

THE 3RD PARTY

**VOL. I
STARTING IN THE MIDDLE**

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Third Party:

Volume I: Starting in the Middle

by Steven Nemerovski

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*For My Nancy
With All My Love*

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PROLOGUE

Ever since Aspen had become his permanent residence, Fridays meant one thing: rise at five thirty; exercycle with CNN; eat a light breakfast of yogurt, granola, and juice; peruse the morning e-mails from his assistant, Liz; quickly respond as required; grab the backpack. Estimated time of departure: 7 a.m.

With foliage at its peak, there is one clear choice for his weekly hike. From his home on Red Mountain, it is approximately fifteen minutes by car to the trail head in Snowmass Village, just off Horse Ranch Drive at The Crossings. Mountain bikers tend to embark the Rim Trail from the west where access off Sinclair Road makes the ascent less taxing. Most hikers start from the east where the early switchbacks, surrounded by flowing prairie grasses and natural flowers, are the easy choice over pavement and where, beginning with the seventh switchback, the early views of Mt. Daly and beyond offer a pleasing tease of Mother Nature's majesty ahead.

With a moderate aerobic pace, forty minutes in brings the birch tree line, a grouping of picnic tables, and a chance to rest. The view is so spectacular that first-timers often quit here and head back down after prematurely exhausting their water bottles and cameras. To the experienced, this is only the hors d'oeuvre.

The next length of trail covers fifteen to twenty minutes. The terrain is moderately steep and scrub oak begins to dominate. In mid-September, the relatively mundane plant turns supermodel, exploding in a range and depth of colors that few plants can surpass. During this last push to the top, the path curves around to expose a southerly view

facing the Snowmass Mountain ski range and a westerly view facing Mt. Sopris, the king of the valley.

At the epicenter of the viewing splendor sits an old-fashioned park bench created out of split tree trunk segments. Though the picnic tables seemed bizarre to him, he thought the bench was genius. With almost 300 degrees of unobstructed views at 10,000 feet, it was this spot, and this bench, that had years ago sealed the deal to make this area his home.

People come to Aspen from all over the world for myriad reasons. Sportsmen come for skiing, fishing, hiking, biking, camping, golf, and more recently, X-games. The arts are plentiful. Shopping is expensive and exclusive. Politicians, celebrities and wannabes can see and be seen. For non-skiers, cool, crisp summers kick off with the Harley-led Fourth of July parade and transition to Labor Day with one festival after another. All of this, and more, presented in a charming, welcoming, yet sophisticated package that most visitors grasp immediately.

That he ever traveled to Aspen was a historical anomaly. In 1949, Chicago industrialist Walter Paepcke and the University of Chicago staged the Goethe Bicentennial Convocation and Music Festival. The main draw was Dr. Albert Schweitzer, along with other international leaders, artists, and musicians. He accompanied his parents to the convocation and the experience created lasting memories.

His next trip, roughly twenty years later, was to ski. The following summer was a longish weekend of hiking and biking; and thereafter, and occasionally, he visited for all of the above.

As he thought back to his late forties and early fifties, he would grudgingly concede the occasional impulse to see and be seen. Though not a celebrity in the magazine cover sense, he had become one of the most accomplished and wealthiest men in the world. Aspen's high society glitterati had also allowed him to bask in the glow of his mid-life crisis of ego.

It's not that one starts out to become a billionaire. He would freely admit that independent wealth was generally on his pubescent to-do list, but it was with an "M" not a "B." Looking back on his career, the day-to-day and year-to-year quest had been about the pursuit of excellence, not

wealth. However, his unique brand of excellence and genius had produced assets on a galactic scale.

He was already well-known and highly respected in his field. But once the tabloids announced his membership in the billionaire's club, he was not just labeled; he was incarcerated. At least he felt that way. Friends who had been easygoing were now tentative, while strangers began seeking him out. Business acquaintances suddenly felt the need to re-evaluate their relationships with him, while anyone with a get-rich-quick scheme pressed for access. He was even more highly sought after by the legitimate press and news media. Given his bachelor status, he also became a target of the paparazzi.

It was then that he discovered another reason to love Aspen. It was a place where he could be normal and inconspicuous. By any demographic it was among the wealthiest communities in the world, yet for all its enticements and sophistication, Aspen was also a very small town. As a local, it presented the most relaxed pace he had ever encountered. The only thing people hurried to do was ski fresh powder or otherwise enjoy the outdoors.

With the exception of an extreme minority, no one was competitive. Work was conducted at a Southern Comfort pace, just short of mañana. People were genuinely friendly. On any given day, he could walk the streets, grab a brew and, for the most part, be a regular guy.

In short order, his newfound relaxation transitioned to playing hooky for hikes and bike rides in the summer, and skiing in the winter. The Rim Trail bench was the one place where he could sit for extended periods of time, relax, close his eyes, and shut out the world.

From an early age he had great insight into the workings of his mind. He knew it was always switched on, even when he slept. Like any high-end computer, it could multi-task, handle complex equations, and operate at very high speeds. He also knew it could “escape think,”—put everything aside, and switch to planning, to theory, to outside the box.

Until Aspen, until the bench, his capacity to escape think had noticeably diminished over the years. He was thrilled to reacquire this skill because once the question was asked, he was driven by the

challenge. The grind of his 24/7 pace conspired against him. The bench was the antidote. And, within a reasonable amount of time, the answer became clear.

CHAPTER ONE

E-MAIL

To: Atlas
From: Liz
Sent: 9/18 9:00 a.m. (CST)
Subject: Kickoff

Good morning. Your guests arrive between 10:10 and 11:05. Two commercial, two private. All transport is arranged and Clay has the itineraries. Lunch at 12:30. Dinner is your call depending on the pace of the day. Usual notice required. Good luck.

* * * * *

At the first sighting of Highway 82 at Glenwood Springs, the Gulfstream banked left and began a gradual descent past Carbondale, Basalt, and Snowmass into the Aspen/Pitkin County Airport. Its lone passenger, General Samuel Huntington “Hunt” Smith, had flown this leg too many times to count. Yet each landing presented its own unique vista of the local beauty, and this mid-September trip did not disappoint. It was easily his favorite time of year to visit Colorado, and Aspen was his favorite destination.

As he stepped off the plane, he removed his cap to feel the cool, crisp, clean air, and gazed into a sky so clear and blue it nearly scorched his retinas. It was more Hallmark card than the real thing. Why didn’t he come more often? Better yet—why didn’t he follow the lead of his best friend and live here year-round?

The staff of the fixed base operator is uniquely efficient at the task of fielding dignitaries and this landing was no different. The General was whisked to the private lounge to freshen up. His bags were quickly loaded into the black Range Rover, the status car du jour, and the driver graciously inquired as to his state of readiness. It was a short ride to his friend's home, roughly two miles east on 82 where it becomes Main Street, then a left at the Hotel Jerome onto Mill Street for the two minute journey up Red Mountain.

All on schedule, the other three guests touched down over the course of the next hour. The Rover transporting Tom Robinson, the last to arrive, pulled into the compound at 11:40 a.m.

Upon hearing, "amazing, isn't it?" his guests turned in unison as Atlas greeted them on the main terrace. This is where he generally chose to meet his guests, especially first-timers, and especially on days when the views could not adequately be reduced to words or film.

"Please, as you were," offered Atlas as he joined them at the guard rail overlooking downtown Aspen, the four mountain ski area, and with the aid of his trusty telescope, a staggering portion of western Colorado by day and untold celestial bodies by night.

"General," said Atlas, reaching to shake his hand, "it's wonderful to see you. You're looking well." He turned to K.C. and gave her a hug. "And you look as radiant as ever." Then, in a lowered voice, "How is Pat doing?"

K.C. looked at him intently and shrugged. Atlas held her gaze for a moment before turning to greet Lauren and Tom. He offered "it's been way too long" to both of them and "I trust you've all met?" to the entire group.

They had, in fact, all exchanged greetings and pleasantries during the ten minutes that Atlas had fashionably kept them waiting. But Atlas also knew that, with the possible exception of K.C. and Tom, his guests had probably met before. Although they came from mutually exclusive geographic and ethnic origins, they all traveled in Olympiad style overlapping circles of business and philanthropy.

"Tom, you've never made it out here. Let me show you a few points of interest." Atlas believed there was no limit to the grandeur afforded

from his terrace, and with appropriate humility and awe he would spend the first fifteen to thirty minutes with first-time guests regaling in the surrounds. Nor was Atlas unique in his approach or pride. The great majority of Aspen residents understand that no matter how hard they try to embellish with their lifestyles and possessions, the magic of the place always begins and ends with its geography.

On days such as this, with an unending canopy of radiant blue overhead, guests were served lunch in his living solarium—a large hexagonal-like space forming the center of the complex. It was the linchpin of his architectural vision. The home was actually a series of connecting pods that shared this common space. Eight pods consisted of five master suites, a four-car garage, a conference venue, and a kitchen/food staging area. The complex had no defined shape because the pods were situated to maximize views and function, and the solarium was the residual between and among the pods.

Whereas the pods had conventional metal roofing, the solarium consisted of a series of Thermopane panels, electronically synchronized to climate and temperature to allow maximum growth of the vegetation within, most of which had been preserved during construction. In its simplest functionality, it was an indoor park. In its practical functionality, it was the main entrance, living room, dining room, reading room, and billiard room, all partitioned and shaped by trees, plants, water feature, and stone passages.

Atlas and his guests trailed into the dining area. In keeping with the ambience of his live-in park, the dining table was more along the lines of a circular picnic table. Unlike the vanilla picnic table on the Rim Trail, this item was cut in a singular slice from a fallen California redwood and seated eight comfortably. Atlas liked the fact that he was not positioned at the head of the table and that the bench-style seating created proximity, thereby facilitating conversation.

“Clay tells me we are in for a special treat,” Atlas said, taking a seat between the General and Tom.

Atlas often invited small, eclectic groups of friends, business associates, and dignitaries to experience Aspen. Liz, his long-time executive assistant, became the social chairman, scheduling monthly

gatherings matching guests' interests to Aspen's seasonal offerings. She planned and coordinated all activities while Clay, the property manager and jack-of-all-trades, served as butler and chauffeur. The result was a series of five-star getaways that rivaled anything the finest travelogues could invent.

Atlas began his canned presentation. "First, a few simple ground rules. As my guests, I hope to indulge your complete enjoyment, comfort, and relaxation. You have already briefed Liz on your needs and wants, but if there's anything else, don't hesitate. Clay, who you've met, is on site and Liz is also available at all times. Clay can be reached by dialing *1 on your villa phones and Liz can be reached by dialing *2.

"I'd appreciate your presence at lunch and dinner each day, with the expectation that the meals will adjourn to discussion sessions lasting approximately one hour. The remainder of your time is yours to explore and enjoy all that Aspen has to offer. My schedule is posted and I welcome you to join me on any or all of my outdoor activities. I have also booked brief one-on-one sessions with each of you. Any questions?"

The General waved his hand, the one that wasn't shoveling a forkful of beet, arugula, and goat cheese salad in his mouth. He was Atlas's closest friend, though some said they made an odd couple. His militaristic appearance tended to either put people off or reassure them that as long as the General was in charge, the world would survive. Mealtime was one of the few times that his joking nature was allowed to surface. When that happened, he always managed to put the other guests, no matter who they were, no matter what their persuasion, at ease. "I'm excited as hell to be back," he said, the fork waving dangerously in the air. "It's been too long."

K. C., sitting next to him, ducked dramatically to avoid his swing, "That's pretty obvious," she said.

The General brought his arm in for a landing. "But what's all the secrecy about, Atlas? What trap are you planning to spring on us this time?"

Atlas opened his mouth to speak, but the General cut him off. "No, no, I'm not pushing. Well, not too much, anyway. I know you'll reveal it in good time in your inimitable fashion. But for the benefit of K. C.,

Lauren, and Tom, before we go any further, I'd like to suggest a hike to the Maroon Bells, maybe a bike ride on the Rio Grande Trail down to Woody Creek, and for some real adventure, how about a shot at kayaking or fly fishing? And maybe a bit of nightlife." He looked at Atlas. "Not you, Atlas. No offense, buddy, you're a great host, but we both know you're a lousy partier." His gaze swept the faces around the table. "Once this guy shuts down for the night, it's all over—usually by nine. So I guess it's up to me to serve as your personal guide to the local hotspots."

"I'm in," said Tom, reaching for the bowl of roasted green vegetables. "These are great—whatever they are, by the way," he said.

Atlas laughed. "Edamame—soy beans."

Tom hesitated, then shrugged. If it tasted good, who was he to argue? As long as he didn't have to spell it.

Atlas had never been much of a night owl—at least in the sense that the General meant. Come 9 p.m., after his evening briefing call with Liz, after checking emails, including all scanned and electronically forwarded documents, one final time, he "retired" to his quarters. This much was true. His head wouldn't hit the pillow for several more hours, however. That was his time to analyze the events and data of the day, and plan for tomorrow and beyond. This was his time to review and reflect.

Atlas freely conceded that his success was due in great measure to his innate ability to function at high levels on less than four hours of sleep. Just for fun, he once calculated that his nocturnal work sessions over the past forty years were the equivalent of an extra 60,000 hours dedicated to his business pursuits—well above and beyond the nine-to-five weekday pace generally practiced. Daytime was for meetings, dialogue, and execution; the bonus hours for preparation and planning. He knew not many others were blessed with this gift of time and that he was among the even smaller subset who could effectively harness the opportunity.

Atlas put down his napkin as if to send a signal. "If you don't mind," he began, "it is my intention to monopolize today's luncheon. I have a fair amount of information to put before you, which you can then digest along with your food during our afternoon break. I have been waiting to

host this event for quite some time and now that you're here, I find myself uncharacteristically giddy.

For a brief moment, the chewing and drinking and chatter stopped as if a cease-fire had been called. Something big was coming.

"Three years ago," Atlas said, "almost to the day, I was interviewed by *Fortune* magazine. I had unfortunately gained excessive notoriety a few years earlier when I was added to the *Forbes* annual announcement as one of its newest billionaires. A fact, General, for which I hold you primarily responsible. I granted the interview because I knew the reporter, Lisa Boudreau, would give me a fair shake. To be frank, I was hoping to arrest the ambulance chasers who were constantly after 'my story.'

"At least it worked," said the General. "Got me off the hot seat."

"True enough," said Atlas. "Although it did not play out quite the way I expected. During the interview, I was noticeably caught off guard when she asked about corporate succession and the ultimate distribution of my personal wealth. How had I planned my estate? Had I, similar to other vastly wealthy people of late, planned to contribute the majority of my resources to charitable causes? If so, what had I chosen? She pointed out that, being unmarried and without issue, I was arguably the world's most eligible philanthropist.

"Color me red. But, I had never thought of it that way before. Fact is, I had a well defined corporate succession plan in place, but until that moment I'd been in denial about my personal affairs. I was only in my late sixties."

"Yeah," said Tom. "We all know the sixties are the new forties."

Atlas acknowledged the interruption with a smile and a nod. "Precisely. I wasn't ready to admit to being on the back nine. I had always been charitable, but not in any sufficiently organized or planned fashion. Lisa Boudreau brought home how delinquent I had been. Her inquiry has been branded into my brain ever since. It became quite an exhausting burden, dominating my thought process and consuming an enormous portion of my time. I've learned the hard way that it's one thing to gain wealth, but entirely another thing to dispose of it responsibly.

“Early in the process I established a baseline. The bulk of any gift should be unique and independent. Most importantly, I hope to see results during my lifetime and to be personally involved. I have no interest in passing along symbolic checks at symbolic press conferences before riding off into the sunset.”

“So, I assume that’s at least part of the reason you have been hosting scientists and the like up here?” said K.C.

“That’s exactly why, K.C. Scientists, political and business leaders, philosophers and religious leaders—you name it—I asked all of them the same question: ‘If you had a personal estate in excess of one billion dollars and no living family, how would you choose to utilize your wealth?’”

“The discussions were as fascinating as they were totally meaningless. The best answers arose from deep personal passion and conviction, causing me to fear that I would never experience that epiphany. My work has been my life’s passion. My passion created this wealth. But until very recently, I had no capacity or urgency to consume or distribute it.

“I finally came to the realization that, in the event of an accidental death, my laissez-faire approach could result in huge sums of money being negligently paid to Uncle Sam. As a fallback, a few years ago I drew up a list of worthy scientific and philanthropic endeavors and assigned arbitrary values in the case of my premature death.

“Since no one in their right mind should ever give the government one cent too many, I began to wonder how we got here. How did we reach the point where government—federal, state, whatever—had become fiscally irresponsible? I know I’m over-generalizing, but let’s face it, our country is the world’s greatest economic engine in history and has been for a while. Yet we don’t adequately educate our children, we experience intolerable rates of crime and poverty, and we appear to be inextricably in debt.

“We’re not talking billions, but trillions. Imagine the possibilities if we could bring a semblance of fiscal responsibility to this process. Imagine the possibilities if, in any year, we managed to salvage just two percent of government waste.

“This sidetrack of mine became a yearlong crusade to examine how we got here and how to change course. I read voraciously, but kept coming back to one document, the Constitution. It’s all there. It’s supposed to be about checks and balances, about compromise and about individual liberties. If you ask me, that’s what we’ve lost and that’s what we have to regain. Congress as the most democratic, little d, was arguably to be the most powerful branch of government. Now? I’d suggest it’s a distant third. And states were supposed to have rights. Political parties and special interests? Not a consideration. But it did not take long for their cancer to appear.

“As you may be aware, George Washington felt the need to issue a warning about political parties in his farewell address. Almost 175 years ago, James Fenimore Cooper devoted a chapter to the evils of party in his book *The American Democrat*. Alexis de Tocqueville, in *Democracy in America*, also focuses on parties, concluding that parties dedicated to principles over consequences, and ideas over men, can lead nations to great things, while parties devoted to self-interest are disruptive. He also found that, in America in 1840, only the latter were in existence. Imagine how he would react to today’s political landscape?

“Around the same time, the talking heads on the political shows were fixated as to whether or not Democrats would gain control of Congress. In reviewing the history of the Constitutional Convention I found no reference to control of Congress by parties. How would the founding fathers react to the scenario in which the executive, legislative, and judicial branches are dominated by one force, one power, as in political parties? Not well, I suspect. But this very scenario has played out repeatedly throughout the twentieth century, with perhaps the worst triangulation occurring over the past six years.

“From all this, I have concluded that the most egregious abuses of power occur when all branches of government are controlled by one party. No checks and no balances.”

These were his closest friends in the world and would have walked on hot coals to come to his aid. But, they were starting to covertly yawn while having that “I need a siesta” look on their faces.

“I know. I’m rambling.” Atlas quickly added. “But, if you can hang on a bit, I promise there is an end to this runaway monologue.”

The General pushed back from the table. “No worries. You look damned good up there on your soapbox. I just need to change before dinner.”

“Got it. Kick me if I’m not finished in five minutes,” Atlas said. “As an outgrowth, I commissioned within my company, Atlas Strategic Consulting, a new area of research. As you may know, the majority of my early work supported and supplemented government functions, first in education and then in the military. We branched out to many commercial applications, but I remained intrigued with government decision-making; to some, the ultimate oxymoron.

“Our new research quickly morphed into the implications of how public officials view the public psyche and that research morphed into new ways to read this collective psyche. With all due respect to political pollsters, it was immediately obvious that current sampling models are, to put it mildly, greatly flawed. You see this incompetence play out when news services attempt to predict elections. And it’s basically the same modeling used to poll on issues; quite flawed, superficial, and incomplete. The main flaw is that the pollsters are limited to the universe of what was and what is. Even when they pose theoretical questions, they are still limited by the parameters of what current government and current political parties can consider.

“Then I realized it’s not about any research, it’s about what’s inside. The older I get, the more my most important ideas are visceral. I have come to trust the gut over the brain on almost all major decisions—the stomach leads and the brain follows.”

“Well,” barked the General, “at your age I’m glad you’re not trying to lead with your dick.”

The subsequent burst of laughter helped to create a relaxed mood for the remainder of the visit. It was another well-timed interruption from an old friend.

Atlas grinned and took this cue to accelerate his pace. “It’s not that I am laying the entire blame for inept governing at the feet of the parties and special interests. Yet I’ve come to believe that an effective solution

to inept governing can come from an upheaval within the two-party system. Let's face it, our society abhors monopolies and would not tolerate such a duopoly in almost any other scenario.

"So, the confluence of my thinking is this: I plan to take the majority of my personal wealth and use it to support third-party activities. In fact, I plan to start a new political party."

There was a stunned silence.

"I don't mean to burst your bubble," K.C. finally said, shaking her head, "but this has been tried before, and rather unsuccessfully, I may add. Teddy Roosevelt couldn't pull it off and he was beloved. Ross Perot couldn't pull it off. He had more money than even you."

"You're right," Atlas responded calmly. "This has been tried and there have been many failures. Roosevelt got just over twenty-seven percent of the vote and Perot, nineteen. Not much to write home about. If you look throughout history you will see hundreds of political parties, yet very few have achieved any significant success. Even in today's world, there are dozens of parties across America that are lucky to hit a bunt single every cycle or two. The few successes, like Jesse Ventura winning the governorship in Minnesota, or Joe Lieberman's recent run as an independent in Connecticut, have been about individuals. They could not, and did not, translate to party continuity.

"Listen," said Atlas, holding his hands as if about to catch a pass, "I know how this sounds. But, I have spent the better part of the past eighteen months contemplating this idea and it is my hope that, by the end of our time here, you will all join me in this effort.

"Lauren, you have more experience than anyone I know in I.T. General, you've spent your entire life organizing and leading troops and then workers. K.C., you've dedicated your life to the advancement of critical social issues, some of which are more mainstream today than ever before. And, Tom, if you will indulge me for the time being, you are my secret weapon."

Tom looked puzzled, but said nothing.

"It will all be revealed in time, Tom, I promise.

“Each of you has impeccable reputations for honesty and the highest ethical standards; above all else, our research shows these to be the most important qualities that Americans covet in government.”

After a brief pause, Atlas stood and stretched a bit. “Whaddaya say we break here? I know you will need time to digest, literally and figuratively. You can resume tearing me apart over dinner. Assuming you don’t pick the carcass too clean, there should be adequate time to forge a third party plan.”

Atlas mentally stepped back and surveyed his guests. He wasn’t sure if they were inspired, in shock, or maybe some of each—but he knew they were totally engaged. In the case of K.C. and the General, it was certainly not the first time he had caught either off guard with a revolutionary idea.

CHAPTER TWO

Alexander “Atlas” Stein was born in Chicago, Illinois, in 1937. He was the first and only American-born member of his family following on the heels of their flight from Nazi Germany. His father, from the second tier of Jewish banking and merchant families in their home country, had managed to liquidate sufficient assets to achieve an equivalent status in America. With the exception of the Friday night Sabbath meal ritual, guilt for those left behind turned his parents from religion. Although Alex always considered himself to be Jewish, his family’s spiritual aversion was accompanied by an aggressive cultural assimilation into Winnetka, Illinois, a deliberately chosen non-Jewish community just north of Chicago.

He was a gifted student and athlete, but with the urging of his parents spent the majority of his K-12 years focused on intellectual pursuits. Although he inherited a warm, loving nature and a keen sense of humor from his mother, his parents’ unrelenting push to attain academic excellence created a veneer of German stiffness that isolated him socially during high school. When his grades and academic awards assured him admission to virtually any college, his parents pushed for the nearby University of Chicago. But, their prodding could not compete with a full scholarship to Harvard and the greater opportunity for cord-cutting provided by geographic separation.

The year 1955 turned out to be a great time for this leave-taking. The wars had ended. The country was in the midst of an economic upswing and Americans felt good about themselves. Later in life, he counted this timing among his blessings. If he had been born a handful of years earlier or later, his college pursuits would have become intensely

political, or the military might have interceded, and either dynamic would have inevitably sent him on a different path. Most importantly, he may have never discovered the person beneath the façade he had developed in spite of himself.

He came to think of his freshman year as The Year of Patrick Covington. They were roommates and opposites. Alex was Midwestern reserved and conservative, whereas Patrick was a free-spirited, fun-loving Massachusetts liberal. Alex's dedicated work ethic had led to a scholarship. Though equally brilliant, Patrick was a three-sport athlete and homecoming king who skated by with grades just good enough to allow dad's alumni pedigree, connections, and contribution potential to secure his placement.

Patrick arrived characteristically late for the dorm check-in. Finding his roommate deeply engrossed in study in his well-organized and compartmentalized half of the room, he extended his hand: "Hello, I'm Patrick Covington. What the hell are you doing? Let's grab a beer."

And in short order, Alex found himself dragged to a nearby row house inhabited by several upperclassmen Patrick knew from prep school who kept their kegs cold and continuous. Neither had much recollection of that first day and night together. But as with Bogart and Rains, it was the beginning of a beautiful friendship.

By the end of their freshman year, Alex had emerged from his intellectual cocoon, sprouting social wings that would pilot him throughout his career. With his limited need for sleep, he glided through his pre-MBA curriculum.

After Alex kicked his butt on the first round of midterms, Patrick's admiration for his sidekick and his own ultra-competitive nature awakened an untapped intellectual capacity that fueled an award-winning career at Harvard and in future business.

The first test of their bond came late in the year when Patrick became the fourth generation of his family asked to join a prestigious final club. There were expectations in the Covington's Harvard genealogy and final club life was among the more cherished.

Upon arriving at the first club invite with Alex as his guest, Patrick was abruptly taken aside, asked where the friend's name appeared on his

engraved invitation, and tersely advised that no Jews were allowed. “Alex,” Patrick started to say, “I’m...”

But, it was too late. It was a toll Alex Stein could never afford. However, as a testament of sheer personality, their friendship would endure this and other tests, but would never wane.

* * * * *

Julie Kersten, an enrollee at Harvard’s sister school, Radcliffe, was as New York and as Jewish liberal feminist as any movie stereotype. Unbeknownst to Alex, she immediately developed a massive crush on him and had targeted and virtually stalked him since the first session of their Introduction to Psychology class. To the contrary, Alex had no idea she even existed.

Her mission was made all the more challenging by the fact that Alex and Patrick were inseparable, and despite all normal hormonal instincts, the residue of their collective immaturity toward coeds was an inaugural college season dedicated solely to beer, books, and baseball, both participant and spectator. Accordingly, it was not until early spring, on a day when Patrick was miraculously absent from class, that she spotted her chance and made her move.

“Excuse me,” she called to Alex as they left the lecture hall, “I think you dropped this.” Having had over four months to hatch her plot, it was rather lame to offer a five-cent pen as a conversation starter. Yet it worked. “No, I don’t think so,” he blandly responded.

She used the opportunity to introduce herself and make small talk for the next few minutes as she escorted him to wherever he was headed. “Well, this is my dorm,” he signaled, and disengaged in one quick motion. While the entire episode was a millisecond, it was long enough for her to leverage into subsequent glances and exchanges for the rest of the year. Not the stuff of romance novels, but her instincts correctly told her that she had started a marathon and not a sprint.

The prior year, Alex’s curriculum included the psych class in which they had been seated one row apart. On the first day of sophomore classes, Julie wasted no time in grabbing the seat next to Alex, sans

Patrick, in Introduction to Economics. He did not initially notice her and then he did not quite recognize her.

A summer of camp counseling had provided a tan the Boston winter had drained prior to the pen gambit, and camp food had been the perfect tonic for her to lose the freshman fifteen. Her mother's insistence on a haircut and a modicum of makeup also gave a finished, sophisticated look that last season's ponytail had avoided. He glanced her way when roll was called, and always a quick study, he put two and two together rather nicely.

She patiently waited a few weeks before asking Alex for help understanding the intricacies of supply and demand. Over coffee she quickly moved past economics to "What other classes are you taking?" to "How was your summer?" to "Where are you living this year?" The next class led to an extended cup of coffee and "How did you choose Harvard?" led to a cursory exchange of family backgrounds.

"Your family was very lucky to have escaped the Nazis," Julie said after hearing his story. For literally the first time in his life, Alex considered that fact, realized he had never before seen its simple truth, and began to appreciate his good fortune. Before parting that day, she secured a commitment from Alex to worship with her at the Hillel during Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. She was from a very devout family and Judaism was her fulcrum. Upon learning the history of Alex's family, she had instinctively formulated plan 1-A.

As the air began to cool, their relationship began to warm. By the end of the year, Julie and Alex developed a deeply emotional yet platonic relationship. Patrick had awakened Alex's social self and Julie had awakened the spiritual. Throughout the year, Alex struck a delicate, fulfilling, and exciting balance of Patrick, Julie and study.

Toward the end of the term, Julie announced her intention to spend the summer on a kibbutz in Israel and asked Alex to share the experience. She was well aware that he was scheduled to work with his father to gain exposure to the world of finance, but quickly convinced him this could be a once in a lifetime opportunity.

Israel was a young, exciting, pioneering country. Kibbutz life, though physically demanding, promised a dimension of character

building and ruggedness quite foreign to life in Cambridge and the northern suburbs of Chicago. After thinking it over and checking with his parents, Alex surprised Julie by accepting her offer. By the end of the summer, he surprised himself by falling in love with her; a place she had found long before.

As juniors, Patrick and Alex moved to an apartment near the Boston Common. Julie maintained an address at the women's dorm, but for all intents and purposes, quickly took up residence with them. A situation that could have severely tested two tight relationships evolved, rather seamlessly, into a three-way bond.

CHAPTER THREE

The troop was again gathered at the railing on the terrace, looking pleased and relaxed.

“I hope everyone had a pleasant afternoon,” Atlas said. “General, what kind of trouble did you get into?”

“Me? Trouble? Surely you jest. I commandeered Lauren and Thomas and we took a walk down the Rio Grande trail. Not too far though. You know how easily I run out of gas my first day here. Each year it takes me a bit longer to get acclimated to the altitude. I might not have ventured out at all if this wasn’t such a short visit. Then Clay ran us into town for a quick beer at Little Annie’s. Of course, I found time for a few winks when we got back.”

“Lauren, Tom, neither of you has been to Aspen before. Did you enjoy the town?”

Lauren jumped in first. “Great spot! At first blush, it certainly lives up to the hype. I’ve been throughout the Rockies, but this is the first place that feels like a real town. The other ski resorts are too suburban, too contrived, for my tastes. The smaller fishing holes are just that, smaller and lacking charm. Don’t get me wrong, they’re all beautiful. I haven’t been out during the fall before and I can’t get over the panorama. Those aspens set against the evergreens. Breathtaking!”

“I’ve never been in any mountains,” added Thomas. “We played at Mile High Stadium each season but it never crossed my mind to head up this way. One of my teammates was from Montana and he always raved about mountain life. Never held much interest for this Southerner, cold weather and all. But, now I get it. I also know what the General means

about the altitude. I drank a lot of water, just as Liz instructed. I also crashed.”

“No hiking for you, K.C.?” Atlas asked.

“Heavens, no,” she shot back. “It’s never too early to start the holiday shopping, especially in this shopping mecca. I have always been particularly enchanted by Explore Booksellers and ultimately found myself captive there for over an hour. One of my favorite escape authors has a new book out. I sat down in one of the comfy chairs and next thing I knew, time had flown. We’ll call that my nap.”

“Well done,” said Atlas. “A little retail therapy never hurts.”

“I also started thinking about your speech at lunch. To my surprise, the bookstore had nothing on third party politics. On my way back, I stopped off at the Pitkin County Library. Again, not much. They were kind enough to provide Internet time and I quickly browsed a few websites—practically nothing.

When I checked Wikipedia, I was caught off guard. I never imagined there are so many political parties currently active in the United States. Other than the Green Party and the Libertarians, and the Liberal and Conservative parties in New York, I’ve never heard of any of them. I guess that’s part of the point you’re making; domination by the duopoly as you called it.”

Atlas laughed. “I thought we might at least have the coffee poured before starting on politics. But you present such an inviting segue, K.C. And you’re right, at both the federal and state levels, I have found dozens of legitimate, yet totally ineffective third parties. My personal favorites are the Boston Tea Party and the Marijuana Party. If you look at Europe, Israel, and various emerging democracies, there may be dominant parties, usually under some semblance of liberal versus conservative, but there are also plenty of alternatives that have enjoyed electoral success. That’s a big difference; our third parties exist on paper, but are almost entirely winless.

“Take Israel’s system. Today, their Knesset is represented by twelve different parties out of over thirty that fielded candidates in their last election and they only have three and a half million voters.”

“Interesting,” said the General, cutting in. “I’m thinking about some of my military stops. There is almost an expectation of a multifaceted government. But isn’t most of that parliamentary in nature?”

Atlas nodded. “And there are some key elements of that system that facilitate multiple parties. The fact that the dominant party forms the government compels them to cut deals, particularly when they only have a plurality. When a third party can bargain to provide the votes necessary for a majority, depending upon the margin, they can pick up cabinet positions and jobs. Among other things, that enhances their power base and, I suspect, increases both its public visibility and fundraising capability.

“With our independently elected executive branch, all the spoils go to the victor. How ironic that one of the factors thought to foster checks and balances may actually thwart it. I have concluded that our winner-take-all philosophy for the presidency and governorships is the single largest factor contributing to the failings of the two-party system. But, that’s clearly never changing.

“The only way I can see for a third party to get a lasting seat at the table is to build its base slowly, but surely, the old-fashioned way; one step at a time. And, it has to be a legislature-based focus, not executive. If you get lucky, you can pick off enough seats to tip the balance from majority to plurality. While it doesn’t offer the same leverage as with our parliamentary cousins, our legislatures contain some very important winner-take-all features that follow majority control.

“The most important are the elections of Speaker of the House and president of the Senate. A clear commandment of political power: Thou shall not cross party lines when it comes to voting for Speaker or Senate president. With that comes control of the process, the agenda, and the committees—all the way down to parking spaces.”

“But, Alex,” said K.C., using the name she had called him in school, “it’s too heavy a lift. The system is designed to inhibit third parties. It’s almost impossible to get on the ballot in the first place and with constraints on fundraising, you can’t catch up. No money, no media. No media, no votes. No votes, no power. No power, no money. I think that completes the losers’ tautology.”

“Nicely put, K.C.,” said Atlas. “As usual, you get right to the crux of it. Getting on the ballot is quite difficult for third parties. However, for the sake of simplicity, let’s assume getting on the ballot is purely a function of manpower. If that’s the case, and I believe it is, then money is the only issue. Petition circulators can be bought and managed. And while it is currently impossible to crack the federal system of campaign finance, that is not necessarily true at the state level. There are a few states with enough loopholes to allow for single source, unrestricted funding, particularly for funds contributed at the party level. And, there is one state in particular, Illinois, where there are no contribution limits at any level. For that, and many other reasons we shall discuss, Illinois shall be the petri dish.”

“But—”

“If you can hold a sec K.C. I know your wheels are spinning so I’ll jump ahead a few squares. Here’s what I plan to do: fund a trust that will be dedicated to the development and advancement of third party politics. This structure, like most things in business, will be tax driven. The trust will fund candidates throughout the United States who meet a predetermined set of standards. At the same time, the trust will devote a significant portion of its assets to the creation of a new third party in Illinois.

“It is my belief that the success of that party will stimulate and drive the same model in other states and, at that point, breed success that overcomes your losers’ tautology. If that success can be sustained for just a few election cycles, then the congressional barricade can be assaulted. I don’t know if it can all play out in my lifetime, but I plan to be around long enough to enjoy the toddler years. And, I am willing to devote my entire fortune, with an initial contribution of two hundred and fifty million dollars.”

“Holy shit!” the General exclaimed. “I didn’t quite grasp where you were going this afternoon. This is revolutionary. I think you’ve read too much John Adams and not enough Ben Franklin. Bottom line, Atlas, they will never let you get away with this. They’re ruthless and vicious. Your world is about helping people survive. Their world is about gutter combat, tearing people down—war, pure and simple. As your friend, as

someone with years in the trenches, I advise you to reconsider very carefully. Very carefully.”

Atlas nodded and surveyed his other guests. “K.C.?”

“We go way back Alex, so I shouldn’t be all that surprised. Yet, I am. There’s so much to consider and my mind is running in circles with all the reasons why your idea is doomed to failure.”

She sighed. “I have to agree with the General. This is not your milieu. As you know, I was there for the Kennedy-Nixon television debates. I’ve been active ever since and it only gets uglier every year. You’ve obviously thought about my ballot and funding concerns, but they’re just the threshold. You need to build an infrastructure, attract quality candidates, develop positions, actually conduct the campaigns—media, press, debates, polling, get-out-the-vote, and on and on. None of this happens overnight, and assuming you’re thinking about the next round of general elections, you’re only fourteen months out. That’s just the obvious. Give me ‘til tomorrow and I will find plenty more nails for your party’s coffin.”

Undeterred, Atlas’s gaze landed on Tom Robinson. “Tom, want to pile on?”

“This is way, way out of my league,” replied Tom. “As a former athlete, I’ve seen many rich people own teams. Most of the time, they overpay to get in the game. The ones that win stay out of the way, hire good GM’s and managers, and build balanced, talented teams. And most win with defense. Politics, that’s just not my game.”

“Obviously K.C. and the General don’t think it’s my game either,” Atlas responded graciously. “Lauren, how about you?”

“Frankly, I’m on the fence. As the General said, this is revolutionary—and it’s also scary. But maybe it’s kind of good scary. I’m hoping you can pull it off. Why not try? I’m probably part of the silent majority and I think a lot of us would not be so silent if we felt we could make a difference; if our vote made a difference. Most of the time I feel as though I’m just throwing it away. That it just doesn’t matter.

“Which is sad because I feel as though there are so many ways to make a difference, to really do something. The Democrats and Republicans just keep offering more of the same. They talk change, but

that just means changing from one party in power to another. What kind of change is that? Are our schools getting any better? Are our tax dollars being spent more wisely? Are we finding the answers? I don't think so.

"The other day I was listening to public radio and there was a feature quoting a range of politicians on how to deal with the latest energy crisis. All of the quotes sounded reasonable. At least until we learned that the quotes were from the early seventies. Over thirty years of doing nothing. It really pissed me off."

The General lightly thumped his fist on the table. "Amazing. I heard the same program, Lauren. Pissed me off, too. Royally."

"Read any of the credible literature," Lauren continued, "and one conclusion screams at you—it's all about short-term promises and pleasures designed to get incumbents re-elected. We've dumbed down the electorate, created entitlement after entitlement, and lack the will to do the right, or even credible thing in almost any situation until it festers and boils over. Then it's blame the other guy, march out the talking heads, and above all, obfuscate. It's beyond sickening."

Atlas poured another glass of wine for himself and passed the bottle. "Bottom line, Lauren?"

She looked him straight in the eye. "How do I sign up?"

There was a pregnant pause. "Well...I guess Tom would say I'm batting two-fifty. I was hoping for at least five hundred. Your points are all well taken. I particularly like the 'revolutionary' part. And K.C., General, you're absolutely right, I am not up to the task. However, as Tom says, I increase my chances if I bring in some good GM's and managers. K.C.'s comments notwithstanding, I have some ideas about where to find them and I think they can be corralled in short order.

"Tom also raises an interesting standard when he talks about winning. Winning in politics currently means getting the most votes and controlling the most power. General, as you know, winning for me, at least professionally, has meant finding a way to eliminate or at least minimize pain so trauma victims can resume their lives and function again. That's the win I'm looking for, at least in the short term. I believe the political system is essentially broken. Although trauma may not best

describe our current condition, I think that economically, environmentally, educationally, and for certain ethically, it is in crisis.

“One of the ways third parties win is to have their issues co-opted. And depending on how it plays out, that could be our victory. What if, for instance, we lead with ethics and civility and drive reform of government? What price would you put on that? Better yet, what if this new party forces balanced budgeting, addresses global warming, or revitalizes our educational system? I’ll bet any of you would have me wager two hundred fifty million on that.

“Well, General, you’re on! As you predicted, I am calling it an early night. This has been a wonderful, yet exhausting, day. I look forward to seeing all of you at noon tomorrow. Enjoy the balance of the evening and rest well. Tom, I understand you and I have a relatively early hike scheduled so, General, go easy on him. Night everyone.”

* * * * *

The knock at the door was rather gentle, leaving out the possibility that it was Clay, and he knew the General was out carousing. He looked at his iPhone : 10:18. “Yes?” he called out.

“Alex, it’s me, K.C. Sorry to trouble you, but may I please come in?”

“Yes, of course.” Atlas opened the door and gestured for her to come in. “What a pleasant surprise! Can I get you anything?”

“No thanks, I’m afraid it will put me to sleep and we need to talk. First of all, I hope you don’t mind my coming down on you rather hard earlier this evening. Believe me, I’ve been there. Any list of horrors I concoct will pale in comparison to what opponents will.”

“No offense taken. I greatly value your counsel and I have no time for mistakes.”

“But I also want you to know that this idea of yours is absolutely inspired and I completely agree with your closing argument at dinner. If you win by losing and manage to significantly move the establishment on any of the day’s most pressing issues, there will be no way to adequately measure the accomplishment.

“Alex—” K.C. ’s lips trembled. “If only I could help you.”

Atlas frowned. "I'm not sure I understand."

She took a deep breath and continued. "I know you well enough. Our small weekend group is too neatly packaged. The General is a brilliant choice to lead your campaign, at least in the field. Seasoned in combat and renowned for his strategic thinking and leadership skills. I am not completely familiar with Lauren, but by reputation she is an Internet genius. And the Internet is the future for political campaigns. It's not totally clear what Thomas brings to the table, but he is the only minority here. His name is golden in the black community, not to mention sports fans across the country. As for me, Alex, there was a time when no one could have out-compassioned me on the environment or education. How am I doing so far?"

"Not bad for a self-proclaimed has-been," he said, gently teasing her.

"Well, here's where I'm stumped. How do you plan to spend a quarter of a billion dollars? That's presidential election numbers spread over fifty states. I don't think you could spend that in a decade—unless, of course, you're headed to the land of the 527 organization."

"We could be," he conceded. "Sometimes you take what you're given. Congress allows the formation of 527 organizations to influence elections as long as they advocate for issues, not candidates. John Kerry found out the hard way during his presidential campaign. If the special interest groups use them against us, I suspect we'll counter appropriately. But if you ask me, they're all part of the same train wreck, so I'd rather not go there.

"In reality, however, only a small portion of the commitment will be spent on third party politics. I intend to create various support organizations to advance the cause. For example, and for lack of a better term, we'll build a 'think tank' for issue development and we will sponsor masters and doctorate level studies at key universities. I also envision a candidate training program focused on public policy. Another project, one that really gets the juices flowing, is creation of a totally independent watchdog function intended to help eviscerate business-as-usual campaign tactics. Imagine a group with the stature and resources to effectively monitor and influence the content of campaign messaging.

“I’m guessing as little as one hundred million, maybe more like fifty million, will land in campaigns. I plan to provide the seed money for the first election cycle or two, but at the end of the day the party dies quickly if voters do not contribute at the individual level.

“And that’s part of why you’re here, K.C. Identify an opportunity and run with it. There is no one better than you to oversee the development of policy.”

“Alex, Alex, Alex,” she said, shaking her head, “it’s brilliant, it’s amazing, but I can’t be a part of it.”

Tears welled in her eyes.

“Patrick’s health has deteriorated significantly. It wasn’t supposed to be like this. They said there would be time. And I can’t tell how much he knows or suspects. I had no intention of coming out here, but he insisted. I had resolved to keep this from you, but I’m consumed with insurmountable guilt. I can’t help Patrick and I can’t help you.” She put her hand over her mouth in an effort to control her quivering lips.

“Please, Julie,” he startled himself with a name from the past, “it’s okay, it’s okay.” He gave her a warm hug. “There’s no guilt here. You had nothing to do with Patrick’s illness and his level of care has been flawless. As for my plan, we both understand and agree with where your priorities lie.”

He quickly shifted gears and offered a nightcap to help calm her. They talked about old times and worked in a few mild laughs. They avoided further talk of Patrick’s illness and imminent death, but it was independently foremost in their thoughts. Atlas still could not believe that his vital, active, and robust friend had fallen victim to ALS.

In the end, they struck a deal. K.C. would help in any way possible as long as no travel was involved. Alex would reach out when he encountered an issue for which he needed the blunt, unadulterated opinion of a trusted friend. She also agreed to sit on the board of the trust along with him and the General. Her Democratic party leaning would be an appropriate foil to the General’s Republican bent. She would follow the third party plan as it rolled out and call when she could offer constructive criticism. Finally, she would consider his offer to lead the think tank.

The General's signature shave-and-a-haircut knock came shortly after midnight. He wasn't as much of a night owl anymore, but on visits to Aspen he was capable of a good three-day binge. Despite his good-natured kidding earlier in the day, he was quite familiar with Atlas's habits and, over the years, they had done some of their best drinking and soul talking late into the early morning.

"So, how did the kids do?" Atlas asked as he opened the door. "You're ahead of schedule. Did the bar at the Caribou Club run out of scotch?"

"Not quite. As you know, Lauren and Tom are great kids, but not exactly party animals. They're quiet, especially Robinson, but they did loosen up a bit."

The General settled into his favorite chair by the window where the moonlit view rivaled the daytime, particularly on a full moon. His hand automatically strayed to the top of his head where he rubbed it like a magic lantern. He knew Atlas's night owl habits as well as his own. They had done some of their best soul searching while the rest of the world was snoozing and losing.

"You totally blew them away, ya know. Then again, you totally blew me away. And next time, asshole, a little heads up would go a long way!"

"I know, I'm sorry," Atlas said. "I went back and forth quite a few times. In the end, I decided the baseline plan had to be all mine. As much as I value your judgment, I wanted and needed a one hundred percent comfort factor before discussing with you and K.C. Also, by keeping you out of the initial decision, it frees you up to be totally independent in your critique. So, fuck you."

"OK," said the General, and laughed. He swirled the drink in his hand and then put it down. "So let's get down to it. What do you need from me?"

"Oh, not much," Atlas said. "I just need you to serve as a co-trustee of the funds and honcho all the day-to-day field operations. The entire effort requires military precision, maybe not military style. I'll leave that to you. But precision is key."

“You never said no to me. If you need me, I’m yours. But, I still think you’re nuts. Have you been sampling the Mary Jane now that it’s legal in Colorado? I don’t know shit about politics. Hell, I might be head of the Joint Chiefs by now if I did.”

“Well, I don’t agree,” said Atlas. “You’re confusing politics, little p, with political parties, big P. You understand the politics of ordinary life better than anyone I have ever met. And you’re a great leader. The people around you understand that you don’t confuse bullshit politics with the agenda. It’s one thing to translate that in the military, but entirely another in corporate America. You’ve done both with great success.”

“Thanks,” said the General. “You could be right. But at the same time it’s not like I haven’t been around the block. I’ve seen what these people do. They’d rather start a fucking war than lose an election. They don’t give a shit about how many die on their watch for the wrong reasons. They get to a point of self-righteousness that allows them to justify almost any action.

“What I’m trying to tell you is that you can never blink. They will attack you personally; they’ll attack me. They’ll go after anyone and anything in their way. You have to be ready to fail, to be disgraced, and to be wiped out. I can get there because I’ve been there. I’ve had men die because of my mistakes.

“More than ideas and elections will be at stake. It may only be death by reputation or financial ruin, but that’s what your troops will be up against. Can you handle that responsibility? And, no, I’m not telling you not to. In fact, and I didn’t come ready to say this, the whole thing excites the hell out of me. What kind of General would I be if I turned down this war? I was born for this.

“I’ve got my own solution, though,” he concluded. “It’s called leadership. It’s called trust. Where are the Washingtons and Lincolns when you need them? My friend, get all the checks and balances you want. But at the end of the day, let’s get some fucking leaders, too.”

“I hear you,” Atlas said. “Trust me, I hear you. Let’s pick it up tomorrow, only—” Atlas burst out laughing. “Try not to hold back

anymore. And just so you know, K.C. beat you here by almost two hours.”

They were the two people in the world he would trust with his life and their reaction was identical. They were talking about a cost he had not totally considered, at least not yet.

CHAPTER FOUR

Alex correctly sensed that an uncharacteristic Wednesday evening phone call from his mother meant awful news. His father had suffered a heart attack at the office and was in stable but critical condition. “How quickly,” she had asked, “can you get to Chicago?” As it turned out, not quickly enough.

His father’s death stirred troubling emotions for Alex. He wondered if things might have been different if he had stayed in Chicago for school. He felt guilty for missing a summer with his father to travel overseas with Julie. He worried about his mother and suddenly had anxious thoughts about losing her too.

Nor did his mother need to ask the most obvious question. She had been a fish out of water in America. Whereas his father was Americanized through his business dealings, she never adequately adapted to the language or the culture. A few days after the funeral he announced to his mother that he had decided to leave Harvard and take up study at the University of Chicago. In addition, he would move back home for the time being. Her tears were all the answer he needed to solidify that he’d made the right decision.

No matter how many permutations she could concoct, Julie could not convince her parents to support relocation to Chicago. She did extort a commitment from them for graduate school, but after waiting one year just to inquire about a lost pen, two years to graduation seemed an eternity.

* * * * *

Julie moved back to her dorm and threw herself into her studies. Patrick moved in with some final club buddies and threw himself into their kegs. They would occasionally grab a cup of coffee when either of them had an Alex update to share. Patrick visited Chicago over spring break and was then able to fill in the blanks for Julie.

If Alex wasn't corresponding frequently, it was because his burden was staggering. In addition to maintaining a full load at the U. of C.—not to mention a one hour commute in each direction—caring for his mother was a full-time job and he was desperately over his head when it came to unwinding and settling his father's business affairs.

What Patrick did not share with Julie was the state of despair in which he had found their good buddy.

He quickly convinced Alex that his mother needed help with the household. Neither Alex nor Patrick was remotely familiar with the necessary qualifications, but they were savvy enough to locate an excellent agency for live-in domestic help. His father's business affairs were not as easily reconciled, because the solution necessitated Alex confronting his own stubbornness. With the help of Patrick's father, trustworthy and competent connections were made in Chicago with an attorney and an accountant who would work in tandem with Alex.

The surprisingly difficult problem was school. On the last night of the visit, after they were well on their way to passing out over beers, Alex totally broke down. For the first time in his life he was failing in school. His dad had been the inspiration for his pre-MBA studies and he was now questioning and rethinking his career. Bottom line, his motivation had been sucked out by the vacuum his father's death had created. Patrick was out of time and almost out of brain cells, but he was clear thinking enough to convince Alex to open up to his academic advisor.

Alex's advisor had seen the symptoms many times before. A brilliant, accomplished student awakens to the reality that his chosen major, for whatever reason, is not the answer. Although with Alex, the complications of his father's death, his mother's dependency, his exile from the Julie-Patrick safety net, and the change of schools did not lead to a simple prognosis.

After a few meetings they reached an accommodation. Alex's midterm grades would be expunged and he would take a leave of absence until the fall. Upon re-entering school, he would devote the next semester, and possibly the entire year, to a well-rounded program of humanities designed to help him locate his educational compass. The advisor also suggested spending the summer anywhere but mommy-sitting in Chicago.

A more focused Alex could easily see that his mother was improving under the guidance of her housekeeper/cook/nanny/ female companion. He reasoned that time away would do them both good and he got quite excited thinking about time with Julie, perhaps again on the kibbutz.

Alex's call had been as unexpected as an earthquake, and the aftershocks hadn't ended there. He told her he wanted to join her on the kibbutz again, that he was taking a leave of absence from college. To be with *her*. Suddenly, for the first time, Julie was utterly confused. Stumbling over her words and confounding Alex with her lack of enthusiasm, she said she'd have to think about it. When Alex hung up he'd sounded like a wounded animal.

* * * * *

If only his breakthrough had occurred sooner. Patrick, playing his new role of psychologist, had recently aided a despondent Julie. Given her passion for politics and causes, he invited her to an early organizational meeting for the junior U.S. Senator from Massachusetts who was contemplating a run for the White House. Patrick's father was among the financial advisors and had volunteered Patrick to spend his summer on the campaign. Patrick had no interest in politics, but attended some of the preliminary meetings to humor his father until a better offer came along. It did not take much arm-twisting for Julie to accept Patrick's invitation and his instincts were instantly rewarded.

Julie had fallen in love with Alex at first sight and she proceeded to fall in love with the message of Jack Kennedy at first stump speech. Alex might be her future, but the presidential campaign became her present.

As phenomenal and unexpected as was Alex's suggestion, she had cast her lot for eighteen months. Alex, kibbutz, and Harvard would have to wait.

Under almost any other circumstances, Alex would have also committed to the campaign, the chance to summer with Julie being reason enough. But these weren't any other circumstances and the need to escape to a familiar safe house again lead him to the Promised Land.

Upon his return, Alex was relieved to find his mother considerably stronger, although she did not react well when he suggested he might return to Harvard. Alex also realized that, for all intents and purposes, he was starting college over. He knew it would be challenging to find ways to share time with Patrick, who would be in his senior year.

Julie had taken leave and returned to New York to second chair the Empire State campaign effort. At twenty-two, she had demonstrated the political instincts of a seasoned veteran. Combined with her boundless energy and chutzpah, she had quickly risen up the ranks, and her home state represented a plethora of electoral votes.

So, with his friends' lives at differing intersections and hesitant to again leave his Mother, a relaxed and invigorated Alex re-enrolled at the U. of C.

Alex had expected to awaken from his educational doldrums and re-board the business world express. However, these expectations were never realized after thriving on the advisor's choice of classes and teachers. Above all, he was fascinated by Professor Joseph Mann's class in child psychology, and by applying the old Alex dedication and drive, he equally fascinated the professor with his potential.

It was early in the second semester that Professor Mann asked Alex to join a group of third and fourth year psychology majors in a project of massive and delicate proportions. Alex was totally unprepared substantively, but his maturity, potential, and energy were more important in this instance.

The professor convened this group of his top students and explained, "As I am sure you are aware, a few weeks ago there was a tragic fire at a local elementary school. I recently discovered that a significant majority of the surviving children are suffering deeply, unable

to function in school, and I suspect at home as well. I also suspect the great majority of parents are not coping either. Because of my expertise in child psychology, I approached the school board and volunteered to work with these children on an intensive level to speed their recovery. I need at least six to eight volunteers to assist me and I have chosen this group for that purpose.”

Alex raised his hand at “purpose.” He could never have guessed the course upon which this gesture would set his life. In just three short years, he would graduate with highest honors with a Masters in Psychology; co-author with Professor Mann the definitive paper on “Stress Disorders of Children Surviving Large-Scale Group Trauma,” and, receive an offer to join the faculty. In those same three years, Patrick would graduate with honors and join a silk stocking Wall Street investment firm, while Julie would forsake graduation for a chance to join the president’s White House staff in communications.

Whereas Alex and Patrick would always have the guy thing, Alex was uncertain regarding his geographically undesirable love affair with Julie, assuming you could call it that. There had been no one else, particularly given the intensity he had devoted to his degree and research. Having closed the college chapter of the book, he decided to relocate to the East Coast where he could consult, teach and rekindle his relationship with Julie. Unfortunately, time worked against him once again as the letter outlining his plan crossed in the mail with Julie’s Dear John letter.

When his father died there was regret and second-guessing, but with this letter there was despair and self recrimination. There was no blame with death, but in this instance the blame and the burden were his alone. Fortunately, the best path to recovery was found in his new profession, his new love. He became rededicated and consumed. Over the next few years he built a reputation for himself as the rising star of research and methodology regarding emotional fatigue resulting from large-scale trauma. When he wasn’t researching he was speaking, writing, and teaching, all at his twenty hours per day pace.

His reputation grew from national to international and he traveled the globe assisting with large-scale tragedies: mining collapses, plane

crashes, chemical plant explosions, and earthquakes, among others. He was hired by governments and large corporations; entities that needed to rapidly address situations and achieve relative normalcy as soon as possible. If nothing else, the job survival of the elected officials and corporate officers who engaged him depended upon his ability to succeed, and to succeed quickly.

In addition to the unique research and applications he had devised over the years, he assembled a talented swat team that could travel with him on a moment's notice. He originally marketed his services under the pedestrian banner of Alex Stein Consulting. But as the scope of the assignments ballooned, the size of his team exploded and travel requirements broadened worldwide. At that point, he transitioned to Atlas Strategic Consulting (ASC).

CHAPTER FIVE

“Morning, Tom. How did you sleep?” inquired Atlas cheerfully. “Actually, that’s not a fair question. A night out with the General has been known to set back many a biological clock.”

It was another day in paradise. Tom and Atlas chatted over French toast, fruit, yogurt, and granola while enjoying the sunrise.

“Actually, I did not sleep that well, but I can’t blame it on the General. You got me thinking yesterday. I have a bit put away myself and I’ll be damned if I’ve given my own affairs enough thought. At least now I know how you felt when that reporter threw you a brush back pitch.”

Atlas decided Tom could handle the Rim Trail. He might not make it the whole way, but as this might be his first and last trip to Colorado, there was no better memory to create for his guest.

Tom proved to be in great shape. One of his earliest mentors had counseled him on keeping in shape year-round during his playing days. Said too many guys lost it during the off season. The older they got, the harder it was to spring back. Staying in shape year-round had the advantage of losing less and extending the career. Tom found this reasoning compelling and attributed that advice to his career’s longevity.

Following retirement, he had resolved to maintain his regimen. He had seen too many retired colleagues looking six months pregnant after a few years. And, he intended to remain an ambassador for the sport. How, he asked himself, can you preach the value of sports if you look like a couch potato?

His initial foray into the world of kids was to endorse and sponsor a city-wide little league program in Chicago, his adopted home town. He

reasoned, correctly, that it would help keep the kids off the streets during the summer months. Besides, he still loved the game and he actively participated in coaching, clinics, and an occasional umpiring stint. At the end of each season, he put together an all-star team and sponsored their entry and travels to the national championships. All great fun, but not enough to keep him feeling sufficiently active or engaged. However, he turned down offers to coach in the minors. The lifestyle was marginal at best and he had no aspirations of playing out that particular string.

At one of the many banquet tributes he attended, he was asked to introduce one of his former teammates, a request that would normally buckle the knees of this proud gladiator. The circumstances forced his hand and he acquiesced. He had last faced a similar challenge a few years earlier when serving as his cousin's best man. At least that time the crowd was family and, more significantly, he had time to prepare. Fortunately, he recalled some safe jokes that fit the mood of the tribute and it served to loosen him to the point of appearing semi-glib for his two minutes of waxing extemporaneously. On both occasions, a few preparatory shots of whiskey hadn't hurt either.

Seated in the crowd was a lieutenant from the Commissioner's office who came away impressed with both the brief performance and the crowd's obvious and undying affection. Within a matter of days, he was officially recruited into the Commissioner's Ambassador Club; a feel good, do good, PR program consisting of retired major leaguers willing to travel the country, sign autographs, and talk baseball. A star had been reincarnated. Eventually, this became a full time avocation and, with training and coaching, he ultimately came into demand as a speaker.

After a while, he felt the need to expand his repertoire. It was wonderful to share some jokes and humorous anecdotes from his playing days, but he wanted the kids in the audience to take away his appreciation for the non-athletic elements that had shaped his emotional and intellectual growth. With the blessing of the commissioner and the aid of a speechwriter, he crafted a message of

teamwork, sacrifice, and striving for excellence that shortly made him the most requested ambassador in the program.

His rise to prominence as a promotional speaker caught the attention of the corporate world and he found himself on the B level speaking tour for corporate outings and their customary golf, spa, five-star trappings. In hindsight, he often wondered why it took him almost four years to realize it was a total waste. Gone were the kids, the parent-child bonding and the only audiences that took home the message. There wasn't a prejudiced bone in his body, but once he realized that the corporate stuff was comprised mainly of fifty-plus-year-old, rich white guys, he did a quick one-eighty from rubber chickens and recommitted his efforts to kids, especially those living in poverty.

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"I hope I didn't embarrass you with my secret weapon wisecrack," Atlas apologized. "But I needed to meet with you one-on-one and being cutesy seemed like an adequate diversion. I think it worked because both the General and K.C. cornered me last night and neither seemed focused on your place at the table. I imagine most people are thrilled to be in the presence of a baseball icon. At least I always am."

"Think nothing of it," said Tom. "Your friends have been quite gracious. No one asked for an autograph and our sidebars yesterday were about anything but sports. When I got your invitation, I kinda figured this would be about more than hikes and pinot noir."

"By the way, I've been curious for some time. Where does 'Jackie Jr.' come from?" Although they had known each other for almost twenty years and talked baseball incessantly, he had always been Thomas or Tom, and Atlas had never inquired.

They had become great friends and Tom never missed taking a quick shot. "Even though you white guys think we all look alike, in this case I guess we do. My first manager played with the real Jackie and insisted on the resemblance from the get-go. Our common surname didn't hurt either. Since all rookies need a nickname, it fit like a proverbial baseball glove."

They rounded a bend and took a few final steps to reach the top of the ridge, where Atlas held out his arms. “Thomas ‘Jackie Jr.’ Robinson, welcome to my favorite spot in the entire world.”

They took seats on the bench, still a bit winded from the climb. “I come here as often as I can. Maybe fifteen times each summer. I come here to escape and to think. Part of that end game I keep contemplating.”

In the blink of an eye, Thomas understood the special nature of their destination. They had reached the top of the world. He also knew there was no need to state the obvious; that he had never seen anything like it in his entire life.

* * * * *

Thomas Robinson was born in Camden, New Jersey, in 1954. His family was somewhere between lower middle class, according to his father, and upper lower class, according to his mother. Although he had not been raised Catholic, his parents sent him to parochial school to better his education. In the Robinson household, education and ‘love thy neighbor’ were always stressed. With his mother’s untimely death from lung cancer, his father moved the family to Texas where a support network from his father’s side was ready, willing, and able. When it became apparent that the educational opportunities were lacking, his father supplemented with a tutor. The tutor discovered that Thomas was quite intelligent and delighted in the opportunity to advance his skills far beyond his grade equivalent.

About the time that Thomas was displaying his academic prowess, his Phys Ed teacher was discovering his marvelous athleticism. All students in Texas were tested in the sixth grade across a wide range of skills measuring strength, speed, and endurance. Thomas’ scores were off the charts. He had never participated in organized sports, but the scores prompted a further assessment by the athletic coach. By the eighth grade, he was excelling at track in the fall, basketball in the winter, and baseball in the spring.

As with most teenage males, Thomas gravitated to sports over scholastics. By his sophomore year in high school, he was on pace for all-state status in three sports. College coaches started sniffing around, and by the spring of his junior year, they were in full court press mode. He was conflicted at every level; whether to go in-state or out-of-state; whether to emphasize basketball or baseball or track; big vs. small; etc. His father, not overly warming to the process, insisted on the best educational choice.

Suddenly, there was another option. A scout from Chicago came calling with an offer that made young Thomas Robinson breathless. It included more money than he could imagine and lofty predictions of playing major league ball. Much to his father's dismay and disappointment, Thomas chose to bypass college for a one-way ticket that ended up covering his travel for the next twenty-two years. Final destination: Cooperstown.

Fame also came with a price. Despite his promises to his father, he never made it back to school. And, he never could square the traveling and playing schedule with marriage or a normal family life.

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They sat quietly on the bench for some time. Atlas knew there was no rush and Thomas was taking it all in, slowly and deliberately.

"I've got my camera," said Atlas, finally interrupting the moment. "Help yourself to a memory or two."

"Thanks," said Tom. "I'm not much of a camera person. Most of my life I've been on the other side of the lens."

"Now that you mention it, maybe I should snap a few with you included. Which direction is your favorite?"

"How about all of them?" Tom quipped.

"I tend to agree, but I'm partial to Mt. Sopris," said Atlas pointing due west. "Roughly thirteen thousand feet of nature's finest, and quite majestic, don't you think?"

"Yes, but can't we both get in one?" asked Thomas.

“Sure, let’s wait ‘til someone passes through. In the meantime, let’s talk.

“As I mentioned yesterday, I’ve spent a great deal of time researching the political history of our country. You can’t do that and not be squarely faced with the convoluted evolution of race relations, particularly in politics; from slavery to emancipation to civil rights to voting rights. And that’s obviously skipping huge chapters. Many regard Lincoln as the greatest president because he freed the slaves. And, thanks to any number of people from Rosa Parks to Martin Luther King Jr. to President Johnson, we have a recent legacy of civil rights legislation.”

“And let’s not leave out the Supreme Court,” Thomas was quick to add.

“But,” Alex continued, “when I try to equate freedom and civil rights to educational and economic gains, I don’t see where enough has changed. There are smatterings of wealthy blacks and my guess is that the majority of that cohort consists of entertainers and athletes, such as you. Peel back another layer, and there are pockets of professionals and businessmen, but certainly no such thing as a significant black middle class. At least on a percentage basis, by comparison, almost every other group that came to America after the Civil War, whether by ethnicity or race, has found greater economic power.

“I sometimes wonder how Atlas Strategic Consulting would have responded to certain situations. Imagine trying to cope with the trauma of the Chicago fire or the Titanic? Hiroshima? The Holocaust? Unimaginable! But the granddaddy of them all would have been the Civil War. I guess what I am trying to say is that our country never came to grips with the trauma of that war. It never adequately came to grips with the trauma of millions of people being set free.”

“I have a sense of where you’re trying to go,” Tom said. “I’ve spent most of my retirement trying to give back and I have a message that resonates one-on-one. But it just seems like a drop in the bucket. I get kids for twenty minutes of their life. So what?”

“Well, at least you’re trying. Giving back. You should take comfort in the effort. And that’s why you’re my secret weapon. Black voters are,

by far, the greatest voting block in America. As I see it, that means they are either the most powerful force in politics or the most taken for granted. And I think we both know the answer to that one.

“So if we borrow from my approach to goal setting in the context of this third party, by better educating, empowering, and emancipating the black voter, we force the current party structure, in this case the Democrats, to legitimately earn the black vote. In the alternative, our third party earns the black vote and uses that leverage to drive the agenda. To that end, I am specifically suggesting educational gains as the fulcrum of the party’s initial platform. My personal view is that the educational system has not been sufficiently responsive to the black community and that some innovative, yet relatively simple fixes will go a long way.”

“Amen to that,” said Tom. “Amen to that.”