaming baby keeping us up all night? How would we survive day to day? You know, a college romance isn't anything like marriage. And I just think that..."

"Emily, I don't care how poor your parents are, or who they are, or even how they treated you. You're here with me now. The rest doesn't matter. I know you, in some ways, maybe not *all* ways. But I may know you better than anyone else in the world knows you! And of course, you know I would do whatever it takes to take care of you. You should never worry about that."

I couldn't imagine her not being able to take care of herself, but if this is what she needed to know, so be it.

"I can't promise you an opulent life, or a trip to Italy every summer. But you know, that's not what would make us happy in the end anyway."

"Well then, what would?" she asked. Was it a rhetorical question? What was she getting at?

"We would, I guess! Being together." I was stammering, feeling too put on the spot. "Isn't that what you think too?"

She just stared at me, no words came.

I said, "Is this the longest yes to a proposal in history? Or is it the longest no?"

"I think it's the longest yes," she said. Then she turned away. "I just need to look at this picture one more time. Because if we can never afford to go back there again, then this is as good a time as ever to say goodbye."

Chapter 9

For reasons that will become apparent later, I want to state that during these years I became acutely aware of what Bruce Springsteen called, "the gap between what the forefathers of America set our course to be, and the reality of what America had become." I became interested in politicians that I thought could set us back on the right course.

Emily steadfastly refused to take any political sides. The only two things she said were these: National elections always seemed to be a black and white choice between greatness and disaster. And, it seemed to her that "America has always been like a fish jumping into the skies of catastrophe before diving back down into the deep of its own soul." That was quite possibly the wisest thing she had ever said. Even if it took me a while to buy into the flying fish as part of the metaphor.

But overall, her responses only added to my frustration. She seemed to be saying she knew more about these things than I did – me, the unwise, ever innocent one. She never stopped me from pursuing my activist work on the political front, on campus, and in the community with more local

issues, but she also never joined me. It was the one major gap in our relationship.

This sets the scene leading to our graduation. It occurred the summer after Bush's second inauguration.

While we had each made friends at school, very few would be tracking our lives after this day. While we had each studied hard to follow our scholastic interests, it was clear neither of us were ready for the real world. Our school was considered a great school, a serious and extremely well respected university. But we didn't learn much about reality here, except for how good love could be. For the most part we were safely hidden behind the walls of the university. We had only bought some precious time here to get ready for the rest of life.

One thing I truly looked forward to on graduation day was meeting Emily's parents. (Otherwise the ceremony was just a meaningless tacky way for everyone to say goodbye. A rock concert and a big party would have been a lot more meaningful for us.)

As far as Emily's folks, they had never met their prospective son-in-law. None of our families had met. I was eager to assess who, and what, had been Emily's primary influences during her years before college. Even though she had asked me many times not to care.

The night before the ceremony Emily invited me out to a rare restaurant date. We had been carefully saving pennies throughout our senior year and would have never thought of going to such a fancy place except to look for part-time work as a waiter or waitress.

She wore a dress I had never seen before. It was made of thin velvet. It was very dark blue, and had a narrow delicate white lace collar. The sleeves were also hemmed with the same white lace.

We sat down, and if I hadn't been dazzled enough, she proceeded to order a one hundred dollar bottle of wine!

"May I ask you what in God's name you're doing, little Miss Orphan Annie?" I was laughing, but also a bit concerned. I didn't have that kind of money on me.

"Let's have a drink first," she replied.

The waiters were all in white jackets. The atmosphere was quiet, romantic, serious. The wine was brought over with the typical ceremony – an attempt to justify the price, I mused. A little swig was offered to me. I twisted the liquid around and sniffed it. It almost made me laugh, since I had never done anything so pretentious before. I had only seen this scene on TV. I wondered what would have happened if I had said, "No, it's a little young. Let's try something else." But I didn't dare. Besides, it tasted spectacular!

When the waiter filled our glasses half way and slipped quietly back into the kitchen I said, "Cheers, and may I add that you look incredible tonight."

She clinked her crystal goblet gently against mine and we heard the faint sound of a bell ringing. Reminiscent of a distant wind chime. This night was getting off to a wonderful start. But she looked a bit concerned. I detected worry in her eyes.

"I have something to tell you, Jack." She subtly cleared her throat. "Something I've been keeping from you for a long time."

She looked down shyly at the table. "It's the secret."

I couldn't read her. My stomach tightened. I wondered if this was a mere confession, or the end.... A strange way to break up, going out in style like this, then leaving me for a guy back home?

"In fact," she added, "I've been keeping it from you since the day we met."

Then I began to wonder, is she sick, maybe even dying?

"What is it, Emily?" I said anxiously. She knew not to extend this any further.

"It's my father," she said.

I had always suspected something terrible was going on with him. A murderer? In jail for life?

She looked down at her wine and took a deep breath.

"Remember when I told you I noticed you eating Polar Ice Caps the first day we met? Well, he owns the company that makes them."

I started to laugh. "Okay...so...? Is that the big secret?"

"He also owns a regional airlines too, Jack. And about a dozen other companies around the world...He's a billionaire. My father is Samuel Briggs.... Thusly, he begat Emily Briggs."

I laughed a short nervous laugh. "You're kidding."

"No."

"Has he disowned you?"

"No, not at all!"

I cocked my head to one side, looking at her from this new perspective. "Why did you make it seem like you were so poor all this time?"

She took a sip of wine and wiped her face with her napkin in a prim and classy way I had never took notice of before.

"When I was in high school, private high school, there were boys that were interested in me. Like any normal girl, I expressed interest in return if someone caught my attention in a good way. Some of them were handsome, many came from rich parents like I did. But the 'daughter of a

billionaire' thing, well that took on a life of its own and brought things to another level entirely. It ruined my relationship with my first boyfriend when he started envisioning that after we got married some day we would buy a castle in southern France and live happily ever after. I had been to southern France. I didn't particularly like Niece, and I wasn't about to ask my dad to buy me the castle in Ez. So I told him that wasn't going to happen. Eventually he saw me as someone who was trying to control his life with my money, since I wasn't willing to even give his dream a chance. The other two boys I dated after that had similarly bizarre requests right from the beginning, and those affairs pretty much came to the same ending. One of them insisted that work was by definition only for poor people. He was serious! Things would start out relatively normal each time, but eventually being the daughter of Samuel Briggs ruined any chance I had to be seen for who I was. Or to get to know who they really were, beyond the greed and the arrogance they hid behind."

Food arrived. Something we hadn't ordered – a special appetizer compliments of the chef, delivered in what looked like a very fancy boiled egg holder. It was cream of cucumber mousse. Quite fantastic.

I waited for her to continue, trying to absorb this bizarre twist.

“That’s why I decided that I was going to ‘dress down,’ so to speak, at college. I was going to choose a school with high academic credentials, but not a Harvard, not a Yale. Some place where I would meet good people who were not all just about status. That’s why I chose to go to our school. It didn’t quite have the rep. And that’s how I came to meet you. I chose my destiny, you see? And I think my plan may have worked! Because we’re here together tonight.”

“I passed the test?” I asked, still stunned.

“I made sure you never had to pass a test! All I wanted you to do was to be normal, be yourself.”

I said, “But why did you choose me? Was it because I was eating Polar Ice Caps? Was that an irony you just couldn’t pass up?”

She let out a long laugh too loud for the atmosphere in this place. “It’s why I remembered you were eating them! But that’s all. It had nothing to do with me falling in love with you. In fact, if anything, it made me hesitate. But in the end, I didn’t hold it against you.”

“So that’s the secret? You’re a billionaire’s daughter. That’s the whole thing? No secret boyfriend? No rare disease? You’re not a spy for your dad’s company? You’re

not just trying to recruit a math wizard for your dad's new secret computer lab and become the next Microsoft? Or take over the world?"

"No. You know everything now, in a way. But you'll see, Jack, money *changes* everything. It can't *not* change things."

She leaned across the table and looked into my eyes, the first real "Emily connection" I felt all evening. She said quietly, "I really don't want to lose the life we've created together. It's sweet. It's pure. I don't want to turn into Mr. and Mrs. Stuck Up, aimlessly wandering around the world from five star hotel to five star hotel. I've done that already actually. The world becomes boring very quickly when nothing is unattainable. I want something more than that. I want to be challenged, Jack. I want to challenge my mind. I want to have fun with you. And I want...." She stopped and leaned back away from me.

"You want...?"

"I want what married couples want."

"Lots of sex?" I teased.

"After that."

"Chocolate?"

Her face began to crumble. I had gone too far with the joke.

“Hey, I’ve thought of all that. I want children too, Em,” I whispered, moving closer to her and touching her cheek. When you’re ready. As soon as you’re ready.”

She came over to my side of the table and held me tightly, covering her face in the curve of my shoulder. I felt a tear wet my shirt.

The food came slowly, one celebrated course at a time. Another bottle of wine was called for. This new bottle was way more expensive than the first.

Chapter 10

Each of our names got called that day. We received the all important piece of paper that now officially assumed we knew something.

My parents gathered around me after the ceremony. As we hugged I spotted Emily gathered around some friends. I began making my way over to her with my parents following close behind. I saw two stately people waiting in the background. There was a white stretch limo parked in a restricted area nearby. I waited for Emily to finish her tearful goodbyes to classmates.

“Oh, there you are!” she said.

She looked around to make sure no one else she knew was near us. Then she motioned for us to follow her. We walked over to the couple standing near the limo.

Emily's father was dressed in a perfectly fitted black suit and a gray silk tie. His hair was dark brown, grown out longer than a typical business cut but fashionably styled. There were tones of silver beginning to show at his temples. It made him look quite wise, astute. His face was a bit weathered, but not just by age. He had a few lines around his eyes that foretold more than his share of sleepless nights.

He had intense blue-gray eyes, like Em's, and a mouth that I thought at first looked a bit severe and critical. But the severity vanished when he nodded hello.

Emily's mother had red hair and a face shaped like her daughter's. I could see what Emily's face might age like, and wasn't terribly displeased by it. She wore a silk Chinese scarf around a white sequined dress. Her shoes were more casual than the outfit called for. Sandals, not heels. But they were gold.

"Dad, mom, this is Jack Hampton and his parents, Alice and John.... Dearest Hampton's, this is Samuel Briggs, and his darling wife Adrian, otherwise known as my mommy." Her mom laughed. She and Emily hugged.

"You remembered your sixth grade introduction lessons very well, Emmy," Adrian said. Smiles all around. Things seemed to be off to a comfortable start.

Her father was staring at me, no doubt sizing me up. I thought I saw a bit of disappointment cross his face. I searched for something to say...I couldn't say, "Glad to meet you sir, Emily has told me so much about you." Nor did I think it was appropriate for me to tell him how much I loved Polar Ice Caps. I don't think that would have impressed him very much. Maybe he wouldn't have even remembered it

was one of the hundreds of companies he owned! He wasn't helping me out since he refused to be the first to speak.

Emily said, "Dad, I told you he was cute. Don't you think I was spot on?"

He smiled for the first time. "Yes, I suppose so." I didn't know if his smile was one of affection for her, or a deflection of the question.

My mom said, "Would you like to join us for dinner tonight?"

"I'm so sorry," Emily's dad said a bit too quickly. "I am a slave to my work unfortunately. I have to catch a plane in a few hours." No boasting about what he was doing, or where he was flying off to.

"So sorry to hear that," my dad offered with genuine disappointment, his voice sounding almost inaudible compared to the booming proclamation of Samuel Briggs. Even when apologizing, Briggs' personality tended to overwhelm and out sparkle those around him.

"Emily," Adrian said, "Would you do me a favor and spend a bit of time with your dad before he has to leave? He's off to Singapore and it's going to be a torturous flight."

"Sure," she said dutifully, and she shook our hands goodbye.

“Em, would you and your mom like to join us for dinner?” I offered quietly. “Or would you rather spend some time alone with your mom tonight?”

“Mom is flying back to California on a six o'clock flight. Why don't I join you at the restaurant after I see her off?”

Back at my mom and dad's extremely affordable hotel they commented on how hard Emily's parents seemed to work, having no time to spend with their daughter on her graduation. I hadn't told them who he was. I just shook my head. “A pity.”

While they took showers and primped themselves for what they considered to be an exciting evening I surfed through channels on the TV. I sprawled across the rough itchy California King bedspread, pointing the remote like a hand gun, firing in rapid succession. As always, nothing whatsoever was on. I found myself alone in a cheap hotel wasting away the first hours of my math degree mesmerized by an episode of “Sponge Bob.” It was an elementary study of spatial relationships. A square yellow sponge, in pants, and a very dumb pink star fish – five equidistant points, no brains. Underwater comedy for all ages. It was just what I needed to relax.

Chapter 11

I suppose it's fortunate when seen through the eyes of a businessman that we made it to Chapter 11 without incident. "Chapter 11" is what happens when a company files for bankruptcy. My life seemed to be going in quite the opposite direction. Marrying the heiress of an inconceivable fortune.

I had even gone so far as to suggest Emily consider a prenuptial agreement with me if she wanted one. She said she wasn't concerned, and that anyway most of her money was held in a trust.

I really didn't care. I was just never one of those people who had been driven by money. Did I have an ego? Yes. Could I succumb to greed and avarice? Yes. But overall, Emily got what she was hoping for. Someone that loved her and couldn't care less about living in a huge house or driving a Mercedes convertible around.

After graduation, Emily and I took "one more vacation" at her insistence, before we settled down to a more normal life. This time we went to Maui. It was her treat, of course. During our two weeks there we would try to decide where to live, and what we wanted to do. So it was a

working vacation. Probably tax deductible in some way, justifiable to her father's accounting firm.

We landed at the Kahului airport and were offered leis, gently put around our necks by a limo driver. Apparently, we were going on vacation, Emily-style. The Emily I had rarely been allowed to experience.

We were escorted, drinks in hand, in a white stretch limo, to the Kea Lani hotel nestled between Kihei and Makena. We made it in time to walk on the beach at sunset. The tropical winds died down to pay homage to the show. People gathered to watch the event and stood still as shadowed statues in groups of twos and threes. Then red and orange melted out of the clouds like wet paint. The sun was large and triumphant as it cast its closing image into the sea, with a final quick burst of green sparkling on the horizon marking the end of time for this day on earth.

That night we ate at a restaurant in the town of Kihei called, "Sarentos." We feasted on cold gazpacho and avocado soup, and salmon with crème on toasted baguettes. Then we shared an entrée of Opakapaka, a delicate Hawaiian fish, topped with olives in a brown sauce with a tomato base and a hint of chili added to spice it rather aggressively.

Walking on the beach after dinner we watched the stars floating in the sky. The air was so clean and clear we could see the Milky Way. It made us dizzy. The closer stars looked magnified, electrified. Cool sand beneath our feet. This was a resting place for our thoughts. We didn't want to move or speak. We were extraordinarily happy.

Emily had rented out a villa on the beach, a hundred feet from the ocean. These private abodes shaped like little Taj Mahals rented for about \$2,000 a night. I didn't ask for, or refuse, anything. I decided to just not make a big deal of it either way.

The next day we took an early morning walk on K Keawakapu Beach. It was seven a.m. There was a half moon over the ocean, dressed in chalk white.

We began to discuss where we would live, where to settle down. Neither of us wanted to live in New York. That was clear. Nor did we want to live in our college town. There was nothing left for us there. I had been to California and loved the San Francisco area. But that was a double-edged sword, because that's where Emily's parents lived: Kentfield, in Marin County, across the Golden Gate Bridge.

Still, I had been to small towns north of there, and other parts of the Bay Area as well. After I was accepted to the University of Berkeley my parents and I had flown to

California to visit the campus. I ultimately decided not to go there, but we visited my dad's friends the following week in a small town called Woodacre, and I felt a real connection to the land and the people I met. They were smart but down to earth. Marin was a "rich" place to live, but not what you would call snobby. There were hippies and dogs running wild and funky stores selling beads and leather-bound journals. There was even an organic ice cream shop which was all winter. The entire store was about the size of two phone booths turned on their sides.

The other part of the "where to live" equation was that Emily wanted to work. She had absolutely no interest in bumming around all day while I trudged off to a job each morning. This set off a whole series of other conversations that began to point to the same conclusion regarding the Bay Area.

One night at dinner she said to me, "Remember how your dad went to work to save your mom's father's company? Well, how about coming to work for my dad, and we could both work there, and work our way up the chain, fair and square?"

"Fair and square? How is that going to happen? Emily, I thought that would be the last thing you'd ever want for me, or for you! I thought it was important to you that I

wanted to be my own man. I don't want your dad setting my salary. I don't want him telling me what to do."

"Okay, okay understood," she responded, shrugging her shoulders. But then she got quiet. Had that been another test?

"Did you really want me to say yes?" It was incongruous, impossible to believe that she would allow us to fall into the very trap she spent four years trying to avoid.

"No, no. I'm glad you don't want to. It's just...something else, really. Not about you."

She pushed her glass of wine away, and shook her head. "Jack, I have a very complicated relationship with my father. He wasn't around much when I was a kid. When he was home he would hug me like I was his favorite person in the world and always tell me how great I was. Even though he had no idea who I was and what I was thinking. Or what I liked or didn't like. He didn't have the time or desire to know. I felt like some little teddy bear he'd visit with once a week. Then, bang, he'd be back at it, racing around the world making deals, and conjuring up new ways to expand his little empire."

She looked up at me, "What I'm trying to say is, even if you don't work for my dad, which is fine with me, maybe I would...or should."

"Why?"

She looked at me with a pained expression. A look I hadn't seen before. "I want to show him who I am, and how smart I am. I want to show him how hard I can work, how much I can help him if he'd let me try."

"For what reason? To win his love that way?"

"To win his respect."

"And then win his love?"

"Yes, I guess. But not just some obligation of flesh and blood, real love that both of us can feel."

"So you'd step in there and immediately be president of one of his airlines? Make a million dollar bonus every year. How would that win his love or respect?"

"That's just it, Jack, I wouldn't want that, but believe me I know my dad, he would never do that. He's a master of putting people at the level of responsibility they're ready for. He never plays favorites. His only favorites are the companies themselves. The people just fill in spaces to the puzzle. He wouldn't offer me anything more than I could handle. But if I deserve it, he would let me work my way up. He wouldn't be able to resist if I was good enough."

I was very hesitant about the whole idea. Of course. But I also empathized in a way. She'd never had a real connection with her dad, so she wanted that. On the face of

it, he was an amazing man. And I thought she was probably as smart as he was, in fact, I was convinced of that. She was brilliant. I also found out she had been managing her own portfolio of stocks since she was ten. With help of course. But she was in charge of all the decisions of a five million dollar portfolio. She had gone through enough crazy markets to know how topsy turvy things can get. She learned patience. She learned to take risks when the rewards increased, and to take money off the table when the profits seemed to come too quickly. She was far more savvy than I could have ever imagined her to be even just a few months ago.

I suggested we take things a step at a time, move to the Bay Area, find a place to rent, let me look for my own job, and take it from there. I asked her not to commit to working with her father until after we were settled into a routine, with me working. If I found a good job, something I could really sink my teeth into, then her idea would make a lot more sense to consider. If I didn't find good work then maybe we'd have to consider another place to live, like Berkeley, or even somewhere further south like Palo Alto. Neither of us fancied living in L.A.

Our decision was made. She was bouncing with joy by the time we left Maui. We had agreed to a plan for our

future – a flexible plan, but at least it was a start. As our plane rose above the island we saw clouds framing the tops of the West Maui mountains, casting shadows on its rugged landscape, intensifying the green grasses that stretched out for miles. A part of me wanted to stay in Maui and make this our future, not just a memory. We could live in peace, in the sun, amidst unparalleled beauty. But her destiny was pulling her back home.

Chapter 12

Our rented house in Fairfax was located on a street that was anything but ultra wealthy. In fact, for the most part, our neighbors drove around in beat up cars, and their living rooms were filled with used furniture. No interior decorator had ever darkened their doorway.

The movie theater was – as originality would have it – “The Fairfax Movie Theater.” It had a red sign above the theater that simply said “FAIRFAX.” Except for many years the “A” and “X” bulbs were burned out. So at night the sign proudly proclaimed, “FAIRF...”

And that’s what we called it. We’d say, “I wonder what’s playing at ‘the FAIRF’ tonight?”

We would see Emily’s parents every few weeks. They lived about twenty minutes away in Kentfield, in a ten million dollar house with a gated secured fence, a private yard, and an infinity pool overlooking the city skyline.

I say they lived there, but what I mean is Adrian lived there, and Sam dropped in via helicopter every few weeks to say hello. Most of the time we went to visit he wasn’t there. Even if he said he’d be! Emergencies were a constant part of his life. Sometimes he was out of state. Sometimes he was

out of the country. Other times he stayed overnight in the city at a penthouse created just for him at company headquarters. "Briggs Tower" was his "house in the city." A thirty-five storey spread on California Street.

Adrian tried to make light of her husband's absences. She was used to it, decades of it. The house chef would always make us a great meal when we came. Adrian would create the menu around Emily's tastes, but would occasionally surprise me with my favorite meals as well. Apparently Emily and her mom would discuss ahead of time what my preferences were. It always ended with some variation of a chocolate desert, usually a soufflé.

One night we went to the Mill Valley Film Festival and borrowed her parents yellow Aston Martin. That caused quite a stir. They thought Emily was the star of one of the movies, with her auburn hair, hazel gray eyes sparkling, wide white confident smile, perfectly sculpted nose and rosy mouth. Red dress. Decked out in her mom's hundred thousand dollar jewelry (just for fun). Emily put on a quite a show, for them and later for me.

Finding a good job was my main goal. All of our plans hinged on it. I had a bit of a hitch during the application process, being that I had a wedding coming up, along with a ten day honeymoon. Not the best way to start off a

“dedicated work relationship.” But once I found the right group of guys at the right place, it turned out not to be a problem.

The right group of guys at the right place was a new technology firm called, “Logix.” They had a Facebook type of culture before Facebook was born, both in work-style and substance. They were located in a town close by us called Larkspur. I was hired as a computer programmer. The interesting thing was I didn't have the experience a lot of the applicants had but they liked the fact that I was a math wizard with a degree. I seemed to fit in personality-wise. I was an abstract thinker who was open to trying almost anything new, and I liked to work.

We were like a think tank, but with nobody outside the company listening! There was no marketing person to sell the brand. I asked Emily to be that person. I tried to sell her on the company, the people, the opportunity. But the team was just too “out there” for her. She couldn't see the potential.

They started me at an unheard of \$50,000 a year. My career seemed to be off and running.

Chapter 13

Our Wedding – a short story, by Jack Hampton

The wedding was ridiculous. If I was writing another type of book I would surely go into all the lush and sequined details, and all the famously rich people who were there, what they were wearing, how many hundreds of thousands of dollars the flower arrangements cost, where the event took place. Etc. Etc. I don't want to waste my time.

The truth is, I hated it and couldn't wait until it was over. Everyone there was mega-stuck up. I always figured when you're a certain level of rich you'd earn the right not to have to attend these kinds of things. But no, there are obligations even for the 3c7 crowd.

I'd go on and on about what famous band played a private concert for us that night (which no doubt was the peak of the event for me) but the truth is I don't remember much, even about that. By the end of the night I was so drunk I fell asleep during the helicopter ride back to the hotel.

The End.

Part II

“Of all the things in this world, the only thing that’s real is the personal monument we build. The rest is just mindless entertainment.”

—Samuel Briggs II

Chapter 14

That quote on the last page from “dad” is detestable to me.

I believe none of it. But in many ways, even from a distance, he controlled the agenda.

We moved from Fairfax to the more outer reaches north of Marin, to a town called Forest Knolls. We bought a beautiful house carved out of wood, with no detail left uncared for. I won't quote the price. Suffice to say that Emily accepted the wedding gift from her parents on behalf of both of us.

Each night I would drive the thirty minute commute home, winding over the crown of hills as Fairfax receded behind me, twisting through the town of Woodacre, past the Buddhist retreat center called “Spirit Rock.” Finally turning down the long newly paved circular driveway of our massive home.

Only a few weeks after we moved into our sparkling new house we found out Emily was pregnant. We were both ecstatic about it. She decided to wait until the baby was a year old before starting work for her father. I was very happy about that.

We were buying furniture for the baby's room, and making love on the couch in the baby's room. Emily's sweet round tummy would welcome my touch. Her desire for sex increased beyond her normally high appetite. Most nights we entered into our adventure with new ideas and heightened expectations. Even a month away from her due-date the hunger didn't lessen for either of us. We were on a drug of unknown quantity.

When Chelsea was born we celebrated silently. For two months Emily recovered from a difficult birth, mostly asking to be left alone with the baby. The birth had blown her mind. She felt like she had almost died in labor. She had refused drugs. We had a mid-wife at the hospital guiding her through it, but there were complications. The baby was fine. But Emily had to stay in the hospital for an entire week after the birth. I would meet her there every day after work and stay until both she and the baby were asleep.

When spring came, and Chelsea turned six months old, a cloud lifted. Emily became her optimistic self again, darting around making life sweet and fun for all of us.

The hills of Marin were golden brown, fog would awaken earlier than the sun each day and disappear begrudgingly like a ghost, thinning into a smoky mist by noon. The city winds rushed through the bay and cooled the

air. Life was comfortable. I loved my wife, and we adored our growing glowing child.

Chelsea's personality was a lot like Emily's. She was happy but very willful, very sure of herself (regardless of outcomes) and very focused. She had straight light-brown hair and blue eyes. The only physical feature that she and I shared was the shape of our eyes. They were overly large, Paul McCartney-like, exuding innocence, whether she or I were innocent at the time or not.

We enjoyed a special relationship. I put her to bed with made-up stories, and let Em sleep in each morning by feeding her and whispering songs in her ear until I had to rush off to work.

Chapter 15

One fairly startling change that occurred in the first year of Chelsea's life was that Emily's dad abruptly decided to stop globe-trotting around the world. He assigned others to do this. He was going to run the show from the home office on California Street. No one asked him for a reason. You didn't ask Sam Briggs to explain himself. But none of us assumed it had anything to do with him missing his family, or wanting to spend more time with his new granddaughter – and it didn't.

This was an important development, because it dovetailed with Emily's plan to eventually work for her dad in order to get closer to him. If she began soon she would be around his physical presence day-to-day, not just chasing his business footprint.

Chapter 16

As the rainy season fell upon us, and the winds grew a bit more surly, Emily decided to hire an au pair and go to work for her dad. She loved being a mom but she felt her mind and her education were being wasted. She was ready to fulfill her master plan.

Each day she was helicoptered from our grassy two-acre back yard to the rooftop of the Briggs building. She would leave about twenty minutes after I went to work and come home just in time for a seven o'clock dinner, which the au pair had prepared for us before leaving for the evening.

Life was hectic, there wasn't much time to play. But Emily seemed fulfilled with her work, and I had to let go of the opulent times when I'd arrive home to her smiling face and Chelsea's waiting arms. Now we faced, in an altered form, what most couples endured – resigning ourselves to being a “working family.” This is what I wanted in some ways – no help from the outside. No reliance on luck or fate. Both of us working, coming home to each other at the end of the day. But the truth was, it wasn't as noble or romantic as the vision it conjured up. I felt a strange dissatisfaction.

My work was fine, fun in fact. And my time with Chelsea was always a joy. But my time with Emily was getting shortened in terms of both quality and time spent in each other's presence. She was coming home late, excited, frazzled, pulled down by the work, obsessed with succeeding every day. I was having a hard time reaching her on any level. She was having a hard time getting in touch with her normally ever-present sense of fun. Sex became infrequent and mechanical to her. She was too nervous about work, too exhausted, too angry about losing a contract she was bidding on. She was becoming more like her father every day. Instead of her getting through to him, he was morphing her into the female counterpart of Briggs World-Wide.

I began to feel like we were less and less of a family and more and more a mini-corporation. She was being paid \$400,000 a year in her first year. Between the two of us, our bank account was growing steadily. But what did it really mean? We could have asked her dad for a five million dollar loan, or asked him to buy us a two million dollar yacht, and he would have written a check and forgotten about it a week later.

Then there was the question of money itself. At what point does the need for money become a person's sole goal and swallow all life and love in the process?

What did we really want? What was the meaning, the goal of working, spending? Did we even have the time to ask now? Couldn't we choose a whole new plan any time we wanted to?

I had always been very wary of organized religion. But I began to go to Spirit Rock on Monday nights, meditating for an hour, then listening to "a talk" afterward by the head teacher there, Jack Kornfield. He spoke of things that made me long for Emily, back in her dorm, kissing each other on a magical rainy night. And of our time in Venice, and in Maui. Not specifically the places, but the way we were connected to each other there. I wanted that dream back. I wanted a life that felt right, in the present. It was insane to put off caring, or joy, or love, for even a minute. It became exponentially insane to put it off for months, or years.

Emily was spending more time with her father, more than she ever had as a child. He opened up to her emotionally at private lunches, just the two of them, after a few glasses of wine. He would tell her about how the world-wide companies he oversaw, each with hundreds or thousands of employees, have to be seen as pieces on a chess

board for any of them to survive and for the employees to stay employed. Each business, in fact each industry, is in constant flux, and it takes focus to keep up with their various markets and technological changes. So it's important, he constantly stressed to her, to stay emotionally detached and stay out of micro-managing any one company or set of companies. He would fire the board of directors before he would fall prey to trying to run the business for them. If he tried to actually run any of the businesses he owned everything would fall apart.

His dispassion was his edge, he boasted. Others made the mistake of caring too much. They let their emotions destroy their intelligence and their objectivity. In fact, that's when he would swoop down and buy their company for a massive discount. It would inevitably be during a time of distress, when the owners were desperate. This was usually after they had destroyed their own creation out of love or care, or because they let their personal integrity get in the way of expansion. He would waive cash in front of their faces at a time of maximum fear and desperation, just enough to make them wonder why they should refuse it, and then virtually steal the company from under them.

He would get the company back on solid ground with a new board, and new leadership, then he would expand at

the right time – always having patience during the wrong times. Knowing which moment, which cycle, that each of his businesses was in, was his forté. And of course, he had easy access to liquid capital whenever he needed it. Banks believed his stories and bowed down to his every whim. He was never forced to create stock until the right time was at hand. He was never forced to beg for cash.

But Em also told me that while he bragged about his ventures, she also noticed an emptiness in him, and a recklessness that scared her. The cool calm Sam Briggs II was all show. His bravado was not just a pervasive cynicism, but a fear that if he stood still for even an hour his life would fall apart. There was nothing else to him but his monument to himself, which needed constant bricks and mortar.

Despite all the money he gave to charity, apparently to create good will for his companies, ultimately, even life itself was of no particular value to him. Nor was love. Nor was money. Nor was respect, or fame, or success! It was all just a cold game played for reasons even he could no longer rationally express. At this point his dispassion served him well because he had no fear. Not even a fear of death, he claimed. He therefore had no hesitation to put his ideas into action when he felt the timing was right.

When I spent time with him I thought he was quite brilliant, charming and affable. Also, very generous. All he wanted to talk about was Chelsea. Business never came up. So I was stunned at Emily's close-up assessment of him. He was obviously a very astute actor. A great showman who knew how to work a room.

Chapter 17

Emily told me, "Dad confirmed at lunch today what my mom hinted to me long ago. *His dad*, Sam Briggs the first, my weird grandfather who died a few years ago, who my dad never liked to talk about, was very strict with him when he was a kid. Insanely strict. He beat him if he didn't get "A's" in every class. Or if he made a bad play in a football game. Grand-dad's ego was so big that he felt it reflected badly on him if Sam Junior failed at anything. Dad admitted to me today he still doesn't care much about anything because of what his father did to him. I mean, why care? Especially if you hated the only person in your life that was around to please. Now he feels he's in a big fight with the world all the time. Mom told me in tears one day she knows he never loved her. He had no idea how to do that. And that if he loves anyone at all, it's me."

"I could believe that. I see it when he's around you."

She fell silent. Sighed. Eyes looking past me out the window. "I still want to help him. I want to reach him. But I don't know if I can. It could take a lifetime."

I said, "It could basically mean sacrificing your life in the attempt. And what about Chelsea and me? We need you too. We want more of your time too!"

"I know, Jack. *I know that.* And I want that too. But something will always feel broken if I don't try to get to him."

"Or he'll break you even more."

She swiped an errant strand of russet hair away from her eyes. Reflected.

"Emily, maybe you need to disconnect and start your own life from scratch, with your own family. The one you chose."

She still didn't say anything. Her eyes became glassy.

"You disconnected yourself when you went to college, Em. You wanted someone who didn't care about your family's money, and you found him. I just care about you and Chelsea, not how much money we have. So you got what you wanted!"

"I love you, Jack. You're right. I did get what I want."

"Well, and didn't you love the life we had before you started working there?"

"That's the point I'm trying to make, Jack! Not really! Something was always missing. Look, I know he can be toxic, I know that. The work is hard. He can be hard. But the

work is also exciting, even when things are falling apart. In fact, that's when I tend to shine, because he sees me sticking by him and not panicking in the middle of the game. I come up with new ideas, things he's never thought of, or at first might just wave off. But then we try it and a lot of times my ideas do work. He pulls me into his office and says, 'I have to admit it, Em, you're one smart kid.' It's such a wild feeling! He's beginning to trust me and respect me, even more than some of his right-hand guys that have been with him for twenty years. Because I'm not just an employee looking for a promotion or a raise or a slap on the back. I'm his daughter, his flesh and blood. He's proud of me, he really is. I'm getting through to him."

"And losing us in the process," I added.

"You're bad at bluffing, Jack. I don't believe I'll ever lose you! I just need a year or two at the most to learn the rest of the business from a genius, get a grasp of how the world operates, and tolerate my dad for who he is for just a little while, and let him love me."

She took my silence as a sign that I might be coming around.

"We're young, Jack. We have our whole lives to enjoy each other, and lay out in the sun with free time to spare. I'm not going to work there forever. But this is a critical time

when he happens to be available to me, in the office every day. He's finally seeing me for who I am. And in a way, I'm proving myself to myself as well. Please just give me a little more time."

Chapter 18

Chelsea and I spent a lot of time together on weekends. Emily was working most Saturdays now. And on Sunday she slept in until noon.

There are specific things two-year olds like to do – such as go to the corner park and rock on the spring loaded horses, eat toasted bagels and cream cheese on their dad's lap at the local bagel store and then smear what they don't want to eat on dad's pants, shop for toys for the bath tub, listen to music while singing and clapping along. Chelsea was funny and precocious. Almost like a little Shirley Temple at times. She pointed out a spider in the corner of our bedroom one day, looking scared. I said, "Don't worry, Chelsea, it's just a little spider, it won't hurt you." She looked closer and then pulled away, "Act-chee, big biter!" she said, with her round eyes looking up at me in an odd combination of panic and defiance. I took to writing down the crazy things she said in a notebook that had I planned to give to her when she was eighteen. In spite of the long odds, I hope I get a chance to do that some day.

Chapter 19

Who Is/Was Jed Whipple?

A longer story than the wedding story

by Jack Hampton

Jed Whipple was, as his name suggests – a wimp, a dork. A nerd. But he was a very smart wimp.

We first met back in school. In fact, Emily introduced him to me as a math wizard – a competition to my title. So when we met it was strange. And *he* was strange. Almost no one got his sense of logic, or even understood what it was he was saying in his mumbly nervous eyes-glued-to-the-ground kind of way.

We stayed casual friends, meaning I restrained myself from making fun of him and his profusely long crooked nose, his paddle ball ears, and his thick overly red lips. I would never have called him “Einstein Bozo,” as some others did. Still, I didn’t find myself wanting to call him to get together for lunch either.

Fast forward seven years after graduation, and here is Jed Whipple, ex-commodities trader, now mega-rich, with a

following of hungry investors that think he is veritably made of gold.

Up our driveway he comes in his green Jaguar. Out of the car he steps with his tailored suit and Italian shoes, and guess what? He was still his same nerdy self. His tie gave it away – gray with little red balloons swirling around in the foreground. Somehow he made his Italian suit look frumpy, like he'd bought it off a Salvation Army rack. Nothing had changed, except he had made millions trading food and oil and pork bellies (is that a food?) in the futures markets.

Successful commodities trading is an almost impossible task except for those whose mathematical skills are matched only by their dumb-assed luck.

He brought me an idea that created a preposterous synergy with my current situation.

Down he plopped, his fat round ass covering most of the love seat in our living room. He asked for something to drink before I could offer him something, then kept his fat ass glued to the cushion while I pretended to happily pour him a glass of white wine from the fridge.

After glugging it down in two swallows and tipping the glass toward his bespeckled eyes to see if there were perhaps a few stray alcohol molecules skateboarding around at the bottom of the bell curve, he began to explain his visit.

He wanted us to start a hedge fund together. Now one might rightly ask, "What exactly is a hedge fund?" The answer is, it's a limited partnership where the manager of the fund can do damn well anything he wants at any time he wants for enormous fees. If the fund is successful, meaning if the manager makes his investors steady money, or huge but volatile profits, the manager will make tens of millions a year. That's all Whipple needed to know about hedge funds. Because frankly, at the time, he didn't know much more than that.

But he did know a lot about one particular hedge fund strategy. He had turned this strategy around and around in his tightly wound little mind, wondering how to insert himself into the game. Around and around he spun his multiple but finite options until all the dots connected. And all the dots now led to me.

He asked me to imagine two math wizards from "Nowhere U" working "as one" for the benefit of the many. Yes, but this would not just be any hedge fund. This would be a hedge fund like no other. There would be no trading, as such. No commodities bets. No stocks bought, or borrowed short. This would be a hedge fund that absolutely could not ever lose money! Not even in a given month. Not even on a given day!

It was the perfect idea, and I had been ordained as the perfect co-General Partner, for reasons you will understand in a minute.

“The idea,” Whipple crooned, “is based on a concept called, “inventory asset-based lending.”

“Wow, that will keep me awake for about 30 seconds,” I responded with Bill Murray-like mock-joy.

Whipple said, “Listen, this could change your life for the better, Jack, and I’m not just talking about the money. So give me five fucking minutes.”

His body language begged for an apology by way of a refill, so I poured and he gulped half of it down instantly before continuing, “Let’s say a store wanted to get rid of a thousand plasma TVs sitting in their warehouse because a newer line of plasma TVs were being offered by the manufacturer. But this store wasn’t contractually allowed to sell their left-over stock to a big discount chain because the manufacturer didn’t want these big stores simply becoming 3rd party wholesalers. I mean, if the manufacturer is selling the TVs to this big store for only \$100 each instead of \$150 to a smaller store, because they were ordering 5,000 of them nation-wide. Even if they’re selling them for \$200 to the public, that’s fine with them. But the manufacturer didn’t want them turning around and selling 1,000 of these TVs to a

discount store for \$125, then letting them sell it for \$175. Why should they be able to shave off a 25% profit for doing virtually nothing?

When the examples that he was using to explain the game got a bit convoluted, and he thought he might be losing me, he would nervously twist his fat fingers around that butt-ugly gray balloon tie of his, Lou Costello-style, and repeat himself. This is what he did now. But instead of TVs, he used a line of suitcases instead. So basically for the next five minutes I heard the same story all over again.

He was putting me to sleep. I was not interested in this idea in the slightest. It got to the point where I thought about offering him more wine, hoping he would pass out before I did.

"Solution!" he exclaimed, with his pudgy index finger reaching high into the sky. "Our hedge fund – HW Partners, L.P. (Hampton-Whipple sounded better when abbreviated to HW) – would loan the money to a *Deal Flow Company* who had special relationships with both the store that was stuck with the outdated merchandise, and a number of discount chains."

"So?"

"So, Mr. Bored Skeptic, *The Deal Flow Company* would buy the plasma TVs – or suitcases , or some other electronic

goods – using HW Partners' loaned money. They would pay the store the same \$100 that the store paid for the TVs to get them out of the store. The store breaks even and clears their inventory out while waiting for the new line of TVs.

Meanwhile, *The Deal Flow Company* then makes a profit as the merchandise gets re-sold to the discount stores for let's say \$120. Here's the thing: The sale to the discount store would be contractually agreed to before the TVs were purchased by *The Deal Flow Company*! So everyone wins, and no one can lose! The store unloads old TVs and clears its shelves for the new ones. *The Deal Flow Provider* makes a 20% profit on the deal. It gives HW their loaned money back, plus a little more than half of the 20% profits. And the discounter can sell the TVs at a lower price than the big chains can. So then, hey, even the consumer wins, buying Plasma TVs on sale compared to the big store's prices. They can buy TVs that they couldn't have normally afforded at a higher price. Every-fucking-body fucking wins! *See?"*

"No," I said flatly. "Why would the manufacturer allow the deal flow guys to buy and re-sell the TVs to the discount store if they wouldn't allow the original store to sell them to the discount store?"

"Ah, yes, the politics of world capitalism. Here's the excellent news about your excellent question: The original

manufacturer doesn't mind the deal flow arrangement because the big store already sold as many TVs as it could, but now with its inventory cleared out, it can buy 5,000 of the new line of TVs. Also, the store suddenly isn't as worried about getting stuck with outdated merchandise in the future, because the deal flow guys will come to the rescue, like timely vultures, six months or a year from now, waiting to clear out their remaining inventory again. So as long as the big store isn't sneakily becoming a 3rd party wholesaler to the discount stores the manufacturer doesn't care. In fact, the order for 5,000 of the new line of TVs makes the manufacturer pee in its proverbial pants with cold corporate joy!"

"Yeah, I have to pee too, in fact."

"Wait, there's more! And it won't take long: Net bottom line, HW Partners, L.P. would gross about 10-12% annually for its partners after HW's investment fees."

I nodded wearily. And by the way, if you could not follow all of this, don't be concerned, it doesn't matter. Just know that business people and math wizards are here on this earth for valid reasons, occasionally.

I said, "The key to this whole deal is that HW Partners would have to have an "in" with *The Deal Flow Company*, so it would allow HW Partners to be one of its lenders. And

HW in turn, most importantly of all, would have to completely trust that company with its money."

"Astute, my boy! Astute again! Yes, and now your ears are about to perk up."

Up until now I had a number of reasons why I had no interest in doing anything like this: I didn't know how to raise capital, nor did I want to know anything about such a nasty undertaking. I wasn't about to ask Sam Briggs for seed capital. So if that's where Whipple was waltzing with all of this the dance would soon be over. Plus, I was happy at my present job. And the several million dollars a year we could split in fees was nothing that I needed to consider because of my dear billionaire wife, who I never saw anymore because she was working way too hard.

So why would I want to join her on the heart attack machine and basically never see her again just to make another few measly million a year?

In the end, I surmised that Whipple was sitting here in front of me to get at Sam Briggs' money. Chance of success, zero to the infinite power.

I said, "Wherever you're going with this Whipple, save your breath. I'm not interested."

But Whipple, aside from being a math wizard and a commodities trader renown throughout the industry for his

uncanny sense of timing, was also a master chess player. He had anticipated my resistance and total lack of interest. But he checkmated me with his next move.

“Well,” slurred Whipple – not from being drunk, but from having his mouth smirk too widely, “it’s too bad you won’t see clear to join me. Because I thought with the added perks of working in the office right next to Emily and looking like a big shot to her billionaire father, this deal might have enticed you.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked. I still thought, suddenly less confidently, that nothing could entice me to leave my cool job with my cool weirdo friends at “Logix.”

“*The Deal Flow Company,*” he said. “is Briggs Inc, affiliate of Briggs World-Wide – located in the Briggs Building, right there smack-dab on California Street. And I have been granted a lease for the office right next to Emily’s big office on the twenty-fifth floor, you know the one that overlooks the Golden Gate Bridge? – with the full assumption that by tomorrow morning I will have changed your mind and you will say yes to my offer.”

I squinted at him. Was it possible he was about to convince me to do this due to some fantastic manipulation of events he had put together in his maze-like brain? Could he have possibly perceived, or predicted, from a distance what

was happening between me and Emily lately? Did she have something to do with this? Could she have put Whipple up to it? Would he admit it if I asked him?

On the other hand, whether she was involved or not, maybe I could resurrect my relationship with Emily by spending more time with her – sharing lunches, going out to romantic dinners together in the city occasionally, while also being a hero to the family, a big-time bread winner. I might also be seen as an up-and-coming business person by none other than Sam Briggs himself. Not a big goal of mine. In fact, far down on my Christmas wish-list. But it wouldn't hurt to fall within his good graces, for Emily's sake.

"Why are you asking me to do this with you, Jed? There are a lot of go-getters out there who could help you raise assets. I can't, and wouldn't. And I'm not the only one who can understand how this game works. So why me? I'm not a CPA. I don't do forensic audits. I'm just a glorified computer programmer. "

"Correcto," he crowed. "But I am coming to you because you have something unique to offer that you don't even realize."

"And what might that be?"

"You know Sam Briggs personally. In fact, you're his fucking *son* now! You could get us in on these deals that he

only lets his best friends and employees in on. In fact, frankly, he has to accept us as a lender or there's no way we can get this deal to happen. And if you refuse to help me with that then you just wasted a couple of glasses of mediocre wine. And I'll have to let go of that office next to Emily's. Because I have no other possible way in."

My thoughts were awash in calculations. Computing pros and cons.

Pro: I get to work next to Emily. My biggest issue at the moment – that of not seeing her enough – could be permanently resolved.

Cons: I didn't want to ask her or her father for anything.

Con 2: I wasn't sure she'd want to have me working next to her office.

Con 3: I wasn't sure I'd like the work. In fact, I was pretty confident I wouldn't like it anywhere near as much as the work I was doing now.

Con 4: I wasn't at all too sure I wanted to work with Whipple.

He was reading my mind, as good chess players often do: "All we have to do is get Emily to have her father accept

our money, get it in the golden loop, so to speak, and we're home free! And then Emily and you would be spending more quality time together. Her office has a lock on the door, Jack! It could be fun for you to be the little college lovebirds again. Imagine it's just her glorified dorm room! I can raise all the capital we'd need in a flash, trust me, Jack-aruni. I have at least two hundred million dollars of high net-worth investors that love this deal but can't get in. They're waiting for me to figure out a way to get capacity – in other words, to get into your dad-in-law's good graces. Once he accepts our partners' money, we set up the legal docs in thirty days and, poof, we'd be making at least five million a year between the two of us in the first year alone."

"Your motive for asking me is solely that you need me to beg my father-in-law on your behalf."

"Not exactly...."

"So you can live on easy street through my connection to Sam Briggs."

"Actually, Emily would have to be the one to run it by your dad, technically I mean, because she oversees the deal flow. I, uh, forget to mention that little detail to you. So, hey, you don't really have to ask your dad for anything! Just ask Emily!"

"Just ask Emily."

"Yes! Bingo!" His gaze was showing me he had the ability to match me in many ways, on many levels. He'd had his own financial successes. He didn't need to beg me. He wasn't desperate for this to happen. It was simply the best investment idea he could think of at the moment. This was not the awkward Jed Whipple I'd known in school.

I squirmed uncomfortably in my seat. He was smiling – not an "I got ya" smile, but more like a "Wouldn't it be fun for the two of us smart guys and college buddies to pull this off and make a fortune together?" kind of smile.

"I don't know what to tell you, Jed. Emily may not want me working that close to her day in and day out. But even if she likes the idea, I still might turn it down. I like my present job."

"Understood. As long as you're logical about it, Jacko, I will accept your decision."

"Well, there are lots of ways to approach logic."

"Yes, math is never just a cold answer in a void, is it? That's the secret to the art of math, we both know that."

He arose from his chair, his suit now more wrinkled than when he entered, and shook my hand. He looked

sophisticated in a rumpled suit kind of way. His beady eyes sparkled at me one last time. He was a master purveyor of calculations, willing to take logical chances with a high probability of success and very little downside.... I admired him for that.

Chapter 20

Emily came home from work exhausted, as usual, and told me that right after dinner she was going off to bed. But when I casually mentioned the potential deal with Whipple she became very excited and animated. As soon as Chelsea was in bed, saturated with fairytales, with the night light framing a gentle halo around her sweet face, Emily grabbed me by the hand, led me to our bedroom, and asked for all the details of the deal.

Then, for the first time in months, she seduced me. She went wild, as if having denied herself food for a long time. She grabbed my wrists and pushed them hard into the bed while she wriggled on top of me like a crazed animal and said we could have some very “interesting private meetings” in her office during the afternoons.

The final decision, as Whipple suggested, was more with Emily than her father. Her dad had given the oversight and control of this part of his business to her. She told me to say the word and Whipple and I would be “in.”

I wondered aloud if she had put Whipple up to this, but she said she hadn't even thought of Whipple in years, which didn't leave much room for her to be conspiring with

him. I don't think it would have made a difference to me either way. Maybe I would have even been impressed and flattered at her attempt to get me to be closer to her. But, looking back, I think Whipple sucked himself into this equation without her.

After a few days, with some serious hesitation about giving up my chaotic creative job with Logix's motley crew, I decided to say yes to Whipple and his eager investors. This was purely a "saving the relationship" decision. I didn't think Emily and I could last much longer on the path we'd been on.

Chapter 21

My first few days at my new job on the twenty-fifth floor of the Briggs Building was more fun than I had hoped for. Emily seemed like her old self again. And really, Whipple wasn't all that bad to hang out with when it came right down to it. He wasn't a total nerd. He just needed to get rid of the balloon tie.

Before long, a radical shift occurred in my relationship with Emily, both at work and at home. We seemed to be back to an emotional and sensual place that was reminiscent of those sweet days before we were married. Neither of us would have predicted the swiftness or intensity of the shift. But the fact was, Emily loved me being in her dad's building, working on a business venture that included and needed him! We were now all on the same team.

This was exactly the type of thing I would have thought she would have been afraid of: a man using her to get to her father. But Emily's game was very complex. It wasn't linear. It had its own internal rules and logic based on her instincts and base needs – to love me, to love her father, and to somehow make those two radically different worlds merge

into one unified emotional reality. That was the game she was trying to win, in the beginning.

I would sometimes meet Emily for lunch in her office at her invitation and not return for a few hours. Her door would lock automatically after I entered. And after our catered meal was over, she would look at me and smile. Then perhaps she'd go to her huge window on the twenty-fifth floor – a window overlooking a great many beautiful hills in this wind-torn city, a window twenty-two floors higher than the white-framed window in Venice, with the Golden Gate Bridge shimmering in the mist – and she would begin to slowly undress. I would come closer as she looked out to the bay, sail boats dotted impressionistically upon a blue canvass, and I would begin rubbing her shoulders, as white and smooth as porcelain. She would casually lean back against me while looking out the window. I would touch her perfect globes of flesh leaning up against my waist. Sometimes we would make love from behind like this, while feeling the thick warm texture of an Arabian rug welcoming our bare feet, with our eyes watching the city move below us in slow motion.

I describe these scenes tenderly and rather graphically because, I admit it, even now I still long for those moments. Every day I long for her, and wait. *For that Emily*. Not the one that hid the truth from me. Not the Emily that eventually ruined my life.

Chapter 22

Whipple was basically an intolerable bore to work with. But that came as no shock. What did come as a bit of a shock is that I was really enjoying seeing the management and performance fees roll in and my bank account grow exponentially every month. I was into it. I had fallen into the world of high finance and felt the rush from time to time.

Whipple brought in the investors, I oversaw the company, interfaced with the accountants and with the deal flow provider – Briggs – whose liaison was Emily. She was now running the entire trade for her dad. This was one of her many jobs, but one where her father had given her complete autonomy.

We were not the only hedge fund doing this deal with Briggs. There were about three billion dollars in this “asset-backed inventory lending” strategy, and four other hedge fund managers had been accepted by Briggs as his lenders. This trade had been going on for seven years now. Our entity, HW Partners, was the newest entry. But we were also the fund closest to the deal flow. In fact, I was married to the deal flow, and occasionally fucking the deal flow in her office.

Sam Briggs had hand-picked each hedge fund manager as a pay-back for a favor they did for him long ago. They each worshipped Sam Briggs in their own way. He was their golden goose, and now he was mine and Whipple's. The investors flocked to us. We were bringing twenty to thirty million dollars of new money into the fund every month.

These were the best of times for Emily, Chelsea and me. Em loved that I was working right next to her. The aphrodisiac of us studying together in college was being closely matched by our working together in her father's sky scraper. Our love life had reignited. And we were also both seeing a lot more of Chelsea, since we were now home-schooling her right in the Briggs building, having recently hired a retired Waldorf school teacher.

A few months later, we decided to rent a penthouse right on California Street, so we could walk to work. Chelsea could now be taught "at home" in the penthouse. We spent weekends in Fairfax, or we took trips to Santa Cruz, Monterey, Mendocino, Los Angeles. We would decide on the spur of the moment where to go and what to do and just take off, literally, since we frequently used the helicopter to get around.

Chapter 23

One day, we picked up Chelsea and went wandering off to the various city parks for the afternoon. We were all playing hooky, taking half a day off.

Emily was often tormented by the fact that she didn't have enough time to spend with her only child. She certainly didn't want to repeat the mistake her father had made for the exact same reasons.

This day, at Dolores Park, Emily and Chelsea had rarely been happier together. They were rolling down a gentle grassy hill, laughing out of control. I sat contented, watching the city skyline floating on the horizon in a slow forming mist – fog trying to be born. The city would soon disappear in a shroud of white.

Emily looked back at me and waved, then took Chelsea's hand and rolled down the hill again, until they fell together in a heap at the bottom. When they came back over to me Emily's hair was tangled, grass was stuck to her cheek. She was breathing hard, smiling.

Chelsea went off to play with a big friendly dog a few yards away.

Emily closed her eyes. "Jack."

"Hmm," I was too peaceful to say a word.

"What would you think if...some day...we had another baby."

"Another baby? Wow! How would you pull that off, Em? You're working so hard you hardly have time for Chelsea? And I'm working almost as many hours as you."

"Well, we'd have days like this! And nights together as one big family! Wouldn't that be sweet?"

"I suppose so, yes."

"You know, Jack, I won't always want to be working this hard. I eventually want to go back to our favorite places, travel the world, with Chelsea, or all the children! We could even bring my mom, or an au pair, and just go off for a few weeks like we used to. We could do that!"

I nodded, smiling, but not wanting to show too much enthusiasm for such a crazy idea. Work had been so overwhelming for both of us lately; realistically, when would we find the time to break away from it for that long?

"We could even travel the world with the kids for months, or years! We could do it, Jack! We need to spend some more quality time as a family. Work isn't the only thing. You know that."

"Months or years? Oh yeah. When? The year we turn sixty? Our kids will be older than we are now by then!"

She looked at Chelsea trying to kiss the dog as it rolled on its belly and leapt to its feet.

“I don't like being as absent as I've been...” she said, squinting up at the hazy sky.

Almost to herself, she added, “It doesn't have to be like that. Not any more.”

Chapter 24

Fall, 2006, "Grandma Addie" took Chelsea for a special week with Grandma, and Emily and I went to Paris alone.

We knew it might be a little cold and rainy, but we could relax and visit museums and eat great dinners without tourists crowding us out. We both thought about taking Chelsea with us but Emily said she had a plan in mind for this particular trip that didn't include Chelsea or Grandma.

The Briggs World-Wide private jet whisked us into Charles de Gaulle International Airport after stopping for a day to see my parents in New York.

We took a limo to the Hotel de Crillon, a five star architectural masterpiece in the middle of Paris. We stayed in the Louis XV suite, a fifteen-hundred square foot room with a private bar, a five-hundred square foot terrace overlooking Place de la Concorde, and, for cold winter nights like the one we were experiencing – there was a steam bath in one of its two marbled bathrooms.

We slept off the flight in an 18th century canopy bed, and then took a limo to Le Meurice for dinner.

We shared a first course:

*CRISPY HEN EGG YOLK WITH GOLDEN OSCETRA
CAVIAR*

Acid green apple jelly with aniseeds

For the main course, Emily ordered:

BRAISED BRITTANY BLUE LOBSTER –

With crêpe mushrooms cooked in a brill, eggplant purée and coral juice

I chose this:

PARTRIDGE WITH JUNIPER BERRIES

With melted green cabbage highly-seasoned with orange peels.

And toast spread with organ meats

We laughed about what we would have ordered for Chelsea if she had been with us: “One glass of milk and a bowl of frozen peas, merci.”

We stumbled back to our hotel laughing and drunk as French sailors. When we opened the door to our suite Emily immediately pulled her fancy dress to the floor and told me to hurry into the steam room with her. She was still cold from the damp night outside.

There was an original Dali painting on the wall. Aubusson carpets, Baccarat chandeliers. We were living the life I thought she would have considered abhorrent a few years ago, but I realized she relied upon times like this on occasion to renew herself.

In the steam room her naked body quickly became hot and wet. She used her mouth to get me excited, and I did the same. Then we allowed our drunken bodies to consume each other until we couldn't stand how hot we were becoming.

We bolted the steam room and ran under the thick covers, then continued an insanely long bout of experimentation. I pretended I was Louis XV. He was quite a good King on this particular evening.

By the end of our historic escapade I was clawing at Emily's back, sucking on her neck. She was screaming, pushing herself down on me faster and harder than a King might have been comfortable with during a conjugal visit from his Queen.

This is how our son was conceived. Royally. Drunk. In Paris, at the peak of our relationship.

I think she eventually changed his name.

Chapter 25

I recall an interesting "business" lunch I had with "dad" a few months after our second child was born.

I was at my lap top, Whipple was on the road whipping up a group of new investors in San Diego, when I heard a knock on the door. A tall figure entered. I almost didn't recognize him at first because of his overcoat and the lack of lighting at the other end of the office.

"Care to eat with me?" Sam Briggs II himself stood at the door.

"Yes, sure, okay," I smiled nervously. I never called him dad. But calling him "Sam" would have sounded off-key. Calling him "Mr. Briggs" would have been way too formal for a son-in-law, so I usually avoided calling him anything.

I grabbed my coat and we walked across the street to "Fleur De Lys."

He began by telling me that he'd sent Emily up to his auditor's office for the day. He made a snide remark about whether I could handle her being gone for a few hours. He was drunk already and we hadn't even sat down yet. I just smiled and didn't reply.

His hair had gotten a good deal grayer over the past few years. His face looked more weathered. Stress had taken a harsh toll. And the drinking did as well. His eyes were no longer like Emily's. They had become milkier. Less intense. More self-absorbed.

We ordered. The wine came, and he had a few glasses before saying anything much. He took an urgent call on his cell phone, lectured someone, then fell silent again, but was uncomfortable with me being equally silent. He was used to people asking him a million questions. He was used to people feeling a rush of excitement being in his presence. Wanting something from him. Trying to humor him, persuade, beg. He stared at me, trying to assess the person who married his daughter. What was my game? What exactly did I want?

"So Emily and you seem to be getting along well," he smiled disarmingly at me. His question felt a bit off. I didn't trust it.

"Yes, we are. She's a great person." I thought that would make him smile, and being satisfied, change the subject.

"She's a great person?" he laughed almost to himself. "You don't know her."

"Well, I've known her for eight years..."

"And I've known her for twenty-seven years, so I think I'm qualified to say for certain that you don't know her."

I shrugged, "Okay, fine."

I refused to touch my wine. This lunch was not going to be easy to get through. And I wouldn't survive it drunk.

"You're placating me," he continued, "but I know what I'm saying."

"And what exactly are you trying to say by saying it?" I shot back.

He leaned back in his chair, a bit nonplussed by my voice being raised. It was the first time I had shown any kind of disrespect to him.

"A lot of people resent me, I know. I'm pretty blunt." He took his cell phone out of his pocket and turned it off. He leaned forward across the table.

Now I became really uncomfortable.

"The banks resent me because they know if they don't give me leverage when I ask for it I might just buy them out!" he laughed. "And the CEOs of the companies I own resent me because they know every time I tell them what to do, and they do something else, they end up screwing up. CEOs love to think they know what the hell they're doing for their company better than an outsider, as if that kind of

experience of running and expanding a company grows on trees."

He took a hefty self-congratulating slug of wine.

"Here's the secret. It's not about smarts, or college degrees, or even on-the-ground experience. It's instinct, and the guts to follow that instinct. They know my instincts are better than their brains, and all their degrees, and they resent the hell out of me."

"Well, I don't resent you," I offered, trying to stroke his ego and get out of this conversation as quickly as possible.

"Of course you do."

"No I don't! Why should I resent you?"

"Don't fuck with me, son." It was the first time he had ever called me son, ironically using it not literally but idiomatically. He said, "You can tell me what you think of me. It doesn't matter. You can't stand that Emily is so close to me, and spends so much time trying win my respect and love, can you? She admires me, she needs me. You hate that. Hence, *resentment*."

He was really extraordinarily drunk now, having downed almost an entire bottle of very expensive wine in ten minutes.

"Can I be honest with you, sir?"

He nodded and smiled in an almost sinister way. His antennas were up. He was waiting to pounce.

"You want to know what I think of you, sir? Here's my answer: I don't think of you. You're not a part of my thinking."

He laughed. "Good! Good come back!" He raised his glass to toast me. He thought I was BS-ing him.

"And what *do* you think about then? What do you want, son, now that you have all this money of ours?" He said this professorially. Leaning back. Is this why he took me to lunch? To question my motives for being in the family?

Then it dawned on me that actually, although his question was incendiary, accusatory, it was still a damn good question. What did I think about all this money I stumbled into? What was the point of it?

In fact, what was the point of being here with him right now, wasting my precious time, instead of being on a beach somewhere with Emily far away from here? Tripping off to Venice? Or playing in a park with my kids?

I stared back at him while taking a sip of Chardonnay, refusing to answer his question.

"So by your silence am I supposed to believe money means nothing to you?" his silver speckled eyebrows raised up as he chuckled condescendingly.

"It means something to me, it just doesn't mean *a lot* to me."

"Well, what if I told you there was some very bad news concerning Briggs World-Wide. Would you care at all about that?"

"Of course, I would," I said reflexively. "For your sake. But is that hypothetical, or is there actually something that's concerning you?" I asked this not expecting an answer, but instead perhaps a dismissive wave of the hand.

"Yes, in fact."

He wrapped his fingers around his wine glass, then nervously put them on his lap instead. "One of my companies, Mid-West Airlines. I don't think it's going to make it. Oil prices are up above a hundred dollars a barrel. It's hurting us. I think we're going under."

"I see," I said, deciding not to pry further. It's not like I had anything to offer. I was not a business entrepreneur or a bankruptcy specialist. And Brigs World-Wide had survived things like this before.

"Wanna buy an airline, cheap?" he laughed. "You know how it is when you play: win some, lose some. Sometimes it's a tie. This one, I would've settled for a tie."

His demeanor had completely changed. He was speaking to me now in that confidential manner usually reserved for friends. He was smiling at me from time to time, and at his minor tragedy, and it seemed authentic.

"I bet you won't be the only airline in trouble," I offered.

This sat well with him.

He patted his mouth with his napkin. Stared at me for a bit too long without speaking. "I guess you're a good kid, really. Emily's right."

I wanted to let out a deep breath out and say "thank you," whereas a minute before I wanted to bolt from the table and never think of him again. He had an alarming ability to draw you into his world, and to see him as an empathetic character, even after he spit all over you. It was easy to feel disoriented around him.

"So let me tell you why I invited you to lunch."

To mess with my head? That's what I was most sure of. But I said nothing. I waited for the next round.

"Emily tells me you love chocolate. And that you've been eating Polar Ice Caps since the day you both met...."

Ah, I get it. After messing with my head he wants to treat me to a chocolate soufflé at Fleur De Lys, and that was going to make me so very glad I came to lunch with this mad man?

"I need a new CEO to head that company. Dan Reesdorf is retiring and everyone on the board is falling all over themselves to prove they're worthy to be his replacement. But they're not good enough to fill his shoes. Besides, I want some new blood. New ideas. A new direction. I need someone whose honest, with good instincts and a strong backbone. I need someone who can be patient and think long-term." He looked straight into my eyes: "Interested?"

"Me?" I was stunned.

"Well," I stammered slightly, "I'm flattered, but I have the hedge fund taking up all my time."

"You're easily replaceable. The oversight of the fund is something any CFO or forensic accountant could do. It's beneath your capabilities."

"Well...but I love the work."

"You love being next to Emily's office, no doubt."

"Absolutely!" I admitted.

"I can kick Whipple out of there, you know. The fund can find an office somewhere else in the building, or even

downtown in the ferry building where all the other hedge fund impresarios work. A few of my own managers work down there, in fact. And you could keep that office next to Emily's all for yourself. Of course, you'd make far more money than what you make with your hedge fund work. Somewhere around twenty million a year, with perks. But it would be a huge challenge. I won't kid you about that. A big responsibility. You'd have to prove your mettle."

I nodded. "I appreciate the offer. I really do. I'd like to take a few days to think about it."

"Well then, you're paying the check!" he boomed, smiling. Then he patted my back as he got up and went off to the rest room.

He figured this offer was something I wouldn't turn down. The problem is, I did turn it down. I never had that kind of ambition. And I wasn't willing to do what my dad did — learn a whole new business after I had already learned the game. Whipple and I were working rather well. I didn't care about the challenge the new work presented.

Also, if I had accepted his offer, I would have been working directly under dear old dad, something I couldn't imagine wanting to do voluntarily. Besides, I had a bad feeling that eventually Briggs would have kicked Whipple out of the trade. He offered it to us because of me, not

Whipple. I felt a loyalty there. I guess I could have made some sort of a quid pro quo agreement with "dad" about that, put it in as a rider to the contract, to guarantee Whipple's continued involvement. But even then, Sam Briggs II was about as loyal to rider agreements as Adolf Hitler. I would have been his Neville Chamberlain. What was I going to do if he figured out a way to "not be able" to honor it? Sue my father-in-law? He would be my employer. He'd have complete control over me. And one thing was certain, he would always do whatever was the most opportunistic or convenient for him at the time, nothing more or less.

My mind was playing chess with a master as I thought about these things. Maybe even a sociopath. So I had to be careful with my response.

I did have one advantage though: Sam Briggs was not thinking about any of the things I was concerned about. He was thinking more about who would have to be set-up, and who would be saved. That's what his mind was working through.

He wanted to save me, in fact. I didn't know it at the time. But as it turned out, I unwittingly refused the rowboat he sent me.

Chapter 26

Emily pushed hard for me to take her dad's offer. She pushed harder than I would have ever imagined. But I told her I had no desire or ambition to be the head of her father's chocolate company. I like to *eat* chocolate, not manufacture it. And if I worked under him I'd probably never want to eat it again. Think of a tragedy like that occurring, I mused. But she was not in good humor about my refusal.

She said she thought this would be a great move up for me. And only a temporary position until I was moved even higher in the corporate chain. Her father would retire someday, maybe soon. I didn't believe that. Besides, I told her I wanted no part of her dad's corporate inheritance. In fact, if it weren't for me being able to spend more time with her I wouldn't even be doing what I was doing now. I would still be hanging out with a bunch of brilliant wild men at "Logix."

"Logix folded last month!" she laughed. "We almost bought them out for about five cents a share but we didn't want to spend the money on the legal documents! So what *would* you want to be doing now if it wasn't working with me and my dad?"

"As if I don't have the capability to support us without Briggs World-Wide handing out charity to me? Are you accusing me of using you? Are you reenacting all your fears now about marrying a bum?"

"Logix was just a bunch of kids with no idea what they were doing," she continued, avoiding my questions.

"I liked the work. Maybe I could have saved them."

"You would have had to save them from themselves. They gave away all their best ideas, like chumps."

"Still, Em, the work was challenging, I enjoyed going to work each day. I could have found similar work with a better organization."

"For \$50,000 a year? You make double that in a week now."

"We don't need more money, Emily! What are you thinking? Why would I have cared about what my salary was if the work was challenging?"

"Well, being the CEO of a company isn't exactly boring, you know! Damn it!" She began to weep. But it wasn't anger. It was just pure frustration. Why was she pushing this so hard?

"Please take the job, Jack," she begged, almost in a whisper. "Please."

I did a lot more soul searching, for her sake. But in the end I just didn't want to get more hooked into her father than I already was. What I was doing now was already incestuous enough. The thought of being one of his many pawns was too much for me. I was happy with the status quo.

But status quo was about to change.

Chapter 27

2008 was a year to forget for most people in the world. At least financially. It was the year the world began to fall apart.

Cities still lit up the sky at night, fancy cars passed each other on California Street, Lexuses and BMWs were still omnipresent. But in the deep recesses of everyone's lives, even for the mega-rich, something had gone terribly wrong.

Sam Briggs II was usually immune, and therefore completely insensitive to this kind of economic downturn. This is where he usually swept in and made big money buying companies with great business plans that suddenly found themselves on the ropes. But not this time. Banks refused to lend to anyone. They literally didn't have the assets. Credit froze up around the globe. Even Sam couldn't find the amount of liquidity he needed.

As stock markets around the world collapsed, with the US market losing more than forty percent that year, he smiled and called it a pity. But, he reminded everyone, almost all of his money was invested in his companies. So what did he care? Why buy the stock when you can own the company? He would remind us of this all the time. As if

anyone else but him had that kind of choice. If you can control a good company from the inside, you can fix the company from the inside, and you can re-sell the company for triple or quadruple what you bought it for in just a few years. Stocks were for pedestrians. Stocks were for bit players. Stocks were for suckers.

Chapter 28

One of the partners in our hedge fund, Jim Sellers, had been invested with Whipple way back in his days as a commodities trader. Jim had become quite rich by starting a web shopping network and was happily married with two kids, living in Marin. We began to socialize, and he started to put more and more money into our fund, which hadn't had any down months, even during the recent credit panic.

The reason for that was that we were loaning Sam Briggs money for his inventory lending business. It had no exposure to stocks or bonds. These were all short-term (60 to 90 day) loans to huge chain retailers. It was a locked-up deal for the privileged few whose high net-worth qualified them to invest. We were still getting investors about twelve percent a year with no volatility. Meanwhile, their stock portfolios were down about forty percent in a year as bad as any since 1931. So the remaining money they had came flooding into their accounts at HW.

Whipple and I were now considered saviors, geniuses, and best friends to our investors whose assets (and asses) we were saving.

We were a magic bank. Producing 12% interest in a 1% world.

Jim would invite Whipple and my entire family over to his mansion for parties and catered barbeques and summer swimming extravaganzas. We were becoming quite close. He would call me sometimes on my cell and we'd discuss his estate plan. I was now considered an expert in anything financial.

One of Jim's late summer parties was particularly memorable.

Chelsea was in the pool with "Uncle Jed," which is what she called Whipple. "Uncle Jed" was in the middle of about seven wild splashing kids and loving it.

There were a lot of very well-to-do clients and potential investors there with their families and Whipple, when on dry land, was explaining to everyone who would listen why our hedge fund would survive the economic mess now darkening the entire world.

Our son, Ryan, was now almost two. He stayed back home this afternoon, probably napping on and off during these precious hours while the nanny texted her boyfriend.

Emily was walking around in a beige bikini that almost made her look naked. Even after giving birth to two children, her stomach was flat and toned; her body was as

thin and curvy as ever. She had a disarming and natural beauty. She wore no make up. There was no false pretense in her eyes. No shyness. But no swagger. A perfect balance.

All the men and a good number of the women, and even some of the kids, would turn their eyes her way as she walked by. Maybe she was getting Chelsea a water toy near the pool's edge, or getting a drink for herself at the outdoor bar. One person's glance would catch her attention, and she would smile at them, her perfect white teeth sparkling in the sun, an "All-American-girl" smile. Her skin glowed, only a bit tan, slightly freckled along the shoulders. She was thirty going on twenty-something. And I was the lucky guy, on so many levels. Envied for so many reasons.

Later in the day, Emily and I went into Jim's house to change out of our swim suits back into dry clothes. Chelsea was with "Uncle Jed." Jim's poolside bathroom was sizable, with a Jacuzzi tub, a shower for two, and two sinks, with a big window overlooking a private garden down a sloping hill. Emily began to peel off her bikini. I took off my swim trunks. Normally this was just something we would have done without a second thought. We would politely hand each other towels after a quick shower and then rush back to Chelsea. But Chelsea was in good hands. And Emily had had way too much to drink.

She came up to me while we were both naked and whispered a two-word profanity in my ear in the form of a request. Then she sat me in a softly cushioned chair next to the vanity. She opened up a canister of potpourri sitting on the bureau and the scent filled our little corner of the room. Then she chose a scent from Jim's wife's toiletries and dabbed some on me. She climbed on top of me and moved in a slow rocking motion as we merged. My face was buried in her breasts. Her arms were holding on to the top of the chair. We tried to keep our moans quiet. But the ending was a bit too loud. As we were laying in each other's arms trying to catch our breath someone knocked and asked if everything was alright. I couldn't speak. But Emily managed a "Yes, thank you. I'll be out in a minute."

We sauntered back down to the pool after we dressed and took Chelsea and Whipple out for dinner. It was the least we could do. It's hard to find a good baby-sitter when you really need one.

Emily had been distant with me lately, ever since I had turned down her dad's offer. But she had made love to me with a recklessness and an intensity that, well, I could only really understand in retrospect.

This was the last time we were together before Emily got caught in her dad's deadly game.

The party, Uncle Jed holding Chelsea in his wet arms while gliding her across the pool, Jim patting me on the back, thanking me for the work I was doing. And of course, my interlude with Emily – these images rest in me as one of the last truly wonderful and innocent days of my life.

Chapter 29

During the entire month after the party things were tense in the family. Emily was not herself. She was not spending any more time with me than she had to. And didn't seem to have a whole lot of time for the kids either. She spent incredible amounts of hours at work. Once again, I was questioning what the hell we were doing with our lives. None of this was making any sense.

One night I told her I wanted to quit. And I wanted her to quit. And then we could take the kids around the world for a few years and have a good time and re-think the meaning of our lives together. It was her dream, after all. Why not live it? This is what money can do sometimes: too many options, too many choices, too much freedom.

Of course, the irony was that, on the face of it, this was also the same idea presented to her by each of her high school boyfriends. I was, in essence, asking her to run off with me with what was really her father's money and buy the castle in Ez.

The other problem was that traveling around the world, even with full-time help, with two kids, one being a two-year old, was – well, if you have kids there's no need for

further explanation. And if you don't, then a thousand words won't get you there. And YOU DON'T WANT TO KNOW.

Bottom line, as they say in the business world, I was done, fed up. I didn't want Emily working for her father anymore. And I didn't want to continue working at HW Partners. I was ready to give the whole damn enterprise to Whipple. If we just sat home and did nothing for a year that would be fine with me.

But it was too late for dreamy plans. Too late for rich lush fantasies. Life as I knew it would soon blow up in my face.

Chapter 30

The FBI raided the offices of Briggs World-Wide on December 23rd, 2008. They claimed in a subsequently released affidavit, that Emily Briggs Hampton and Sam Briggs II conspired to commit fraud to the tune of about three billion dollars – one of the biggest frauds in U.S. history. It involved an inventory asset-based lending scam. The hedge funds that loaned Briggs the money were all dead in the water. Broke. HW was dead. All of our investors' money was gone. Irretrievably lost.

I found out afterward that the fraud started about a year back, during the beginning of the 2007 - 2008 economic crash. Sam Briggs kept his cool regarding his companies' disintegrating values. He was a McCain man. He believed that deep down amongst the weeds Bush planted, the economy was fundamentally sound. In a year or two America would be back in business and stronger than ever. And with McCain in office and corporate tax breaks on the way his businesses would thrive once again.

I was an Obama man. I believed that deep down beneath the weeds that Bush created, there were more weeds. The problem was systemic. By deregulating

corporate responsibility and assuming corporations could be moral on their own, without any legal rules to force morality upon them, “free capitalism” as envisioned and implemented by Bush, Cheney, McCain, Greenspan and the rest of the free-market ideologues, had failed. Plainly and simply, de-regulation failed to assess the human condition. It was like refusing to put limits on your two-year old because, after all, eventually in a free and supportive world they will choose the right thing to do. Hopefully, before all the furniture is destroyed, and before they kill themselves running into the middle of the road.

Ridiculous!

Parents know two-year olds have no conscience other than the conscience imposed upon them by the parents. Free-market theories about deregulation, and espousing simplistic slogans like, “the government is the problem, not the solution” was akin to a two-year old thinking “parents are the problem, not the solution,” (imperfect as parents and governments may be).

And the global house of cards came tumbling down from the unchecked growth of a dozen toxic strains of weed – derivatives, sub-prime loans, CDOs, CMOs, ABS, all the games that corporations created because there were no longer any laws in place to stop them.

So actually, in the end, deregulation was the problem, and when it opens the financial system's version of Pandora's Box, government becomes the only remaining solution. Greenspan later admitted as much. But by then it was far too late.

Emily was still politically agnostic. She didn't care about politicians or their laws, or anyone outside of her immediate field of view.

She only knew one thing for sure. If she could get her father out of this mess he put himself in she would forever be a hero and a genius in his eyes, and then she could stop. At least this is what she fantasized. Because, she would finally feel she had lived up to her own expectations, and because clearly she loved each of us. That I believe still. Call me naïve, mesmerized, insane, blindly in love. Maybe all of it is true.

Nonetheless, the situation at Briggs World-Wide began deteriorating rapidly back in late 2007. Briggs felt that everything would be okay as long as he and his affiliates could remain solvent. As long as they had enough liquidity to survive the onslaught, perhaps they could even expand, cannibalizing the competition, and in the end they would come out further ahead of the game than ever.

Where would that liquidity come from? Why, it was simple. He would siphon off the loans from the hedge funds and use them for his own companies. He would pay their crazy fees of 15% and pay them back within a year or two. No one needed to know.

But what could not be foreseen was a time when even the biggest banks would start to refuse to loan even the biggest companies money. Credit was beginning to freeze up. It would only get worse over the next year. And Briggs finally saw the writing on the wall. When it was too late. All of his free cash was already loaned out to his affiliates. He was starting to run out of time.

He fired thousands of people in his various companies. He cut prices across the board, hoping to attract volume. But sales were still decreasing everywhere. Infrastructural excesses were coming back to haunt him along with everyone else. He was slashing corporate budgets, cutting all the research projects, and canceling plans to expand as fast as he could make phone calls. But he still would need hundreds of millions to keep his companies afloat for the next few years. After that, he might just become the richest man in the world. All he had to do was hold on through the tidal wave of economic panic.

If the banks wouldn't lend him the money, and no private investors were willing to come up with anywhere near that kind of cash in a time like this, well, that would be okay. He had found a solution – an expensive temporarily illegal solution, but a solution nonetheless.

The FBI files are incomplete. Because no one knows if it was Emily or Briggs himself who first came up with the plan. But it involved the trade that HW Partners was in. And all the other hedge funds like us. We were going to be their way out. Their unwitting savior. And eventually we and our investors would be no worse off. Our principal would receive 12-14% interest annually. Everyone in the deal would make their money. All's well that ends well.

Sometime in early 2008, false purchase orders were created so that all four of the hedge funds Briggs had hand picked were unknowingly taking part in corporate loans, four times over-subscribed.

That meant that all the funds were lending one hundred million dollars – four hundred million dollars in total to Briggs Inc. – for a single hundred million dollar trade. Inventory lending had suddenly become a ponzi scheme of enormous proportions.

It would be temporary, they assured themselves. There was an exit strategy. When the economy settled down, they

would get loans from the banks, then all of the ponzi money would be repaid with interest, their companies would have stayed afloat against all odds, and they would have cornered the market in so many industries. Briggs could be the next Warren Buffett or Bill Gates. Only he was going to do it in the worst economic environment since the Great Depression.

Without the loans, Briggs World-Wide could go under. Chapter 11s would ruin Briggs financially and leave him with the worst of reputations. He would have been seen as a failure. A sucker. A fool. That would have been his legacy, that would have been the personal monument he would have left behind. One of monumental failure.

This outcome would have been far worse than being caught in a fraud. In fact, being seen as a failure would have literally been worse than death.

Emily chose to show her father how loyal she could be. She would help save him, and his life's work – the only thing he really lived for. Maybe she could save Briggs World-Wide single-handedly. Because she was going to be the point person for the game Briggs needed to play. Only the two of them could know about this. She had long ago been put in charge of this trade. She knew how to access all the books and records, how to create false templates for

purchase orders, fake receipts from warehouses, UCC filings, everything.

Most importantly, she bought into the idea that if this plan worked, in a few years Briggs World-Wide would be stronger and more respected than ever. While everyone else burned in the global wreckage, Briggs would thrive. As long as they were not caught in this “temporary transfer of assets” this would be the most ingenious solution imaginable – a desperate organization of this size finds a way to loan itself money at a time when no loans could be found anywhere in the world.

On the other hand, if she failed, or if she refused to act, her father would be ruined, and her family riches – which she relied on more than she would ever let on, for security, for her identity, for her peace of mind – would all shatter, implode.

The thought of Emily Briggs being broke, with no anchor, no safety net, was as frightening to her as seeing her father humiliated and destroyed. Neither of those outcomes was an option.

Emily was brilliant. Tenacious. Disciplined. Charismatic. Persuasive. Prone to secretiveness. All in all, failure or getting caught for doing something illegal never seriously entered her mind. She knew she could pull it off.

Besides, her father had been invincible. If he assured her the plan would work how could she doubt him?

Briggs was grateful for Emily's loyalty to him. But sadly for Emily he had no capacity to love anyone. He had no conscience. Just like a corporation itself has no conscience. I guess that would be the best way to describe him – he was a human corporation.

Without regulations a corporation is sociopathic. It only cares about the bottom line: profit margins and stock prices. It has no innate conscience or concern about ruining the environment, or underpaying its employees, or over-borrowing, or putting out bad product, as long as the consumers and employees and stock holders will tolerate it and come back for more. Stock holders don't pay up for conscience. They only pay up for revenue and profits. So they would never be the ones to care.

This corporate philosophy was forged throughout his childhood, when perfection had to be achieved at all costs. There were no excuses. There were no other options.

Chapter 31

For the first ten months everything worked perfectly. The “Robin Hood” plan was not quite what Robin Hood had in mind. This was a plan to borrow from the rich to loan to yourself.

The mood around the corporate offices was tense. There was no room for error. And the mood around our house was tense. Especially when I had refused to take the CEO job for Polar Ice Caps, Inc.

Briggs and Emily begged me to become CEO because HW Partners was right in the line of fire. I was being defrauded. By them!

Our partners' assets were nearly worthless until Briggs and Emily some day decided they could afford to put Humpty Dumpty back together again. Their timeline was mid-2009. Not too long at all, according to a typical corporate calendar.

But then something happened. One of the hedge funds received fifty million dollars of redemptions from three large investors whose own assets had gotten devastated in the 2008 crash. They didn't want to redeem their money but they had no choice. Suddenly Emily received redemption

notices for fifty million dollars, all due and payable within ninety days. That kind of money simply wasn't available in cash. They always had five million on hand in case a higher than normal amount of redemptions came in. But they never expected this. It started an avalanche. Because when it came time for the money to be wired, Emily asked the fund for a little more time. This had never happened before. Suspicions were aroused.

Someone working for Emily, overhearing a phone call and realizing that the money wasn't available, got frightened that they were being set-up. They called the FBI. At first the call was handled as a routine investigation. They received calls from disgruntled employees all the time. But then as more facts were uncovered, things began to unravel.

I myself never caught onto the fraud on a forensic level. I accept full responsibility for that. I was too lazy to check every purchase order against goods sitting in one of hundreds of warehouses all around the country. That task in itself would have taken up all my time. And even if we had hired someone to do that full time, the trade just moved too fast to verify every loan.

But in the end, even discovering one fraudulent loan would have forced me to pull the alarm. I just never looked after the first few years of spot checks that tediously

revealed everything was status quo. I didn't check anymore. And neither did anyone else.

Even the audits in 2007 revealed nothing suspicious. Emily had done a phenomenal job of covering her tracks.

Chapter 32

Emily and Sam Briggs II destroyed a lot of people's financial lives. To this day I'm still unsure how or if investors will get any of their money back. There are many law suits pending. All of the Briggs assets are up for grabs to pay back the defrauded investors. But the problem is, so many of his companies went under there just aren't that many assets left. Sam Briggs was in jail. So was Emily. But we'll get to that part of the story soon enough.

Sam Briggs, once caught, insisted he invented the plan and forcefully coerced his daughter to take part in it. He said he threatened her physical harm if she didn't cooperate. There was no evidence at the time to substantiate or refute that.

He also cursed and chided everyone from behind bars, telling them it would have been better for everyone if he had been free to manage the companies through the economic crisis and guide them out of harm's way. He insisted the plan had been working, and that he would have been successful, with investors paid back, including interest. He was the only one that could make this mess right. But now it was too late. He blamed the FBI for toppling his house of

cards. It was unthinkable, even from jail, that he would have failed if they had just left him alone. He was not going to blame himself for anything.

At the same time he was willing to lie for Emily and look like a monster if it meant getting her free.

I was trembling with stress for days on end. Whipple was on the verge of a heart attack.

Our two children were too young to know what was going on. They only knew that mommy was “away on a long trip with grandpa.”

Chapter 33

It was 6 pm on October 15th when I heard a knock at the door. When I opened it, I felt like a ghost stood before me – my wife, pale and shaking, stood before me, her face streaked with tears.

She explained that a large amount of bail had been posted by her mother on her behalf. Her father was denied bail at any price.

The kids, after their initial ecstatic joy at seeing her, quickly fell into their normal requests, asking her to read them stories. Chelsea wanted her to play with her new dolls. Ryan had his all-cotton robot that he kept sticking in her face. She was very choked up as she read and played. Visibly shaken. This was not the Emily I knew. All of her normal cockiness and sparkle was gone. She looked panicked, beaten, out of place.

After the kids were in bed we sequestered ourselves downstairs to her home office to talk.

She was trying to convince me of her innocence. She told me that her father set her up. Factually, it's still unknown whether that's true or not. There is evidence to support and refute it. I still truly don't know.

But what I know now, that I didn't know at the time, is that this very same afternoon of her release, she had drained all of the money in our remaining family bank accounts. All the money I had earned and saved, as well as all of hers.

"I have some news for you," she said, looking at the black screen of her lap top. It was rarely in off-mode like this. Her reflection was the only thing she saw. Her desk was made of Koa wood. It had gathered quite a bit of dust.

"What's that?"

"I'm quitting Briggs World-Wide!" she said perkily.

I looked at her like she was crazy.

"I'm *joking*," she laughed nervously.

She looked down at the plush red carpet, then whispered, "Jack, you were right all along. I was wrong. I should never have gone to work for my father. He wrapped me around his little finger and destroyed me just like he destroyed my mother. Day by day, hour by hour, he had his way with both of us. I don't know how he talked me into the things he did."

She shook her head. "He said we had to act quickly. No time to decide. He always seemed so sure of himself, and so sure that things would work out and that we'd all end up on top."

She began to ramble, "I should have worshipped my mother, not that pig. She loved me. But her love was too easy. Like yours is. There was no challenge to it. I didn't need to earn it. It was simply there. Like mother's milk.... He, on the other hand, demanded I become invincible, a super hero, before he would even look me in the eyes and acknowledge my existence. His father destroyed him. He destroyed me. And now it's over. I'm done with him. His life is over. I just hope mine isn't."

The painting on the dark blue wall, the blank plasma TV, the house lights shining just outside her office window, were coated in a wet glassy mist. My eyes had glazed up. I don't know if I was crying, or just exhausted from days of no sleep, or both.

"So what are we going to do?" she asked quietly.

"I don't know what we *can* do, Em! Other than rely on your lawyers to get the truth out about your dad, and rely on my lawyers to try to get some of our investors' money back."

I said this cautiously. It was bizarre, she was part of the fraud, the fund I managed was considered one of the victims. And here we were together trying to find her a way out.

"Isn't there anything else you can think of that we can do, together?" she pleaded.

I tried to think, but I was no good at coming up with devious manipulations. "I don't see any other way."

Just like the offer of the CEO position at Polar Ice Caps, Inc., I didn't get the hint.

"Yeah, yeah, I guess not."

Her eyes were moist. She seemed seriously disappointed in me.

"Emily, you and I have been on different tracks for a while now. I didn't care about the money. I just wanted to raise our family together in peace...."

"Good old American values," she whispered a bit cynically. "Even in a depression."

"They're human values! What's so wrong with that? With living a sweet simple life?"

"Yeah Jack, what the hell does that look like?" she cried. "Who lives a sweet simple life? A monk in Thailand? Who? Whipple? Was he living a sweet and simple life? Who? All the people who can't afford to live in their house any more? Or people like my dad's friends who have more money than they know what to do with and are stressing out about all the crap they own on paper while sitting on the

beach in Hawaii? Nobody's truly happy, Jack. Nobody has the answer."

"I don't believe that, Emily. Our children, those two sweet kids asleep in their rooms – they're happy, as long as they have us! I'd do anything, and give anything, just to keep them safe, and see their eyes staring at me before they go to sleep each night, loving me the way they do. And you too, I loved you, Em. That was enough for me."

"I don't believe it," she shot back. "We would have gotten bored with each other. It'd already started to happen. We would have always needed something to challenge us or we would have gone mad. You know what I'm talking about, Jack! I know you do. Life isn't just for sitting around on a tropical island and fucking and having babies and getting fat until we die. We're not dogs or cats. We think too damn much to ever be satisfied with anything for long."

There was no need to agree or disagree.

Eventually we went upstairs to bed. It was strange. She hadn't been home in three weeks. Normally I would have been so happy to have her back in bed, touching her skin, smelling that iris scent that only I...except I couldn't smell it anymore. It was me. I felt dead inside.

I crawled into bed feeling cold and absurdly distant.

She came close to me and touched my face, looking at me in the dim light. She sighed and a shiver ran through her. Then she whispered, "You've always been so good, Jack, and so loyal to me. I can see how worried you've been. You've lost weight. You have dark circles under your eyes. You look terrible." She pushed my hair back. "I see a little gray. I've turned you into a worried old man, haven't I? God, I'm so sorry."

I felt nothing but a dim fear.

"Let me put you to bed," she whispered. "You look so tired. By morning a solution will come. I just know it."

This made me laugh. How she could be so naïve and so cynical at the same time?

She laughed back, "What?"

"You are an optimist deep inside, Em. I've always loved that about you."

"I'm optimistic about us too," she said soothingly, "and the kids. Everything's going to be okay."

Then she kissed my lips and a door opened slightly. A door inside of us that we had walked through a thousand times. It had been closed but not completely locked shut. Her warm body surrounded me like an ocean. I was lost in her again. After we made love I fell into a terribly long deep sleep.

When I awoke late morning and went downstairs, at first I wondered, and hoped, and forced myself to assume, that they were out for a late breakfast together. Or a walk to the neighborhood park. But after waiting and pacing for half an hour, with a bad feeling in my stomach growing worse by the minute, it hit me like a flash to check the dresser drawers in the kids' rooms. Clothes were missing. Suitcases were missing. They were gone.

Chapter 34

I wanted to hire someone to track her down. But she left me with no resources, not a dime. All of our money had been withdrawn from our accounts. She was in control of the money, awash in secret plans, and I was officially broke.

Just like it was in the beginning.

I couldn't very well ask her mother to help track down her daughter and throw her back in prison. Sam Briggs may have helped her think of the ultimate way out. He may have even known where she was going. But he would never tell.

I called the police and the FBI. They've never been able to find her.

I was now like so many other Americans in 2008 and 2009. Without a job. Without any way to pay the mortgage. With a business deal that went south. With a family in tatters; tsunamis forming from the economic shock wave.

Alone. Desolate. A hole burning in my stomach. A scream always at the edge of my lips. That was who I was now.

She had stolen my children. She had disappeared. A liar. A cheat. A thief. A kidnapper. Was that what she was?

Was that all she was? A master scammer? A holder of deep secrets?

Was anything I saw in her real?

How ironic that she had landed on her feet again. We had somehow exchanged positions. I was now in prison, emotionally. Emily was free.

Chapter 35

When I look back, I realize she was begging me to come up with the answer she had already come to: "Let's run away, all of us, Emily. Tonight. Let's escape together." And our love would have survived. And we would have all lived happily ever after.

She was waiting for me to say that. And believe that. And be loyal to the plan. But it didn't happen that way. So she had to leave without me. She couldn't take the chance of bringing up the plan to me directly – if I had refused to go with her, refused to become a fugitive and accompany her, her plan would surely have fallen apart.

She would have ended up back in jail, maybe for life. Because, I could have either stopped her from leaving, or at the very least stopped her from taking the children. She had to keep it a secret from me. She had no choice.

Or maybe, when she pleaded with me, almost frantically, "Isn't there anything else you can think of that we can do, together?" ...if I hadn't been so callous, so dispassionate, maybe I would have come up with some other answer that made sense, something she hadn't considered, and saved us both. But it would have had to be

something more than “trust the attorneys.” Something more than “family is everything.”

Even though I felt that way (and still do now, more than ever, with my children gone) in the end, family is not everything to a human being. We all search for more. More than money. More than fame or accolades. More than winning some insurmountable challenge, where the more you win the bigger the game gets.

Unlike Sam Briggs' famous quote, it wasn't completely fulfilling to just go out and build a personal monument. That's not the only thing that's real to a human being – ego.

In fact, building a personal monument just sucks you more deeply into the illusion – the ultimate delusion that we can be something magical. Truly strong. Truly rich. Immortally so. None of these things are humanly possible.

And is there something even more that we all search for – more than money, power, respect, fame, love, and all the rest of the glitter and sensory addictions we shoot-up from birth, something more, even if we're not aware of it day to day?

Even for those who are not believers, in our secret moments of despair, we cast our eyes skyward when all else fails and pray to “God” to understand.

What is *that*? What is the meaning of *that* word?

In times of our deepest despair we call out and ask for a sign that we're not here alone. So that we might rise above the darkness and fly.

But maybe we were never meant to fly like that. Maybe answers to mysteries that deep have to be discovered, not given. Or maybe the answers to mysteries that deep are only reserved for the ones with no need to ask the question in the first place.

Chapter 36

They could be in Paris, Rome, Maui, Canada. Or somewhere completely hidden. Somewhere in the opposite direction from any of my guesses. Knowing her, she has found a perfectly unguessable place.

I am sickened more and more each day by the loss of my children. I know she loves them. I know her capacity to love is real. But my love for them is real too. I know without a doubt that they will suffer deeply without me. They are missing me. Crying sometimes. Asking her sometimes where I am, and why didn't I come with them. What will she say? Will they believe her?

I want them back.

She is already a fugitive, wanted by the FBI. Now kidnapping has been added to her three counts of fraud.

But here's the oddest thing. When I think of her, I can't help myself – I remember all the times, everything, clear back to the beginning.

Not just the ending.

And what if it's not the ending? What if there's more? What if she's not gone forever?

Before she left she wrote a note to me. I haven't shown it to anyone, or said anything about it until now. I keep it hidden in a drawer in the basement.

It said: "I love you, Jack. We'll all be together again someday. As soon as I feel we're safe, I'll be in touch. I promise you. Please have faith."

Sometimes I wonder why I'm still waiting.

And sometimes I remember.

The End

Gary Marks