

Chapter 1

Tom Gives His First Performance Review

It was Tom's second week with *Empowerment International*, a company that created and sold self-help products to teach people and businesses how to be successful. He was already having buyer's remorse.

Tom's title was "Director of Outbound Sales." Ostensibly, he was responsible for the outbound sales operations and staff. When he was hired, he was told that it would be his show to run as he saw fit. In reality, he was an order taker for the company's president, Don Helmsley. In fact, everyone in the company did as the *Don* ordered. Now the *Don* had written a performance review for one of Tom's sales people, Greg Lovitt, and he wanted Tom to deliver it.

It was a harsh review. Tom disagreed with its conclusions and wondered if there was some animosity or conflict between the two men. Both were in their middle sixties and he heard that there was history between their families.

In the short time Tom had been with the company, he had observed Greg working the phones and thought he was excellent with the customers. It was true that the quantity of his calls was far less than those of the other sales staff, but Tom felt the quality of Greg's conversations was far superior and would ultimately lead to more sales. Tom would have written a positive review, but instead was being forced to deliver an evaluation that included penalties and a demotion.

Now Greg sat in Tom's office, on the other side of his desk, looking composed and ready to face what was coming. He was close to retirement age, if not already past it. He was an elegant, well-dressed man in a dark blue suit, although the sleeves of his coat were slightly frayed as was his shirt collar. He had a full head of silver hair, an old-fashioned pencil thin mustache and the

darkest eyes Tom had ever seen. He looked like he could have been the Maître'D of a sophisticated upper-scale restaurant. It was only when he smiled, that the illusion of elegance vanished. His teeth were yellowed and there were two noticeable gaps where a few were missing. So Greg rarely smiled.

Tom was uncomfortable. He had two copies of the review, one for himself and one for Greg. But he couldn't bring himself to hand over a copy to Greg and was having difficulty deciding how to begin the conversation.

Greg spoke first. "Thoreau was right."

"Huh?" Tom responded.

Greg pointed to the framed poster on the wall behind Tom. It was one of the motivational posters produced and sold by the company. Tom turned around and looked. There was a beautiful image of a couple holding hands on the bow of a sailboat. They were maybe in their late thirties. Tom guessed they were married. They were happy and smiling and looking out over a deep blue sea under a brilliant blue sky. Underneath them was the quote.

Go confidently in the direction of your dreams. Live the life you have imagined.

Henry David Thoreau

"You still have time." Greg said.

Tom turned back to face him and asked, "What do you mean?"

"You are still young. You still have time to try things, to experiment with life and test the possibilities. I don't." Greg gave a friendly smile, although he kept his lips together to hide his teeth. Then he leaned a fraction closer and asked, "Are you married?"

"Yes."

"Any kids?"

“No, not yet. We’re waiting for the right time.” Tom was confused. It felt like he had lost control of the meeting before it had even started. At the same time, he wanted to be polite and he was curious. He asked, “Are you married? Do you have any kids?”

“I had a son. He died in the 83 invasion of Grenada.” Greg’s smile faded and his eyes dulled for a moment as his gaze shifted to the floor.

The office suddenly seemed small and stuffy. Tom fought an urge to get up and open the door and said softly, “I’m sorry.” He knew the response was inadequate.

After a moment, Greg looked back at Tom and shrugged. “It was a long time ago. My wife has never quite gotten over it. She’s very ill now and requires oxygen and medicine and almost constant attention. Our life is hard and not what we imagined it would be. It didn’t turn out like that poster.” He studied Tom for a second and then continued, “I’m telling you this not to gain your sympathy, but to help you understand.”

“Understand what?”

Greg gave a rueful smile with closed lips and said, “My real name is Greg Lovitt, but my stage name was Greg Love. It sounds almost magical doesn’t it?” His smile broadened and his lips involuntarily parted. “In the early fifties, I was an actor and an extra on the lot at Paramount. The ‘Golden Age’ of Hollywood was starting to wind down. But there were still lots of stars there. I remember Ronald Reagan and Tony Curtis and Chuck Heston and Bill Holden. I used to go out drinking with Bill. And I remember Liz Taylor and Marilyn Monroe and Grace Kelly. In some way or other, I worked with them all. There was one day I will always remember clearly. I was working on the set of some ridiculous costume adventure with Tony Curtis. I was dressed like a medieval knight. I was young and dashing and everything seemed possible. Janet Leigh was in the picture. She hadn’t started dating Tony yet. She was... radiant. I had an enormous

crush on her. I remember standing there with my fake armor on and my fake sword at my side just staring at her. She saw me looking and she gave me the biggest most welcoming smile I had ever seen. Then she blew me a kiss and winked at me. I planned to ask her for a date after the shoot.”

Tom was caught up in the story and had forgotten about the review he was supposed to be giving. He asked, “What happened? Did you go out with her?”

Greg laughed. “No, Tony beat me to it.”

Tom laughed too. Then they sat in silence, both lost in their own thoughts.

After a moment, Greg said in a quiet voice. “The very next day I met my future wife. She was an extra too and she looked a lot like Janet. We started going out and soon fell in love. We married just three months later. A year after that, she was pregnant and I took a sales job to help support us.”

“Did you ever get back to acting?”

“I did a few cigarette and car commercials. Had a walk-on part on *I Love Lucy* and was a semi-regular bad guy on *Sgt. Preston of the Yukon* and performed on some westerns and other shows as well. But I never made much and always needed to take other jobs to support my family. Then, I don’t remember when exactly, I realized I had given up on acting. I was so caught up in life and responsibilities; I had let my dream slip away. And that’s what I want you to understand.”

Tom looked at him. “You gave up your dream.”

Greg nodded. Then he spoke with an intensity that caught Tom by surprise. “You’re young. You don’t have kids yet. You have time. Don’t make the same mistake I did. Whatever your dream is, follow it. If you don’t. If you put it off. If you give up. Well, one day you may find

yourself sitting across a desk in front of a much younger man, about to be chastised for being a... a failure.”

Tom didn't know how to respond. He looked at the performance review on the desk between them and felt embarrassed.

Greg saw the look on his face and understood. He reached over and picked the document up. “Is this my performance review?”

“Yes.”

“Did Helmsley write it?”

“Yes, but I don't agree with it. I want to rewrite it. You're... you're not a failure. I've watched you. You're good at what you do.” Tom held out his hand to take the paper back.

Greg held on to the review refusing to give it back. Then he laid it on the desk and taking a pen from his inside coat pocket, signed the document with a flourish as if he was signing an autograph. “In the grand scheme of things, this is nothing,” he said, pointing to the review with the pen. Then he put the pen away, stood up and extended his hand to Tom.

Tom was stunned and it took a moment for him to stand and take the offered hand. He was surprised at the firmness of the grip. “Thank you,” he said.

The old man smiled, this time showing his yellow teeth and responded. “Don't end up like me. There's still time for you. Listen to Thoreau. Live the life you have imagined.” Then he turned and left the office.

Chapter 2 **Barnabas Makes a Choice**

Barnabas Lovitt stood outside the rickety wooden shed struggling to get the cow shit and mud off his boots before it was his turn to go in. He was next in a long line of filthy, stinking, shit and mud covered men. All trying to clean themselves off as much as possible before it was their turn. Most carried long, bent nails to scrape the dark, gelatinous muck from between the treads of their work boots as they swatted at the swarms of biting flies and mosquitoes that surrounded them. There was nothing they could do about their clothes. The unlucky ones who couldn't afford an extra pair of boots or change of wardrobe were doomed to tramp through the deep filth in the same footwear and outfit they would wear when they left the stockyards, taking the stench with them wherever they would go.

It had rained three days straight, not unusual for mid-May in Chicago, but now the sun had finally broken through and it felt more like a hot, oppressive, muggy afternoon in July. Curtains of mist rose from the saturated ground and the backs of thousands of sodden cattle to swathe the dirty, brown stockyards and clapboard buildings in a hazy diffused light. The retched smells of manure, urine, sweat and fear infused the thick air. Livestock cried out plaintively, exhausted men cursed loudly, new machinery screeched and trains roared and rumbled through the grounds making the earth shake as if by an earthquake.

For Barnabas it was hell on earth.

But it was also a paycheck and the only place Barnabas had been able to find work. So, on this day, it wasn't the heat or the smell or the muck or even the noise that troubled Barnabas and the men waiting with him, it was the all-consuming fear of losing their jobs.

It was the depression of 1897, one of the worst in the nation's history. By some accounts unemployment had risen to 20% or greater, banks were shutting their doors and railroads that had overreached and overbuilt were now declaring bankruptcy. And it was the railroads that owned the stockyards.

The door to the shed opened and a man encrusted in dried filth stepped out into the bright morning sun. Barnabas was close enough to see that the man had been crying. There were thin clear lines of flesh under his eyes where the tears had fallen and washed away the grime. The man saw Barnabas looking and managed a small smile as he wiped his face with the back of his hands smearing the grunge across his cheeks. Then making an effort to stand straight and hold his head up high, he walked away and it was Barnabas' turn.

Barnabas stepped over the threshold as if he were stepping over a deep black pit and slowly walked into the shabby office. A gruff voice called out, "Close the damn door." Barnabas obeyed with slightly trembling hands as he felt his fear grow exponentially. Then he looked over at the man who had spoken and saw him sitting behind an old, scarred wooden desk. His name was Scott Jones and he was Barnabas' boss. He was an older man, in his fifties, wearing wire rim glasses that rested on the tip of his nose with a bald head and long grey sideburns that dropped down to the bottom of his chin and then curved back up to meet in a large bushy mustache. On his desk was a stack of envelopes.

Jones motioned for Barnabas to take a seat.

Barnabas sat down slowly hoping his panic didn't show and held his breath as he watched his boss search through the envelopes.

Scott Jones was a good man. He saw the distress on Barnabas' face and understood it. He had already seen the same frightened, sorrowful look in the twenty-two employees he had just fired and knew he would see it again in each of the next thirty men waiting outside his door. He could have made an announcement to all of them at once, but he felt that he owed each man a few minutes of his time to deliver the bad news personally. It was how Scott hoped he would be treated when his turn came, which he figured was soon. Times were bad and getting worse.

Barnabas saw Scott grab an envelope from the middle of stack and instinctively knew it was for him. He wanted to speak up before it was too late, but, as was always the case when he was anxious, the words came into his mind too quickly and jumbled for him to form a coherent sentence. This time, however, his family was at risk. He took a deep breath and forced out the words that came to him first. "Sir, please, I need this job. I'm willing to do anything to keep it. I need to be working. I need a paycheck. I have two children and a wife dependent on me. I..." the words left him.

Scott sighed and dropped the envelope on the desk. Then he took his glasses off, placed them carefully beside the stack and studied Barnabas as he rubbed small red depressions on each side of his nose. When he spoke, the gruffness was gone from his voice. "You're a good lad and a hard worker, but mucking out stables is not the work for you. You have an education do you not?"

"Yes, I studied to be an accountant, but there is no work anywhere in the city. I have tried. They say I am too young and inexperienced and there are plenty of older men to do the work. I've looked everywhere, for any job, but there is no work of any kind to be had, except what I

have been able to find here. Please, I need this job. My family needs for me to have this job. Is there anything you can do? Is there anything I can do?”

Scott looked down at the envelope and said in a soft voice, “There is nothing I can do for you or even for myself, except...” He paused not sure if he should continue.

“Except what?” Barnabas pressed.

Scott thought a moment longer, then shrugged, looked back up at Barnabas and said, “Except that I hear rumors of gold being discovered in Alaska. The stories say that in the wild country of the Klondike, there are nuggets of gold the size of your fist, just waiting to be plucked from the creeks and riverbeds. They even say that there are veins of gold as wide as a house that run for miles and miles so near the surface, that all a miner has to do is scratch the earth to find them.”

“Are you saying I should go to Alaska?” Barnabas asked incredulously.

Scott picked up his glasses and put them back on so that they were once again perched on the tip of his nose. Then he picked up the envelope and said, “If I was in your place, and I will be soon enough, I would take my family and move to the West where there is still opportunity. That is what I would do.” He handed the envelope over. “Now maybe this will help. This is what we owe you for your last week’s work and a few days more. It’s all I can do.”

“But...”

“I am sorry there isn’t more.” Scott said with the gruffness back in his voice. “And, unfortunately, there are many more I must speak to today.” He gestured to the door and then stood offering his hand.

Barnabas rose from his chair reluctantly, shook Scott’s hand, turned and left the office. He paused when he stepped out into the sunlight and saw the next man in line studying him and

realized that he had been crying. He wiped his face with the back of his hand just like the man before him had done and then he walked away.

Near the entry gate to the stockyards was a long table filled with tubs of soapy water for the men to clean up. Barnabas stripped his soiled clothes off and scrubbed the grime away as best he could. Then he retrieved his street clothes from a hook and dressed. He didn't have an extra pair of shoes, so he put his muddy boots back on. He started to bundle his dirty clothes together to bring home for washing, but then tossed them to the ground. They were as worthless as he was and would not be needed anymore.

The next few hours Barnabas wandered aimlessly through the streets of Chicago, unwilling to face his family and hoping he might find another job. He looked for signs in windows that said, "HIRING. INQUIRE WITHIN." But there were none. He walked into stores, restaurants, shops, factories, whatever he could find, and asked for work of any kind and always the answer was the same. There was no work to be had anywhere.

Finally, Barnabas found himself across the street from his home, a tiny apartment on the third floor of a rundown tenement. The sun was low in the sky casting the street in sharp relief and a cold bitter wind was blowing away the heat of the day. Barnabas felt exposed and vulnerable. He was still not ready to face his family. He needed more time and thought about going into the neighborhood tavern and having a drink or two or three. There was practically one on every street corner, but Barnabas had a favorite. He walked the short distance, looked into the bar's window and saw a group of his friends already there sitting around a table. They were laughing and filling their mugs from large pitchers of frothy beer.

Barnabas stepped in and was immediately greeted by his friends. They made room for him at their table and signaled for another mug. As he walked over, a few men wrinkled their noses at the

stink from his boots, but no one said anything. They all understood the sacrifice behind the smell. By the time he reached the table, a full mug of beer was waiting for him. Before saying a word, he picked it up and drank hungrily not stopping until it was empty. Then he put it down and as they refilled it, he told his friends of his day.

The hours passed swiftly as the men talked of the hard times they faced. The beer continued to pour and Barnabas continued to drink, his guilt and self-loathing growing each time he reached into his envelope and took from it more cash to pay for his share. Toward the end of the evening, he came to a decision and announced it to the one other man who remained at the table, a good friend named Gus. “I’ve decided. I am going to the Klondike to dig for gold. I’ve no choice. There is no work here and even if I could find something, I am tired of slaving for others. I want to be rich and I want my family to enjoy the fine things in life. Going to Alaska is the only way someone like me can achieve that. Others have become rich in the West, so why can’t I? It will be hard on my family at first, but by this time next year we will be wealthy and they will understand that I am doing this for them. I’m convinced this is the only way open to me.”

Gus put down his mug, there was a bit of white froth on his upper lip and he wiped it away as he studied Barnabas’ face. “My God, you are serious, aren’t you?”

“I am,” Barnabas said a little defensively.

“But what of Beth and the boys? Why not take them with you out West. You need not dig for gold. I hear there is plenty of opportunity to build a life in many other ways. I’ve often thought of doing the same.”

“No, I haven’t even the money for myself to travel. I plan to ride the rails and that is no life for them. Beth has a sister in Gary. She and the boys can stay with her. They have a farm that is prosperous and there is plenty of room. Her sister, Gretchen, has invited her many times.”

“Then why don’t you go too?” Gus asked.

Barnabas thought a moment before answering. “Because Gretchen hates me and I don’t think too kindly of her either. She never approved of our marriage. And…” he worked to form the words, “we would still be poor and I am tired of being poor.”

Gus picked up his mug, drank the few drops of beer that remained and then slammed it hard on the table. “I have had enough to drink. It is time I went home to my family. You should do the same and forget about this nonsense.”

“I am leaving tonight. It is the only way I can help my family,” Barnabas repeated.

Gus stood up and threw a few coins on the table. “That is not true. You are not leaving your family so you can help them, you are running away from them and from your friends and from your life here. What you are about to do, you are doing for yourself. Think on it.” Then Gus turned and walked away.

Barnabas sat a while longer and thought on it, but his decision was made. He asked the bartender for a slip of paper and pencil. The bartender ripped a sheet from his order pad, took a pencil from behind his ear and handed them both to Barnabas as he warned him it was almost closing time. Barnabas promised to be quick, but it took him a while to figure out exactly what he had to say. When he was sure, he wrote his message, folded the paper and stuffed it into his pay envelope with the remaining cash.

Beth and the boys were asleep when Barnabas walked into their plain apartment. There was only a tiny bedroom and the main room with a small kitchen off to one side. Beth was asleep in the bedroom curled in a tight ball under the blankets and breathing deeply. Barnabas thought about kissing her, but was afraid that would wake her. Instead he stood for while watching and then took a chance and very lightly stroked her hair. For a moment, it looked like she might wake

and Barnabas tensed, but she only turned over. Barnabas let out a soft sigh and said in a whisper, “I love you.” Then he placed the envelope next to her pillow so she would see it when she woke and tiptoed from the room.

On the floor in the main room, Barnabas’ boys were sleeping wrapped in blankets and snoring fitfully. He bent down and put his hand lightly on each child’s forehead swearing that he would return a rich man and their lives would be much better. Then he straitened up and took a small framed sepia photograph hanging on the wall. It was of him and Beth and the boys on the sandy shore of Lake Michigan. He carefully removed the picture from the frame and kissed it before placing it in his pocket. Then he gathered a few belongings and put them into an empty pillow case. When he was ready, he took one last look, wiped tears from his eyes and stepped out into the hallway closing the door quietly behind.

Chapter 3 **Amy in Crisis**

“Are you listening to me?” The customer screamed.

Amy didn’t answer. She could barely hear him since she turned down the volume on her headset. She needed to focus on the pick message slip that had just been dropped on her cubicle desk. The handwriting was sloppy and hard to make out. It looked like:

FROM: Cool Nurse
TO: Amy
SUBJ: Daughter has a beaver and needs go home!

Luckily, Amy had been with the company long enough to know how to decipher the message. “Cool nurse” had to be the *school nurse* at her daughter’s grade school and her daughter, Kelly, had a *fever* not a “beaver” and she must be sick enough that she had to be picked up and taken home. Amy squinted to read some scribbling in the upper right corner that listed when the call had come in. It was over an hour ago.

“Damn it! Are you listening to me?” the caller yelled.

“I’m listening,” Amy finally responded as she turned the volume back up.

“Well, am I getting a refund or not? I tried your stupid product, *How to Negotiate for a Bigger Raise and Promotion*. On the cover of the damn disc, it specifically states that if you follow the lessons, you will learn how to successfully negotiate for a big raise and promotion. Well, I followed those fucking lessons and did everything they said to do and not only did my boss not give me a raise, he fucking fired me and I want my fucking money back.”

“Yes, sir, I understand your frustration, but we can’t take responsibility for how a customer implements our advice. For example, if you watched the DVD carefully, you know that using profanity and threats usually doesn’t work well in a negotiation situation?” Amy said sweetly.

She knew that she was probably provoking the customer, but she was past caring. She was worried and overwhelmed and she had to call the school nurse and pick up her daughter. And for that she needed permission to leave early from her boss, Rowena, and that would be a fight.

“God damn it! I don’t like your fucking attitude. I want to talk to your manager!” The customer demanded.

“Sir,” Amy said in the same sweet voice, “as I’ve already explained, you purchased the product five months ago and our refund policy is only valid for three months from the date of purchase and that is usually not negotiable. However, if I can put you on hold for a few minutes, I will check with my manager to see if we can make an exception.”

“No! Don’t put me on...” Amy unplugged her headset jack from the phone but kept the unit on her head. Then she took a quick look in the “Smile Mirror” permanently affixed to her cubicle wall and tried to smile, but it was impossible. Her reflection showed a frowning, anxious, unhappy young woman growing old prematurely. She could see the beginnings of wrinkles around her eyes and the corners of her mouth and she wondered if she should start using makeup. But Amy liked being low maintenance, it fit her personality and it was definitely cheaper. It’s why she kept her blonde hair cut short so that all it required was a comb in the mornings and it was why she did all her shopping off the clearance racks of Ross, T.J. Max, and Marshalls. Amy was twenty-nine, a single mother with a degree in Art History and for the past six months, a customer service representative with *Empowerment International*. It wasn’t the job she wanted or the career she dreamed of, but she needed the money. When she took the job, she had hoped that the self-help products and seminars they sold would teach her how to achieve success too. But that hadn’t worked out and in that way, she understood and sympathized with the customer’s complaints.

Amy turned away from the mirror, picked up the pink message slip, left her cubicle and walked over to the Call Center Command Center which everyone called the *CCCC*.

Rowena looked up as Amy approached, arched an eyebrow and said with a sneer. “You are supposed to be on your phone. What do you want?”

Amy, like most of the call center staff, was afraid of Rowena who was a favorite of the *Don*'s and usually did what she could to avoid her. But now she had no choice. She spoke quickly without stopping to take a breath. “I have a very upset and angry customer who bought one of our DVD's five months ago and is demanding a refund and I need to call my daughter's school. I think she is sick and I need to leave work and pick her up.”

Rowena smiled wickedly. She drew sustenance from the fear and discomfort of her staff. It provided her with something she had never had before in her life, power. When she was in her station at the *CCCC*, she was omniscient and like a ruler of old, she could pass judgment on the supplicants who came before her every Monday through Friday from 8:00 to 5:00. She looked down at Amy and said, “No, the customer can't have a refund, our rules are very clear on this point, and no, you can't leave early. You have an hour to go before your shift ends and you need to stay. But I will let you make a personal call after you resolve this issue with the customer.” As Rowena spoke, she folded her arms under her ample breasts. She was wearing a low cut top with a leopard skin pattern. It was purposely a few sizes too small to accentuate her bosom. Rowena thought it looked sexy. Everyone else thought it made her look like a plump sausage stuffed into a too tight skin.

Amy stood her ground. “But I already told the customer exactly that and he just got angrier using very, very offensive language. I need to call the school nurse right now and I need to leave and pick my daughter up.”

Rowena was ready. “You know the company policies. If you can’t follow them, maybe we need to replace you with someone who can. Then you can spend all your time with your daughter.”

“But...”

“No buts. You know the rules. Make up your mind. Your customer is waiting.”

Amy held the pink message slip in her right hand. She took off her headset with her left hand. Then she held both hands out in front as if they were the platforms of a scale and she was weighing each item against the other. She needed this job, but her daughter needed her more. She was tired and stressed and near her breaking point. She made her decision and started to speak, but was immediately interrupted by a voice behind her.

“Good day, ladies.” It was Greg Lovitt looking dapper in his worn navy blue suit and holding a single red rose in his hand. “It is a beautiful day as are the two of you. Rowena, this is for you.” He presented her the rose with a theatrical gesture and said, “What’s in a name? That which we call a rose, by any other name would smell as sweet.” Greg had just recently been demoted from sales to customer service and now reported to Rowena.

Rowena beamed with genuine pleasure at the gesture and gift. Greg was the one person she liked. He treated her with respect and made her feel special. She accepted the rose, sniffed it and then placed it in a small vase she already had prepared.

“Now ladies, I couldn’t help but overhear your discussion as I approached. I believe I can help as my shift does not yet start for another hour. Dear Rowena, we have a difficult customer who isn’t happy with what he is hearing. Perhaps if he hears the message from an older more mature voice, he will find it more acceptable. And, clearly, Amy must take care of her child at

school. I would like to volunteer my services. May I please take the call for Amy? I have the time available right now.”

Rowena smiled at Greg and said, “Yes, you may.” Then she turned to face Amy and her smile turned back into a sneer. “Amy, thanks to Mr. Lovitt, you may leave early this one time. Now, hand him your headset and take him to your station.”

Before Amy could respond, Greg said, “We thank you” and then guided her away before she could say anything.

When they were far enough so Rowena couldn’t hear them, Amy said, “It’s a good thing you came when you did. I was about to quit. I don’t know how I can thank you. How do you do it? How do you survive here? How do you survive period?”

“I persevere, my dear, I persevere. Rowena is a witch and a tyrant and she has the power to either make our time here miserable or bearable. And, for most of us, she chooses to make it miserable. I believe there must be something in her life that makes her behave this way. I imagine she is very lonely. To make my time here bearable, I present her with a flower and pay her a compliment at the beginning of my shift. It is, I believe, a highlight of her day. The flowers cost me nothing. There is a woman in our building who works in a florist shop. She is a friend of my dear sick wife and out of kindness, each evening she brings my wife a bouquet of flowers that are left over from the day. But, the flowers are beautiful none the less and they brighten our home with their color and sweet aroma. Every morning, before I leave for work, my wife picks the prettiest and freshest of the flowers and places it in the lapel of my jacket as a token of her love and so that I will look my best. And, everyday when I get to work, I give that flower to Rowena.”

They reached Amy's cubicle and she handed her headset to Greg and said, "That's very sweet, but the flower was meant for you. I'm sorry, but aren't you really just, 'sucking up?'"

Greg took the headset, carefully placed it over his silver hair and replied, "Performing an act of kindness to help someone feel better about themselves is never 'sucking up.' And, if at the same time, that act of kindness also lightens your burden, well, what can be wrong with that?"

"You're right, of course. I'm sorry for asking."

"Don't worry about it my dear. You have a child that needs you and your income, such as it is here, and you should never quit till you have found something else. For now, you must instead learn how to persevere"

Amy looked at him for a long moment, thinking about what he said and then she asked, "Will you teach me how to persevere?"

"It would be my great honor," Greg answered gallantly.

Amy kissed him on the cheek and whispered, "Thank you." Then, she retrieved her purse from an overhead compartment and left to pick up her daughter.

Chapter 4 **John Helmsley Makes a Getaway**

John Helmsley loved his cigars. Not for their taste or aroma or the tactile feel of holding one. He couldn't even tell the difference between an expensive cigar and a cheap one, though he only smoked the most costly. John Helmsley loved his cigars because they were a great prop. They helped create an illusion of wealth, prosperity and power. They could be used to emphasize a point or deflect attention. When he held one in his hand and gestured with it, suckers focused on the movement and not so much on his words and that could be very helpful. John had learned years earlier that for some unexplainable reason people were fascinated by the smelly things making them a wonderful distraction. He developed a method that was diabolical in its simplicity and effectiveness. Before meeting with a victim, he inserted a thin wire down the center of a long, fat, expensive cigar and that was enough to keep the ash from falling. Marks would focus on the glowing ash at the tip of his cigar as it grew longer and longer wondering when it might fall and only half listening to him. It helped make them more open to suggestion and that was what he wanted.

There was a long glowing ash on the end of John's cigar right now and the three men sitting across the ornate desk from him were watching it closely despite their rage. Of course, John Helmsley wasn't using his real name. To the three angry men, he was known as "John Sagget," a wealthy entrepreneur and investor. He always used his true first name, it was easier to avoid a slipup or mistake. The three men, like John, were in their mid-thirties, fashionable dressed, neatly groomed and manicured and all cultivated an air of superiority. The only difference was that John was calm and the three men were alternately enraged, worried and depressed.

“Gentlemen,” John said extending his cigar forward. “I am truly sorry about this. It is why I asked you to come to my home tonight in Brooklyn. You three are my largest investors and I felt I must deliver this disastrous news immediately and to your faces. You have already heard that the Philadelphia and Reading Railroad has declared bankruptcy along with the Northern Pacific, Union Pacific and Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroads?”

The three nodded.

John brought his cigar back and inhaled slowly before continuing. The tip glowed red and hot as the ash grew impossibly longer. “Well, just as I invested your funds in these railroads, so too did I invest my own. I believed that the expansion we were experiencing would continue on for many years, that our investments would grow substantially and our future was secure. I was wrong. I... we, have lost everything. I am afraid the funds you left in my care are now worthless.”

The man seated in the middle, Carl Frobisher, forced his eyes from the cigar to stare at John and yelled, “You told us our money would be safe. That we’d make millions on these investments, that it was guaranteed.”

The man sitting to Frobisher’s right, Ben Needham, spoke up, his voice deep and menacing, “I don’t believe you, Sagget. You’re lying and you have stolen our money. I will have the authorities on you, sir. I have friends in high places. I dine often with the Chief of Police. He will make certain this is investigated and you are jailed.”

Then the third man, Frank Bodeen, asked softly. “Is there nothing left?”

“Nothing,” John answered.

“Nothing?” Frank Bodeen asked again.

“Nothing,” John repeated.

“You bastard!” Carl Frobisher bellowed.

“I never trusted you,” Ben Needham rumbled. “I smelled the rat. I only entered into this deal because of the others.” He glared at Frobisher and Bodeen.

Frobisher turned on Needham. “What do you mean? You only got into this deal because of Frank and me? You were just as excited and as much a part of this as we were. In fact, you were pushing for us to all go in together, you mealy-mouthed, boat-licking, prick!”

Then the three men turned on each other yelling and screaming all at once. John let them go on as he quietly smoked and the ash at the end of his cigar grew longer still.

Finally, Frank Bodeen with his loud squeaky voice managed to break through the recriminations. He pleaded “Gentlemen... gentlemen... please...now is not the time to turn on each other. The man at fault is sitting here before us. He is responsible and it is at him that we should be directing our anger. Perhaps if we lower our voices and talk reasonably we can find a solution?”

“Fuck you!” Frobisher and Needham screamed in unison.

Bodeen put his hands up in a sign of surrender and said, “I’m only trying to help. Anyway, it is all his fault.” He pointed at John.

“Yes,” agreed Carl Frobisher. “It’s Sagget’s fault.”

“Yes, you’re the reason we are in this fix,” added Ben Needham.

The three men glared at John.

John looked back, shrugged and said, “You are quite right. I take all responsibility for this fiasco. The blame is mine alone and I will do everything in my power to repay you the debt I owe you. I had only the best of motives when I approached you. All my life, I have strived to do the right thing for my fellow man and my investors and always there has been profit with enough

left over for me to help the poor unfortunates who populate our great city.” Still holding his cigar, he gestured with a sweeping motion to indicate the room they were in, but all three men’s attention was instead drawn to the ash on his cigar. “The brownstone you sit in and the expensive furnishings that surround you are a testament to my good fortune and financial savvy. But this horrible turn of events has cost me more dearly than you three. I am ruined.”

Needham slammed the table with the flat of his hand and said, “Spare us the sad story. I don’t believe it. I want my money back.”

Frobisher slammed his hand on the table as well and demanded, “I want my money back too. Needham may know the Chief of Police, but I know other men who are not as concerned with the law. If I do not get my money back, they will come here this very night and take it back from your flesh a piece at a time. First they will break your legs, then your arms and then...”

“Gentlemen,” Bodeen interrupted. “Maybe there is a way Sagget can repay his debt to us.” He gestured at their surroundings as John had done and continued. “We know that there is much value in this brownstone and its furnishings. The artwork alone must be worth a small fortune.”

“He is right,” agreed Needham.

The three men looked at their surroundings for a moment and then turned their attention on John and for the briefest of seconds, the ash on the end of his cigar. Frobisher said, “If you truly wish to repay your debt then sign over this house and all within it to us.”

John stared at them in disbelief and it took a moment for him to form a response. Finally, he stammered, “But...but if I do this, I will be penniless. I mean to pay you all back what I owe you, but what you ask is worth much more than my debt to you three. You would leave me with nothing while making a profit on our misfortune. Surely you can give me some time to find another way?”

“There is no other way. Sign over the deed to this brownstone and an additional paper that states we three own all within it or the Chief of Police will be at your door before the morning sun,” demanded Frobisher.

“And before the sun is near to rising, my own men will pay you a visit and beat you bloody if you do not do this now,” added Needham.

Bodeen was studying the ash on John’s cigar, it was now almost two inches long and ready to fall at any moment and he wanted to see that happen. Without looking away, he said, “They are right. Do this thing tonight or you will live to regret it.”

John asked helplessly, “You are resolute in this?”

All three nodded in unison.

John sighed and shuddered, tears came to his eyes and for a moment looked as if he would break down before them and beg. But the moment passed. With a shaking hand, he placed his cigar carefully on the lip of a white porcelain ashtray. The three men leaned in to stare at it, sure that the ash must fall off but still it remained intact. John said, “I have no choice then and I am a man of honor.” He rose from his chair leaving the cigar for the men to watch and walked across the room to where three large paintings hung. He gripped the right side of the middle painting and pulled so that the painting swung away from the wall on hidden hinges. A wall safe with a large dial and lever was revealed. John turned the dial three times, gripped the lever and opened the safe. “Gentlemen, this is all I own and it is yours.”

Frobisher, Needham and Bodeen reluctantly left the smoking cigar and walked over to peer inside the safe. There were documents, some cash and jewelry, a bank book and a key. John reached in, scooped out all the items and carried them back to his desk where he laid them down for all to see.

“Here is the deed to my home, some jewelry including diamond cufflinks and rings, some gold trinkets, a bank book to provide an accounting of what funds I have currently and a key to my safe deposit box. All of it is yours.” Then John wrote a quick note, signed it and held it up for the three men to see. “This note states that all within my home is also yours. I hope now that you will forgive me.”

“Is this truly all you have?” Frobisher asked suspiciously.

“There is one more item of value I own, but I beg that I may keep it.”

“I thought so,” said Needham. “What is it?”

John pointed to a small elegant cherry wood humidor on his desk. “I ask that I may keep this to remind me of better times.”

“Not a chance,” said Frobisher. He grabbed the box and doled out the cigars within to the other two men. “I will take this with me tonight and then tomorrow morning we will meet here again to divide up the rest.” He tucked the humidor under his arm, faced Needham and Bodeen and asked, “Does that meet with your satisfaction?”

Both men agreed, but before they left, Needham took the cufflinks and Bodeen took the gold and bank book.

Once they were gone, John picked up his cigar and smiled. The ash was now almost three inches long. A tall, older man dressed in attire appropriate for a butler came into the room carrying an empty valise.

“Hobbs, good timing, you heard?” John asked.

“Indeed I did sir.”

“Fools,” John said dismissively. “Some say that Barnum, the great showman and even greater con artist, once said, ‘there’s a sucker born every minute.’ I don’t know if he said that or

not. It doesn't matter because it's wrong. The saying should go, 'there's a *customer* born every minute.' John ground out his cigar in the ashtray exposing and bending the thin wire within back on itself. "Are the arrangements made?"

"Yes sir. We have passage on a ship leaving tonight for San Francisco and your bags are packed and ready to go. And it is a good thing too. Your false identity will not protect you. If you are seen on the street, you will be recognized."

"True. I've been thinking that it is time I no longer use false identities. In fact, I think it is time we become legitimate."

"Legitimate, sir?"

John laughed. "By legitimate, I mean we shall set up real businesses while we employ patsies to take the blame for our more... creative endeavors. This will be much safer and we will no longer have to hide our faces and run."

"I understand, sir. Now, might I suggest we *run*?"

John laughed again and took the empty valise from Hobbs. Then he walked over to the painting to the left of the middle one that still swung open and pulled it back from the wall to reveal a second safe. Inside were stacks of cash and a very fine, jewel encrusted humidor. John put a few stacks of bills in his pockets and then placed all the rest along with the humidor into the bag.

"Not a bad exchange," he chuckled, "worthless stock, a fake deed, phony trinkets, all in exchange for this nice money. I wonder how the real homeowners will react when they return from Europe to see strangers living in their home and their possessions gone?" He picked up the stuffed valise and said, "Well, Smyth, are you ready for our next adventure?"

"Yes sir, but if I may ask, why San Francisco?"

“Because gold has been discovered in Alaska and most men are going through San Francisco to get there. We may decide to move on to Seattle or even Skagway, but wherever we end up there will be men looking for gold. And men looking for gold are natural ‘customers.’ We shall fleece them as they go to the gold fields and if they actually find any gold, we’ll fleece them as they come out.”