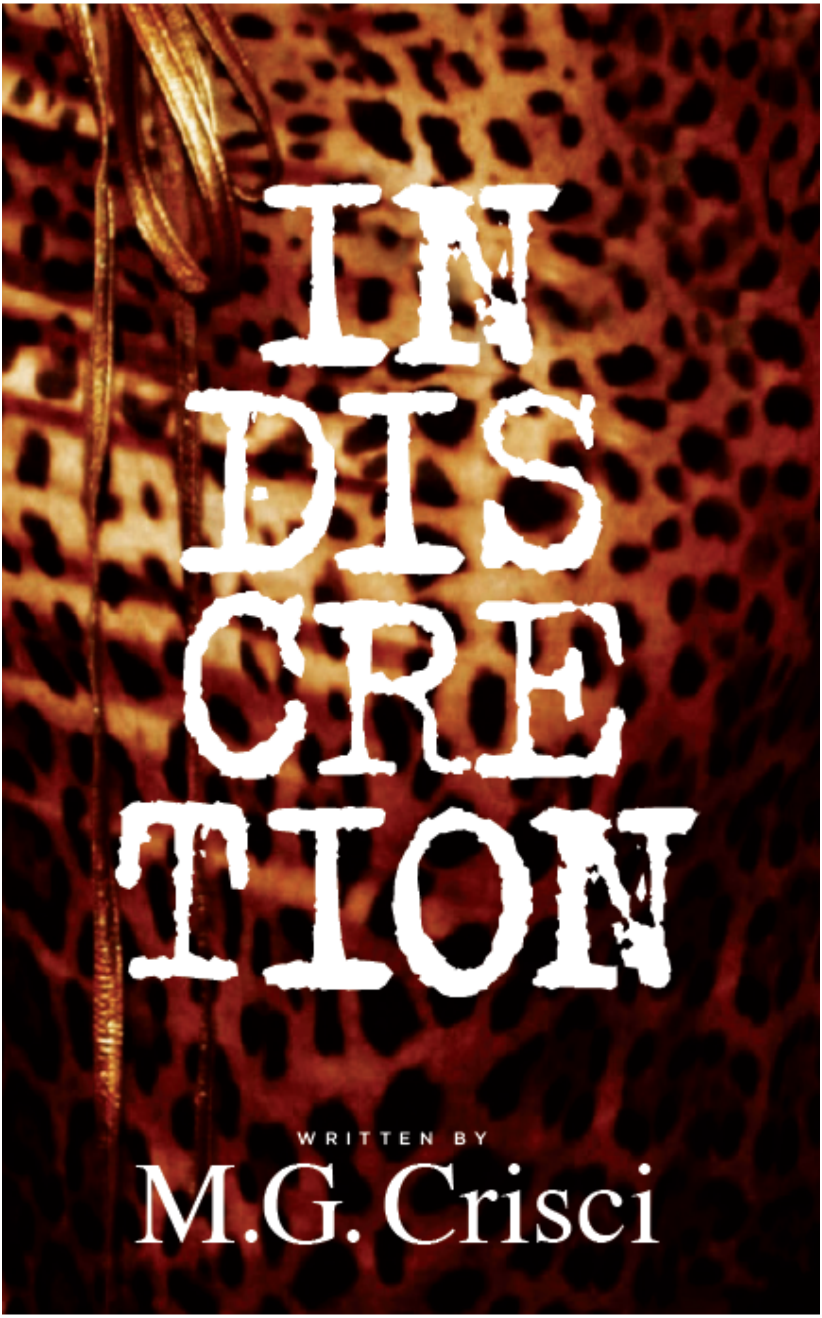
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WRITTEN BY
M.G. Crisci

Also by M.G.Crisci

Call Sign, White Lily
PAPA Cado
Rise and Fall of Mary Jackson-Peale
Save the Last Dance
Seven Days in Russia
This Little Piggy

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Second Edition

To the Imperfections of Man

April 23, 2012

Dawson Craft
President, CEO
American Financial Associates, Inc.
380 Ferry Street
Bridgeport, CT 06604

Dear Mr. Craft,

This is to lodge a formal complaint against Senior Vice-President Martin Ruff for committing physical and emotional acts of sexual harassment during the past 24 months of my employment at American Financial Associates ("AFA"), which has led to a serious decline in my earned income and quality of life and has caused me countless hours of untold stress and the need for pro-fessional counseling.

I seek damages for all of the above.

My difficulties with Mr. Ruff began when I introduced him to a potential business venture with ContactPro, a business services software company I thought might be valuable to many of our over 3,000 licensed independent financial advisors and a significant source of income for AFA. We met with company principals on October 12, 2011, in Westport, Connecticut.

Since the meeting took place after hours—at his insistence—Mr. Ruff suggested we have a drink to discuss the meeting findings at a nearby restaurant. As this was one of his corporate areas of responsibility and he was one of the company's senior partners, I agreed, although my instincts told me our post-mortem meeting could have been held at the office during working hours.

In the course of our conversation, Mr. Ruff articulated he was not really interested in the venture and assumed the reason I so forcefully sponsored the meeting was because I was sleeping with ContactPro's president. Furthermore, when we returned to the parking lot to enter our respective cars, he surprised me by grabbing me firmly and kissing me.

Rather than cause a commotion in the parking lot, I chose to enter my car and leave.

While we never consummated a deal with ContactPro, I did see Mr. Ruff on a few other occasions socially because I was fearful for my job, given his position of influence within the company. However, after about a year I refused to socialize because of the continued calls to my home, which caused serious mental anguish on my part since he was a married man. I am attaching to this com-plaint three such phone calls that I recorded.

This rejection led to a deliberate and continuous process of mental harassment within the day-to-day working environment, which has affected my income-earning ability as well as my overall quality of life. In one instance, he had personal performance conversations with my immediate supervisor, Bill Johnson. According to Mr. Johnson, Mr. Ruff stated I 'didn't get it,' meaning I was seemingly unable to keep up with the new products and services being offered to our licensed advisors. Clearly, Mr. Ruff was retaliating for my rejection of his advances.

Furthermore, on a number of other occasions as he walked by my office, he would throw crumpled paper at or near me to communicate his continued displeasure, which added additional stress to an already uncomfortable situation, knowing I was constantly being watched.

Lastly, since I have rejected his direct advances, he has begun a tactic of employee manipulation to regain my favor. An example of such underhanded behavior was a call I received recently inviting me to dinner with him and a new manager, Joseph Boston, recently relocated from Cleveland. His rationale was that Mr. Boston was also from the Midwest, lived next door to me in Westport, and didn't know a soul in the area. Again I politely rejected the offer by stating other plans were already in place rather than reject the invitation completely. It was at that point I knew I had to file a formal complaint.

Given that Mr. Ruff is an employee and senior partner of AFA for more than two years, I believe the Company is liable for substantial damages as well as a stern reprimand or dismissal of Mr. Ruff so his actions are not repeated upon other female employees of the firm.

My attorney, Mr. Burton Moss, and I would like to discuss the Company's specific offer of retribution as soon as possible.

Sincerely,

Alexandria Plummet

Alexandria Plummet
120 E. 83rd Street
New York, NY 10028

cc. Burton Moss, Esq., Moss Twilliger Thompson, PLC

1

Pete's Vision—The Funeral—Belinda's Luck

Four years earlier...

I was absolutely stunned when I got the call on Saturday morning. Pete Maroney, our dynamic forty-five-year-old leader, had died an hour earlier in a tragic racing-car accident at the Old Lyme Speedway in North-ern Connecticut. A blue Maserati doing 190 miles per hour tried to pass Pete on the inside lane as they headed into the final turn. The driver lost control, bounced off the retaining wall, and crashed headlong into Pete's Lamborghini, also doing some 180 miles an hour. He was dead on impact, according to racing buddy and business associate Dave Lineman, riding not more than twenty feet behind Pete.

"One minute we were smelling the finish line and the next minute Pete's skull is split open, bits and pieces splattered all over the car. I'll never forget it as long as I live."

He left two children, a daughter and a son by his first wife—a loving, gentle woman. He also left a stepdaughter and a gold-digging, opportunistic second wife who dressed and acted like a cheap trick on the Vegas strip.

The next few days were sheer chaos at the office. I had been hired specifically by Pete only eleven months before to help him and his partners, Dawson Craft, Jeremy Costas, and Eddie Carr, evolve American Fin-ancial Associates (known in the trade as "AFA") from a limited-service, regional broker-dealer into a full-service national financial services power-house. Pete, a well-read security salesman with a high school education and sound business instincts, had a simple but grandiose vision. He realized that most broker dealers merely processed and supervised buy-sell security orders placed by their licensed independent financial advisors according to guidelines established by the Securities and Exchange Commission; consequently, they captured a modest fee per transaction.

Pete's concept was to give AFA competitive differentiation by offering financial advisors value-added services (such as lead generation programs, innovative pro-duct offerings and branding assistance), which would help advisors grow their business more rapidly and allow AFA to charge higher transaction fees, thus increasing Pete's cash flow and profitability. Pete's ultimate goal was to become America's leading broker-dealer in total trading volume and transactional fees, becoming filthy rich in the process.

Pete had a good handle on his own strengths and weaknesses. He chose Craft, generally considered a product-development expert, to develop innovative securities offerings; Costas to oversee day-to-day operations; and Carr to build and monitor backroom structures and systems. At the same time, he used his charismatic personality to recruit other top salespeople to license with AFA so he could teach them how to market and sell AFA products to target consumers. Believing the best salespeople were motivated by greed, he developed a simple selling proposition: "Let me help you make more, faster." In just five years, he had licensed more than four hundred top salespeople and grew AFA to $200 million annually, which was more than enough to support his increasingly grandiose lifestyle.

But while Pete shared the cash profits among his partners, he retained one hundred percent of the stock. "I'm happy to share our financial success with the people who perform, but the company belongs to me and my family."

He was the sole vote and unchallenged final decision-maker. He was confident he could trust his partners—partially because he made them all multimillionaires, partially because they embraced his vision and his mission, and partially because he scared the shit out of them when necessary. Pete realized they were functionaries, skilled at specific tasks, limited at others. He was always publicly supportive of the threesome while privately pointing out how ill-conceived most of their suggestions actually were.

Pete and Craft had met in high school, waited tables together during their ill-fated attempts to obtain college degrees, and both loved fast cars. That's where the similarities ended. Craft, despite his rather homely appearance—5′ 6″ tall, rotund, bald with black-rimmed granny eyeglasses—loved to sample at least two different women a week. The handsome, athletic Pete preferred one relationship at a time. The two friends continually bantered about their approach to relationships. "Give me one reason why a beautiful woman would date a homely dude like you?" joked Pete.

"Pal, I'll give you three. I'm charming, funny, and have the stamina women crave," retorted Craft.

Dawson fancied himself Pete's alter-ego despite the fact that he had absolutely no day-to-day operating experience and had been fired eight times in his career, mostly for corporate insolence—in other words, telling the wrong people at the wrong time that they didn't get his latest product or strategic concept. "Dawson, I love you," Pete used to laugh out loud to Craft publicly. "God, it's a good thing I'm here. Imagine if I let you run the company!"

But when it came to money, the tables turned. Pete spent every cent he made while Dawson saved first then spent what was left. Pete thought money was for spending. Dawson believed that having lots of hard cold cash meant he never had to suck up to anyone.

~

Jeremy Costas owned a state-of-the-art yacht repair shop in Norwalk, Connecticut, that catered to wealthy hobbyists. Unfortunately, he couldn't make a living in that role and, after filing for bankruptcy, became an administrator at a national rent-a-truck company. Pete met him at the National Entrepreneurs Association annual trade show in Orlando and recognized that he was exceptionally good at day-to-day detail, something he knew was important but in which he had little interest. Costas was also a stickler for improving his knowledge base while at the same time he was intimidated by rapid change. Pete thought Costas's temper tantrums were quite humorous. They reminded him of his own past behavior, which he had eventually conquered. "Managing Jeremy is a piece of cake. When he gets nervous, he explodes. I tell him to take the rest of the day off. Next morning he's cool as a cucumber. We never discuss the day before."

Eddie Carr's name couldn't have been more prophetic. He was a former race car driver, built like an NFL offensive tackle, who had a strong mechanical aptitude. His teddy bear physique and happy-go-lucky attitude tended to offset the fact that he was intellectually the brightest of the three. "Dad was a neurosurgeon and believed my brother, sister, and I should all follow suit. Two years into medical school, I said, 'This isn't for me.' Dad was pissed, but hey, you gotta lead your own life."

Pete and Eddie shared an interest in extreme sports generally, and super fast cars specifically. They met at a NASCAR race in Napa, California. Pete, needing a win to actually crack the top-twenty ranking, was having trouble getting the gearbox of his souped-up yellow Lamborghini to shift smoothly during the warm-ups, which could have led his car to stall at a critical juncture during the actual race. Carr, a friend of the event's promoter, was hanging around the pit area before the race and noticed Pete's dilemma. He volunteered an unconventional adjustment to the intake manifold. "Pal, if we change the ratio of gas to air, your problem goes away."

Pete asked his pit manager what he thought of Carr's suggestion.

"Pete, you've gotta be crazy to make changes like that at the last minute."

Pete instinctively felt Carr knew what he was talking about and overruled them. Pete won the race, and the two became steadfast friends. With Pete, first impressions were usually lasting impressions, so Carr was now typecast as the guy who knew how to fix things. No more, no less. Pete knew his company also needed one of those at the highest level.

~

How I came to meet Pete was equally unconventional, particularly since we came from two different worlds.

I wanted to be an investment banker, so it only seemed logical to attend Wharton Business School to ensure a meaningful pool of the "proper" business contacts. Without too much effort, I was making $250,000 a year as a junior investment banker at Merrill Lynch and living the life of Riley on the Upper East Side with two roommates in our $8000-a-month penthouse.

I met my beautiful and unpretentious Lauren on a blind date and fell in love instantly. A born-and-bred Iowan, graduate of Northern Iowa University, Lauren was the complete opposite of the trendy, career-focused women who had been my stock and trade. It took me two years, three months and twelve days of intense lobbying to convince her that she was madly in love with me. After a short engagement, we married in front of forty of my parents' closest friends and relatives at Saint Patrick's Cathedral. Since she had come to enjoy the urban lifestyle, we decided to live, work, and raise a family in Manhattan.

Between my school connections and my flair for corporate finance, I became one of the firm's most successful investment bankers, literally making the firm hundreds of millions of dollars. Within ten years, I landed a lucrative position as vice-chairman of the snooty, blue-blood firm Goldman Sachs. As our wealth grew, Lauren, a lifelong nursing professional, marveled at how I made money. "It seems to me, people pay you money even though you don't actually build or grow anything."

Somewhere along the way, I met filthy-rich Bob Goldwasser, an acknowledged Wall Street shark who had a knack for identifying undervalued companies and repackaging them for consumption in the public market-place. Bob convinced me that my personal net worth of $50 million was "chump change." I quit Goldman to identify and finance our own deals, imagining a net worth of billions. Our Initial Public Offering—a consolidation of the medical instruments industry—went smoothly enough. Within three years of the offering I was worth about $200 million.

Unfortunately, our second major deal—consolidation of the very private barter trading industry—did not go as well. After a smashing IPO, company operations began to collapse since we were unable to integrate the highly entrepreneurial former owners into a corporate team. Bob smelled the problem quickly, sold his interests and moved on. "Martin, get out while you're on top; the Street doesn't like losers," advised Bob. I ignored his plea and tried to rebuild day-to-day operations using personal guarantees. When the dust settled, I exited with shat-tered dreams and a net worth of minus $10 million. Hat in hand, I returned to Goldman until we again had enough capital to maintain our desired lifestyle.

As my career ebbed and flowed, Lauren became the family's Rock of Gibraltar, raising two sons with solid value systems while building a personally satisfying middle management career at Bellevue Medical Center and managing my high-maintenance Type-A personality.

Once the kids were out of the house, Lauren and I had decided to relocate from Manhattan to Southport, Connecticut, for lifestyle reasons and to be closer to our two sons, Martin Jr. and Bart. They had concluded that living their lives, building careers, and rearing families in the Pollyannaish towns of Westport and Darien, Con-necticut, respectively, was preferable to Manhattan's impersonal concrete canyons. Lauren's concession to my roots was the purchase of a two bedroom pied à terre on a high floor near the East River, a few blocks south of the United Nations.

Lauren also decided she was ready for a more challenging role at the prestigious Cornell Medical Center, so she became a reverse commuter on those evenings we did not stay in Manhattan. Within months of her arrival at Cornell, the attending physicians and hospital administration recognized her as a top-flight health management professional with vision. Her career skyrocketed. In less than two years, she was named to a senior management position. Lauren's gregarious per-sonality was also a perfect cultural fit for Cornell, a place that believed in frequent social interaction (parties) to motivate employees and biweekly chamber music performances on in-patient floors to attract happy, well-insured, and financially-endowed patients.

Despite the years, career pressures, and rearing a family, Lauren took good care of herself physically and nutritionally.

Her slim 120-pound figure and her flawless, virtually wrinkle-free Mediterranean olive complexion left her looking twenty years younger than her actual age.

At the first Cornell Christmas party we attended, the doctors and nursing staff dubbed her the female Dick Clark, the forever young "rock 'n roll" television per-sonality and Rockin' New Year's Eve host. (Her Cornell moniker re-minded me of our family summers on the white powder beaches and the wide boardwalks of West Wildwood down the Jersey shore during our sons' teen years. She'd always stop by one of those "guess your age" booths and walk away with a stuffed animal. Last time I looked, the collection numbered twenty-eight lions, monkeys, zebras, and bears. She says she's "saving them for our grandchildren.")

~

As our boys became men, their personalities differed dramatically.

The oldest, Martin Jr., thirty-three, a graduate of Boston University, was intellectually the brighter of the two but also emotionally more complex. He was handsome, athletically gifted, and had a dry sense of humor. From his early days, I noticed the warm attachment to his soft-spoken, gentle mother, and his tense body language whenever I raised my voice or expressed frustration with him, or with anyone for that matter. In time, I learned his childhood memories of his mom were all good while those of me were mixed at best. I received accolades for what I accomplished in business and an F- for the kind of person he thought I had become—an impatient, insensitive foul mouth who made a David Mamet character sound like an angelic orator. Despite this, MJ, as we called him, was a strong-willed survivor who dabbled in a few unfulfilling careers before discovering his fascination and creative ap-titude for computers. In five years, he created a robust information management consulting firm and traveled the world helping large multinational companies imagine and execute customized informational architectures.

In stark contrast, our younger son, Bart, thirty-one, was the quintessential overachiever. A natural salesman, he had an uncanny ability to persuade his high school teachers to award him higher grades than he actually earned. I'll never forget the assessment of his French teacher at a parent teacher conference. "We (the teach-ers) know Bart is conning us, but his excuses are so articulate and plausible. I usually give him a blended B—a combination of A for effort and C for the actual work."

After graduating from San Diego State (he wanted to taste Southern California before he settled down), he used his charisma to convince Mexican companies to buy industrial chemicals from a gringo. Eventually, he decided to move back to New York, where he discovered the hospitality industry. Initially he sold mid-tier hotel franchises, (i.e., Fairfield Inn, Clarion, and Holiday Inn) to Asian and Indian developers. Capitalizing on his reputation of spotting great locations, he recruited some well-heeled partners and began developing, financing, and investing in business-class hotels for his own account. Five years later—at the tender age of thirty—he was a multimillionaire. Second only to his accumulation of wealth, which he called his personal scorecard, was dating smart and beautiful career women. He believed that unless a woman was smart, she wouldn't be challenging. If she didn't have a career, she would be uninteresting. If she wasn't beautiful, she'd have no "dangle value" with his buddies.

The fact that he asked me to be his best man when he got married was an endorsement that I had been a decent father with at least fifty percent of my family!

~

While the family was out and about doing its thing professionally, I had decided to fulfill a lifelong dream: write a novel inspired by my mother's relationship with Charles Imperale, the man she loved for some seventy-five years, but somehow never married. It was a wonderful respite from my twenty-five years of corporate life.

The novel, for me, was partially driven by a desire for commercial recognition, but mostly as a kind of memorial to my mother, who revealed the intimate details of this poignant and private relationship during the last four years of her life when we became particularly close. Fanny, as she was nicknamed by Charlie, was an enormously dignified and determined first-generation Italian-American immigrant. One evening after consuming a big bowl of strawberry (her favorite flavor) Jell-0 with fruit, she called her older sister, Mary, aged ninety-six, to say goodbye because she wasn't going to be around in the morning. Later that evening, she died peacefully of old age at ninety-three. I've always believed some of my personal tenacity and professional pride was part of her legacy to me.

The words flowed easily. Within six months I was proudly proofing the first draft of my manuscript when the phone rang. The voice on the other end was raspy, inart-iculate, and terribly self-conscious. I wasn't sure if it was male or female until she introduced herself as Marge Jamerson. She explained that some guy by the name of Pete owned a business in the very racially mixed, middle-class town of Bridgeport, about fifteen miles south of elitist Southport. He apparently had located me on the Internet and wanted to meet because, as Marge phrased it, "He thought I might be able to help him."

I asked the logical questions. "Who is Pete Maroney? What exactly does he do? Why me?"

Marge was a one-trick pony. Her response to each question was the same, "You need to talk to Pete about that." The only fact that came through was that Pete licensed 2000 of something, so the company had some critical mass. *What the hell,* I figured.

Our first conversation in his modest office overlooking Bridgeport Harbor began as sort of a sparring match between titanic egos. I brought a one-page bio and an attitude. I wasn't selling; I was exploring. After all, based on the Internet research I had completed, I had more big-time business experience than Pete and his partners combined.

"So who are you?" said this rough-at-the-edges, athletically configured forty-something guy with an out-of-date flat crew cut and red, white, and blue American-flag tie.

"I'm sorry, but who are you?" I retorted.

"Nobody talks to me that way," said Pete, standing up and leaning on the table.

I just tilted my chair back and took my shot, "Nobody talks to me that way either."

The response was the ice-breaker. He laughed, "You look like you don't back down from a good fight."

He then glanced at my bio for about 30 seconds and did a complete 360. His vision was simple but grand: Worldwide leadership in safe-money asset allocations. His assessment: "Moving in the right direction, just not as fast as I'd like." His needs: A detailed checklist of resource requirements, human and otherwise, necessary for future growth, all from memory. My Pete assessment: insightful and honest, self-effacing, and somewhat full of himself.

"Now that I've put my cards on the table, how about showing a few of yours?" said Pete.

"Dad was a wholesale butcher who made a bunch of money with his cousins on the black market during World War II. He decided he wanted better for his only son. We moved to Park Avenue—far from the family, if you know what I mean. I graduated from Penn undergraduate and got my master's at Wharton. That pedigree, my marks, and a few connections landed me on Wall Street. First as a trader at

Merrill Lynch, which eventually led me to deal-making at Goldman Sachs. Within five years, I gained an unjustified, over-publicized reputation as a "kingmaker." Someone who could spot undervalued companies, advise them how to grow, and design exit strategies that made managements wealthy. I made a bunch of money in the process and then decided to strike out on my own. I started two public companies from scratch by consolidating undervalued companies in the same business space. My first foray made me really wealthy. Maybe a $150 million net worth on paper. The second venture not only destroyed my paper wealth but also left me $10 million in the hole in real hard cash. So I sucked it up, went back to work at Goldman, paid everybody off rather than declare bankruptcy. Actually got myself to a few million on the plus side and a couple of multimillion dollar homes. So last year, I said enough is enough and decided to write the great American novel, which is now finished. Somehow I wound up with a first-class New York literary agent. She's out pitching the book as we speak."

"You have two kids; are you still married?"

"Very much so. Met Lauren on a blind date. She was smart, beautiful, articulate, polished. And loaded with Midwestern values."

Pete sat back in his chair and smiled at my candor. "I guess it's true: opposites attract. I could see you charm the pants off someone and piss them off, all at the same time." He immediately got to the point. "You're perfect for what I need. But," he paused and stared, "You're fifty-seven. Are you willing to work that hard?"

I laughed. "Depends."

"Depends on what? Looks like you've got some money, but maybe we can get that hundred mill back. Five years, that's all I need."

Sitting in Bridgeport overlooking the New England Thruway, the whole proposition seemed a little far-fetched. I countered with, "I'd like to meet some of your people. Get a better idea of what you really do. Maybe talk to a few of your field reps."

Over the next two days, I met everyone, including his three partners. They graded out just as I assumed. Nice people, business lightweights. My due diligence left me uncertain, so I didn't respond immediately…until I was literally summoned to Pete's conference room by Marge, a sweet, unpolished sixty-something lady who wouldn't get off the phone until we confirmed a date. I later learned old Marge would die on her sword for Pete because he gave her respect and, at $80,000 per year, more money than she had ever made in her life.

"So?" he said.

"Not sure."

"You name the amount. I'll pay you anything that makes you happy—*within reason*."

"It's not just about the money. Tell me why you're so hot to hire me."

"You know I want to make AFA a Harvard Business School success story. But I'm also a realist. There are things I don't know how to do in corporate America that you've done again and again. You are my exit strategy. I want Wall Street to love us, so we either go public or sell to the highest bidder for an obscene amount of money."

"Tell you what," I responded casually even though I was intrigued by his objectives. "How about I come on board as a full-time consultant for sixty days at absolutely no cost to you? If you like what I do and I like what I'm doing, we can negotiate an appropriate com-pensation package."

"I've never heard of anything so ridiculous," said Pete. "What's the catch?"

"The catch is there has to be some significant equity kicker in the deal. I'm not here just for the cash flow. That's just to keep you honest. I want at least five percent of the company on a fully-diluted basis."

"And you have the balls to tell me it's not about the money," smiled Pete.

We shook hands on our verbal pact. I saw visions of five percent of a few billion dollars dancing in my head.

The next day, Pete told his partners he had made the hire of the decade and sent a nice note around the office to announce my arrival.

As I discovered later, he never mentioned the equity ownership agreement to anybody.

~

The next eleven months were interesting, to say the least. Pete placed me in the office next to his, which pissed off his partners to no end. In the beginning I just listened, trying to determine what was really needed to achieve Pete's objective—a $10 billion company within five years. Most of the people I talked to loved Pete, wondered who the hell I was, but followed suit since it was clear I was Pete's pick.

I learned the company basically had three departments: Recruiting, Financial Managers, and Marketing Account Executives.

The recruiting group spent their day cold-calling independent financial advisors (mostly forty-plus males making at least $250,000 a year) and inviting them to the Rivage Hotel on the water in Westport, Connecticut, at the company's expense, to hear Pete tell them how they could make more money than they ever dreamed possible. Recruiters were almost exclusively young, durable, articulate telemarketers, accustomed to rejection. It was headed by Julia Maroney, Pete's daughter by his first marriage, whom he adored. She was like a chip off the old block: confident, outspoken, and intimidating. She was also drop-dead gorgeous. Despite her years, she was considered an integral part of the company, Pete or no Pete. After all, her group had convinced over 2000 of America's most successful financial advisors to visit AFA in four short years.

The financial managers were entirely different. They tended to be forty-five and older, with significant sales management backgrounds, which gave them credibility with the independent financial advisors they were trying to license. Once licensed, managers worked closely with these financial advisors to increase their income using AFA's marketing and sales techniques and products. This was the company's prestige job. The average financial manager made four or five times more than any other employee. They were generally a sarcastic, know-it-all lot who were income-complacent and resisted change but were tolerated by the masses because Pete "the salesman" was their guardian protector.

At the time I joined the company there were ten managers, eight men and two women. The men were cookie-cutters, above average plotters with bland personalities. The two ladies were as dissimilar to each other as the men were similar. They worked hard to know everything possible about their product lines. Give them a specific customer portfolio and they could spout product options in their sleep. When they didn't know the answer to a product question, they personally went and got the answer.

Barbara Brag, having never been married and in her mid-forties, believed *most* businessmen were empty suits and *every* man wanted to get into her pants. Her strategy: tease them till their tongues hung out and their private parts were about to explode, then close the sale. Her insurance policy was strategically revealing blouses designed to subtly expose her well-endowed figure. Despite the book cover, she was extremely stingy with her actual sexual favors. They were reserved strictly for absolutely, positively necessary situations. She was self-confident enough to project a what-you-see-is-what-you-get attitude.

Despite strong ties to Pete's second wife Belinda, Brag eventually self-destructed. She decided she was so influential with AFA field advisors that she would start her own firm to compete with Pete, and they would follow in droves. The evening after she resigned, she slipped back into the building and was caught stealing the company's advisor data base. Charges were never brought but, of course, there was no severance package and no competitive company.

The second female consultant was forty-six-year-old Alexandria Plummet. Her persona was the direct opposite of Brag. She was a well-groomed, conservative Midwesterner with two grown daughters. She looked at least ten years younger and preferred to date men of that age. She always said she never mixed business with pleasure. Business was business, personal was personal.

Once an advisor was assigned to her group, she built strong relationships based primarily on frequent contact and sheer personal charm, secondarily on the actual business advice she provided. At the time of my arrival, she was one the highest paid managers, earning in the neighborhood of $350,000 a year.

The only bit of unconfirmed dirt was her personal relationship with Craft. He apparently did business with her at one of his stops along the way and personally recruited her to work at AFA. Supposedly they slept together on a semi-regular basis although evidence of such activity was highly circumstantial at best. Senior employees said they had a funny way of looking at each other whenever they were in meetings.

Despite her bright smiles, perky demeanor, and solid listening skills, Alexandria never bought into Pete's add-ed value mission. She believed that salesmen merely wanted product options so they could make a quick trade and a big commission. She was stubborn as a rock. Interestingly, she quickly noticed I could be equally stubborn when I wanted to make a point, so we operated at arms-length…at least initially.

The third department was marketing. Marketing account executives created and implemented strategic plans agreed to by an outside advisor and his or her manager. When I arrived, this group was staffed by a few twenty-something kids with minimal experience and a performance-based compensation, which forced them to recommend activities that generated the most commissions. Pete knew this was his immediate Achilles heel. If word got around that he over-promised and under-delivered, there would be no $10 billion anything. Problem was, Pete was not sure what to do next. He just knew he was way over his head. Enter Martin Ruff and a major department overhaul.

~

My sixty-day trial period went by in the blink of an eye. On Day sixty-one, Pete, myself, and his three junior partners—Craft, Costas, and Carr—had a half-day, off-campus session at the Greenwich Inn on Long Island Sound. As the sailboats passed to and fro, I explained my impressions and findings and laid out a no-holds-barred, three-year plan, step by step, year by year, department by department. "To begin with, the data suggests you're spending far too much per head to recruit licensed financial advisors."

Pete and Craft immediately became defensive since this was one of their primary purviews.

"Buddy," smiled Craft cynically, "You just don't understand our business. But then, how could you? You've only been around sixty days."

"Give the man a chance," interrupted Pete.

"The fact is, despite your success, you've given the recruiting department no flak cover. You guys need a big-time public relations program so that every time a producer picks up a trade magazine he sees something positive about AFA."

"That costs money and takes time," sneered Costas, "and there are no guarantees."

"Jeremy," I said, "You're right on all three counts. But if it works, advisors will want to visit Bridgeport rather than be badgered to visit. Your costs per recruit will drop dramatically, and profits will soar. To say nothing of the improved employee morale."

"How do we hedge our bets that it will work?" said an intrigued Pete.

"We hire the best PR firm I know—Kekst, Slade and Bitters in Manhattan—and create a corporate communications program that becomes the talk of the industry by featuring the humanity and quirks of your top producers."

Carr stood up. "Are you telling us you want to send up our producers in public? They'll piss all over us!"

"Eddie, with all due respect, after talking to a number of your top guns, I think they'd welcome the candor, the lack of pretension. From what I can see these guys have what I call 'the blue-collar millionaire mindset.' These are relatively uneducated, unsophisticated entrepreneurs that are making more money than they ever imagined. Trust me, they'll love it."

I looked at the pained expressions on the faces of Carr, Costas, and Craft. They were not happy campers. I had just described them. Pete sensed we needed to move on. "What else have you got?" he interjected.

"I've done an audit and analysis of your consumer marketing materials. First of all, you are spending a printing premium versus current market rates."

"But our producers aren't complaining about the pricing," responded Craft thinking he had me cornered.

Fortunately, my years on the Street had prepared me for eventualities. "That's great!" I said. "At the annual volume you currently print, you can drop another $625,000 to the bottom line. As I understand things, you all share in the profits. It seems to me everybody can use another car. We also need to update the content and design of the consumer direct marketing options. Your response rates have been slipping over the last eighteen months, so it's just a matter of time before somebody starts complaining."

"Okay, buddy,' said Carr, unintentionally mimicking Craft. "How the hell are we going to turn that one into a positive?"

"It's just part of our new 'AFA impact-maximization program,' which is designed to make sure every dollar an advisor spends to market and brand himself generates more leads and more prestige."

"What impact maximization program?" queried Craft.

"The one I just made up," I responded with a big grin.

They all began to howl and laugh. I had finally connected with all four of them.

"Where do you come up with this bullshit?" smiled Carr.

"To be perfectly honest, I don't know. It just happens."

"I think a lot of what you're suggesting is absolutely terrific," said Craft as he readied the one objection he knew would raise Pete's hackles. "But it sure sounds like a lot of new things for our field people to absorb. By the time you finish, buddy," said Craft, "our guys will be so confused, they might stop selling just to get educated. And, that could be very costly to *us*."

Again, I was prepared. "Dawson, again an excellent point. That's why I have a few suggestions on corporate structure and improving operational efficiency. It's all designed to make our activities even more turnkey while increasing the profitability of our consulting groups."

Carr and Costas just sat back quietly while Dawson and Pete challenged my assumptions and suggested changes. Two hours, later Pete was satisfied, Craft was frustrated, and Carr and Costas had fallen asleep in the corner of the conference room.

Pete came to a simple conclusion. "Sounds good to me. Let's do it."

"Are you sure you want to tear the company up like this?" asked a recently awakened Costas.

"Jeremy," said Pete, trying to gain consensus. "We're not tearing anything down. Martin's given us a pretty good blueprint on how to capitalize on the foundation we've already built."

"I disagree," glared Costas.

"That's your prerogative," said Pete. "But as long as I'm the final vote, we do things my way. Are we clear? I'll see the three of you in the morning at the office," said Pete. "Martin, stick around, we need to talk comp."

Craft wanted to stay. "Pete, since I'm responsible for employee comp discussions, are you sure you don't want me to stick around?"

"Dawson, Martin is not an employee, he's one of us," said Pete pointedly. "So, I'll handle the matter. Got it?"

Craft nodded and meekly followed Costas and Carr out of the room.

~

Pete's financial proposal was direct. "Look, I don't want to haggle. But I also don't want to be a fool. How about we settle on a $30,000 a month salary plus all expenses, five percent of annual profits distributions, and a five percent equity stake after twelve months?"

I paused and stared at him. "The cash is more than I need or expect, the equity timing less than I prefer."

"Deal."

We again shook hands and began our short-lived journey. My goal was simple: turn my stake into $20-$30 million, then walk off into the sunset.

~

The biggest surprise during the next six months was not about the business but rather the end of the business day. Pete would come into my office, close the door, and start bombarding me with personal questions about my wife, my family, and how I kept it all together with my fourteen-hour days toiling in the corporate jungle. Before long, he was sharing his own situation. He married his first wife, Dorothy, when they finished high school. Quickly, they had two children, Julia and Pete Jr. Realizing he was not particularly suited to work for someone, Pete started a small construction company in Litchfield County, Connecticut. Before long, he was building residential communities and had one hundred employees. Life was good and the couple was very much in love. But success created an odd twist of fate.

Pete had an affair with his accounts receivable co-ordinator. Dorothy was deeply hurt when she found out. Pete apologized profusely, promising never to stray again. She didn't believe him. Every time he talked to another woman, she imagined he was sleeping with her or at least initiating a proposal to do so.

The marriage became more strained as the money continued to roll in. Out of spite or boredom or some combination of both, she had an affair of her own with one of Pete's construction foreman and did little to hide the fact. When Pete found out, he went into a rage, slammed chairs and cracked windows at the office. He frightened the death out of his family and employees. Both scattered while he underwent counseling to control his anger. In the end, his marriage and the business collapsed.

To provide some kind of financial support to his ex-wife and kids, he quickly got the appropriate licenses and took a job as a securities salesman in a small regional broker-dealer. As a sales natural, he became very successful. His goal (he was committed to daily goal setting) was to talk to so many customers a day and make at least five sales a day. He quickly became one of the company's top salesmen, but he felt unsatisfied financially and emotionally.

Along the way, he decided to open his own broker-dealer, developed his added-value concept, founded AFA, and the rest was history. As the company grew, he hired a flashy, sexy assistant, Belinda Marshman. She knew a good thing when she saw it, plus she had a daughter from her failed first marriage. Rumor was that her nymphomaniac tendencies not only burned out her husband *but also* most of the husbands in their upscale Darien, Connecticut, community. The marriage lasted four years. Apparently hubby and his private investigator documented an enormous number of Belinda's indis-cretions in court. As a result, Belinda was awarded a monthly stipend that was monitored by her husband's accountant. The turn of events put a substantial cramp in Belinda's lifestyle, until Pete entered the picture.

They both loved the good life. Before long they were sleeping together, and everyone at the office knew it. One year later they were married. Within two years, Pete felt he had made a mistake. Belinda was spending money like water and was again rumored to be in the market for a tryst or two. During all this personal turmoil Pete remained dedicated to being the best father he could be to all his kids. By most accounts, he seemed to have delivered on that promise. Our conversations also revealed a deep embarrassment. Pete wanted Dorothy back in his life.

He asked me what I would do. I explained I didn't have a clue. I was a one-woman, one-love, one-marriage, one-family kind of guy. With reservation and trepidation, after discussing it with her, I offered Lauren as someone he might want to consult. He jumped at the chance.

Lauren and Pete quickly became bosom buddies. He loved her style and class. She gave him her best advice, and he started the long road back by having honest conversations with Dorothy. Neither ever revealed the details, but Pete seemed like a different person post-Lauren.

Pete also loved the way Lauren made everyone feel so comfortable. Before long, whenever we entertained out-of-town guests, which was about twice a week, he insisted Lauren be invited.

I'll never forget the day Pete, his three partners, and I were sitting in a strategy session. Pete was doing a headcount for a producer dinner three days hence. I explained Lauren wouldn't be able to make this one; she had a board meeting of her own. He promptly changed the date to accommodate her schedule.

Craft protested, "Unfortunately that change doesn't work for me."

Pete smiled, "Dawson, then just don't come. When you learn how to schmooze like Lauren, *maybe* we'll accommodate you."

The more frequent the dinners, the less frequent the appearance of Belinda. Not surprisingly, she became intensely jealous of Lauren. Privately and publicly.

~

With each success, Pete's confidence in me grew.

The corporate PR and advertising campaign was voted by the trade journals as the most noted campaign of the year. And, just as I had predicted, the producers stood in line trying to be the feature subject of the next AFA ad. As we started to hang oversized reproductions of the ads on the office walls, employee morale visibly increased, and people walked around the office with a bit of an arrogant swagger.

As for the direct marketing programs, I brought in a series of professional advisors. Materials were changed, altered, and eliminated as new ones were put in their place. When the dust settled, the average producer was getting thirty-eight percent more leads per planned activity for the same costs, which meant hundreds of thousands of dollars more in their pockets every year and millions more in the AFA coffers.

While I knew I had gained Pete's confidence, I never expected what happened next. On my sixth month anniversary with AFA, Pete held a company-wide meeting to explain our recent successes. "Before we leave today, I want to officially recognize the incredible job Martin Ruff has done for this company in six short months. Martin, come up here." Pete hugged me and shook my hand. "I want you all to know that—starting right now—Martin speaks for me. So if he asks you to do something, just do it."

Dawson Craft was stunned. I could see the disappointment in his eyes from twenty feet away.

That evening, I told Lauren what had transpired over a glass of wine as we watched the stars from the patio. "I'm not surprised," she said confidently. "You seem professionally at peace for the first time in a long, long time, and your diverse business experiences just seem to fit everything the company needs."

"Let's not get crazy," I smiled. "It's still business. Things could change tomorrow."

"I'm not sure about that. The people I've talked to think you're an integral part of the AFA family."

"Like who?"

"Everybody. Employees, the advisors and Pete's partners, especially Dawson Craft. "

~

Pete's funeral was vintage Pete. I could tell the whole thing had been choreographed by Dorothy and the kids. His beloved yellow Lamborghini, covered in red, white, and blue carnations, sat front and center on the altar. His oldest son, Pete Jr., sang one of Pete's favorite songs, *Smile*. And we played a video, one I had been asked to make. It was a labor of love. The day after Pete died, Julia came to my office with a box of pictures. It was the family's life with Pete; it was a treasure trove of emotion.

I told her to leave it to me. I worked twenty-four straight hours with two of our outside video suppliers to create an emotionally arresting video set to Pete's favorite music. I designed it to match the phases of Pete's life. It was about seven minutes long. When I played it privately for Julia, she cried. "It's just perfect. Thank you so, so much."

When we played it at the funeral, there wasn't a dry eye in the place.

Another touching moment was the personal eulogies. Person after person, many who had flown in from all over the country, thanked Pete for changing their lives.

Unfortunately, Pete's fast track philosophy also attracted its share of charlatans. I can still remember Pete's phony friend, Charles Bronson II, monopolizing the podium for almost thirty minutes, explaining we all needed to follow the light, as the Bible said in section this and that, if we wanted to see Pete again in the Promised Land. Six weeks later, old Charles had his bulb dimmed. He was arrested for selling nonexistent payphone booths to senior citizens in a multimillion dollar investment scam.

I thought it would be presumptuous of me to rise to the podium. But at the end of the ceremony, Pete's mom gave me a big hug and said, Thank you for the incredible video." I asked how she knew it was me. Her response made me realize how deeply Pete had affected my life. "That video could only have been made by you. A mother knows."

As the church emptied, Julia stood quietly by the closed casket. I gave her a hug and offered my condolences. "Martin, I just wanted to tell you Dad spoke of you so often. He said God sent you to help him. He was so thankful for all you've done."

I promised there and then I would do everything humanly possible to make Pete's dream a reality.

2

Intestate—B's Escapades–Sympathy Sales

In the two weeks following Pete's death, there were surprise disappearances; nasty, very personal family squabbles; and an avalanche of unconfirmed rumors.

Just after Pete's death and before the actual funeral, Belinda, based on the advice of her Dad, Lou Marshman, and his attorney, declared Pete had died intestate, which technically, under Connecticut law, left sole control of AFA to Belinda. At the time of his death, AFA was independently appraised at about $150 million. She also calmly went to the bank and transferred all of Pete's cash accounts, about $1.9 million, into a series of father-daughter joint bank accounts in Boston, where Lou Marshman claimed official residence.

Dorothy and her two kids, preoccupied with making the funeral an unforgettable tribute to Dad, didn't get wind of the transfer until after the fact. By then, there was nothing she or her attorney could do about it.

Days after the funeral, the Marshmans and the Maroneys and their respective attorneys entered into a no-holds-barred, highly personal court battle to settle the ownership dispute.

The daughter, Julia, who had numerous public personality riffs with stepmother Belinda right from the start, swore under oath she signed trust documents which named the four kids by Pete's first marriage half owners in the business, thereby insuring them financial stability. Unfortunately, her attorneys couldn't produce a shred of documentation. Rather, they attempted to build a circumstantial case based on Pete's declarations while alive that part of being a great father was to take care of all his kids. Craft, who was also Julia's godfather, swore under oath that he recalled Pete obsessing about *modifying* his will to insure all shared in the wealth, even though he never actually saw the document.

The Marshman attorney's final summary was personal and brutal. "Your honor, here we have a family, disappointed that they were clearly rejected by their father, attempting to build a financial claim based upon loose recollections, nonexistent documents, and casual conference room conversations with Mr. Craft, the godfather of Mr. Maroney's money-mongering daughter. Mr. Maroney was a financial professional who didn't even name his so-called beloved first family as beneficiaries on a life insurance policy. Judge, as difficult and tragic as this case may be, you have to render a decision based purely on the facts. Mr. Maroney's action, or lack thereof, strongly suggests he knew exactly what he was doing. He intended to leave the business and all related assets to his current wife, Belinda, and his stepdaughter."

When the dust settled officially, the courts were forced to declare that the man who established an extraordinarily successful firm for safe-money financial advisors *appeared* to have died without taking a single measure to put his own financial affairs in order. However, the judge did cut the

Maroney family some slack. "Despite the fact, incredible as it may be, that Mr. Maroney died intestate, this court finds it only fair, given the size of the estate, that both families receive economic benefit. We suggest that both families meet privately to discuss the sale of AFA and to reach agreement on a fair split of the proceeds. If upon disposal of AFA the families cannot agree their pro rata shares, I would suggest an independent arbitrator be appointed rather than drag this affair through the courts a second time. As for the Maroney bank accounts, the court rules in favor of Mrs. Belinda Maroney, on the basis that one hundred percent of said assets belong to his legally binding direct heirs."

After the verdict was rendered, Belinda Maroney decided to throw family number one a bone, against the wishes of her father. She was well aware Pete loved all his kids unconditionally.

"Belinda, are you crazy?" her father taunted. "You don't owe that woman and those kids anything. Did you forget she was trying to get him back?"

Feeling a rare hint of benevolence, Belinda held her ground with certain contingencies. She agreed to give the two kids a nonvoting thirty-three percent of sale proceeds, divided however they wanted, so long as Dorothy did not receive or control any of the proceeds. The bitter family number one reluctantly agreed and the process of selling the company to the highest bidder began.

During and for some time after the court battle, rumors flew like wildfire around AFA. Two of the more popular rumors contained Machiavellian twists.

The first was that Belinda had discreetly paid her attorney $500,000 during the funeral grieving to insure Pete died intestate. Credence was lent to this rumor during the court proceedings when Belinda adamantly refused to provide deposit and withdrawal information on her Massachusetts bank accounts.

The second rumor focused around the notion that Belinda realized Pete was seriously contemplating recon-ciliation with Dorothy. He wanted to get off Belinda's merry-go-round, but he knew she'd want a serious pound of flesh and then some. in the process. To Pete, that was unacceptable. He had worked too hard to accumulate his wealth; he wasn't about to squander it on a short-term spouse. While Pete pondered his options, Belinda developed a counter strategy: she would tempt destiny by playing 'automotive euthanasia.' She knew Pete had an insatiable appetite for the exhilaration of speed. So, at every turn, Belinda chided Pete to buy faster cars and enter evermore dangerous races. "History's movers and shakers always strove to exceed their expectations. That's why they made history." Pete's ego always bit at her intellectual bait.

~

With their spiritual guru and visionary now gone, most everyone at AFA felt the company was in a perilous position. Jobs and livelihoods were at stake. Competitors called every one of AFA's 2000 licensed advisors and 15 account managers, pitching them to switch allegiances. To Craft's credit, he galvanized Costas, Carr, and myself into a team.

There were two *stated* objectives during those chaotic times: keep key employees in place and maintain the con-fidence of licensed, independent producers.

The four of us held a company meeting to com-municate that things were going well and it was business as usual. The employee base was then about one hundred and thirty people. We met with everyone individually. There was a lot of sensitive damage control.

Craft also used Pete's kids deftly. We held a company family picnic featuring Pete's favorite chow—barbequed chicken and ribs—in the parking lot with life-size blowups of Pete and his three kids. Both wives were there, but neither volunteered or was asked to speak. Craft's message was clear.

"Let's do it for Pete's kids." The event had just the right blend of sentimentality and solidarity. During that first six months after Pete's death, not one employee or licensed advisor quit.

At virtually the same time we were reaching out to employees, the four of us began calling our key field advisors. The message was always the same. *Thank you for your business, and even though Pete is gone, we will continue to help build your practices and create new product offerings. We are and will continue to be the best and the brightest.*

But Craft added a grotesque twist. "Fellas, I think we can use this opportunity to our advantage. Events like this don't grow on trees."

"What the hell are you talking about?" challenged Costas.

"Pal, I'll explain the strategy, but you gotta let me handle this one by myself. Agreed?" Craft explained Pete's tragic death was a rare window of opportunity to significantly increase everybody's commission income. (He didn't mention that under the terms of his deal with Pete, he received three times the commission per new sales dollar as Carr or Costas.)

You had to give him credit! Craft proved he was a master psychologist who could identify and exploit tiny chinks in the armor.

He understood that AFA's top salespeople were convinced they were doing good things for their clients. He also knew they worshiped Pete's mentor system because it was a way of believing someone would coach and inspire them during the inevitable sales slumps and losses of confidence that every salesperson faces. Craft also recognized that, in death, positive accomplishments of hero figures were magnified, and shortcomings forgotten.

"I've gotta tell you Dawson, I'm devastated," said Doug Blue, one of the company's top producers from Biloxi, Mississippi, while standing on the condolence line at the funeral. (At sixty-three, Doug was older than most of Pete's recruits, but highly respected as a wise old sage.) "What a tragedy. I can't believe the outpouring; so many producers from all over America. It's amazing how a guy as young as Pete was able to motivate some of the most arrogant, untrainable securities salesmen I've ever had the displeasure of knowing." Then he chuckled, "Including this old fart!"

Craft's Machiavellian light bulb glowed brightly, his mission now crystal clear: Create untold personal leverage by causing sales to skyrocket with an understated motivational speech that combined an assumptive tribute to Pete as coach and mentor par excellence with a generous spike of personal guilt.

First, he created a motivational sales dialogue on PowerPoint slides. Craft believed working from a fully rehearsed script gave him confidence to sound credible. believable, and, most of all, spontaneous and from the heart. He rehearsed ad nauseum until the speech was automatic.

After some final polishing, Craft took to the field for his national roll-out. He developed a hit list of the most vocal top producers he believed were role models to the other AFA field producers. Then he started dialing for dollars, sounding like a grieving undertaker soft-selling the unsuspecting family of the deceased more casket with more bells and whistles than they ever needed or probably could afford. "Pal, you were so special to Pete. He used to talk about you all the time back here."

"Really?" would say the gullible moron on the other end of the phone.

"You have no idea how proud he was of your success. He was honored to call you his friend." If the guy had a wife and kids, Craft would say, "Pete also thought the world of Gloria and the girls. It pleased him to no end that he was able to help change your lives."

By the time Craft finished his set-up, the advisor on the other end of the phone would be in tears. The tactic worked best on macho guys, who at this point represented over ninety percent of the company's revenue. The advisor's response had a familiar refrain. "Dawson, I felt the same way about Pete. I can't believe he's gone."

That was Craft's cue the unsuspecting prospect was ready for the close. "I don't know about you, but I've been thinking: in what small way could I pay tribute to my old friend?" To heighten expectation, he would pause for twenty seconds. "Then it came to me," Craft sounded incredibly natural. "I've decided I'm going to really ramp up my personal production during the next few months." (Of course, he had no personal production, but nobody ever challenged him). "I'm going to break my ass to exceed my personal best. It's my way of saying thanks to the man who changed my life."

Inevitably, the guy on the other end of the phone would agree to do likewise.

"While none of us will ever replace Pete, I'll have so and so (one of the account managers he personally selected) check in with you regularly so that you keep a documented 'Pete-score.' You remember how he loved to set goals and then exceed them."

The "Pete-score" was designed to make the field advisors feel guilty if they did not achieve what they promised. Scores were posted company-wide every week for all to see. Sympathy sales came rolling in by the hundreds of millions. Craft was now in the driver's seat with respect to turning the company into cash. He had Belinda and her father by the brass cojunes.

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Craft's other sales activity involved spending lavishly on producer entertainment. He'd invite the highest grossing advisors and their wives—no more than two couples at a time—to an all-expenses-paid Manhattan weekend. There was an expensive thank-you dinner, a lavish night on the town, and some strategically placed free time and the all-important confidential company update, which made pro-ducers feel like anointed disciples.

The welcoming committee was some combination of Craft, myself, Carr, Costas, and Lauren. Like Pete, Craft was taken by her engaging style and classy carriage. He knew he could count on her to make our guests feel that we were listening to every word.

The welcome dinner ritual was always the same. A bacchanalian pig-fest at Porcini & Maloney, the most expensive expense-account restaurant within the five boroughs. Courses included 1½ inch Kansas City cut (on the bone) sirloin steaks, all-you-can-eat succulent Maine lobsters, piles of Florida stone crabs, and rare vintage boutique Napa Valley reds. Every meal was preceded by a selection of potent, exotic cocktails with names like Broadway Lights, City Lagoon, and Thousand Islands, and ended with calorie-laden New Orleans Ladies (Häagen-Dazs ice cream, coconut milk, and Kahlua) served in an oversized champagne glass. The goal was to make sure our guests knew we were spending an obscene amount of money. Over the course of a few years, Craft's patronage got him a guaranteed regular table and a shiny brass plaque inscribed "Craft," which always seemed to impress our guests.

This process appeared to go smoothly until the evening when Craft had another commitment. Lauren, Carr, Costas, and I went to the table with our four guests. There, sitting on the wall, was a brass plaque engraved "Ruff."

The maître d' said, "Mr. and Mrs. Ruff, I hope you and your guests find your table satisfactory."

I nodded. Lauren smiled and kicked my leg under the table as if to say, I'm impressed. Our guests commented, "Wow, didn't know we were dining with a New York celebrity." Carr and Costas sat quietly and seethed. That was our last out-of-town guest dinner with the two of them.

As I learned, it was one more reason for Carr and Costas to make sure senior management consisted of the three partners, with me trailing in the distance as a nonvoting associate partner. They felt strongly that they were the ones who had been there from the company's inception; they neither understood nor cared about my twenty-five years of big time business experience.

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While the four supposed senior managers were subtly breaking into two camps—Ruff and Craft, the dreamers, and Carr and Costas, the operators—the four wives bonded homogeneously despite their diverse backgrounds. But Lauren was the only spouse invited to the producer dinners. Like Pete, Craft knew he could count on Lauren to schmooze his guests. The rest, while pleasant enough, were not surefire conversational bets.

Carr's wife, Evelyn, had been an up-and-coming garment district designer when she left it all behind to follow her man and have kids. Along the way, this self-assured, articulate, and outspoken woman morphed into a shy, cautious bundle of fragility, until she got to know you. Costas's wife was earthy and loved to drink, but couldn't hold her liquor worth a damn. She was unpredictable. And Craft's own wife, Amélie, was a French administrative assistant who locked onto the homely, wealthy Craft during a European vacation. While her accent was charming, she could rarely be understood and had no clue what anyone else was saying.

Unlike the boys, there was no petty animosity among the four wives. They developed a monthly girls' night out. Gourmet restaurants, Broadway plays, hard to get concerts, or shopping excursions. Not surprisingly, Lauren was appointed ringleader and visionary. They affectionately called her *the human social machine*. Her motto was, "No event too small to celebrate, no store too expensive to shop."

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With the unexpected bump in sales and the high employee and field morale, Lou Marshman figured it would be a slam dunk to sell the company quickly and quietly.

He hired a broker so there wouldn't be an appearance of the nervous father-in-law trying to shop the company in a desperate fire sale. Marshman's goal was top dollar. Logic-ally, he offered to sell the company to Appalachia Insurance Company in Minnesota, the firm's number one product supplier and the majority recipient of the opportunistic sales. Marshman, who disliked Craft, Costas, and Carr because they had openly shown their disdain for his daughter Belinda's forced intrusion into Pete's life, was giddy with delight upon discovering Craft and his two cronies didn't have a drop of equity. He figured that left him in the driver's seat, financially and operationally.

Carr, Costas, and Craft were one step ahead of Marshman. They had already made certain that the highly-compensated Patrick Defore, president of Appalachia, knew Craft et al. were the real key to AFA's future health. Craft suggested to Defore that if he took a pass on Belinda's offer to sell, Craft would finance the purchase with his other partners and they would in turn sell a substantial equity interest at a discount to Appalachia. "I think it would be the classic win-win for everybody," said Craft on the phone.

"I know you well enough, Dawson. That down-the-line equity interest will cost Appalachia more than buying the company outright from Belinda right now, so why the hell would I even consider your offer?"

Craft, a world-class risk-taker, then gambled the house. "Because Jeremy, Eddie and I will bolt. I could be wrong, but I'm guessing when sales start slipping your board is going to ask you, 'What the hell happened to our number-one product distributor?' It's your choice, pal, no skin off my nose." Craft paused, "You know pal, there may also be some founder's equity [lowest price insider stock value] lying around that could be transferred to you personally."

Defore got Craft's drift and thanked him for the call.

The next day, Defore called Belinda Maroney directly, since they had met at a number of their respective company functions. Now knowing Craft's intention, he figured he could bully Mrs. Maroney into a fire sale and then take his chances with Craft, Costas, and Carr.

"With all due respect, Mrs. Maroney, most companies are looking at the current AFA situation and thinking to themselves, 'I'll wait to see if the current management can hold it together. Because we worked so closely with Pete, we know AFA well. Even if Dawson, Eddie, and Jeremy were to leave, I'm confident after a few initial hiccups we could make the company prosper.' However, I don't know how big the hiccups might be or how long it would take to restore a healthy growth trend. Fortunately for you and your family, Appalachia not only has vision, we also have deep pockets. That's why we can make you a substantive offer right now.

"We'd still like to offer you fifty percent of book value paid upfront, fifty percent cash and fifty percent prefer-ed Appalachia stock, plus a generous secondary profit-sharing formula." In plain English, Defore was offering a quarter of what the company was really worth before the Craft sales surge and a minor share of profits after Appalachia took the majority of profits each year.

The streetwise Belinda Maroney smelled a rat. "What makes you think Dawson, Eddie, and Jeremy want to leave? They are making more money than they've ever seen in their lives."

"I didn't say they were leaving. I'm just guessing, of course, but if I were them, I would figure you couldn't possibly run things without them. Not to insult you, madam, but you have no operating experience, no business relationships with the field advisors, and no apparent role with employees looking for a leadership."

While he was correct, Defore had insulted Belinda big time. She and her dad refused to even make a counteroffer. Through an unnamed source at Appalachia, Craft learned of Defore's double-cross and just coolly filed it away for future retribution.

Lou Marshman heard the same story from the company's other product suppliers as his broker shopped the company around to the other potential buyers. Craft had gotten to everybody with the Appalachia speech, including the illegal private stock offer.

As Marshman, his attorney, his broker, and his daughter began to sweat, Craft and company made their
unsolicited offer: $10 million in cash for forty percent of the company plus an immediate share of profits, and a secondary note at two points below prime to finance the balance of the company over ten years.

An unhappy Belinda Maroney reluctantly accepted the offer as her only real option.

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Despite my equity understanding with Pete and my growing importance with the company, Costas, Carr, and Craft were hell bent on eliminating me from the purchase process. "Dawson, do you think we should apprise Martin of the deal?" asked Carr, torn between doing the right thing and concern that his equity position would be diluted.

"I'm not sure," said Craft. "He's done some incredible things in twelve months to improve the overall value of the company. At the same time, I can't help but feel Pete was just smitten by his Wall Street background."

As Craft and Carr seesawed back and forth, Costas sat quietly recalling the early days. How he agreed to embrace Pete's vision, with no guarantees. How he used his credit cards to live on during the zero-cash-flow days. How the financial pressures destroyed his first marriage and shredded his relationship with his kids. Most of all, he remembered sitting on the floor of an office the size of a postage stamp making homemade charts to sell Pete's vision to prospective financial advisors. It was his turn to speak. "Eddie, I agree with Dawson. We're the ones who did all the grunt work to get this company off the ground while Martin was out making his millions on Wall Street. I'm the one with the bankruptcy on my record. We should make him earn it, just like we did. As far as I'm concerned, he's been paid for his contributions to date. We owe him zippo!"

Carr, never known for his original thinking, played follow the leader. "Jeremy, you're right. If we do all the work and put up all the cash, why should we let him in?"

"I say we give him a share of the profits, like Pete gave us," proposed Craft. "But the company equity is ours. Just like Pete did with us."

"I can live with that concept, depending upon what share of profits you're thinking," said Costas.

"I'm thinking ten percent. As in ninety to ten," smiled Craft.

The three men looked at each other without saying a word.

"So moved?" smiled Craft, breaking the silence.

"Motion carried," responded Costas and Carr with shit-eating grins on their faces.

~

Craft was well-prepared when I approached him about my verbal agreement with Pete. "We plan to honor the profit-sharing agreement, just like you and Pete agreed. After all, we're family."

"What about the equity part?"

"Pal, I don't know what you're talking about. Do you have something in writing?"

"No, it was a handshake."

"Pal, I'm not disagreeing that you may have *thought* you and Pete had some general understanding, but Eddie, Jeremy, and Pete had been working on an equity participation deal for quite some time. His death only added certain urgency to those conversations. Your name never came up. That having been said, there is no question about your contributions to the firm. That's why Jeremy and Eddie want you to have a ten percent share of annual profits." He then handed me a check for $500,000 and said, "*Trust me, pal.* They'll be lots more where this came from. And we'll eventually figure out something on the stock."

We shook hands as he joked, "Don't forget to remind your accountant that it's his job to keep your taxes to a minimum."

I decided to say nothing about my five percent agreement with Pete. "Dawson, I have an idea. Since you're clearly trying to work out something with the family, why don't we use this check for my portion of the equity purchase?"

He seemed surprised. "How do you know about the purchase of the company?"

"Actually, I don't know anything. It's the other three-hundred-plus employees who are telling me what's going on."

"Pal, this is a complicated thing. I understand your interest. It's appreciated and won't be forgotten, I promise you." Craft started to walk out of my office and then paused. "Oh, I almost forgot. Dawson, Jeremy and I own a little jewelry company for fun. This is for Lauren."

He handed me a little clear plastic bag with a 3.4-carat diamond ring set in an 18-carat gold setting.

~

That evening, I filled Lauren in over a bottle of wine. I placed the check next to her glass. "Here's a little something Dawson gave us today."

She stared at the amount. "Oh my God, you've got to be kidding!"

"Oh yeah," I said deadpan, taking the plastic bag out of my pocket. "He also wanted you to have this little bauble."

Dawson had made a friend for life. Then Lauren made an interesting observation. "If they're giving you all this, imagine how much they must make."

"And that brings us back to the fact that we still have no equity stake. I'm just an expensive hired gun."

"You know, honey," she said sweetly, "You sound incredibly ungrateful. Maybe you heard what you wanted to hear about the stock thing. Remember, you told me, Pete was very reluctant about giving you equity since Dawson, Eddie, and Jeremy didn't have any."

"Equity participation is not about seniority; it's about contributions. AFA is not a hospital, you know," I replied accurately but insensitively.

Her pained expression telegraphed *low blow*. To her credit, she maintained her composure.

"Don't take this the wrong way. I love you very much. I've heard the wonderful things advisors have said about you at the Pete and Dawson dinners but, let's be honest: you've only been there eighteen months, while the three of them started by making invoices and taking out the trash."

I countered. "Let's think selfishly for a moment. Why did I get involved to begin with? We felt we had enough to be comfortable, but this was our chance to be super-wealthy, to ride off into the sunset dropping our Bentley GT off at Westchester Airport before boarding the chartered jet to our mansion on Lake Tahoe. Remember? At fifty-seven, how many more chances like this do you think will come along?"

"Maybe I'm missing something. Aren't you making a ton of money?"

"But you said it yourself; I'm not making what they're making."

"Martin, *how much is enough*? Don't get me wrong. I love the good life just like you, and we've been fortunate to have more than most. But are money and toys the measure of a man? I thank God every day that he has given us good health and a wonderful family. But most of all, I thank him for my wonderful loving husband. You have been and always will be the love of my life. What else do we really need?"

~

Alexandria Plummet was the whole package: smart, sexy, and very street-savvy. She also knew information was king. Prior to Pete's death, she had befriended Belinda using the trials and tribulations of the single mom as their common bond. Much to her chagrin, after Pete died and Belinda fled, her flow of insider information vaporized.

For reasons unknown to me at the time, she had decided I was going to be her new source of substantive insider information. She employed a two-part information-gathering process, which was about as subtle as a sledgehammer, and therefore made me all the more cautious.

First, she would make it her business to *casually* stop by my office just to chit-chat. Before long, we were playing Twenty *Questions*. How were last month's num-bers? How is cash flow? Are we going to make our targets? As a single mom, should I be looking elsewhere? Who's going to own the company? Are commission rates going to be reduced?

"Why do you think I know the answers to all those questions?" I responded.

"Well, the rumor is that you're part of the buy-out group."

"And who, might I ask, is head of the rumor com-mittee?"

She smiled coyly. "No investigative reporter worth their salt reveals sources."

Her charming response disarmed me. I threw caution to the wind and began to provide this intellectually challenging bundle of roller-coaster emotions "selected" insights into what might be going on. Insights that were always generously spiked with conditional caveats. My verbal responses were inconsequential. She was all about body language. When I stopped talking, she'd cross her legs, smile her impish smile, stare into my light blue eyes with her light blue eyes and say, "You wouldn't lie to mommy, would you?"

Then she'd move to phase two of her program, *Wild Ass Rumors.*

She'd explain she been working the phones diligently with her producers–that was French for spending twenty-five percent of normal business hours trolling for juicy rumors and nasty innuendos. Then would come the questions: "Somebody down in Texas said Jeremy once filed for bankruptcy? Is it true that Pete died intestate?" Even though her questions were usually spot-on, my response was always the same, "I don't know anything about that; you'll have to ask the boys."

She'd look at me skeptically; I could smell the wood burning. Her response was always the same too: "No need." It took me a little time to understand that this was all a smoke screen. She had only one agenda: to make sure she shared in the spoils and never to get screwed financially.

When she got wind of Craft's sympathy sales pitch, she assumed she wasn't getting her fair share. She was convinced the eight male account managers were the primary commission beneficiaries. She was still pissed after our CFO took the time to project her windfall commissions. One thing became clear: Alexandria was financially insatiable. Whatever the number, it never seemed to be enough.

I did notice something positive during these "information-seeking" debate sessions. My testosterone level would ramp up and my mind would stray. She was beautiful, quick-witted, mature, and had a fantastic figure. I'd wondered, did she find me attractive? Interesting? Sexy?

My razor sharp, brash assistant, Courtney Street, smelled the testosterone percolating. And she made it abundantly clear she didn't approve!

Courtney and I were like the original odd couple. When I arrived at AFA, she was an eighteen-year-old part time clerk who was going to NYU full time. She was also Julia Maroney's best friend. I remember Pete laughing, "It's your turn in the box. Figure out what to do with her. She's pissed off everybody else in the company. But she's really, really smart." I spent about thirty days doing *Courtney trial and error*. Creative writing, marketing department, accounts receivables, recruitment telemarketing, etc. There were peaks of excellence followed by valleys of highly vocal dissatisfaction…for Courtney and her immediate supervisor.

Like Pete, I came to enjoy her spunk and respect her intelligence. This led to an orthodox solution! I'll make her *my* executive assistant. People thought I was absolutely nuts. It was like trying to tame a wild stallion. When I informed her of my decision, even she went bonkers, "Me work for you! Not a chance. You're too demanding. Too undisciplined. You try to do too many things at once. You…"

I asked her to shut up for a moment so I could explain her options. I told her she could work for me and get a forty percent raise or should could get fired. She decided to "try" option number one. To everyone's surprise, she became my loyal eyes and ears. Lauren became her second mom, polishing her rough edges and sharing my little foibles, woman-to-woman, giving Courtney insights in how to work most effectively with me while bonding the two of them forever. "Men," I overheard Courtney commiserating with Lauren one afternoon. "Doesn't matter what age. They need to be led around by the nose."

Whenever Courtney sensed my conversation with Alexandria might be turning personal, she stormed through the doorway brusquely announcing, "Time's up! You've got your next meeting with so and so...right now!" Courtney would stare at Alexandria, and Alexandria would smile insidiously. I used to discretely chuckle during their silent bouts of annoyance versus dalliance.

Whenever Alexandria left my office with kernels worthy of dissemination, she'd activate her patented information distribution system and replay selected excerpts to her two close cronies, Sam Cameran and Bill Johnson. They, in turn, would redistribute their version of what they heard to the rest of the account managers, who would then create their own version of the truth.

In the end, what Alexandria initially understood and passed on bore little resemblance to the rumors that would resurface in my office days later. It was like the children's game of "Telephone." They were all so obvious; it was downright comical. My biggest concern, however, was not the rumor mongering. In many ways, that was harmless and a part of office politics everywhere. Plus, I was able to manage the content that went into the Alexandria-hopper. My bigger concern was all the wasted time that could have been put to productive use making money.

Initially, I thought Alexandria and her trusted communications team were odd bedfellows. Cameran, a late-sixties, conservative, retired insurance trainer, collected a full-time paycheck while spending half his time enhancing digital photographs with Adobe Photoshop; Johnson, Alexandria's arrogant mid-fifties direct super-visor, was an average coach with a hushed past—two broken marriages laced with spousal abuse, a touch of alcoholism, and some unstated drug rehabilitation. As time went on, I would learn they had more in common with Alexandria than I initially imagined.

~

After Pete's death, I made it my business to stop by Julia Maroney's office every day, ostensibly to check on recruitment flow. But she and I knew it was about more than that.

From time to time we'd close the door and shed a few tears together.

One day, she seemed noticeably upset. I tried to cheer her up with one of my in-bad-taste teases. "Young lady, you keep frowning like that and I'll have to get you some of my wife's Estée Lauder night wrinkle repair."

"Maybe there's a reason," frowned Julia. "This battle with my stepmother is driving me crazy. You know, she emptied Dad's bank accounts. Mom didn't even get her monthly child-support and alimony payments this past month. I've been trying to help. I really, really hate that woman!"

"Julia, you've got to stay calm. Things have a way of working out. How can I help?"

As I leaned back in the chair, Craft wandered in. He saw the tears in Julia's eyes. "Is this guy making you cry?"

She smiled. "Uncle Dawson, Martin and I were just talking about the situation."

He looked at me pensively. "No problem, just don't forget about the agreement."

She nodded.

"Gotta go," he said.

"Martin," said Julia, "I hope you realize I have no problem working for you. Dad wanted that anyway."

"I'm not sure what you're talking about."

"Oh, I'm sorry, I should have realized. We're all under the same gag order until the negotiations are completed. Sorry."

I didn't let on, I had no idea what the hell was actually going on. But my absence of a full deck of cards was starting to become apparent. The partners were trying to work a deal to buy the company without me. The half-million dollars was smokescreen money. They figured they'd keep the actual equity ownership (the big payoff) for themselves and dribble out bits and pieces via stock options to the peons like myself.

The sordid affair was starting to feel like a familiar old-time movie. *Martin Ruff, Wall Street Redux*.