

***In between
the no longer
and the not yet***

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A daily 5 minute reading of hope in a changing world. See
where we might end up when we put our minds to it!

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In between the no longer and the not yet. A 5 minute a day reading of a novel of hope.

Chapter 1.

“Do you know that there’s a halfway world between each ending and each new beginning? It’s called the hurting time.... It’s a bog; it’s where your dreams and worries and forgotten plans gather. Your steps are heavier during that time.....”

The Little Paris Bookshop by Nina George

“I love that quote. That’s where we are right now, the hurting time. The halfway world, where we get to choose where we want the new beginning to go. Really Ian, you need to learn to love it.” said Sydney.

“Love the hurting time? Girl, you are crazy, do you know that?” replied Ian.

Sydney laughed and picked at her nails. Going to need to whip a quick manicure into her day. “Of course I know that—but I’m not wrong either. Crazy yes, wrong no.”

“And what exactly am I learning to love anyway? The chaos of watching all our institutions implode? Of leaders whose moral compass is in the gutter of insanity? Children being torn from their mother’s arms and our schools being turned into war zones of fear?” Ian’s face got redder and redder the more he spoke.

“No, of course not that. That’s the ending. Love the halfway world, the hurting time, and the bog. Even love the heavier steps because when you do you’ll discover it is the impetus for the new beginning. Love that it is opening you up to change and boy, if we need anything now, we need change.” Sydney wondered about going colorless on her nails for a while. The next week or two were going to be quite busy—perhaps easier to not have to consider them for a while.

“Great,” said Ian, “The world is falling down around us, the Armageddon nuts are dancing a happy dance and you’re telling me to walk into a halfway world.” Ian said all this as he moved around the living room picking up magazines, newspapers and otherwise straightening up the immediate chaos of a house needing a good cleaning.

“Ian, remember—this is what we’re doing now. We are all in the bog—the whole world is there. There’s not a corner of the globe that isn’t experiencing this. But what you have to remember most of all—is that we always go forward Ian—it is inevitable.”

Sydney walked up to him and grabbed his shoulders. “I know things looks terrible right now—and they are. Or, at least they are if you watch the nightly news propaganda machine. But there’s a whole other layer of folks working to bring in the new ways and they’ll happen, Ian. They will.”

He looked her straight in the face and said, “How can you be so optimistic? Listen to Fox News for a few hours—they’re spreading hatred and fear and people are suckering for it left and right. How are you going to stop that?”

“Well, said Sydney, “it isn’t only Fox. It’s CNN and MSNBC, ABC and even NPR. They’re all chasing the monkey tail and people are absolutely fascinated by it. But it is only a monkey tail. When you stop chasing it, you’ll discover there’s a whole other world out there and it’s amazing.”

Ian shook his head, despair furrowed in his brow.

Sydney tapped his cheek and said, “Buck up, Ian. Better days are ahead. Listen, I gotta go. I promised Amelia I’d take her to her doctor’s appointment. I’ll catch up with you later. In the meantime, thanks for getting this place cleaned up!”

Sydney headed for the door, a spring in her step. Ian watched as she left, wondering how she always made him feel just a bit better.

Chapter 2.

Brook Foster watched as one of his staff came through the door of the glass enclosed conference room. Sitting around the huge table were 27 managers representing 18 different enterprises under the Axiom banner.

He had always loved the name of his company and it had been the impetus for every enterprise he’d added over the years. Each served as an axiom—a premise or starting point for furthering his reasoning that capitalism was the greatest way to run an economy and thus, the world. It had certainly been good to him. From his first foray into technology back in the late 70’s he’d created a network of ever more diverse enterprises that had resulted in a massive fortune and a company that in someway or another touched almost everyone somewhere in the world.

Yes, capitalism was the best system and had done great things. And he was still excited about where else it could take him. Today’s gathering of his many CEOs was both a challenge for them to find the next enterprise where Axiom could make its mark and a reward for their success too. Bonuses would be awarded but only after they’d successfully figured out that next direction. What was left, where could they take control and set their standard?

As Jason, his executive assistant, headed in his direction, Brook looked around at the men and women who were reading the documents that had been prepared for them. This would give them the parameters for the work they would be focused on for the next two days. All of them knew that their brains would be ready to explode by the end of this exercise, but all of them were game. They wouldn’t be sitting in this room

if they didn't have what it took to find the answer to this question: What does Axiom do next? It wasn't a simple question—they all knew that. They were looking for a place to make their mark that would provide huge profits and enable them to impact the market in ways that were significant.

The thing is, Brook already had the answer. He was just waiting to see if they would work themselves through to the same conclusion. After his opening speech, he'd be leaving them on their own. They of course didn't know that he'd already made the first steps to securing this new path. But that didn't matter really. Because this whole exercise was really about finding out if he'd created a strong enough organization for the future. This was the first test because he needed to know that they could keep Axiom growing forever. Too many companies ignored succession planning but Brook felt it was important to explore while he still had a decade or more of working at Axiom.

Jason stopped by his side and bent over to whisper in his ear. "I'm so sorry to bother you sir but Maia has called from her current jail encounter and is hoping you can do something for her." Jason's eyes looked to the ground. He hated bringing these messages to his boss—always feeling that somehow Brook would remember him as the bearer of bad tidings.

Without missing a beat, Brook calmly replied, "You may inform her that she'll need to sit tight for a while and if she attempts to make a scene, she'll find it will only last longer."

Jason stood up, his face trying not to register the surprise and pleasure at hearing this. Maia, Brook's daughter, was 37 and a constant thorn in Brook's side and his usual response was to rush to rescue her. "Very good sir, I'll relay that message." And he quickly turned and left, hoping as he did that it would prevent Brook from rethinking this and insisting instead that Jason begin the process of getting her out of jail and into some cushy hotel instead.

This was a first for Brook and Jason hoped it would be the first of many changes he would make in dealing with Maia. She was a spoiled brat who'd been given everything possible and squandered it all. Jason knew it destroyed Brook to watch his daughter—a very bright and capable woman—choose instead to let her hatred of him put her on a fast-track of self-destruction in the hope that it would destroy him. Of course, it didn't destroy Brook because he was not the one swallowing the drugs, swigging the alcohol and treating her body like a sewage dump.

Maia's anger was fueled by her mother, Theresa—Brook's ex. But Jason didn't want to waste another minute on this. He picked up the phone and said, "Maia, are you there?"

“Yes, I’m frigging here! Where do you think I’d be, I’m in jail!” Maia’s voice was shrill and slurred all at the same time and Jason imagined she looked pretty strung out by now.

“Maia, your father is quite busy right now. He has informed me to tell you that you’ll need to sit tight there for a while longer. He’ll get to you and your issue later this afternoon.” Jason almost gleamed as he said this. He’d wanted to say that forever to her instead of the usual, “I’ll be right there.”

“Sit tight, what the hell are you talking about? I’m not going to sit tight—he needs to get me out of this pigpen immediately! Maia’s voice had come through the phone so loud that Jason had to pull it away from his ear. And from there his hand just kept on moving until he put the receiver back in its cradle and hung up.

Chapter 3.

Amelia was waiting for Sydney on the front porch. It was one of the lovely homes of Richmond that reminded you of the old South. A three-quarter porch that wrapped around the house enabled you to manage the weather depending upon wind or sun. Amelia had lived here her entire life of 89 years. She’d watched change after change as Richmond grew past its legacy of the Civil War and became a modern, 21st century city.

The Fan district had had its ups and downs along the way too. It was in a good time now as Virginia Commonwealth University had grown from a sleepy little urban school into the centerpiece of a thriving urban core that extended to the downtown and Shockoe Slip. The Fan district had transitioned from run down neighborhoods where you could rent a whole house for a pittance to become a gentrified mixed neighborhood of run down and expensive homes and destination shopping for the urban crowd. And through all those years, Amelia had sat on her front porch and watched it change.

Sydney climbed the five stairs with a big smile on her face. Amelia began to laugh and said, “That smile of yours can’t convince me that this is going to be a good trip to the doctor! But I do appreciate you trying!”

Sydney’s body showed a response to Amelia’s comment and she slowed down to take in her aunt and make a quick assessment of how she thought her aunt may be feeling. “Amelia, you know as well as I do that your face tells your body how to respond to the day—of course I’m smiling because we’re going to have a good day.”

Amelia slowly began to slide forward on her chair. At 89 she was actually in pretty darn good shape but she’d also learned to make no fast movements. It was a

preventive measure for someone who knew that a fall could lead to a broken bone and nothing good would come of that. She'd spent a lifetime on high speed, but age had finally taught her to live in the moment. She got up, looked at Sydney and said "Well, let's be on our way then. No point in keeping the doctor waiting though let's be honest, he'll probably keep me waiting anyway!"

"You're probably right about that, Aunt Amelia!", replied Sydney. Sydney knew better than to take her aunt's arm—Amelia was quite capable of getting down the stairs and into Sydney's Forester with no assistance. Still, Sydney came by her side and walked down while Amelia held onto the stair rail. Better to be safe than sorry she always thought.

"I love this car, Sydney!" Amelia said as she finished buckling her seat belt and getting settled in. "It's easy to get in and out of and yet, it feels like we're in luxury."

Sydney began pulling out on to Grace St. as she headed to Amelia's doctor's office. "I'm with you on that, Amelia—kind of the best of both worlds." Sydney avoided a car parallel parking and turned right to get back out to Broad St. As Sydney went through the green light, Amelia reached over and turned up the radio. One of Amelia's quirks...and she had many...was that she thought drivers should only drive and not talk. Turning up the radio was her way of saying, "Just drive and listen—don't talk!" Sydney was used to Amelia's ways and had long ago learned to go with the flow.

"I'm Terri Gross and this is Fresh Air. "First the news". Amelia said, "Oh good, I love her show—wished we'd caught who her guest will be." As Amelia said this, the top of the hour newscast began.

CNBC reports today that the wealthiest 1% of the world's population now owns more than half of the world's wealth according to Credit Suisse report. Total wealth grew to \$280 trillion. In the US, the richest 1%, approximately 1400 families, hold about 38% of all privately held wealth while the bottom 90% held 73% of all debt. And according to the New York Times, the richest 1% in the United States now own more wealth than the bottom 90%.

Russian news reports said fake bomb calls prompted the evacuation of tens of thousands in Moscow on Tuesday. The city's emergency services received nearly 300 bomb threats. No explosives were found.

"That's insane," said Amelia. "Fourteen hundred US families own more than the other 90%. Well, they're a stupid 1400 because if they know anything about history, they'd know they're setting themselves up for a fall! But I always said, money doesn't buy you smarts!"

Sydney smiled. This was a favorite topic of Amelia's—wealth inequality. Though, if Amelia was honest with herself, she'd have to acknowledge that she was at least part of the top 10%. Her home alone was valued at almost one million dollars. Add a few more properties she'd collected in down times in The Fan and her net worth was pushing three million.

“That means your friend Brook is part of that 1%. Didn't I hear his name mentioned as being one of the top 10 wealthiest men in the US? Or was it the world?”

Sydney pulled into the parking lot and headed towards the handicapped spaces. Amelia yelled—“Don't park in handicapped! Save it for someone who really needs it and that sure as heck ain't me!”

Sydney laughed and found a shaded spot behind the handicapped area. “Aye, aye, captain! And yes, I'm afraid my friend Brook did make that list—top 10 in the world. I think they estimated it around \$49 billion.”

“Well, no one human being should have that much money. It's simply obscene and he should know better. How do you stay friends with someone who is so out of touch?” Amelia said all this as they walked across the parking lot to her doctor's office.

Knowing they were just about to walk into her doctor's office, Sydney quickly said, “Amelia—we were friends long before this became true for him. I doubt he even knows how much he's worth. And don't worry, I'll give him hell for you the next time I see him.”

“Well you ought to. Tell him to give it away—it's good for the soul.” Amelia found a seat while Sydney went to the desk and signed her in. The front desk clerk asked if there had been any changes in her insurance and Sydney shook her head no.

Joining Amelia now, Sydney went to grab a People magazine—the one benefit of taking Amelia to her doctor's appointment was the chance to read this gossip rag! As she did, Amelia elbowed her and said, “Look around here will you? Every one of these people has a bag full of drugs with them. That's all we get now—just a drug for everything.”

Sydney looked up and around the room. She was surprised to see that her aunt was correct. Every patient had a bag with prescription pill containers in them. Sydney said with a wry smile, “Well, did you bring yours?”

“Mine? Are you daft? You know I don't take drugs. We've become a nation of drug addicts and these doctors should be shot for abandoning their profession to Big Pharma!”

Sydney was about to respond when the door opened and the nurse called Amelia's name. "Ms. Carter, so good to see you today!"

"And so good for you to see me on time too.", said Amelia as she stood up and then walked down the hall. The nurse exchanged a suppressed smile with Sydney. Everyone loved Amelia but she could be a pill when the mood set in and today the mood had set in.

The nurse said—"Let's stop and get your weight today, Ms. Carter." But Amelia kept on walking and said, "Why bother—my weight hasn't changed more than half a pound in ten years. I can tell you I weigh 122 and I don't need any stupid scale to tell me so."

"Yes, indeed, you're probably right, Ms. Carter.", said the nurse. They all entered the patient room. The nurse began the customary process—blood pressure, oxygen/pulse, confirming she hasn't gotten any new medications from any other doctor. "Ms. Carter, Dr. Betzu will be in shortly. Have a great day!"

"What else would I have?" snorted Amelia as the nurse walked out.

Sydney's eyebrows shot to the moon as she looked at her aunt. "Amelia, what's got a fly up your shorts today? That's not like you to be so caustic. Especially to her when you know she's just doing her job."

"Oh, you're right, Sydney. I am on edge. I think every time I come to see a doctor I feel like I'm in defense mode. I have to prevent them from trying to do ridiculous interventions, give me a slew of drugs I neither want nor need. I miss the days when a doctor was as much an artist as he was a technician. But now they talk to their computers more than they talk to me. They ask me a question and the computer spits out the answer!" Amelia finished saying that just as Dr. Betzu walked through the door—laptop in hand. He quickly sat down on his stool, laptop open and ready to go.

"Ms. Carter, you're looking great today. But I see it is time for your echocardiogram. How are you feeling overall?", Dr. Betzu asked. Amelia actually liked him. She'd trained him a bit over the last ten years and he knew better than to look at his laptop for at least the first five minutes of her visit.

"As good as an 89 year old woman should feel. And what's the point of another echocardiogram anyway? My heart is fine, it's my hip that's hurting and we both know I'm not replacing it, so there, that's how I feel."

Dr. Betzu started laughing. "I know we're not replacing your hip—though honestly, you're in good enough shape to do it and enjoy the benefits of getting that hitch out

of your step as you say! As for the echocardiogram, it just helps me know how great your heart is and that I can expect you to live to 100!”

Dr. Betzu began listening to her heart and lungs. “Well, the only reason I’m letting you do the echocardiogram,” Amelia replied, “is because it is one of the few tests you can do to me that doesn’t hurt! Otherwise, forget it because at my age, who cares—something’s going to get me!”

The nurse walked back in as Dr. Betzu said, “Ms. Carter, I suspect you’re going to outlive me from the sounds of your heart and lungs, but occasionally let’s use the benefits of our great medical system! Nancy here is going to take you to the other room for your echo and I’ll have the results tomorrow. Otherwise, I think you’re good to go!”

Amelia smiled a thank you and walked out with the nurse. Dr. Betzu then turned to Sydney and said, “Your aunt is in amazing health—you really should try to convince her to fix her hip. It’s not that invasive anymore and she’d be tap dancing before she knows it.”

“Thank you, yes she’s sharp as a tack and I can’t imagine not having her around. She’s still my go to for advice and her knowledge of history and the way the world works is simply mind-boggling. But stubborn—ooh baby, she can be stubborn. I’ll try one more time to convince her about her hip doc, but don’t hold your breath!” They walked out of the office and he said, “You know, she’s the only patient I have who isn’t on a drug?” Sydney shook her head and said, “What a shame.” And she meant it.

Chapter 4.

It had been two weeks since her father had finally gotten her out of jail. Filled with vengeful anger, Maia had been on a tear. Immediately after leaving the jail with a court date set three months in the future, Maia headed straight for her dealer. She was ripped at her dad and the two days in jail had festered her usual anger into a full-on rage. Damn him, she thought. He has all the money in the world, a staff that takes care of these things and yet, he’d let her sit for two days with the lowest of the low. She was certain she was entitled to better care by him.

Despite looking like something the cat had drug in, she’d walked into Dr. Smythe’s office knowing that relief was soon to be hers. She looked at Becky the receptionist who knew her well by now. “Sorry, Becky, I didn’t have time to call for an appointment, but can you fit me in?” The office was half full and Maia was hopeful that she had beat the lunch crowd. She only needed a script and she’d be on her way.

“Sure, that’ll be \$250.”, Becky said as she barely looked up at Maia. Maia slipped five \$50 dollar bills across the small opening in the bulletproof glass Becky sat behind. “Thanks.”, said Maia. She started to head for a chair but at the same time the door opened and her name was called.

Well, that’s what I pay for, thought Maia. Concierge service. Becky must have some sort of buzzer that let’s them know their preferred clients are here. Maia smiled to herself and thought, yes indeed, I am a preferred client so a small thanks to daddy for once. Maia walked through the door and six steps later had her prescription in hand. “Ah back pain, my good friend,” Maia said and the nurse smiled back in agreement. “Til next time!” said the nurse.

Maia headed out the patient exit door and straight over to the pharmacy. A bottle of 250 OxyContin would soon be in her possession and she would find relief. She’d been strung out two days in jail. Luckily she had found an acquaintance inside who fronted her just enough pills to keep her sane. First order of business was to find Priscilla and pay her back with 15 of these little babies. Important for my support system to know they can trust me, thought Maia, and anyway, I’ve got enough to get me through the next two weeks at least.

Maia appreciated the efficiency of service that Dr. Smythe’s system provided. Easy in, easy out and all the meds you ever needed whenever. A dealer with panache! It cost a pretty penny but it beat having to buy stuff on the street. Here she knew she was buying top grade, straight from the manufacturer. Sure, she couldn’t use insurance to pay for all this, but heck, who cared?

She’d been crushing her pills and shooting up several times a day the entire two weeks. She’d been obsessed with staying at just the right side of “too much”. This allowed her to still get up and go to work each day and convince people all was fine. But that wasn’t the real reason she was doing it. The last bust and her Dad’s refusal to pop her instantly out of jail had left a lasting impression.

Sure it was a fluke that she’d been pulled over and gotten a DUI that night. Actually that was a blessing because if they’d known that she was mostly high on fentanyl, things would’ve gotten much worse. But driving a fancy Mercedes and weaving a little, the cop had assumed she was drunk and that’s all he wrote in the arrest report. She’d refused a Breathalyzer test—she’d done this enough times to know to say no. A DUI was a bummer and she might lose her license in a few months but not likely. Her attorneys were magical about getting this type of stuff to disappear and leaving no record.

What bugged her more was, how had she been so stupid anyway? Tommy’s party had been lots of fun and she’d been in a really good mood. She was high when she got there and with the extra boost of booze, everything was going great. She couldn’t even remember how she got the fentanyl or who gave it to her. At first she’d

felt great and the world was spinning joyously around her as the high kicked in full force. Her mistake of course was to get in her car and take off for home even though it was only six blocks away. She'd wanted to be home alone to enjoy the fentanyl high but instead she ended up in jail.

Jail was a nightmare and had left her paranoid and obsessed with making sure she didn't do that again. She'd promised herself that from here on out, only the legal stuff and only just enough so she could feel numb enough to get through the day but not so high that she couldn't function.

Thank God for Dr. Smythe. And that reminded her, she needed to make another appointment and get some more pills. Yes, they would give her shit that she was using it too fast but in truth she was just trying to stock pile it so she never had to worry about running out. She figured if she got 250 every three weeks, she could build a stash in a few months that would make her feel more secure that she'd have what she needed whenever she needed it. She hit Dr. Smythe on speed dial and when Becky answered, "Dr. Smythe's office, how can I help?", Maia said calmly, "Becky, it's Maia Foster, I need to see Dr. Smythe. My back is killing me."

Becky replied in her always so sweet, professional voice, "Yes, of course Ms. Foster. Would Monday at 11 am work for you?". "That's just perfect.", replied Maia. "I'll see you then." Maia relaxed for a second knowing she had a plan that was going to work great. "Take that Dad! You're always saying I have to plan for my future. Well here I go in all my splendor. I've got a plan!" Maia's phone rang. Time to get back to work.

Chapter 5.

Brook looked out over the Pebble Beach golf course. What a splendid place. View upon view of breathless wonder. Brook wasn't much of a golfer but the opportunity to golf at Pebble Beach a few times a year made him keep trying. He didn't much care what he scored. He just loved the course, the ocean views, the deer walking calmly across the fairways and the reality that most golfers would never have an opportunity even once to play this course. This was about his 20th round and the thrill was still there.

Brook was here to attend the annual Axiom Technology event. Axiom Technology was a think-tank division of Axiom Corporation. Axiom Technology did quarterly event gatherings to discuss current business and technology challenges. But its real reason for existing was to build a network of connected CEOs and top managers who understood the Axiom brand and were supportive of it. These relationships were crucial in enabling Axiom to secure its place as one of the top corporations ruling the system. Many of the corporations who came to these events enjoyed participating and being included by Axiom Tech was considered important.

The Pebble Beach event was Axiom Tech's exclusive event. Only 50 invitations were extended and only the CEOs could attend. All 50 of these CEOs felt this invitation conferred a status that they appreciated and felt entitled to because they'd worked so hard to earn it. It also carried an anxiety should they not get the invitation next year. No one said that out loud of course but it was felt nonetheless. Brook Foster commanded a tremendous amount of respect and fear within the corporate world.

Brook's caddy, Tom, walked up to where Brook was in the fairway. That was another joy of playing at Pebble—having a caddy. These guys knew the course by heart and considering how difficult the course was, Brook was happy to depend on Tom to choose his club and tell him where to shape his shot. Although to be honest, being told where to shoot and then actually doing it were two different things. Still, Tom brought calmness to Brook's game.

Tom said to Brook, "It's 164 to the green after your great drive, sir." Then Tom began to hand Brook a 7 iron as he said, "Best to try for the far-right corner of the green sir. Then it can slope back towards the pin. Avoid the left side unless you're in the mood to practice your sand shot."

Brook smiled as he took the club from Tom. In the corner of his eye Brook could see Bodhi Chunduren waiting to shoot. "Well, I guess we're about to find out, Tom," said Brook. He settled himself and took a couple of practice swings before finally committing himself to the shot. The shot took off with a good trajectory and Tom commended him as it landed where he wanted it—the far right corner of the green. "Well, I'll take it, Tom—thanks for the guidance." Tom handed him his putter while Brook continued walking towards the green. Tom went back to get the cart and pick up Bodhi after he shot. Brook preferred walking the course as much as possible but it also allowed him to avoid conversations with his golf partner. He liked Bodhi but Bodhi loved to talk about business and in Brook's opinion, there was plenty of time to do that the rest of the weekend.

Brook finished the 18th with a sweet birdie and a solid round of 87. Bodhi walked up and congratulated him while handing him a \$100 bill. "You got me again, Brook," Bodhi said.

"Lucky is all I can say, Bodhi," Brook replied. "See you tonight for cocktails and dinner." Brook took Bodhi's \$100 and added two more that he then handed to Tom. As he shook Tom's hand he said, "Great to work with you again, Tom". "The pleasure was all mine, sir", Tom said while thinking, I wish everyone remembered to tip their caddy so generously.

Bodhi wasn't in the mood to let Brook slip away until he found out what tonight's topic was going to be. He handed his caddy \$300 as well, knowing to do otherwise would be frowned upon by Brook. Then he picked up his pace to catch up with

Brook but realized he was already too late. Brook was walking very quickly with a clear intention of not being caught. "Damn," thought Bodhi, "that man is impossible to figure out." Bodhi headed back to his suite shaking his head.

Chapter 6.

Sydney was glad to finally be home. As she walked in the door she could feel her body beginning to relax. Her cat Sassy was laying in the window box all curled up as peaceful as can be. Sydney thought to herself, "Seeing you like that Sassy is a good reminder that it is possible to live in this crazy world and still be calm. Thanks for being here for me today!" Sassy opened one eye and looked up, did a twisty turn and went back to sleep.

It had been a crazy day for sure. The restaurant had been packed and the lunch and learn series she was teaching was well attended. She gave an enormous amount of energy to these sessions and it was worth it. But by the end of the day her energy was drained. A quick shower to wash off the kitchen fumes and she'd be revived and ready to catch up with Ian for dinner.

Peeling off her clothes, she quickly slipped her hand in the shower to turn it on. Wrapping her hair up in a ponytail, she looked in the mirror and smiled. Years of yoga practice and healthy eating had left her in pretty good shape for 52 and she had no complaints. Neither apparently did Ian. "Lucky man", she thought as she hopped in the shower and let the water float the day away.

She continued thinking about Ian. They'd been dating for several years and she enjoyed his company. But she also enjoyed her independence and had no intention of changing their status. Ian however was beginning to hint that he thought that they should get married. Ian was 57 and had been divorced for 10 years. His girls were both grown up and out the door now so he didn't feel any obligation to continue to keep the house as if he was still raising them. They may not like him selling the family home but it didn't make much sense for him to keep it. His girls had completed college and were working in other cities. They rarely visited and maintaining the father role as the most primary focus was now over. He needed to move on and create the next phase of his life.

Sydney could certainly appreciate that but she had to admit to herself, Ian's next phase of his life and hers were not exactly on the same wavelength. Yes, they had much in common. He was intellectually stimulating, thoughtful and fun to be with but all of that came with no obligations. She especially liked it that way and so had

he for the last two and a half years. But with his last daughter well established and on her way, he felt free to make some significant changes in his life. One of those changes seemed to be that he wanted to get married again.

They say everything in life is timing and for Sydney, it was not a time for her to consider marriage. She'd been married for twenty wonderful years to Brian but when he'd died suddenly in the car accident, she woke up to discover an entirely different path for her life. She'd started her restaurant and wholeness center, gotten involved with teaching and was active in systems change work. She was on cloud nine as every day offered something new. But it also required a very flexible schedule that could only accommodate her timeline, nobody else's. That had worked great for Ian too in the beginning but she could see that timing was changing for Ian. He wanted something different and she was going to have to be honest with him. She couldn't give him what he wanted and she would not want him waiting for her to see if or when this might change. At 57, he needed to find a partner and she wasn't going to be it.

It would be sad to part but it would be sadder to pretend otherwise and only end up frustrating them both. They weren't kids any more and while this would cause some level of pain, it was far less pain than jamming their lives into something that only felt right to one of them. Sydney was clear she wouldn't compromise on this and deep down she didn't think Ian was going to be all that surprised. Yes, he might still be hopeful that somehow she'd come to a different conclusion. So that's why telling him tonight was the thing she needed to do. Dragging this out wasn't helping either of them.

Out of the shower and standing in the closet, Sydney pulled out a tank top and wiggled into a pair of white jeans. They were meeting at Xtra's in Carytown and casual was always in style. She could hear her cellphone ringing as she pulled the top over her head.

"Coming, coming, coming!", she said to herself as she ran into the hallway and grabbed her cellphone out of her purse.

"Sydney here!"

"Hey, it's Brook, how you doing?"

"Doing great but running out the door to meet Ian. What's up?", she said as she put the phone on speaker and returned to her bathroom. She fluffed her hair and put some mascara on.

"Just wanted to confirm our lunch next week. I'm in San Francisco right now but will make it back in plenty of time unless you needed to cancel." Brook said.

“No, I’m good unless you wanted to reschedule. Do you need to stay in San Fran a bit longer?” She put her hairbrush and mascara away as she tidied the vanity.

“Heck no, I’d pick a lunch with you over San Fran any day! Good. I’m glad we’re still on. See you at our usual table at The Tobacco Company.”

“Looking forward to it.”, she responded as she grabbed her phone and left the bathroom. She picked her purse up in the hallway and headed to the front door where she slid her feet into her shoes. “Listen I gotta go, so I’ll see you next week!” she said. Then she hung up and did one last check in the mirror before she walked out the door. A lunch with Brook was always a stellar event. She walked to the car in a great mood until she remembered what she was about to do with Ian. “Ah well, life moves on!”, she thought as she unlocked the car, hit the ignition button and began to back up.

Chapter 7.

The applause continued for Brook as he finished his speech and looked out on the audience attending Axiom Technology’s final night of the conference. He knew it was a speech that would be well received by this group of highly successful CEOs attached to multi-billion dollar businesses. It reiterated his oft-expressed sentiment that the less regulation on businesses the better, matched of course with less taxes too.

He’d highlighted some of the significant accomplishments that lobbyists had achieved with the funding support of Axiom industries. Each of these received its own share of applause and nodding heads by the CEOs. Brook felt as he left the podium that all was right with the world and the future looked bright.

Walking quickly back to his table Brook was pleased to have this portion of the evening behind him. This was never his real cup of tea but it was a necessity for the business. As he reached his table he could hear Rebecca who was emceeding this evening event tell a joke and shift the attention to the upcoming entertainment. They had a star-studded cast of a popular TV comedian and musicians that would ensure the memory of this evening as one of the great moments of their lives. They would be talking about this to friends and colleagues around the world for a long time to come.

Brook smiled at Bodhi who was sitting at the main table with Brook. As Brook sat down, Bodhi congratulated him and then said “I had wanted to thank you again for Axiom’s support. Raymond Novack’s work out of Tremplin Slater wrote a brilliant piece of legislation pushed through by the Senator Thompson that has removed the

last vestige of regulation over the distribution channels that were creating problems for us at Rosatti & Kearn. I don't know if you'd heard but it clear-sailed through Congress on Friday. "

"No, I hadn't heard what with being so busy here this week. That's great, Bodhi. And what does that mean for you specifically?" responded Brook.

Bodhi had a huge smile on his face when he said, "Well, it's one big headache that's been removed from my day. Sales will be able to skyrocket since this bottleneck at the DEA trying to control our flow of legal drugs is gone. This should be a very good year for bonuses if you know what I mean."

Brook nodded approval. "That's good news for sure, Bodhi. My investment in Rosatti & Kearn last year will certainly begin to pay off handsomely. What do you think that will do for your market share and stock price?"

Bodhi continued to beam with delight. Knowing that Brook Foster controlled a 27% share of R&K stock and saw R&K as a major player in his huge stock portfolio meant Bodhi's own stock value could only be going up. "Well, Brook, right now R&K has a solid 45% of the distribution channel of the three major drug classes that carry the largest profit potential. That's the OxyContin group used for chronic pain, insulin group for diabetes and anti-depressant group. All three hold huge growth potential and the profits will continue to increase. And now that the distribution channels are wide-open, there's definitely room for price increases as well. We'll be doing a review of all of this shortly but if we can raise prices and also incentivize the doctors to see how this improves their bottom-line, I think all we can see ahead is win-win."

Brook took in all this information and gave Bodhi a nod of approval. "Let's enjoy the show, Bodhi, I think we both have earned a night of fun and relaxation for all our hard work this year."

Bodhi smiled back, lifted his glass of Cabernet Sauvignon in a mini-toast to Brook and then turned his head to watch the comedian on stage saying "What's the difference between an environmentalist and a developer? The environmentalist has his cabin in the woods; the developer hasn't got his yet." This crowd appreciated that joke and laughed heartily.

Chapter 8.

How things have changed thought Sydney as she climbed up the four short steps into the Tobacco Company Restaurant in downtown Richmond. What was once a huge tobacco warehouse sitting on the river had been converted decades ago into a four-

story restaurant, bar and nightclub. It had been a huge gamble that had paid off handsomely for its early owners. Somehow, despite the odds it had remained successful as a stand-alone restaurant in an industry where even stalwarts like Outback Steakhouse found themselves struggling.

Sydney entered the ground-floor bar and headed to the hostess station. She recognized Brandon who had worked at TCR for over 20 years and that too was incredible considering the turnover in the restaurant industry. He obviously recognized her as well. “Good afternoon, Ms. Oliver. Mr. Foster is waiting for you on the 3rd floor in the private room.

“Thank you, Brandon,” Sydney replied as she waited for the gorgeous brass elevator to take her to the 3rd floor that was technically the 4th if you started in the basement nightclub. But most people entered on the ground floor and it was easy to forget the nightclub below since its primary entrance was off the alley where people were carded before entering. “Wow, Brandon. The elevator is looking especially bright, did you just complete another polishing?”

“That we did, Ms. Oliver. Thanks for noticing. It’s a never-ending battle of course, but we pride ourselves on keeping everything in great form,” he said just as the elevator door opened and Sydney walked in. “Have a great lunch,” Brandon said as he turned to go back to the podium and greet the next guests.

Sydney rode the slow elevator and switched her focus on the impending lunch. Lunch with Brook was always stimulating and challenging. They had known each other since their early 20s and now, some 30 years later their friendship continued. But their paths had gone in very different directions and their world-views were now at opposite ends of the spectrum.

It had seemed that in the early days Brook has been more moderate but the years spent building his massive corporation had moved him deep into a more conservative and Libertarian view. Later Sydney was able to see that the seeds for Brook’s beliefs had been planted long before she knew him. In fact, he’d first stumbled upon these ideas when growing up in poverty. Under the umbrella of an abusive, alcoholic father who Brook grew to despise, he’d discovered there was a far better model to align himself with—the successful businessman. He was looking for something that was the exact opposite of his father who, from Brook’s point of view was working a system where others did all the work while he sat on his butt. That never set well with Brook—not for his father, not for anyone.

Sydney walked into the private dining room—one of the small, intimate rooms that been created on the ‘formal’ floor of TCR. The dress code on the second floor was casual but on the third floor it was decidedly formal. Here men were expected in suit and tie and women in heels and hose. Jeans were forbidden though that had loosened a little over the years. However the coat and tie had to accompany the

jeans and the jeans had to be new. Still jeans were somewhat frowned upon and since Richmond was the capital of Virginia and members of the Legislature were frequent guests, TCR had somehow been able to maintain the high bar of dress code on the third floor without creating too much backlash from most patrons. The rare time an out-of-town guest wanted to make a stink about it (thank you New Yorkers!), TCR staffers were well versed on how to quiet the commotion.

Brook stood up as he watched Sydney enter the room. She smiled and they gave each other a warm hug that reflected decades of caring between the two of them. “So glad you could make it, Sydney! I’ve been looking forward to this all week.” Sydney settled into her chair as she squeezed his arm and was about to say “me too” when the waiter arrived at the door holding Brook’s cocktail of Jamison on the rocks.

Sydney didn’t say anything as the waiter put down the drink in front of Brook and then looked at her and said, “The usual, Ms. Oliver?” Sydney nodded her head and said, “Yes, the Wy’east Chardonnay please.” “Very good ma’am. I’ll return with it and then share today’s lunch specials.”

Sydney turned back to Brook and chuckled a bit. “This is the only place in the world I have a usual and it’s kind of nice”. Brook chuckled too and then said, “You look lovely as always.” Sydney decided to play her southern charm act—it felt somewhat fitting in downtown Richmond. She said “This old thing, its seen more years than the two of us combined!” They both laughed at this point as their bodies relaxed in the joy of being with someone they loved and respected despite the very opposite world views and ways of living their lives.

“So, what’s the latest at Axiom?”, asked Sydney. That’s not what she really wanted to talk about but it was a good place to start. Brook looked up to see the waiter bring Sydney’s wine and saying “May I share today’s luncheon specials and then take your order?” Sydney and Brook nodded yes and sat back to listen.

Once Brook completed his order, he looked at Sydney and said, “Well, I’m excited to say that Axiom is taking off in a new direction. Or I guess I should say, growing in another direction. We just completed an internal development process and the decision has been made to dig deep into vertical food production. Sorry for the bad pun! I won’t go into all the gory details but suffice it to say that Axiom sees this as the wave of the future as you so like to say, Sydney.”

Sydney’s eyebrows expressed a wow response as she took a sip of her wine. “And what motivated this happening? I know you’ve got lots invested in the input side of things but never the actual growing”

“Well, I know you’d like me to say that it’s all about feeding the world, but you’d know I would be lying.” Brook gave Sydney an “excuse me for not caring” face. “No—it’s about continuing to grow Axiom’s footprint in new profit centers. I think food

production is headed in a far more manageable direction. What I mean is that we've never invested in direct food production because the weather made it too volatile. But climate change is going to necessitate moving food production indoors and our research shows vertical farms will be very profitable. And as you know, that's always my biggest motivator."

"Ah, yes I do, Brook. And that reminds me, I have a message for you from Amelia. She heard some quote the other day about how well the 1% are doing and she told me to tell you that no one person should have that much money. It isn't good for the soul and you should just give it all away!" Sydney said this with a wry smile on her face knowing full well that Brook would never do such a thing.

"Well, you tell Miss Amelia for me that my soul is doing just fine and I'll be holding on to my money for now. But that I will take it under advisement should ever my soul ever need a little tweaking!", Brook laughed.

"I will pass along your response but I figure she'll keep you in her prayers whether you like it or not!", said Sydney. Then she looked up and saw the waiter coming in the door with their salads.

Chapter 9.

Maia opened the door of her condo with a welcoming smile and a loud, "Hello ladies!" In walked three women who were clearly not Maia's friends but were happy to see her anyway. Maia had hired them as shills with pain problems and she was paying handsomely for the bags they held in their hands.

The idea had dawned on her when she'd gone to find Priscilla who'd helped her get through her last jail visit. Priscilla had provided her enough pills to survive the jail ordeal and now she was returning them to her. Maia considered it an important relationship that was best nurtured with trust. She'd promised Priscilla she'd get the pills back and a week later Maia and Priscilla had met at a coffee shop to make the exchange.

Priscilla had been an addict for a long time. She didn't have the luxury of the money Maia did so she was always working odd jobs in between her binges. It had occurred to Maia that they had a mutual interest in securing more pills. Maia was stockpiling pills while Priscilla just needed hers to get through the current day. Maia realized that if she could get Priscilla into Dr. Smythe's office on a regular basis, she could be an additional source for her stockpiling efforts. Then it occurred to Maia—why stop at one runner—how about 3? She was willing to contribute to their needs while securing her own in a win-win situation. She had the money, they had the time and they all had the need.

Along with Priscilla were Kima and Beadie. All three of them had considered this situation a stroke of great luck. Maia was paying for their appointments at Dr. Smythe's as well as for the pills they picked up at the pharmacy next door that was also owned by Dr. Smythe. This was a horse they hoped they could ride for a long time. Having to give Maia a third of their pills every two weeks meant they still had to find some more but it was worth having the security of a pretty solid stash of their own, week after week.

For Maia, she felt it was a stroke of genius. She didn't have to see Dr. Smythe herself quite as much and it reduced the likelihood of them catching on to what she was doing. Little did she know, none of them cared how many or how often she got the pills. They were making a huge fortune and it was not their problem who bought their product. As long as you had the funds, you got the pills.

And for Maia, she always had the funds. She had a trust fund from her grandfather and the quarter million dollars a year was more than enough to take care of her needs. As well, she worked at a division of Axiom for a neat salary of \$100k despite the little bit of production she actually created. She was flowing in dough and as a result, flowing in OxyContin too. She was happy to spread the wealth with her new acquaintances, Priscilla, Kima and Beadie.

"Any problems this week?", asked Maia. All three of them shook their heads as Kima said "Easy in, easy out as they say. It's such a pleasure to walk into that office—they are so nice!"

Beadie said, "Of course they're nice, they're just running their business and we are their good customers. Without us, what would they be doing?" They all sat down at the dining room table. Maia always provided lunch for them because the Lyft ride that brought them from the east side of Richmond to Dr. Smythe's and then to her condo took up a good deal of the morning. By the time they got back to their neighborhood on the east side of Richmond most of the day would be gone. It was the least she could do and besides, they would eat while she would count and make sure everyone was staying honest.

A half hour later, the three of them were hopping into another Lyft and heading home. Maia's credit cards took care of all of the payments. No cash transpired between any of them and it was better that way. Occasionally Maia would tip them all a \$100 dollar bill and tell them, "From the generosity of my father, he taught me well!" That extra cash was a fortune to them but it would be gone by the end of the night.

Chapter 10:

“Honestly Brook, you Libertarians are the best marketing scheme for the Progressive movement ever. I don’t get how you don’t see that.” said Sydney as she took another sip of her chardonnay. Brook and Sydney had been going round for round throughout their entire lunch.

Brook laughed and said, “Really—how do you see that happening?”

“It just seems to me, Brook,” said Sydney, “that the view you’re championing is extreme. Yes, it’s good for the 1%, maybe even the 10% but not for the majority. Inevitably, the majority wakes up to see the 1% is twisting everything and the system blows up. You do all our work for us because you believe in a theory so repugnant to the human psyche that it awakens consciousness and with it, progressives gather together to move the dial forward. Add it up, Brook—after the Great Depression you get the New Deal, Social Security and Medicare—with Medicare being the most loved of all social programs. After Brown vs. the Board of Education that motivated you guys to try to kill the public school system, you end up with Civil Rights, Voter’s Rights, and the Feminist movement. The 2008 Great Recession turned the world on its head but the first black American became president, same-sex marriage was passed and democratic socialism is enthralling the Millennials and GenZ generation. “

“And how exactly are they going to pay for their free college and free health care? Brook was hitting his stride. Whenever even the hint of socialism was discussed, he went apoplectic. “They’re going to steal my liberty and force me, the minority to pay for it whether I like it or not. Why do they have that right? They sit on their butts and I do the work.”

“Because,” said Sydney, “I thought the United States had committed to being a democracy and with it comes an acceptance of majority rule. And I know—the second I say majority rule you freak out because you believe this ‘majority’ is enslaving the 1% minority by forcing you to pay more taxes to support what they want but you don’t. The thing is Brook, the minority loves their tax cuts which the majority may not like but you don’t give a damn because if you like it, then they should too. But somehow when the majority wants something you don’t like, then you think they should listen to you. Seems like a heads I win, tails you lose belief system. “

Brook was pulling out all the usual Libertarian talking points and Sydney was used to it by now. “Which only reinforces the reality that human beings are fundamentally all about controlling others to meet their needs. All I’m asking for is to be left alone and not have my liberty impeded by those who are hell bent on stealing from me.”, said Brook with his somewhat smug smile.

“Perhaps,” said Sydney, “all of this would work out Brook if your theory was produced in a laboratory. But it’s not. It’s created in the chaos of real life and life is

messy! And that brings me back to the fundamental flaw in all your arguments. Humans are not a species that is 100% committed to selfish desires. In fact, our most successful survival strategy is cooperation. We are a species that is ever evolving. I'll grant you, there are plenty of un-evolved, undeveloped people walking the planet, but as a whole species, we are little by little moving forward, changing and growing. And we do it best when we work together"

"I can show you example after example of why I'm right, Sydney. Social Security, Medicare, and even the public school system are all about the majority's selfishly wanting others to work and produce the capital necessary to keep the world flowing while they reap the benefits." Brook's face was getting red and yet he knew Sydney would not back down.

Sydney laughed. "Ah, my friend, there's flaw number two. Capitalism or I should say Capital. You believe humans are put on this earth to support capital and I can show you that for the 70,000-year journey of homo sapiens, 60,000 of it was centered around life and not capital. Then 10,000 years ago we switched to your view—that capital makes life flow and we are now sitting on the brink of extinction."

"How can it be a flaw when this 10,000 years has brought the greatest explosion of knowledge and production?," said Brook.

"I'll grant you that, Brook," responded Sydney, "if you'll admit that it has done it at the expense and extinction of so many species of which the human species may soon be one. Again, we don't live life in a laboratory. We live life on a finite-resourced planet. Look at history—as Pickety's very dry treatise on capital shows—over and over again the pattern has repeated—the 1% keep notching forward the capital disparity from top to bottom and eventually it crosses a line and the whole thing comes tumbling down. Since the 1400's capital and the small base of people that corners most of it have repeated this cycle again and again and every time it ends the same. How is it you guys don't see that?" Sydney sat back in her chair with exasperation, shaking her head and smiling at Brook.

Brook was about to respond when the waiter entered the room. "Mr. Foster, your driver is waiting downstairs and says you have an appointment you need to get to in twenty minutes." Brook looked at his watch and nodded at the waiter and mumbled a quick, "tell him I'll be down shortly."

Then he looked at Sydney as she said "Ah, saved by the bell again my friend. We'll have to continue this discussion for another day it seems." Brook nodded to her and said, "I'm sorry I've got to go. You know how it is, capital calls!"

Sydney rolled her eyes as they both stood up and pushed back from the table and moved to give each other a hug. As they did, they simultaneously said, "Well my friend, there's still hope for you so I won't give up on you yet!" This is how they

ended every one of their meetings. It enabled them to come back to the middle where they remembered how much they loved and respected each other despite each knowing the other lived life on a premise that made no sense!

Chapter 11.

Brook and Sydney walked out of Tobacco Company Restaurant together. As Sydney handed her ticket to the valet, she turned and said to Brook, “When did you start using a driver? I thought you loved driving your Mercedes?”

“I do,” replied Brook, “but the last three times I’ve parked downtown I’ve lost my car in the garage for some strange reason. My earlier meeting was at the Federal bank building and I was worried if I lost my car again I wouldn’t get here to meet you on time, so I had my driver bring me down to avoid the whole hassle.”

Sydney was nodding with an understanding smile. She was just about to comment when her phone started ringing and Brook’s driver pulled up in front of them. Brook moved towards the car saying “Great to see you again—I look forward to our next debate!” Sydney retrieved her phone while signaling good-bye to Brook. She hit the accept button and said, “Amelia, what’s up?”

“Where are you girl? I need your help! I’ve somehow gotten a flat tire and am stuck on the 100 block of Cherry St. in the Fan. Any chance you are close by?” Amelia shouted loudly into the phone.

“Your lucky day my friend. I’m just coming out of TCR and the valet is bringing my car as we speak. I can make it up to the Fan within 10 minutes. Sit tight and hey—don’t you have AAA?”, said Sydney as she handed the valet three dollars and slipped into the front seat of her Forester.

Amelia, sounding a bit flustered, said “Yes, I do, but I was hoping to wait until you got here to call them. I’m always afraid they’ll try to take advantage of an old lady but with you here I know they won’t give me any guff!”.

“Well, I’ve always found them to be very helpful but if it makes you feel better, get back in your car and sit tight. I’ll be there, shortly.” Sydney said this as she turned left to head up on Main St. into the Fan district. And she was right. She arrived within 10 minutes and found Amelia’s car parked on the street. She pulled up along side her and rolled down her passenger side window while Amelia opened the driver’s side window. “Give me a second to find a parking space and I’ll be back Amelia”. Amelia nodded and gave a thumbs up while Sydney pulled forward and said, “Please parking gods—let there be something further up the street!” Parking in the Fan was always difficult since VCU’s campus had sprawled out over the years.

“Ah, there is a parking god and it’s going to be good to me today,” said Sydney, as she noted a spot just six cars up from where Amelia was parked. She was able to parallel park in it as she watched two students passing by on their way to campus. She popped out of the car, hit the lock and headed back to Amelia’s car.

Sydney heard the car door unlock as she approached Amelia’s car. She opened the passenger side and slid in to greet her friend. Before she could say anything, Amelia said, “Oh thank you for coming to my rescue!”

“You know I’m always happy to help. Let’s get on the phone with AAA and they’ll be here in no time to fix this flat of yours. How do you think it happened?”, Sydney asked.

“You know they’re doing a lot of construction further up on Cary St. I must’ve picked up a nail and by the time I got here, I heard that horrible thump, thump, thump of a flat tire. So, I turned down Laurel St. but there was no parking so I started up Cherry St. and found this space. That’s when I called you.” As Amelia finished speaking, Sydney connected with AAA and began to explain the predicament and give them Amelia’s card number.

“Yes,” Sydney said to the AAA operator, “that’s fine. I’ll sit tight with Ms. Carter until your tow driver arrives. You think within a half hour then?” Sydney nodded a few more times and finished the call with a simple “Thank you, that will be great.” Then she looked at Amelia and said, “Real help is on its way so let’s just sit back and chat for a bit!”

Amelia sighed with relief as she relaxed back into her seat. “Who were you with at TCR or do I already know that answer?”, chuckled Amelia.

“Yes, you know the answer, “ Sydney laughed back. “Brook and I were having another one of our contentious debates about how the world runs which of course we never quite complete. But I think I was beginning to make some real headway with him. I’d brought some data with me that he was having a hard time refuting although as we know—facts don’t often do the trick! Oh, and yes, I passed on your message that he should just give it all away. He said he would put it under consideration but for now he was fine with all his money. ”

“I don’t know why you waste your time with him!”, replied Amelia. “He’ll never change his mind because he’s rolling in dough and has no reason to believe his way isn’t good since it has been so very good to him. And as long as he lives in his bubble of wealth, he’s immune to considering the millions of people living in dire straits as a result of his system. Hey—do you see that house across the street? Do you know the story of why that is the only house sitting on a block that’s been consumed by VCU’s campus?”

Sydney leaned forward to look past Amelia. At 126 S. Cherry St. was a duplex standing all alone and then next to it was a huge brick building that took up the rest of the entire block. “No, I don’t know why that duplex is there like that. Did there used to be houses along the whole block like there are on this side of the street?”

“Oh yes—that side of the street used to look just like this side of the street,” and Amelia pointed to the block filled with duplexes. Then VCU decided they needed that block for an athletic complex. I think originally it was about tennis courts. So, they started buying up the block. Then they got to that duplex and one side of it was owned by Earline and Doug Jenkins. They didn’t want to sell. They’d bought that house like in 1943 and they intended to spend their life there. So VCU tried to take it through eminent domain. Well, Mr. Jenkins was a quirky old guy—retired from the railroad I think it was. He did his research and had decided tennis courts, while nice for the students were not a reason to invoke eminent domain and take his home. So, he trotted down to the Governor’s office and showed the then Governor why he should be allowed to continue to live on his property. Must’ve done a good job because the Governor decided he was right. You can imagine how upset VCU folks were. Well, I guess they figured this Governor wasn’t going to be there much longer so they worked on their plans and figured after the next election, they’d get their way. Not to be—new Governor and damn if Mr. Jenkins didn’t trot back down to the office and once again showed him why he shouldn’t lose his home. And as you can see VCU finally realized they’d need to work around it and Earline and Doug lived out their days in their home.”

Sydney smiled and said, “That’s really a great story of the little guy standing up to the big system and winning. Obviously this was their community and moving at that point made no sense. That’s what I was trying to tell Brook today at lunch—that community and life is way more important than massive accumulation of wealth. “

“It’s funny you say that,” Amelia laughed. “Because Earline and Doug were actually quite wealthy. He had a good pension from the railroad and she’d accumulated a big quantity of stock from Thalhimers. Do you remember them? They were an upscale department store that finally got swallowed up by Macy’s. She had more stock than most of the management did. But they also loved their simple house. You know—it didn’t have heat, just a kerosene heater they used in the winter along with a woodstove in the kitchen. “

“How do you know all this, Amelia?”, Sydney asked.

“Oh, long ago I met Earline at the store. That was in the days when there was real service in a department store. When I needed something I made an appointment with her and she’d help me do my shopping. We got to know each other quite well over the years. She was a wonderful woman and like you said, they prove that money isn’t the most important thing, relationships are.”

Sydney sighed. “Yes, unfortunately for Brook, his golden goose has ended up destroying all his relationships. People like him for his money and what they might get from him. His ex-wife and kid can’t stand him and he can’t stand them. In some ways, I think I am the only real relationship he has left and obviously even that is a big challenge for him because I won’t back down or kiss his ass. “

“Well girl, you know how I feel about him, but if you want to play in that pond once in a while, I guess it can’t hurt! Oh goody—look, the AAA guy is here. “ Amelia rolled down her window while Sydney stepped out of the car.

Chapter 12.

Brook looked out the window and saw the James River winding through the edge of Richmond’s downtown. Fall was beginning to show its face now—leaves turning and just a little briskness in the morning run he took each day.

The door opened and Brook began to turn around to see his three doctors walk into the clinic conference room. Two weeks earlier, Brook had been in for a full battery of tests. He could tell by the looks on his doctor’s faces that his hope that his headaches were a quickly solvable problem was not going to get concurrence by this group. All of them had that look of dire seriousness. It must be a tough job to have to tell someone they had a serious illness. Brook decided to try and make their job a little easier. He flashed them all a smile and said, “Good morning, all.”

Dr. Eric Morehouse cleared his throat as he said, “Good Morning, Brook. Please come and take a seat so we can go over the reports we’ve received.” While Dr. Eric Morehouse was the lead doctor this morning, Brook nodded at Drs. Karin Albano and Roberto Alonzo as they all headed to the conference table. All three of the doctors were holding files that obviously held identical information. Dr. Morehouse opened his file and looked at Brook.

Dr. Morehouse started to say, “Brook—you and I have known each other, all of us really, for a long time. So, I know that you want me to cut to the chase and tell you what these tests are telling us.” Brook nodded his head yes and said, “Honestly Eric, I can tell by all your faces that this is serious. No point in pussyfooting around this—ooh, my apologies Karin—bad choice of words.” They all kind of laughed. Brook looked back to Eric and said, “Give it to me straight then, Eric.”

“Well, the long and short of it Brook, is that you have a brain tumor. A glioblastoma that is growing fast and pressing on your pre-frontal cortex and cerebellum. It is, I’m afraid, the source of your headaches and likely your short-term memory problems like losing your car in the parking garages.”

Dr. Albano was watching Brook take in this tough batch of information. His body had gone rigid and it was clear his mind was racing. She reached over and said, “Brook, take a deep breath.” Brook looked at her and smiled. “Good advice there Doc— You’re right—I had stopped breathing there for a second. Well, okay, that’s the bad news Eric. What’s the good news?”

Eric shook his head and said, “I wish I had some to give you Brook. But the CT scans and MRI show us this has been growing for a while. As you told us, you’d been having those bad headaches for over six months now and in that time it has had the ability to grow. Initially I’d hoped we find this to be a benign tumor but that second set of tests confirmed, it is malignant—Grade 4.”

Brook sat there, staring at the mahogany conference table. He was in shock at this news but tried to shake it off and shift to his usual pattern—find a solution. “Okay then, it’s not good news for sure. But what are the options? How can we fight this? What’s the prognosis of getting me back to good health?”

Eric smiled at Brook and said, “Well, I knew for sure you’d want to fight so here’s where we’re at. Surgery is only a marginal option. We can go in and try to remove some of the tumor but the reality is, this tumor is growing into your pre-frontal cortex and the right side of your cerebellum. That means surgery could take some of the pressure off but if we go past that point we could end up destroying significant portions of your brain and your capacity to have a brain that works. The next option is chemotherapy. Radiation is out of the question right now—the tumor is simply too big and growing. Our hope is that the chemotherapy will stop its growth and then we can follow up with radiation. But the bottom-line Brook is that we have to get started immediately. We would like to admit you today if that is possible.”

“Hmmm,” replied Brook, “You didn’t answer the most important question, Eric. What’s the prognosis, how much time do I have left?” Eric fumbled with the file in front of him and said, “Well Brook, I’m not god. No one knows for sure and if I had to have a client who will give it a tough fight, it would be you. But I won’t lie to you. Realistically, this is one of the most challenging forms of cancer and I hate to say it, but 6-12 months is a typical prognosis. As well, at least six of them are going to be going through therapy and hoping we can slow down the tumor growth. If we achieve that, it may give you an extra year but we don’t have a cure for this Brook. But if anyone has a chance to beat the odds, I would put my money on you. Once we start therapy, it’s not likely you’ll be able to work since you’ll need to keep in as sterile an environment as possible to eliminate the risk of infection and other issues

from creating more problems. It's the fight of your life, Brook and it is the only thing you can concentrate on if you hope to beat the odds."

Brook sat forward and with his elbows on the table and hands in prayer at his lips, he closed his eyes to take it all in. Life as he knew it was over. There was no magical rabbit to pull out of the hat. He hated not being in control and having to surrender to a stupid medical problem and watch his life turn upside down. All of this ran through his brain quickly and from the depths of his soul he found himself screaming out loud, "Fuck!" Brook took a few more deep breaths and then sat up straight and looked at his three docs, all of who wished they could be miracle workers. "Well guys...and gals," Brook smiled as he corrected himself again to honor Karin's presence, "I'm going to fight, but I'll need a couple of days before I check myself in to the hospital. I'm sure you can appreciate that despite the urgency to get started, I want to make sure everything is lined up, just in case I need to be incommunicado with folks for a bit."

"Understandable, Brook," said Dr. Karin. "That makes sense. Today is Thursday. Do you feel if we plan for a Monday check-in, that will give you sufficient time to get things in order?" Brook shook his head yes and began to gather his briefcase and stand up. "That's a plan then. I'll get here about 9 am that morning and once admitted I'm ready for whatever plan you put in place. I trust you all and know we'll work as a team and hope for the best of outcomes."

There was nothing left to say. Brook shook all three doctor's hands and said, "Until Monday then." Eric nodded and said—"If you have any other questions later Brook, call me on my direct line. I'll take it no matter where I'm at."

Brook opened the conference room door and as he did, he could feel his phone ringing. Life didn't wait for illness. It just kept on moving. Brook debated ignoring it but as the elevator doors opened, he took the call.

Chapter 13.

Brook walked into the elevator as he put his phone to his ear and pushed the lobby button all at the same time. "Foster here," he said and waited for a response while wondering if the elevator's closing doors would result in a dropped call. Part of him wished it would, part of him was happy to have the distraction.

"Bodhi here! Brook, are you watching the market this morning? We're shooting through the roof! Rosatti & Kearn's stock is exploding after the quarterly reports announced huge profit increases. It's up over 4% just in the first hour of trading. That legislative change has made all the difference. Kind of beyond my wildest dreams." Brook could almost see Bodhi jumping around his office in ecstatic glee.

Simultaneously Brook's mind was exploding. This news ought to have him laughing in delight. His capacity to quickly compute what Bodhi was telling him meant close to thirty million in increased value considering his 27% share of R&K's stock. But just as quickly he could compute how little money was going to mean to him considering what he'd just learned upstairs with his doctors. As he carried these two ideas that were on opposite ends of the spectrum, the doors opened and he walked out of the elevator.

Bodhi was waiting for a response and when it seemed there was none coming he said, "Cat got your tongue, Brook? I was expecting a bit of a high five over the phone when you got this news."

Brook lied instantly and said, "Yeah, sorry was just coming out of another meeting and hopping into an elevator. You know pushing buttons and juggling too many thoughts at one time. Definitely great news. Maybe I should sell it all now—gonna be hard to top that anytime soon."

"What?," said a shocked Bodhi. "Not now, Brook that would be crazy!"

"Just yanking your chain, Bodhi. Not gonna sell it today for sure. All's good, hey, have a great day. I'm heading towards my car. I'll check in with you soon. Thanks for sharing the news." Brook was about to hit the disconnect button when Bodhi responded, "Yeah, you too Brook, glad we're both winners on this!"

Bodhi looked at his phone that was now silent and thought, man, that was not the way I thought that call was going to go at all. Well, maybe he had something else on his mind and I just caught him off-guard. Bodhi was still on his high of watching his portfolio grow so precipitously in such a short time. Time to call his wife.

Brook walked into the large lobby of the VCU medical center. Glass walls rising 5 stories high let a lot of light in and enabled a plethora of fresh plants and trees to live there. The goal was to make the setting peaceful and healthy feeling since so many of the people who walked through this lobby were ill.

Brook decided to sit for a bit and found a quiet space around the fountain that allowed the sun to pour in on him. He rarely sat still and the privacy of this moment—before having to meet with his Board, call his attorneys and bankers and begin dealing with the sudden new reality was, he realized, likely one of the last private moments he would have for a very long time. Once word got out, there would be so many people calling and so much to do that he figured staying here for a bit was a precious opportunity to process it quietly. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Holding back the tears while wishing he could go back to bed and start this day all over on a very different trajectory.

Brook remained with his eyes closed as his mind raced with all the changes his life was about to undergo. The medical challenges of chemo, isolation and being in a hospital were somewhat scary to think about but he knew he could get through it. Harder was walking away from Axiom and letting someone else run the business. He loved his work and yet knew, it would be impossible to meet those obligations and fight brain cancer.

He was just saying to himself, “What should I do, what should I do?” when the silence was disturbed with a sweet little voice saying, “Brook, is everything okay? Brook opened his eyes to see Amelia Carter standing in front of him. Probably the last person in the world he would’ve expected to call his name and yet, probably the best person in the world who could right now.

“Ah, Amelia, how nice to see you again. What brings you downtown and here to VCU medical center?” Brook quickly regained his composure and put a smile on his face.

“Well, don’t tell Sydney, but I’ve come down to discuss a possible hip replacement. She’s been nagging me about it for a couple of years and I’ve always said no, but I think I’m going to bite the bullet and go for it. But forget me, your face tells me that something is going on with you. I don’t want to intrude, but if I can be of some help, I’d be happy to talk with you.”

Normally Brook would’ve been gently dismissive and sent Amelia on her way. Nothing was normal right now and he looked in her face and knew that she would be brutally honest with him and that’s what he really needed right now. She had no skin in the game of his life and Sydney had always told him that she was a source of wisdom and he could use some of that right now.

“You’re right, Amelia. There is something happening. I’ve just gotten the news from my doctors that I have a fast growing brain tumor and need to admit myself on Monday morning to start chemotherapy.” All this Brook said in a quiet, contained explanation that had no hint of emotions.

“Well, blow me over with a feather, Brook. That is a tough load to hear. Your mind must be racing a mile a minute right now. “ Amelia’s mind was racing too. She was wondering just how far to reach out to Brook without violating his privacy but she didn’t want to lose this opportunity to help him in any way she could.

Brook was shaking his head yes and saying “More like 10,000 miles a minute. The prognosis isn’t good if I’m being honest with myself. I’ve got maybe one year left and as the doctor’s said, much of that will be going through therapies and I won’t have my usual energy. I’ve got four days to put in place a new plan for my life and my businesses so I can walk in here Monday ready to put all my attention on something I’d rather not even give the time of day.”

Amelia was shaking her head and giving Brook a calm smile. “I like the way you phrased that Brook. You are right, it is a new plan and the need for it has come out of left field and whether you like it or not, it is what you’ve got to do now. I know you and your success in business has been incredibly rewarding. Sydney reminds me over and over again—that success isn’t about the money for you. It is about the work of your businesses and how that has impacted so many people, communities and the world.”

Brook was listening intently to Amelia. She was right. He loved what Axiom had done in all its different iterations. The fact that it had made him a billionaire was secondary and as he thought that to himself, he realized that even his billions couldn’t get him out of this predicament.

Then he heard Amelia say, “So now the universe has given you a different project to work on. It offers you the opportunity to determine how to continue your impact while going through therapy that will require all your attention. Your life is forever changed with this diagnosis, there’s no doubt about it. But may I say from the vantage point of my 89 years it isn’t the number of years one has that’s important, it’s what you do with the one’s you’ve got. I know I’m being blunt, but I suspect your doctor’s were too. This could be terminal yet you have time to prepare and that’s not true for everyone. I’d say that’s your new project Brook—determining how to further your impact from this new vantage point.”

Brook laughed for a second. “Sydney always says you’re a no nonsense, get to the point source of wisdom for her. And I have to say I’m happy right this second to be on the receiving end of that wisdom too. You’ve helped me cut to the chase of how to use this next four days—not just dealing with logistics but more importantly, having the vision to see the future impact even though I may likely not be part of it. That brings me great peace right now. I’m not one to wallow in self-pity and with only four days to work this through, thank you, Amelia. I feel much better now and ready to head out and get on with it.”

“Well Brook, the world works in mysterious ways. I guess we were supposed to bump into each other today and have this little heart to heart chat. Glad I could be here for you, but if you talk to Sydney and tell her I’m going to have my hip replaced, I’ll still come hunting for you and give you different piece of my mind!”

Brook laughed and said, “Your secret is safe with me, Amelia. I promise. Now, I’ll call my driver and get going. Can I give you a lift somewhere as well?”

“I appreciate the offer, Brook, but I’m good. I put Uber on my phone and I want to use it again and get better at knowing how to do it. It’s giving me a new independence and while Sydney might be upset that I don’t call her so often, I’m happy to have it as an option. Let me give you a hug and send you on your way.”

Brook stood up—his 6’4 frame bending near in half to hug Amelia. They held tight for a minute, then parted looking each other in the eye and smiling. Brook walked away knowing everything was going to be fine—different, but fine.

Amelia watched Brook walk towards the main door and picked up her phone. She dialed and waited. She didn’t like to drive her car in downtown Richmond—it was too crowded and finding parking was a nightmare. Uber was an easy solution and she loved increasing her tech skills too.

“Amelia, what’s up?”, asked Sydney. Amelia cleared her throat and replied, “We need to talk now. Can you meet me at my house in an hour?”, said Amelia.

“Is everything okay, Amelia?” Sydney said with deep concern in her voice.

“For me, yes, Sydney, all’s fine. We’ll talk when you get to the house.” Amelia hung up and hit the Uber button on her Iphone. She smiled as it told her a ride would be there in three minutes. She’d be home in plenty of time to pull some snacks out of her pantry and be ready to share Brook’s news with Sydney. Then she wondered if perhaps Brook has already called her and she’d know by the time she got to Amelia’s house.

Chapter 14

It was Sunday and Sydney had joined Brook at his home. He’d spent the last two and a half days dealing with lawyers, financial advisors and his management teams figuring out how to set Axiom up for transition. Fortunately for him, Axiom was a well-oiled machine and was deep with talent that could keep it flowing for the immediate future. The Axiom Board was well-advised and while no one wanted to talk about it, they were all aware that Brook might never return. But for now, they were betting on his strength and making it through this challenge.

“Let’s move to the solarium, Sydney,” Brook said as Margaret, the cook, refilled their coffee mugs and began to clear away the brunch dishes. Margaret had worked for Brook for twenty years now and managed the household with an iron fist. The home was a small mansion in the West End that on the outside showed all its southern charm but on the inside had every modern convenience and update possible.

“That sounds lovely, Brook. I love the view from that room.”, responded Sydney. She grabbed her coffee mug and said “Thank you, Margaret. That was a great meal as always.” Margaret smiled her acknowledgement of the compliment and watched as Brook and Sydney left the dining room. Margaret was sick with worry about her boss and had made a meal she hoped he realized was packed with prayers and caring.

Sydney slid into one of the deep cushioned chairs that looked out on the lawn and small forest. Brook came in with a three ring binder and sat on the opposite chair. Neither talked for a few minutes while they took in the view.

“Ah, look Sydney, off to the left—there’s a deer and her fawn just at the end of the lawn.” Sydney looked up and over and smiled. “It’s beautiful here Brook, and sights like that just add to the ambiance of it all. Maybe you should set this room up for when you get home from the hospital. It would be a nice place to sit while you heal.”

“Good point, Sydney. I’ll think about that. First, let’s talk about how you can help me through this. I mean, there’s the obvious. I know you’ll visit me and be a cheerleader for me. But I’d like to make you my health surrogate and durable power of attorney in the event I become mentally disabled through this process. I know there’s a real possibility that I could lose my capacity to make good decisions and could even get to the point where I’m in a vegetative state. I don’t want life extension if I’m not going to live independently and I want you to feel confident to pull the plug so to speak if this happens. I know we’ve never talked about something like this before and my previous will had another person in place, but as things stand today, I’d like it to be you. Can you do that for me?”

Sydney was incredulous as she listened to Brook. Never in a million years did she think this is what they were going to talk about today. She came to comfort and sooth him and now she’s hearing he wants to put his life in her hands in the case he becomes an invalid. Sydney’s eyes widened in shock but then she quickly regained her composure.

“Wow, Brook, just hearing you were so ill has been a big adjustment but your asking me to take on these roles for you takes it to a whole different level. And yet, as I say that, I know deep in my heart that I am so happy to be able to say yes--yes I can do those things for you. My biggest hope of course is that it will never be needed but we’re both realistic enough to know it definitely could. I’m here for you every step of the way.”

Brook’s body visibly relaxed as he breathed a sigh of relief. “Of all the people in the world, you are who I trust the most and especially in this awful situation. I can relax and know that whatever is going to transpire over the next few months, you’ll have my back. I hope you can come with me on Monday and meet the medical team so you can hear about what they’re planning, what I want in the event it goes bad and for all of you to be on the same page.”

“Absolutely, Brook! That makes good sense. Right now, I’d like to sit back and listen to you tell me what you want as far as how much intervention, when to step or, in some cases simply not do any more interventions. I’d like to hear it so I can be at

peace that if I have to make one of those really tough choices, I know I'm doing what you told me you wanted and I don't need to have any guilt whatsoever. "

"Good Sydney, good. That works for me too. Okay, well what I'd definitely say is that I don't want to prolong the quantity of my life if in doing so I've left all of the quality of my life on the table. In other words, I don't want to live just to be alive. I only want to live if I'm really going to be living. The very last thing I want is to end up in a nursing home, attached to tubes and drips unless doctors are totally confident I'll get up and walk out of there within a month or two. Otherwise,...."

And just as Brook said 'otherwise', there was a knock on the door. With a flash of irritation, Brook turned his head and was about to yell, "go away" when the door opened and Margaret and a policeman walked into the solarium.

"Excuse me, Mr. Foster," Margaret said. "I'm so sorry to disturb you, but Detective Jared Stiles has insisted he must talk to you immediately."

And in a flash, Brook knew exactly what Detective Stiles was going to say. Brook waved him in as he watched Margaret back out the door.

Detective Stiles looked down and then straight into Brook's eyes and said, "I'm sorry to have to inform you Mr. Foster, but your daughter, Maia Foster has been found dead in her apartment of an apparent opioid overdose. We were called to do a safety check after she didn't show up for work the last two days and she missed meeting a friend last night."

Sydney watched Brook as he stood there in shock. She got up and walked to his side and said, "Brook, sit down now. We'll deal with this together."

Chapter 15

The funeral plans had had to evolve quickly due to Brook's health needs. After Detective Stiles had left on Sunday, Brook had instantly taken control of the situation. He called his assistant Jason to get him started on the logistics of moving Maia's body to the Whitney Funeral home and gathering the information they needed for a memorial and burial. He also asked him to call Dr. Morehouse and let him know that he would need to push his entry to the hospital back a few days, at least until Maia was buried. Then Brook had called his ex-wife though Detective Stiles had told him that she had already been informed.

That call went as expected—terrible. Theresa had insisted that Maia's drug overdose was his fault. He had enabled her by giving her everything she wanted and so much money she was able to buy big stashes of opioids at the pill mills. Then she hit him with the gut punch. "And did you know," screamed Theresa, "that Rosatti &

Kearn—the company you own so much of—they’re one of, if not the largest distributors of those damn pills? You killed your own daughter, Brook and made a whole lot of profit while you did!”

Now as he stood in the funeral home and watched people coming in, Theresa’s words continued to reverberate through his very sick and tired brain. Detective Stiles had explained how Maia had died in a house filled with over a thousand opioid pills and bottles with lots of different people’s names on them. All of them from the same pill mill. And yet, there was little that could be done to bring anyone to justice. On top of what Theresa had told him, Brook had learned that the new laws that had been enacted as a result of the lobbyists hired by him protected R&K as well as the pill mills. What had seemed like a good business decision now had enormous consequences on a personal level. He did feel that he had helped put into play the pathway that killed his daughter.

He thought back to the moment he’d had at Pebble Beach when Bodhi had told him the legislature has passed that bill. From that high to this low as he touched Maia’s hand in her open coffin. And with his brain tumor growing, his grief only doubled as he thought, “I’ll never be able to make this right again. How many other children will die as a result of R&K and their freedom to distribute pills with impunity?” Knowing that tomorrow morning he headed to the hospital and a spiral down into chemotherapy and more sickness, the ability to do anything about this now was lost.

The funeral director walked up to him and said they were ready to start. Brook looked out at the gathering. Those attending were a mix of Maia’s friends, Theresa’s support group and many corporate people here to pay their respects to him as much as anything else. In the corner he could see Sydney, Ian and Amelia sitting together talking quietly. Brook nodded to the funeral director and the music they chose along with a video of Maia’s life, began to play. Theresa began to cry and Brook knew the next hour of his life would be the saddest ever.

And it was. Eulogies from Maia’s friends were both funny and poignant but all ended in grief. Theresa was unable to get up and talk about her daughter and perhaps that was for the best. Brook had been afraid she’d share her rage and that would’ve been unfair to Maia to do it here. And finally he’d given his eulogy.

He’d wanted to say how sorry he was for all the conflict between him and Maia. How he loved her but was sad that her hate for him had led her to drugs and alcohol and this untimely and unseemly death. He wanted to say he would vow to undo the sins of R&K and spend the rest of his life trying to solve the opioid problem, but of course tomorrow he’d be watching his brain drink up chemotherapy and his own life be put on hold. So, instead, he kept it simple and sweet. And true to form, within the hour, mourners were strolling out of the funeral home and heading back to their own lives. Theresa had her family members supporting her and she’d have a gathering at her home but Brook headed back to his home alone. He most definitely wasn’t

invited to join Theresa and secretly he was glad about that. He simply didn't have the bandwidth left to deal with more grief.

On the way home his phone rang. He smiled when he saw it was Sydney. "I was wondering if you wanted some company?", she said. "Do you have the time, Sydney?", Brook replied. I know you're coming with me tomorrow too, so I understand if you need to get some things done in your own life. Maybe Ian wants some of your attention too."

"Not a problem, Brook. And Ian understands this is not exactly normal times. I'll head out as soon as I've dropped Amelia off at her home. I should be there within an hour or so. I think I'll change clothes before I come out so it might be a bit longer."

When she finally got there about four in the afternoon, Brook was sitting again in the solarium. She walked in and he said, "I'm going to have them move a hospital bed in here for me. I think you're right, this would be a good place to be while I'm throwing up my guts after chemo."

"I think that's a good decision, Brook. How are you feeling right now about everything? It's a lot of stuff to deal with all at one time.", said Sydney. Brook shook his head back and forth and then put his head in his hands and started crying. "That girl drove me crazy. But I loved her that I know. My divorce from Theresa though forever changed our relationship. Theresa hated me and insisted Maia hate me too. Maia was good at everything—and she got really good at hating me as well. And the drugs and alcohol problems were a part of that hate. I tried numerous times to get her into rehab, but she wouldn't go. I begged Theresa to try to convince Maia to go into rehab but all that did was increase Theresa's hate for me. She believed that Maia wouldn't have needed rehab if I hadn't ruined their lives by divorcing her and destroying our family."

Sydney stroked Brook's back and sat down next to him. "Yes, Brook, we both know they got stuck in hate, but that didn't need to happen. But it became the path they traveled on despite your efforts. You can't be guilty about that. Sad, yes. Guilty, no."

Then Brook looked at her and said, "Guilty about their hate—no, I'm not. But let me tell you where I am guilty. And here my moral lapses aren't just about Maia or Theresa, they impact many other people too. Rosatti and Kearn is a huge drug distributor that I own a significant portion of and I paid lobbyists to enable R&K to be able to more easily distribute those pills. I saw it as simply a government regulation thing getting in the way of a business being successful. When my lobbyists gutted those regulations the stock's value shot up and pill mills were able to increase their purchases. Put it all together and I have made it easier for many more deaths to occur as a result of what I did."

Sydney was in for an earful as she realized that so many of the conversations she and Brook had had over the years about corporate responsibility, greed, and the way the world worked had finally come home to roost on a very personal level. Sydney listened as Brook processed his awakening to an acceptance that things needed to change and his grief at not being able to be a part of it.

Chapter 16

It had been three weeks since Maia's funeral and Brook entering the hospital for treatment for his glioblastoma. He'd spent eight days in the hospital. First they had done a small surgery to remove what they could of the tumor without destroying Brook's brain and his capacity to think. This had taken some of the pressure off and relieved the headaches he'd been having. But they had explained this might be a short-lived relief if the chemotherapy did not stop the tumor's growth. He'd had his first chemotherapy treatment while there and it had resulted in heavy nausea and discomfort for the rest of his stay. But by the time he went home, he was feeling a bit better.

Home now, Brook had another week before his second chemotherapy treatment. He knew this would be the best he felt for the month and that's why he'd called in his attorney, Ron Tyler from Tyler, Barker and Cane. Ron had been his attorney for the last thirty years and had helped Brook in and out of many legal scrapes. Today he was here to help him write his final will.

Brook's assistant, Jason, had taken up residence and worked daily with Brook from the solarium that had been set up as part office for Jason and healing room for Brook. When Brook was not too tired or feeling ill, he had continued to do what he could to manage Axiom from the sidelines.

Jason walked in carrying a video camera and tripod. He nodded at Brook and said, "I've got what you requested as far as the video camera and microphones for you and Mr. Tyler. Where do you want me to set this up? Will you be talking to him from the hospital bed or over here in one of the chairs?"

Brook had been pretty much bed-bound for the last two weeks. Simply, it was easier to do this because he could pull in his computer or phone when needed and push it away when he got too tired. They'd found that he could go about an hour and then have to stop and take a rest. By staying in bed he could take these cat naps whenever he had the feeling he needed to rest.

"Let's put it over by the two chairs. I don't think I want to be videoed in my pajamas and in a hospital bed. Kind of sets the wrong tone that I'm healthy enough to do what I'm about to do."

As Jason worked on setting up for the video, he heard the doorbell and knew that Margaret would soon be bringing Mr. Tyler in. He worked quickly knowing that he would not be in the room during their discussion.

Sure enough, within two minutes, Mr. Tyler was walking into the solarium. With an outreached hand Ron Tyler moved to shake Brook's hand. "Brook, you look good! I'm happy to see that."

Brook had slid out of the bed and was buttoning up a starched shirt and tie over his pajama bottoms. He knew the video would just be a chest and headshot so he didn't need to bother changing his pants. "Thanks, Ron. Doing the best I can considering the situation. Thanks for coming out here to work with me. My doctors encourage me to limit my travel and exposure to the outside world just to lower the risk of infection."

"That makes sense, Brook", Ron said as Brook gently moved them both over to the where the video camera was set up. "Yes, it does," replied Brook. "Ron, I'm having my assistant Jason prepare for us to video tape our conversation. He'll be here just for a few minutes as we make sure it is all working but once we've gotten through the basic formalities, he'll leave us and we'll do our work in private, okay?"

"Whatever you say, Brook. I'm here for you and whatever you need.", Ron said. As he sat down in the chair that Brook had motioned him to, Jason walked up, introduced himself and then said, "I'm going to put microphones on you both so we ensure there's good sound quality. Then, I'll start the camera, and you'll answer basic introduction questions—you'll each say your names and location. Then I'll stop the camera, double check that everything is recording correctly and if it's good at that point, I'll restart the camera and you can talk for four hours on this disk. If you need to go more than four hours—you'll need to stop and call me back in. Then I'll come replace this disk and restart the taping."

Brook sat down too now that he'd finished tying his tie. "Sounds good, Jason. You ready to hit the start button?" Jason, nodded yes and said, "Mr. Tyler, why don't you start first with your name, your law firm, and location. Then Mr. Foster, you'll do your name, and location."

Both of them followed the directions Jason had given them. Jason was relieved when everything worked fine on the first try. Mr. Foster didn't like it when things didn't go smoothly and now, with his being so sick and tired, Jason knew they didn't have any time to waste on technical issues. "Mr. Foster, I think we're set. I'm ready now to hit the start button and leave. I'll be right outside so if anything happens just call me. Otherwise, I think you're good to go."

“Thanks, Jason. Yes, hit the button and take your leave. Ron, we’ll repeat what we had just done and then we’ll move on to discuss what I want to talk about with you.”

“Got it.” said Ron. He looked at Jason who assessed they were ready. “Gentlemen, here we go. I’m hitting the button and taking my leave.” And Jason did exactly that.

Then Ron began by saying, “My name is Ron Tyler, I am the principle attorney with Tyler, Barker and Cane. We are recording this at the home of my client, Brook Foster.” Brook smiled at Ron and then did his introduction by saying “I’m Brook Foster. I am in my home in Richmond, VA. I have asked my attorney, Ron Tyler to be here today as I am going to rewrite my last will and testament. I am recording this because I want to ensure that this last will and testament can never be disputed by anyone. I am 64 years old and of sound mind and capable of making the decisions put forth in this new will. Due to unexpected changes in my life, the death of my daughter Maia Foster and my diagnosis with Stage 4 glioblastoma, I have determined that I want to change my will as to the distribution of my wealth.

Ron Tyler was not surprised that Brook had called him and said he wanted to talk about his will. Maia Foster would have been a recipient of some of his fortune had she lived and so Brook had said he wanted to address these changes even though Ron had told him that her death eliminated her from his will automatically especially since she did not have any children or potential heirs for her portion of the inheritance. But Brook was worried about his ex-wife Theresa assuming that she would inherit Maia’s portion out of some convoluted thinking. He wanted to ensure there was no miscommunication on this point.

But he had the surprise of his life when he then heard Brook say, “I have decided to give my entire fortune and estate to Sydney Oliver to do with as she will. There will be no other recipients and anyone challenging this will is forthwith informed that any legal action taken against Ms. Oliver or my estate will be met with a vigorous legal response to stop this immediately. Save your time and money. This will is airtight.”

As Ron Tyler regained his composure, Brook looked at him and said, Ron—let’s get to work on writing this up.” All Ron could do was nod yes as Brook added “You will concur with me Mr. Tyler, that you find me of sound mind and capable of making this new will and testament?”

The next two hours they hammered out all the details. It ended with Ron packing up his brief case while Brook removed his shirt and tie, pulled on his pajama top and headed back to the bed. At that moment, Jason walked in, removed the disk and said to Ron, “Mr. Tyler, I’ll need to download this and then I’ll make a copy and have it forwarded to your office. We will keep the original here in Mr. Foster’s safe. When you’ve finished the written will, please let us know and we’ll have you return and

we'll have a notary and two witnesses ready to sign it. Then we'll place it next to the video in the safe.

All neat and matter of fact. Just three men taking care of a business transaction even though the only one this really impacted was Sydney and she wasn't even in the room.

Chapter 17

Ian and Sydney had been finishing dinner at The Daily Kitchen & Bar when the call came in. The food had been wonderful but the conversation had not gone as Ian had hoped. He'd finally asked Sydney to marry him and while he knew it was not likely she had changed her mind from their previous conversation, he knew he couldn't put it off any longer.

Sydney had said no. Not because she didn't love him or think he'd make a great husband. She even said it could end up being the biggest regret and mistake of her life, but she had to listen to her heart. Her heart said she didn't want to be someone's wife at this time in her life. She'd been a wife and had enjoyed it but after Brian's death, she found she didn't miss that role after all and that had not changed for her in the last few years. Maybe it would in a few more but she owed it to Ian to let him go and find someone who did want that and would make him a good partner. She had tagged on to it a *and if you don't find that and I then change my mind, I'll let you know.*

So when Sydney's phone rang, it was almost a relief because it ended the sad conversation that was hard for them both. They had looked at each other for half a second as Ian nodded for her to take the call as he motioned to her he was going to the bathroom. Sydney hit the button to hear Jason's voice saying "Ms. Oliver, I'm so sorry to have to call you with this, but Mr. Foster passed away this evening." Sydney was so stunned she had almost dropped the phone.

She'd spent the last six days in a fog. Standing once again at the funeral home where they'd buried Maia just five weeks earlier, she continued to scream inside herself, "It was not supposed to happen this soon!" She had known that Brook's life was on a countdown, but she'd assumed they had at least six months or possibly even a year. They'd all hoped for a miracle and he would pull through but she'd come to terms with the reality that the miracle wasn't likely. He was, by the time he was diagnosed, very sick.

The autopsy had shown an aneurysm in the brain. No one could say whether it was an after-effect of the brain surgery, part of the tumor's growth pressing on the vascular system or a massive reaction to the chemotherapy coursing through his body. For Sydney, it didn't really matter because the outcome was the same. Brook

was gone. They'd spent the last 5 weeks together almost every day talking about everything. Topics they agreed on, topics they disagreed on. Both of them felt an urgency to make the most of their time together fearing that the brain tumor and chemo might rob Brook of his ability and energy to continue these talks.

Now as she looked around the funeral home at the hundreds of attendees, the television cameras outside noting the loss of one of corporate America's great champions, Sydney could not help but wonder how she'd go on without the great antagonist in her life. Their years of sparring had been such fun for them both and she realized she'd expected that to go for many more years.

Ian had wrongly assumed that some of the reason Sydney had refused his marriage offer was about Brook but Sydney had set him straight on that too. No, she would never have wanted him as a husband either. She was adamant that she wanted to be on her own and that she preferred them both as friends. Knowing this Ian had stood by her side these last few days, and now, as she prepared to give one of the eulogies, he was right there.

Out of the corner of her eye, Sydney saw Theresa Foster heading towards her. Sydney's heart sank as she recalled the last encounter with Theresa—when she had informed Brook that she held him responsible for Maia's death by screaming at him over the phone. Sydney could not imagine what beef Theresa might have with her because their divorce had never involved her in the least. But she also knew Theresa was a woman filled with rage at Brook and would need to find another outlet. Sydney crossed her fingers and hoped she would not be the temporary new recipient.

No such luck. Theresa walked straight to her and within ear shot of everyone shouted, "How could you! You manipulating, controlling bitch. You worked your magic on him and got what you always wanted! All his money and god knows what you're going to do with all of it. I'm sure you conspired with him to make sure he could hurt me one last time!"

Sydney's brain was flying in multiple directions at once. She was trying to keep calm and process whether what Theresa had just told her could possibly be true or was just the rant of a misinformed ex-wife. At the same time, she was remembering that they were in a crowd of hundreds of Brook's friends and business associates and she wanted to maintain decorum at this solemn event. Thankfully, Ian was behind her and he said firmly to Theresa, "This is neither the time or the place for this. Go sit down now." He moved around Sydney and quickly took Theresa by the elbow and guided her to the other side of room and sat her down. He bent over and quietly said to her "For once in your life, act like an adult." And then he walked back to Sydney.

Ian looked at Sydney who was clearly upset and said to her, "Let's focus on the business at hand here, Sydney. There will be plenty of time to deal with that later.

Remember Brook—he needs you to do your part and I know you will want to remember giving his eulogy from your heart. Let that go and remember him right now.”

Sydney looked at him with gratitude. Ian really was a great guy. She gave him a gentle smile and said, “Thanks.” She turned just as the funeral director came up to her and said, “Let’s get started, Ms. Oliver.”

As they walked by the front pew, Bodhi Chunduren heard Sydney say to Ian, “I’m sure she’s mistaken anyway. Brook would never have done that.” Bodhi had heard Theresa’s missive and thought to himself, “Well, what if she is right and Brook gave her everything. What does that mean for Rosatti & Kearn and my stock options? Perhaps I should sell now before this becomes common knowledge and the stock price drops. Then I can buy it back later and make a killing.” Bodhi chuckled to himself and thought, thanks again, Brook—you may have made me a fortune twice on this R&K stock. Such is the irony of the stock market.”

Organ music began to play and everyone turned their attention to the minister who was beginning the ceremony.

Chapter 18

Ron Tyler was waiting in the conference room at Tyler, Barker and Cane. Coffee and water had been placed on the sideboard. Copies of Brook’s will were laid out at four chairs. The screen had been pulled down at one end of the conference table and he’d put the USB disk into the computer. All he had to do was hit the start button and the video Brook had made just a month ago would be how he started this meeting.

He was glad to have the video because it would quickly dismiss anybody from trying to bust the will. Fortunately Brook had had only one chemo treatment before he made the video. He still looked healthy and came across knowledgeable and coherent. While Ron was thinking about Brook, the intercom interrupted his thoughts. He heard his executive assistant say, “Mr. Tyler, all four of your guests have arrived. Shall I bring them to the conference room?”

Ron ran his hand through his hair as he walked over, hit the speaker button and said, “Yes, Debbie. That would be great.” The door opened and Debbie stepped in followed by Theresa Foster, Sydney Oliver, Neal Reed and James McBride. “Thank you, Debbie and welcome everyone. Please take a seat at one of the four chairs where you will see a copy of the will. That is for you to take with you but not necessary for you to read now as I will be going over it.”

Theresa Foster was obviously wound up and ready to explode. Sydney seemed calm and looked as if she couldn't quite believe she was in the room. The two men were from Axiom and they looked professional and interested. They knew of course that they were not going to personally benefit from Brook's will, but they were concerned as to how any decisions Brook had made would impact Axiom and perhaps their jobs.

"I'm not sure if you all introduced yourself outside, but let me start there. On my left is Sydney Oliver, a friend to Mr. Foster. Next to her is Neal Reed, Board Chair of Axiom. Then, James McBride, acting CEO of Axiom and then finally Theresa Foster, who is the ex-wife of Mr. Foster. Mr. Foster requested me to invite all four of you to this reading of his will. Or perhaps I should say, hearing of his will." Everyone nodded to each other in a quiet welcome.

"You'll see that I have the video screen down," said Ron. "Mr. Foster produced a video will and a written will which corroborates what he has said in this video. I'm going to begin with the video as Mr. Foster himself is the best one to read his will to you, so to speak. Debbie, would you lower the lights and then hit the start button?" Debbie did as requested and within just a few seconds, Brook, dressed in the shirt and tie began to talk. It started with the introductory information of name and place and then quickly got into the heart of the matter when he said, "I've invited you all to be here for the reading of this will. I've made this video because I want to make clear that no one is to challenge this will. I am of sound mind and the decisions I've made here reflect my desires. I know I am battling cancer at this time and it very likely will result in my death. I am at peace with that. I have thought long and hard about my last will and testament. I believe it will be the final piece in the legacy I hope I have made throughout my life and through my work with Axiom Enterprises."

Everyone in the room was watching intently and when Brook mentioned Axiom, Neal and James looked at each other and smiled. They relaxed somewhat as they expected that Brook would protect Axiom and their jobs would be fine for now.

They looked back at the video to hear Brook say, "First, I want to address my ex-wife, Theresa. Theresa, we have had our issues throughout our lives and our divorce left our family decimated. The loss of Maia is something we will both have to carry to our graves." At that point, Theresa's eyes were glued to the video and being invited had given her hope that she would receive a big payout after all. But as Brook continued, those hopes were dashed. "Theresa, the divorce settlement left you a very wealthy woman and I believe you should be able to live to the end of your life in comfort. So, I want to state unequivocally to you, I am giving you nothing from my estate and this is a conscious decision. Do not waste a dime of your money trying to bust this will. It is airtight and no court in the land will be able to overturn it." As Brook finished this last sentence, Theresa stood up and screamed at the video, "You vile man. Right to the end you are hateful. I hope you rot in hell!" She then grabbed the packet in front of her, stood up and said to the others, "I will not stay here to be

insulted by this man any more. I will see you in court.” Then she walked out and attempted to slam the door but it was too heavy and slow to get much of the desired impact.

The video had continued on while Theresa had thrown her fit. While all showing a bit of discomfort, they quickly returned their eyes to the video as they heard Brook say, “There will only be one recipient of my estate once it is dissolved through the efforts of my lawyer, Ron Tyler, my accountant, Jill Draper and the assistance of Neal Reed, Axiom Board Chair and James McBride, acting CEO of Axiom. The details are outlined in the packet in front of you but it essentially says to dissolve any and all of my interests in Axiom, any and all stocks and investments into an all-liquid account. The only exception is my Richmond home whose title will pass to the recipient of my estate until such time that she might decide to sell it. For now, she will inherit everything in the home, she can live in it if she should so choose and she can use it as a headquarters for the work she’s about to embark on.”

Slowly but surely it was dawning on everyone in the room, that Sydney Oliver was about to inherit the entire estate of one Brook Foster.

Brook’s voice continued on as he said, “Yes, Sydney, it’s you. It’s all yours to do with what you want. I hope you don’t end up hating me for this but we’ve talked for years about changing the world. I had my way, you had yours. By the end of my life—which has happened if you’re hearing this, I’ve come to believe that you just might be right. It is time to build a new model. I know you have many ideas for doing this and now you’re going to have the funding. I can’t say exactly how much the sale of my Axiom shares and all my other investments will be, but in discussion with my accountants, I think I can safely say it is somewhere in the range of \$49 billion dollars. Yes, that’s right, billion with a b. You’ve always wanted to change the world Sydney—now you have your chance. I trust you’ll work hard to leave the world a better place and I’ll watch from the other side knowing I put in charge the best person I could find to do it.”

At that moment, the video showed Brook walking out of the camera range. He’d obviously walked behind the camera and turned it off. Debbie, realizing the video was finished, jumped up and turned up the lights.

Sydney was sitting there in shock. Neal and James were looking at her and then shifted their gaze to Ron. Ron cleared his throat and said, “All the details of his wishes are within the packets you have. Theresa Foster’s threat will be dismissed by the courts if she tries to bust the will. So, we don’t really see any major worries there. We have already begun the work of liquidating Mr. Foster’s estate per his instructions in the will.” “Gentlemen,” he said, as he looked at Neal and James, “I think you can take your packets and return to your offices. My team as well as Jill Draper’s office will be contacting you soon. Per Mr. Foster’s instructions, our goal is to make this transition as calm as possible. Does anyone have any questions?”

Neal said, “No Ron, I think we get it. Ms. Oliver, we’re at your disposal as well, though I think you’ll find it easiest to work through Mr. Tyler and Ms. Draper directly.” Sydney nodded in acceptance as Neal and James proceeded to leave the room.

Sydney could not believe how matter of fact all this was. Finally she looked at Ron and said, “I can’t believe this is happening.” Ron smiled at her and said, “Oh yes, Sydney, it’s happening. How about if you and I go over the will page by page and you’ll see how this is all going to transpire.” Sydney nodded yes and reached for the packet in front of her and then said, “What in the world was he thinking? And why didn’t he mention this to me at all, Ron?”

Ron shrugged his shoulders and said, “He figured it was best this way because then no one could say you had manipulated him on his death bed for this. I know for a fact that he kept this a secret from you for that very reason.” Ron then reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out an envelope. “This is from Brook. It’s a letter to you that I think will help explain it all. Would you like some private time to read this first?” Sydney shook her head yes. Ron stood to leave and said, “Just hit this intercom button when you’re done. Debbie will come get me and we can proceed with the will.”

Chapter 19

Amelia handed Sydney a mug of tea and sat down next to her on the porch swing. It was a lovely fall day. A brief return to summer had set in after a short cold snap. As a result, they were sitting comfortably on Amelia’s front porch, enjoying the sunshine and quiet. Between them lay the letter that Brook had written to Sydney.

Sydney took a sip of tea while her other hand fingered the letter. She looked at Amelia and said “I don’t know if I want to kill him or hug him but for sure I want to scream at him. I want to have ten more conversations with him before he dies so I can parse out what he means in this letter in a way that I know for sure I’m doing what he wishes with the staggering amount of money he’s left me to deal with. “

Amelia smiled at her and replied, “Well, I think you’ve missed the window of opportunity for killing him and I guess I’ll have to do as far as listening to your screams. And I’ve read that letter about as many times as you have Sydney, and I think he’s pretty clear what he wants you to do. What I think you’re mad about is that he didn’t tell you exactly how to do that. Which is somewhat surprising considering the years he spent building businesses based on strategic plans and long-range goals. But there it is—it’s up to you.”

“It’s up to me,” mused Sydney out loud, “It’s up to me.” Then she started to laugh as Amelia looked at her calmly, then reached out her hand to Sydney and said, ‘Dearest, you don’t have to spend it all by next week. You have time to think about this strategically. Maybe hire some consulting company to bring in focus groups and just talk about it with others for a while. And honestly, I would figure that with \$49 billion in your back pocket, you could call up anyone who you think could be helpful with this and they’d be more than happy to come talk with you about what to do.”

“You’re right, Amelia. I’m sure a whole host of experts are out there with ideas of how to spend this money. But right now, I think I need to just be comfortable sitting in the ‘hurting time’. You know that quote by Nina George? “It’s a bog; it’s where your dreams and worries and forgotten plans gather. Your steps are heavier during that time.”

Amelia shook her head in acknowledgement. “Yes, I do—it’s from her book, *The Little Paris Bookshop*. I recall you telling me that you shared that quote with Ian and his head almost exploded trying to figure out why this is a good thing! But I think you’re right. Your life is about to change in so many ways that perhaps stillness for a bit is your best bet. By the way, does Ian know about this?”

Sydney shook her head no and said, “You’re the only one, Amelia. I left the attorney’s office and headed here. The Board chair and acting CEO of Axiom know about it—but they were informed not to talk about it at this point because of the potential impact on the Axiom stock price. And then of course, there’s his ex-wife Theresa who will make a futile attempt to bust the will, but she’ll be wasting her precious money and time. This thing is airtight. And the only reason she wants to bust it is for her own personal financial gain and Brook’s video will make it very clear he doesn’t want her to have the money. So, only you my dear—because I know you’ll keep me grounded as I go through figuring out how best to re-infuse \$49 billion back into the economy in a way that does what Brook asked—change the world.”

“Well, what’s most important to you right now, Sydney. What needs to happen today?” Sydney smiled back at Amelia and her practicality and said, “You know what it is? It’s to go to the restaurant and get through the day. That’s the first order of business—to not let my own business and passion collapse in the meantime! The \$49 billion can wait. I’m heading to the restaurant!”. And with that, Sydney stood up, grabbed the letter and jammed it into her purse. Then she bent over and gave Amelia a kiss on her cheek and said, “Thanks. Now back to regular life. The crazy life ahead can wait for a bit. I’ll give you a call tomorrow and we’ll see how I’m doing then.”

Amelia watched Sydney bounce down the stairs to her car. It was a smart move on Sydney’s part to head to the restaurant and do a regular day of work. Amelia hoped it was a busy enough of a day to keep Sydney caught up with dealing in the here and now demands of a packed restaurant and give her one last reprieve. Because the

truth was, Sydney's life as she'd known it was over. Her life was heading off on a new trajectory she couldn't have imagined in a million years. It made winning the lottery look like chump change.

Sydney's drive to her restaurant was less than ten minutes from Amelia's house. On the edge of the Fan, Wholeness Rocks! was the love of Sydney's life. She'd owned it for five years and it had steadily grown and enabled her to cook great food, teach people about wholeness and become a mentor to many. As she approached it, she could see a big crowd outside. She smiled as she appreciated the day was going to be busy as folks waited for their table. But as she got closer, she realized something looked different. She passed by and turned right into the alley and headed to her parking spot behind the restaurant. And then she realized the crowd was a bunch of reporters with cameras on tripods and satellite trucks parked down the street.

And at that moment she knew that the cat was out of the bag and the world had heard: she'd inherited Brook Foster's fortune of \$49 billion. She would not get even one more day of normal as she parked the car and headed in through the kitchen. Cooks and waiters and her main hostess, Roxy, all looked up to see her and their eyes were all asking "What the heck is going on?" Sydney thought one more time, "If you weren't dead Brook...I'd have to be killing you."

Chapter 20

The unexpected and impromptu press conference Sydney had been forced to hold in front of Wholeness Rocks! had given her a big taste of what was to come. She had quickly learned from the press that Theresa Foster had been their source to discover what Brook had done. Theresa had given them a drama-filled diatribe telling them that Sydney had manipulated Brook while he was fighting a brain tumor and she would see them all in court to right this wrong.

Sydney had stared out at all the cameras and shouting reporters. It was so surreal that for a moment she was able to lift herself above the fray and just watch it from a detached perspective. She was not going to let Theresa set the story of lies and she knew Brook wouldn't have given the press that comfort either. She was able to quiet the crowd by using her hands to let them know—be still and I will say something. And as they quieted, she spoke.

"Yes, thank you. I have just hours ago learned the contents of Brook Foster's will and I am as surprised as anyone. As you can see behind me, my business, Wholeness Rocks! is in the middle of the lunch rush and I really need to attend to my customers. At this time, I do not have any more to say about this situation because I am just beginning to comprehend this myself. I'm not really able to comment on what's happened just yet. I need a few days and at that point, I'll be ready and able to

answer your questions. So I will make you a promise—if you pack up and leave right now, I will hold a formal press conference in three days and then you can ask me any questions and I'll be prepared to answer them as best I can."

Someone yelled out, "How will we find out when and where that's happening?"

Sydney smiled and said, "Good question. I will have my office send out a press release with time and place on Thursday—two days from now. It will go to all the usual outlets and it will be posted by noon on the Wholeness Rocks! Facebook and Instagram feeds. The press conference will be on Friday and you will have your story. Can we agree on that?" Sydney stood and looked at them and inevitably someone tried for one more question and she shook her head no and said, "No, not answering til Friday. See you then. Please move on now." And with that, Sydney turned around and walked into the restaurant. Amazingly it worked! The press packed up and left.

Sydney was now watching this all transpire on the 5 o'clock news when Ian walked into the solarium saying, "Wow, this is quite a place!" Sydney looked up from the television and smiled at Ian while shaking her head yes. Ian had brought Sydney some clothes from her place. Sydney had had to retreat to Brook's house when, after leaving the restaurant and heading home she'd found an entirely different group of reporters waiting for her there too. She'd turned around before they saw her coming down the street and then drove to the Foster estate. She knew the gate code after all these years and had texted Margaret to let her know she was coming. She was relieved when she pulled up to find no reporters here at all. It seems not to have occurred to them yet that she had inherited the estate too. She was able to drive through the gates and as she watched them close behind her, she had a chance to deep breathe.

Margaret greeted her in the circular driveway. Sydney was happy to have a friendly face to meet her and as she got out of the car, up walked Steve, the estate manager. He said, "I'll take your keys and park the car in the garage for now." Sydney was a bit startled by him but then realized he was just doing his job and she handed over the key. A lot to get used to—first a garage and now a valet to park it for her.

She had followed Margaret into the house and as they entered Margaret turned around to her and said, "Can I get you something to eat?" Sydney responded, "Why don't we go into the kitchen together, Margaret, and talk. I don't know how much you know and I'm not entirely sure what the situation is quite yet either, but I'm hoping you'll stay on with me and keep this house going. I'm going to need you so much. And maybe we should call Steve in too? Anyone else who needs to be a part of this conversation while we figure out how to keep all our lives flowing through this big change?"

Margaret said, "No, it is basically Steve and I who oversee everything. We hire staff as needed and Mr. Foster trusted us to stay on top of whatever was needed. I generally had moderate expenses but Steve would often have to come to Mr. Foster to get authorization for big expenses related to the house or the grounds. I think they had some kind of cost threshold that they'd agreed upon. You can ask him about that but it seems to have worked well for years."

They'd entered the kitchen and Margaret said, "Would you like some tea, coffee or a glass of wine perhaps? Have you had anything to eat today? I can whip you up a quick sandwich if you'd like or a full meal as well."

"Thank you, Margaret. The glass of wine sounds great and maybe some cheese and crackers to go with it. I munched on a few things at my restaurant, but mostly while there I helped the staff and told them what had happened. And I'm fortunate, just as Brook was with you and Steve. I have a great staff and at least for now, I've handed it over to my two managers to keep the ship running. I won't attempt to go back there until after the press conference on Friday. I know they are more than capable of taking care of it. I think mostly everyone was relieved that they've got jobs and hopefully this news will bring in more customers not less and they'll all be fine."

The talk between Steve, Margaret and Sydney had gone well. They would stay on and maintain status quo for at least the next year while Sydney figured out more about managing the estate, the finances etc. Then she'd taken the wine, cheese and crackers and gone into the solarium. She'd called Ian and asked him to gather some clothes for her from her house and he'd just arrived. Margaret had given him a tour of the house as he carried the clothes into one of the guest rooms where Sydney would be staying. Sydney poured him a glass of wine and said, "Well, welcome to my humble abode. Looks like I'm going to stay here while I figure a few things out!"

Ian laughed and said, "I'd say that if anyone can figure it out, it will be you, Sydney. Besides what's the worst that can happen? You blow a \$49 billion estate and have fun in the meantime!"

Sydney handed him his wine and laughed too. "Thanks for the vote of confidence, old friend. I look around this room and I can still feel Brook in here. This is where he had moved to after he started chemo. You can't tell right now since it is so dark out, but it looks out on a beautiful forest. We both thought it was a good place to help his recovery. But alas, that was not to be. I'm going to miss his friendship something awful and as I said to Amelia this morning, I know there will be days I will want to kill him all over again for having dropped this on me. But as it begins to sink in Ian, there's an incredible wave of opportunities ahead and I'm excited about that too."

“Well, I’m here for you in whatever way I can be. I know what you said at the restaurant still stands and I’ll continue to move forward in my own life, but if you ever need a set of ears to bounce things off of, I hope you know, I’m your man.”

Sydney looked at him with all the love she had for him. He was right, she wasn’t going to change her mind about marrying him but she was glad tonight that they were still each other’s good friends.

Chapter 21

The next morning, Sydney called Jill Draper, Brook’s accountant. Sydney saw it as a first step in trying to figure out what the heck was happening and how to develop a strategy that maintained good financial oversight and awareness for things like tax consequences etc.

Jill’s firm, Draper & Draper included her two adult children who were also CPAs and three other non-relation CPAs and support staff. Brook had been by far their largest client. The minute they’d heard about the will and the way Brook was dissolving his estate, they’d been working non-stop to prepare a presentation to help Sydney come to terms with what might happen next. They couldn’t guarantee she would continue to retain them but they were doing their damndest to make sure she did. It would be quite the hole in their business to lose this account on both a financial and work-flow level and could result in having to lay-off one or two of the CPAs.

Sydney opted to drive in to their office in downtown Richmond and meet with Jill face to face. She had been whisked into the conference room as soon as she’d walked through the door and Jill was waiting for her along with two of the other CPAs who worked on the Foster account. They had worked together for hours after Sydney told them she needed to have at least a basic strategy in place before the Friday press conference.

After that two hour meeting, she had walked over to the Tobacco Company Restaurant to meet Amelia for a late lunch. She needed time with a wise friend to digest all she had just learned. Amelia had Ubered down knowing that Sydney would bring her home. They were sitting on the third floor where Sydney and Brook had always lunched.

“This is where we sat when we met downtown. It’s kind of eerie now to be sitting here with you Amelia, instead of Brook. But fitting too somehow because I know he had great respect for you. Before he died, he told me how your bumping into him right after he’d been diagnosed had given him great comfort at a crisis moment.”

Amelia smiled in memory of that moment. Then she looked at Sydney and said, “He didn’t tell you anything about what I was doing down there did he?” Sydney shook her head and said “No, just what you’d said to him and how it enabled him to redirect his energy into the future even though he was pretty sure his own future was less than a year. I think in many ways, it’s why we’re sitting here today and talking about how I’m going to spend \$49 billion dollars. His will, the letter he wrote me all seem to say that after you and he had talked, he knew he wanted his money to go towards new solutions and improving the world. He no longer worried about Axiom Enterprises and continuing to make money. That would fall to the next CEO and team. He was complete there.”

“Well, honey, as you know, I always thought it was insane that one human being had that much money at their disposal. And now I’m sitting across from you and you have it. Ain’t that a kick in the pants!” They both laughed as the waiter brought them a glass of wine. They were trying a new one from Washington State. The sommelier had stopped by when he heard Sydney was here. He told her, due to the success of the Oregon’s Wy’East Vineyard’s sales that he found another local winery, Jacob Williams and been able to have three cases shipped to TCR. Diners were raving and he was delighted that she’d turned him on to wines from the northwest!

“Hmmm, this is good, Sydney. I never knew that good wines came out of that area. Now, let me tell you finally why I was down at the hospital. Then you can tell me a bit more about your plans to spend that money. I have decided, after much nagging by you and my doctor to go ahead and have my hip replaced! I’m scheduled for the week after Thanksgiving and once I’m out of the hospital I’m going to check myself into Hawthorne Rehab center and stay there for six weeks. That way no one has to come and help me up and downstairs or spend the night with me. It just makes sense to do it that way. And if you and my doctor are right, I’ll be ballroom dancing at 90!”

Sydney eyes were wide open as was her mouth! She was in a bit of shock and said, “Well, you know I’m ecstatic and old girl, you are going to do great and be up in no time. I think it is a great idea to stay at the rehab center. It will make it easier for you for sure. Who will take care of your house though during those six weeks?”

“Not a problem. I’ll just lock it up, ask the police to keep an eye on it and then the week before I’m ready to come home, Nan will come in, clean it up and stock the refrigerator and I’ll get back to my normal life.”

“Wow”, said Sydney, “You’ve thought this whole thing through. I’m sorry I haven’t been around to help you but it looks like you really didn’t need me either.”

“Well, you’ve been busy for sure Sydney, but my doctor and his nurse helped me design this. So, I’m ready to go. Now, tell me, what’s the plan you’re working on after meeting with the accountants?”

“Ah, well that. Yes indeed. The first thing they helped me with will enable me to have the press conference on Friday and give the world a peek at where and how \$49 billion will come flowing back into the economy. Though, fortunately, it is not all available right now, but certainly enough to get some projects going. It’s going to be amazing Amelia, just amazing.”

At that moment the waiter walked in with their meals. Sydney sat back as the plates were put down and then looked at Amelia. “So, here’s what I plan to say at the press conference.”

Chapter 22

Bodhi’s heart was racing as he watched Sydney giving the much-anticipated press conference on Friday afternoon. Sitting in his office at Rosatti & Kearn, he wondered if she was going to directly mention anything about R&K and if so, what it might do to the stock price. Considering that Brook had owned twenty-seven percent of R&K’s stock, there was no telling what might happen to the stock price if there was a sudden sell-off from Brook’s estate.

Right now the stock was selling at an all-time high and Bodhi had expected it to continue to rise. He’d bought a new yacht and a house in the Hamptons was under contract and set to close in two weeks. His income statement reflected the wealth in his stock portfolio and he could ill-afford a crash of R&K stock. He had not for an instant considered Brook dying as a factor to be weighed when he made these purchases. His last conversation with Brook had been wonderful and only now was he realizing that call was just as Brook had been diagnosed with the brain tumor.

“She’s sounding sane and rational so far,” Bodhi thought to himself. “Let’s just keep it that way and all will be good, Ms. Oliver, all will be good.” He turned back to the TV and heard Sydney say, “I think that about does it at this point. In a quick review, I am currently studying the landscape of possibilities and will make no rash changes that could upset markets or otherwise set into motion an unintended ripple effect. My team and I will be working towards using these funds to produce the greatest benefit to people and the planet. Thank you. I’ll take a few questions at this time.”

Bodhi’s heart stopped racing as he leaned back into his chair with a sigh of relief. “Well, looks like I’ve dodged a bullet. All is going to be just fine. Someone clearly has informed her that a major stock sale of R&K would disrupt the markets and she’s smart enough to know that isn’t good for anyone. Yeah for me! Looks like a weekend cruise down the coast is in order and the decorator can keep working on the layout for the new house. All is well.”

Bodhi reached over and turned off the TV. He picked up the phone and dialed his wife Carol, saying, "Hey, how about dinner out tonight and then spend the night on the boat so we can cruise out early tomorrow morning?" They discussed details for a few minutes. Carol too had been watching the press conference. Bodhi had expressed his concern to her that it was possible the yacht and the house would have to go if Sydney did anything crazy today that would tank the stock price of R&K. She turned her back on the TV and walked into the bedroom to begin packing an overnight bag for the two of them.

They both missed the commotion that happened a few minutes later. Out of nowhere came gunfire. In an instant reporters and cameramen were trying to cover this unexpected news event while balancing it with their own potential demise. Not an easy pair of choices. Run and miss the story. Stay and possibly die. Fortunately, the decision took care of itself as the gunman, or actually gunwoman was quickly wrestled to the ground. A young man who just happened to be in the right place at the right time saved the day. Once he was on top of her, several others piled on top as they worked to remove the gun from her hands. She was screaming and trying desperately to get out from underneath them all but that wasn't going to happen.

Sydney was still standing at the microphones as law enforcement circled her with guns drawn. She looked over and one of the deputies was bleeding in his left arm. As the deputies pulled her away, she could see his shirtsleeve was already blood soaked and she said a quick prayer that it would be a minor wound. In seconds they had her concealed inside the office building that housed Tyler, Barker and Cane. She had chosen this spot because it afforded her the ability to stand on raised stairs while the press gathered below on a wide sidewalk with their cameras. And as it turned out, it also enabled her to move to much needed safety during this crisis. Once she was secured, the police headed back outside.

By this time, the gunwoman was standing up and being handcuffed. She was screaming incoherently and saying "She doesn't deserve to live and steal all the money for her greedy self." And there it was, Theresa Foster had come to put a final closure on her hate. The attempted murder of Sydney was apparently worth throwing her life away forever. One of the deputies looked at his partner and said, "I've never seen an assassin dressed so nicely. This world is truly crazy when the filthy rich are trying to kill each other in broad daylight and come dressed as if it's a freaking prom party!"

They were right. Theresa Foster had hidden her gun in a three thousand dollar designer purse and was wearing shoes that cost over a thousand dollars a pair. Her entire outfit combined was worth over five thousand dollars. She was going to be very bummed when she discovered how bad she looked in an orange jumpsuit that cost less than sixty dollars. As they pushed her into the squad car, she continued to scream, "Get me my lawyer! I'm not talking to anyone until I talk to my lawyer."

Sydney watched through the thick glass doors as Theresa Foster was driven away. Ron Tyler was trying to get her to come upstairs to his office and get her out of the crowded lobby where many office workers, just going about their day, had discovered themselves in the middle of a shoot out. But before he could successfully move her to the elevator, several police had walked into the lobby and were headed directly towards her. She walked towards them as well. "Ms. Oliver," one of the policemen said, "We're going to need to take you in for questioning. The detectives will want to talk with you since you were obviously the target of the alleged shooter."

Sydney shook her head yes as she looked at Ron and said, "Do I need you to come with me?" He said, "Probably not—you're not under suspicion of anything. Just tell them what you know."

"What do I know?", thought Sydney. Other than Theresa Foster was a nut-job with a poor aim, thankfully.

The policemen turned around and opened a space for Sydney to walk through as they all headed outside towards a police car. Sydney looked at one of them and said, "Am I correct that one of the officers was wounded? Is he going to be alright?"

"Yes, ma'am, you're correct. Officer Carrel was hit but it looks mostly to be a flesh wound. They'll take him to be checked out but he should be fine." "Well, that's a relief at least." said Sydney. She smiled at the officer and felt a wave of exhaustion come over her.

She climbed into the back of the police car. There was still a big commotion going on as several policemen were blocking off the crime scene and reporters were on camera talking about the event that was both a report and now, a part of their lives. Sydney looked out the windows and thought to herself, "I hope this is just a fluke connected to a mentally imbalanced woman. Otherwise, this \$49 billion could get many of us killed for no good reason at all. And that certainly isn't what Brook was intending, that's for sure."

Chapter 23

Thanksgiving had come and gone. Theresa Foster had been indicted by a grand jury and she'd been committed to a locked ward at an expensive psychiatric center. The first order of business was to determine her capacity to stand trial or to declare her incompetent due to insanity.

Sydney had not wanted to press charges. As nasty as Theresa had been to Brook and how she had twisted Maia into a bitter daughter that ended up dead from an overdose, at this point, she'd lost everything. Spending the rest of her life in jail

wasn't going to help anyone. Sydney was on the phone with the Attorney General's office to see what could be done to divert this into something less tragic and keep the citizens of the state from funding a prisoner for thirty years.

After that call, Sydney returned to the solarium where a small group had gathered including Amelia. Amelia's hip surgery had gone splendidly and while she was still staying at the rehab center for another three weeks to complete her therapy, she was able to get out into the real world with the help of a walker. Sydney had sent Steve to pick her up so she could join today's brainstorming group.

Sydney had decided that slow and steady was the way to go with what had happened. The \$49 billion wasn't going anywhere and it was going to take her a while to sort out what would be the best use of it. So she'd decided to create a series of brainstorming groups and invite a wide variety of voices to the discussion. She would use the next few months to determine who to invite and with each group, spend two days discussing their vision of how best to use these funds. If necessary she would fly them in and put them up in the mansion to make it easier for them to attend. The group that was here tonight was focused on just one task—determining the invitee's list.

As she walked in, she heard Amelia and Ian throwing out names that were being put up on a white board. They had just started and in true brainstorming fashion they were all yelling out names and no one was allowed to dissent at this point. Sydney had charged them with going broad and to include liberal, progressive, libertarian, conservative and ultra conservative voices. She wanted a wide view and the only way to get that was to get out of her comfort zone. And besides, that's exactly what had made her and Brook such great friends and resulted in where she was now. They had been at opposite ends of the political spectrum and worldview. It would be important that each future group would represent what had made their own connection so special—tolerance for the other's view. There was no guarantee that these mixed groups would be able to get along as she and Brook had, but it was at least worth a try.

Along with Ian and Amelia, Sydney had invited Ron Parker. She'd assumed, correctly that he was more like Brook. He'd brought along two others, Gene Schiff and Laura Merkley who leaned conservative to her, Ian and Amelia's more progressive view. Together the six of them were spanning the globe so to speak to find people who could add their perspective on where these massive funds would flow because one thing that Sydney had already decided was that this money was coming back into circulation. Traditionally, foundations took their funds and invested them in Wall Street and from there they took out the required 5% of whatever their total was and gave it away.

Sydney wasn't a fan of Wall Street—even though Brook obviously was since a good portion of his fortune was tied up in it. She wanted these funds invested into the

community commons where it could grow in a different way through small businesses, co-operatives, co-housing and intentional communities as an example. Her hope was that as these communities thrived they were evermore able to reinvest in themselves as the money continued to work towards strengthening their community.

That was the only parameter that Sydney would place on the brainstorming groups. And she could see, even in this gathering, it was causing consternation from the Brook side of the equation. Laura was adding a name to the white board but as she did she said, “Well, I don’t know if he’ll come if he has to think this far outside the box. I doubt he’s ever considered such a thing!”

Amelia laughed and said, “But that’s what I find so fascinating about this whole process. We have the opportunity to consider just about anything other than maintaining the status quo. It’s obvious current systems are failing us. We’ve been told we have 15 years to pull our heads out of the sand and deal with climate change or we can expect Florida to be underwater by the end of the century.”

Gene interrupted and said, “And yet, half the world thinks that’s simply not true.” Sydney then piped in and said, “Well, perhaps, but I can tell you that Brook had finally become convinced we were staring down the barrel of a harsh world if we didn’t open our minds to this reality. So, I think I’m safe to say, in concurrence with Amelia, that we need to use these funds now because twenty years could be too late.”

Ian looked at Ron and said, “Where do you weigh in on this? You were his attorney so I know you knew him well.” Ron said, “Well, I thought I knew him well, but honestly, when he first told me what he had planned I practically fell off my chair. I would never have expected him to walk away from Axiom and the making of more money. That was his love and I thought it was the legacy he had always dreamed would be what people remembered him by. But something, or someone,” and Ron looked at Sydney when he said this, “convinced him that there was something else that would be better. And so I’ll do whatever I can to honor that wish and hope that as we work on this list of people and they come together in the near future, it’s going to produce something even better than Axiom. I think what sealed it for me when he said one day when we were working on his will—“Ron, it is time for me to invest in life instead of investing in money.”

Sydney smiled as she heard this. “Well, Ron, I’m guilty as charged. One of the last conversations we had before he died centered on that very phrase. But I didn’t think I’d convinced him at all. He argued that money made everything possible and I argued that life made everything possible. We’d gone back and forth and ended with our usual agree to disagree. I guess he must’ve continued to think about it some more because here we are.”

“Yes,” interrupted Ian. “Here we are, so let’s turn our attention back to the list. We’ve still got a lot of spaces open. Sydney, while you were out on your phone call, we decided to organize this into 10 different groups. As you can see on the white board, there are some you might expect—a group for business, financial, environmental and social orientation. Some of these will be strictly focused on that area as an expert only group. On this other side, you can see it’s a more mixed gathering so this way we get both a targeted view and a more holistic perspective around the same topic.

“This looks good so far,” nodded Sydney in approval. Gene said, “I think we need someone from the World Bank as well as the International Monetary Fund over here in this group and perhaps let’s look at the Davos list and see who we could ask from there.

And with that, the list began to grow and grow. Tomorrow they would begin to narrow it down into something more manageable and a back up list to replace the few who might not be able or want to participate in this whole process.

Eventually it would still land back on Sydney’s shoulders as to how all these groups and their visions would be used. She hoped a consensus would emerge after months of letting these groups come together and work. But for now she would have to wait, watch and see what happened. Her greatest hope would be that whatever plan would be set in place that it would also inspire many others of the wealthy 1% to reconsider keeping their massive fortunes locked up and hoarded.

The world was heading into some dire predictions due to climate change, over-population, water shortages and species collapse. Sydney thought to herself, “I know there are many who think Armageddon is a necessary component for their view of the world. But Armageddon is such a boring option put forth by those who cling to fear and ignorance. We have the capacity to make major systems change, heal the planet and restore a new equilibrium. Brook, my promise to you is to use these funds to build a brighter future for people and the planet. That will be your legacy, Brook.”

Chapter 24

It was late May. Sydney was sitting in the solarium enjoying the windows being wide open and air flowing through. Spring in Richmond was a mixed bag—some days still very cool and winter feeling and the next the warmth and gentle winds giving the promise of another summer ahead. Today, fortunately was the latter and Sydney was taking advantage of it.

Surrounding her was the outcome of last winter's brainstorming process. She'd hosted over 30 different groups from all over the world. Some were targeted on one particular area such as finance or climate science. Others were groups that had gone off on whatever direction they were interested in. All of them had met the May 15th deadline for sending her a written report on their recommendations for how to spend \$49 billion back into the economy. Some of these were focused strictly on US investment and others took a much more global perspective.

She had insisted that each report be short, sweet and to the point—ideally no more than twenty pages. Behind those twenty pages they could insert any of the data they utilized to reach their particular conclusion. Mostly she wanted to be able to read the report and its recommendations. As she had told them, “I know you are all intelligent and capable. You don't have to prove that by writing some treatise with every imaginable data point. I trust that whatever recommendations you suggest would have reasoned arguments behind them. So, do your work, wrestle and argue the ideas into your recommendation and know that the shorter the paper the happier we'll all be! You won't waste an enormous amount of time writing it and I won't have to spend so much time reading it. Because where I want to spend my time is mulling over all the ideas and deciding how best to implement them. Even at twenty pages each—that's 600 pages of reading for me and honestly, I think 300 pages would be more to my liking!”

Each report had mapped out what they wanted to do in the area they targeted and what the costs and ROI would be in financial, social, environmental, and business terms. Using this format had provided a consistency of all the recommendations and helped her be able to compare oranges to oranges and not oranges to apples! It prevented them from going off on wild-eyed dreams just for the fun of it. If they couldn't fit that wild-eyed dream into a practical, tangible format, it wasn't likely to be implementable either.

So here she sat, enjoying the warm breeze of late spring, sipping a nice cup of tea and up to her eyeballs in reports. Her goal was to do a first read of all of them as her own brainstorming exercise. Reject nothing, be open to everything. Hope to be surprised with something innovative that hadn't even occurred to her. As she settled into her chair she was excited in a way she hadn't been for a while.

The last 6 months had been very stressful. These groups had done their work in the relative quietude of their time here at the mansion and then collaborating afterwards from their own homes and offices. Sydney meanwhile had been deluged with an onslaught of confrontations when she was out in public. There was always a small group waiting for her at the end of the driveway, hoping to convince her why their need for the money was so important. The media had had a field day with their opinions and conspiracy theories of how it had come to be that Brook had left her the money. Sydney had repeated hundreds of times that she was as surprised as anyone was and Ron Taylor had reinforced this by saying that only he and Brook had

worked on the will and she knew nothing about it. Of course, it did not stop the conspiracy folks. They needed something to run amok on and this came in handy for sure!

There was also a continual flow of mailings from all over the world seeking funding. These were generally short stories of desperation imploring Sydney to send money now. They all pulled at her heart-strings and she quickly decided to read none of them since it wasn't how she was going to spread the money. Instead, she hired Becky as a part-time person to come in three days a week and read every letter and sort it according to the issue or need. Some were medical emergencies, some were for housing to prevent homelessness. What she was most interested in finding out was—what was the major dilemma that was being expressed. She figured after about a year these letters would slow down and she'd at least have some data to look at. In the meantime, they were slowly filling up one of the garage bays at the house as Becky sorted them into paper filing boxes. It was quite the collection.

Sydney finished reading the thirteenth report. She stood up and walked over to one of four huge whiteboards that were on rolling stands. She grabbed one of the markers and stood back to look at the four boards. On it, she could see the twelve circles from the first twelve reports. Each circle contained the core idea that that report had focused on. Sydney was looking to see if there was going to a large amount of overlap or everyone was unique.

So far, she could already begin to see that there was some consensus around human development and conscious family planning. Another big area was financial systems focused on promoting public banking and alternative currency options such as blockchain exchange. Four of the thirteen were focused on food issues from production to waste management and that warmed her heart. Food systems were her thing so there was going to be some easy synergy for her to spend money in that direction.

But this thirteenth one was an outlier so far. Its focus was on Big Pharma. These writers felt that the world had become a pill popping mecca that was resulting in too many people handing over their lives without realizing they were doing it. Their passion was about self-responsibility and empowerment. They were concerned that people were being turned into zombies to the benefit of Big Pharma and wealthy investors but at the expense of people learning how to live their own vibrant lives. They saw a two-line approach of bringing down Big Pharma while building up humans around the globe.

Sydney took the marker and made a circle on the Board that held the circles with human development and conscious family planning. She wrote 13th and Big Pharma in the circle—knowing that it would remind her of what's in the report. Then she drew a line to connect it to the human development circles and on the opposite side, drew a line that said, "Take down Big Pharma". She sort of smiled as she did it.

Never having been a fan of drugs—legal or otherwise—she was happy to see others felt somewhat the same way she did. Not that all drugs were a problem. Penicillin had changed the world as had smallpox and polio vaccines. But somehow we'd transformed from a world that used a drug to solve a crisis to creating drugs that convinced people they had a problem they needed a pill for. In the United States, each person averaged seven prescription drugs in their medicine chest and since Sydney had none of them, she knew there had to be people with way more than seven. It had not resulted in us being healthier but sicker. There had been 70,000 opioid deaths last year alone. In Sydney's mind that constituted a crisis created by a drug instead of solved by one. She could appreciate them wanting to tackle this but was this more important than other ideas she was reading? Or could it be folded into a multi-idea approach once she had completed reading?

Don't think too much about this idea, right now, Sydney thought to herself. It's easy to get bogged down with any one of them. She was pleased so far with what she had received from each of the groups. She slipped back into her chair and grabbed number fourteen and said out loud, "Okay, let's see what number fourteen wants to discuss!".

She opened the report jacket to see "Fund a campaign for a constitutional amendment to end Citizen's United". "Hmmm...", she mused, "how expensive could that be? And what's the return on that investment that makes this group think this is so important? Sydney relaxed back in her chair could feel her excitement rising. "All of these ideas are so fascinating. There are so many paths and solutions we could be working on and all of this gives me hope. Yes, it's a mess out there but despite the daily bleak reports of the state of the world, there is so much that can be done! And I better finish reading these so we can get on with it already!

Brook had always called Sydney the ultimate optimist and he was right. One of her favorite stories had been how the GI Bill had come to be. With fifteen million military personnel about to return to the US after WWII, government leaders knew a crisis loomed because after WWI five million returning veterans had created chaos and riots in the street when they had nowhere to work after coming home. That threat was tripled after WWII and on the back of a napkin at lunch one day the basics of the GI Bill had been written. Miraculously, after being shaped more fully by the American Legion, it had been implemented within six months of the napkin episode and proved to be the most effective government investment ever. It wasn't a perfect solution and in fact, one of its biggest flaws was that it had primarily benefited only white veterans. Black veterans were largely excluded, as were women veterans.

In the back of her mind, Sydney dreamed Brook's \$49 billion would produce similar results while making sure to correct this situation. "Yes," Sydney mused, "these funds will be utilized as an opportunity for all humans to benefit from equally."

Sydney turned her attention back to the report feeling comfortable that the decision to get all the input and creative ideas was going to prove very successful. It was clear many others could see incredible solutions for many of the big challenges ahead of them. She thought to herself, "This sure beats Armageddon!"

Chapter 25

"No kidding and then they expected you to be happy about it?" said Sydney. She was talking on her phone as she was walking up the handicap ramp that zigzagged in front of Amelia's house. About halfway up she could see Amelia sitting on the porch waiting for her and she nodded her recognition to Amelia while indicating she'd be off the phone shortly.

"Well that's insane and obviously reflects their belief that because I have the funds they should double the price for the lawn chairs and tents. Check a couple of other places without indicating that it's for us and see what they say. Then call the first place back and tell them if they're willing to do it for that reasonable sum they can have the job otherwise we'll go some place else." Sydney's hand rubbed her forehead and was shaking her head yes to the phone as Margaret confirmed what Sydney said and then hung up.

Sydney popped a smile on her face and finished walking up the ramp. Amelia had accepted what she called this "ugly change to my lovely home" and put in the ramp after her hip surgery. Her hip was doing great but at almost 90, she agreed it would be better for her to avoid the high steps that led to her front porch. Sydney had offered to install an elevator for her on an external wall but Amelia had gagged at the idea. "No," Amelia said. "When I'm gone they can take out the ramp but if I put in an elevator it will forever change the beauty of this home and that would be a crime against architecture!" And then she thought but did not say, "and what a waste of twenty thousand dollars! That must be the kind of crazy thinking you get when you have \$49 billion to spend!"

Sydney plopped down next to her on the porch. All the porch fans were blowing but still Sydney said, "Isn't it a little hot to sit out here on this fine June morning?" Amelia laughed and responded, "When you're my age you're happy to feel warm once in a while. I'm always cold and you know how I hate air conditioning. But if this is too much for you, we can go inside."

Sydney waved it off and said, "No, I think I can handle it!" She looked down and saw Amelia had a book in her lap. "What are you reading?" Amelia closed the book so Sydney could see the cover. "The Fifth Sacred Thing....hmmm, sounds interesting, what's it about?"

Amelia said, “Well it’s an amazing book considering it was written in 1993 and yet, you’d think it was written two weeks ago. Everything she talks about in this book is coming true. Water wars, extremism, climate crisis and the have and have not’s. It’s set in the upper west coast—San Francisco and north has separated from the rest of the US and is living in harmony with the planet while everywhere else is in chaos. I won’t give it all away but the author, Starhawk was one of the early hope/punk writers though I doubt they called it that back then.

“Hope/punk?” asked Sydney? “How is it my almost 90 year old aunt knows what that is and I don’t? And what is it by the way?”

“Well, I call it the Anti-Armageddon writers. Hope/punk is that genre of fiction that is focused on solutions to the world’s issues instead of the fear and destruction that you see in things like Game of Thrones. To me it is a breath of fresh air in a world that’s normalized hate and fear as the only way to live. Look at all the movies, TV shows and stupid stuff like the Left Behind series and it far outweighs the hope/punk writers. Starhawk’s book takes on the fear and hate and transforms it in an inclusive way to show that if given a chance, most people would choose love. We just need to give people more chances to do so!”

“What are the five sacred things?”, asked Sydney.

“Oh, well, the first four are the basic elements of water, wind, fire and earth which provide humans with all the necessities to live life and that we’re responsible for caring for throughout our lives. The fifth sacred thing is spirituality or I would call it love. It is the one that connects all the elements—we must love the first four and realize how it interconnects us all. Every human must respect the four elements and make it possible that every other human has access to them as well. In the book, water is being stolen and controlled by one group of humans to the detriment of others. It’s a battle ultimately between love and hate.

Sydney said, “Well, I’d love to read it one day. As I’ve always said, Armageddon is such a boring, dull option. Humans have far more capacity than to spend most of their time fighting each other instead of learning how to live whole lives and sharing that with others. There in lies the wrinkle though. Most folks know very little about wholeness—or I guess in Starhawk’s way of saying it—they do not have a connection to the four or five sacred things and thus, live in fear. We are a slow learning species that’s for sure!”

“We are that but we’re gonna need to speed things up a bit if we’re going to survive. I think Starhawk’s way would be welcomed by so many. But then I’m hoping whatever you’re planning will enable these ideas to get to a global scale. Is that what you’re here for? Have you figured it out and are ready to let the cat out of the bag? You know the suspense is killing me here and I don’t have much time to wait! Prey tell me, Sydney, what brings you to my porch today?”

“Ah, dear auntie, I have good news. The cat, as you say, is pretty close to being ready to come out of the bag. I’m here to invite you to the September gathering. I’m inviting all of the two hundred and fifty people who have been part of the brainstorming process back for the unveiling right after Labor Day. I’m planning a weekend long conference with them all. First I’ll announce the outcome of everything and then spend the rest of the time working on how best to begin the implementation of the ideas.”

“Pretty close you say? What’s left to do and what can you tell me today?”, Amelia said in a pleading voice. “Spill the beans before I croak!”

“Just a little more patience, Amelia. Yes, I’ve got the framework of it laid out. I know the primary areas I’ll be targeting but I’m still working out the cash flow part. I know you’d think that \$49 billion would let me do everything imaginable but I was amazed how easy it is to run through that amount of cash!”

“You do say, Miss Sydney. I can’t quite imagine how you’d run out of money but that only tells me that you are planning some incredible projects.”

“Yes, I hope so.” Sydney said as she tried waving some air across her face. Richmond’s June air was heavy with humidity. “Actually, I’m here to talk with you about one part of it that I think your life experience could shed some light on. But can we go inside to do it? I’m afraid the heat is getting to me!”

“Ah, you young’uns are such wimps. Come ahead then, let’s go inside. I’ll get you some tea. Sweet or unsweet?”, Amelia said as she stood up, opened the screen door and waved Sydney inside.

“Unsweet for me, Aunt Amelia. You know I’m a failed southerner and sweet tea is not my thing!”, Sydney said as the front door closed behind her and they walked down the hall to the kitchen.

Chapter 26

With just two weeks before the international gathering at the mansion, activity was rising to a fevered pitch. The preparation for several hundred people coming from around the world was no simple task. Some were world leaders and others were just average folks. Security firms had been hired, as had a tech company that would enable the event to gather data and share it in real time. A variety of hotels had large blocks of rooms set aside and waiting to receive guests. Caterers were stocking up and coordinating events at the mansion as well as at the hotels where guests would have a concierge room that would provide for them 24 hours a day. It was a huge event and seasoned professionals were in charge and making sure this side of

the event would go off without a hitch. Sydney felt confident that this portion of the event was well under control.

Sydney was working with a small team to get all the power points and handouts ready to go. Sydney had mapped out her intentions based on all the 30 teams reports. When she started presenting it was with a clarity that there would be no more discussion. This is what was going to happen because of their reports. But she still wanted their input on the final strategy and implementation phases. Her hope was that she'd organized it sufficiently that it could be easily understood by everyone and they could shift towards action immediately.

In the meantime, the markets had been reeling around the world. Some of it had to do with the reality that \$49 billion was set to be infused into the global economy and no one quite knew what that would do to the markets overall. Some were trying to figure out how they were going to siphon that money back out of whatever systems would be the recipients of it. They were of the mindset that is where this money belonged—in the hands of the 1% again! Sydney looked at the end of day market changes and just chuckled to herself. Each day someone would write a reason why the markets were up or down and she'd think to herself, "how silly!" One day the markets were down for reason X and the next day they were up for the same reason.

Sydney walked into the dining room where her team was gathering for lunch and to go over the day's to do list. Margaret was putting a big bowl of soup and large salad on the side buffet. Everyone would serve themselves and come to the table. "Looks delicious, Margaret. Thank you so much!" Margaret stepped back and did a quick review of the buffet. "I think you've got everything you need here. I'll be in the kitchen so if you need anything else, just give a holler, okay?"

Theo and Ricky were picking up soup bowls and getting started. It was really Theodora but she went by Theo. She was the lead of the team so she wasted no time in getting her food knowing that once she did, the others—Ricky, Karin and Sharon would follow suit. She'd learned pretty quickly that Sydney respected them as professionals and didn't like wasting time over formalities such as waiting for Sydney to get the first bowl. This had led to a relaxed atmosphere where everyone felt comfortable contributing their expertise and working as a united team. Sydney had pulled them all from Axiom. She knew that Brook had hired some of the best in the world and when she presented the idea to James McBride, the CEO of Axiom, he'd been happy to oblige her. They both felt that Brook would've been delighted that Axiom was continuing to contribute to this whole process.

Sydney walked to the buffet, got her soup and salad and then joined the team at the table. In front of her was the 'to do list' and she reviewed it quickly. First order of the day was to look at the handouts and make corrections or changes. She looked at the team and said—"While we eat, let's each of us go through these pages and mark up any changes and then we'll talk about it. Okay?"

All four of them nodded agreement. In silence they ate and turned the pages. This handout contained the entire plan that Sydney had created out of the reports. It too was short and sweet—just like she'd required of them.

Everyone on this team had been sworn to secrecy. She'd not even shared the plan with Ian or Amelia as she knew that the more people who knew about it ahead of time, the bigger the risk that leaks would happen. Out of respect for all the work that had been done by the 30 teams, she wanted them to be the first to hear and see it. As well, she knew once it was out, she had to be ready to implement and these last few weeks she'd been doing a lot behind the scenes to get ready for that as well. This team did not know about that—nor did they need to.

Theo's pen was crossing out a paragraph and writing something in the margin. She had to keep reminding herself that she wasn't being asked to give her opinion or view of what was here but simply to make sure that it was well written and made sense. This was a challenge for her because as a chief strategist at Axiom, her mind was always assessing and discerning whether something could work or not. So as she read this one section about taking on Big Pharma, Citizen's United and the opioid crisis, she had to wrestle within herself to be quiet. This was the only area where she had a huge conflict with the direction Sydney was taking. It was her opinion that Citizen's United—where corporations were viewed as people and their free speech was enabled—was right on. Sydney's decision to take on Big Pharma and hold them responsible for the opioid crisis and the 70,000 deaths that had occurred threatened free markets in Theo's opinion and it was best left alone. Nobody forced a person to take an opioid and it is the addict who should take responsibility, not the corporation who provided these valuable drugs.

Theo shook her head for a second to bring her thoughts back to the handouts. "Stay focused," she thought to herself. But in crept that thought of her stock options with Rosatti & Kearn. She'd bought ten thousand shares on the advice of her cousin Bodhi and now was stuck between a rock and a hard spot. She needed to sell them but if she did, she knew it would send out a red flag to market watchers who might put two and two together that she was working with Sydney and this might be part of the upcoming plan. But if she didn't sell them, she'd be bankrupt as she bought the stock high and it would for sure be going low. How could this train be stopped is what she was trying to figure out. Sworn to secrecy yes, but needing to protect her own life loomed large too.

Theo was interrupted from her mental distraction when Sydney said, "Is everyone done or do you need another few minutes?" Theo realized she had three more pages to go so she raised her hand and said, "I need another five minutes if that's okay?" Then Karin added, "Me, as well." Sydney said, "That's fine. It's 12:40. How about if we start at 1? In the meantime, finish up and take a bathroom break if you need to. I've got to go make a phone call anyway so let's reconvene and be ready to go at 1."

Everyone nodded in agreement as Sydney picked up her cellphone and headed towards the Solarium. Jill Draper had texted her about some of the financial data relative to her being ready to implement the plan and she wanted to get that info immediately.

Sydney hit the recent calls list and the button for Jill's office. As it rang, she noticed Theo getting up and heading down the hall to the bathroom and was pleased she'd suggested that they reconvene at 1 and that Theo was using the time effectively.

Theo walked into the bathroom and locked the door. Then she took her cellphone and texted her cousin Bodhi. "We need to talk, asap. Can I meet you tonight for a drink?" Within seconds she got a reply, "Sure, what's up?" "Can't talk now, where do you want to meet?" Bodhi replied, "How about Tobacco Company Restaurant?" Theo texted back, "Can you get a private room for us?" "No problem. See you on the third floor at 7 pm? Just tell Brandon at the host station when you come in and he'll bring you up." Theo ended with a curt, "Gotta go, see you at 7."

Theo's heart was racing as she finished her text and flushed the toilet. She'd not needed to go but she wanted it to sound like she did. She felt like she'd just walked out on a plank and was either going to jump or get saved by Bodhi. She hoped it was the latter.

Chapter 27

Bodhi was surprised that the Tobacco Company Restaurant was so packed on a Tuesday evening but that only made him all the more pleased that he had a reservation on the third floor. Being recognized by Brandon when he finally made it to the host station made him feel special. Brandon's welcoming, "Good to see you again Mr. Chunduren. Your private room is waiting. Would you like to take the elevator or prefer to walk up?"

Brandon knew his repeat customers so well. "Thanks, Brandon—I'll take the stairs." "Very good sir, if you'll follow me," Brandon said as he turned and began the walk up to the third floor. Bodhi quickly came to the same stair and walked side by side with Brandon so he could talk with him. "What's happening that things are so crowded here tonight?" Bodhi asked. "Ah, there was a short session of the legislature dealing with some budgetary crisis. I think tomorrow they'll adjourn, but you know, whenever legislature is in session across the street, we're extra busy. Don't worry though, I have your usual room ready."

“Thanks, Brandon. It will be sad to sit there without Brook, but to be in a different room wouldn’t feel right either! I imagine you miss him too?” Brandon shook his head yes and said, “That I do—he took care of me quite well over the years. I was almost thinking I might be in his will since I’d been part of his life almost every week for twenty years! But alas, looks like Miss Sydney got it all.”

They were walking into the room now. Bodhi turned towards Brandon and said, “Yes, I think that surprised everyone and God only knows what havoc she may wreak with it! Doesn’t seem fair somehow but I guess we’ll all deal with it.”

Brandon smiled and said, “Well, no sir, life isn’t fair. If it were Mr. Foster would still be with us. But even with all his money he could not buy himself out of a brain tumor and his unexpected death, a child who died of a drug over-dose and an ex-wife arrested for attempted murder. As they say, money can’t buy happiness.”

“Well that may be true Brandon, but it can sure make it feel better in the meantime.”, laughed Bodhi. He was just about to tell Brandon that his cousin Theo would be joining him when she came around the corner and entered the private room. “Oh thank God you’re here!”, Theo exclaimed with a look of high anxiety plastered all over her face. Without missing a beat she looked at Brandon and said, “Bring me a glass of your house Chardonnay,” and then she turned back to Bodhi and said, “You are not going to believe what I’m about to tell you.”

There was a brief awkward moment where Bodhi looked at Brandon with a face that said, “excuse my cousin, she doesn’t realize you’re not our waiter”, and then Brandon said, as a way to diffuse the awkwardness, “I’ll let your waiter know your wishes, ma’am. Mr. Chunduren, I hope you have a pleasant evening with memories of Mr. Foster and your times here. Good evening, sir.” Brandon pulled the chair out for Theo and she, with complete indifference to him, turned back to Bodhi and said, “Well that man has done us no favors. We are about to be wiped out!” Brandon walked slowly out of the room and heard her say. “She’s taking on Big Pharma—R&K is in the crosshairs and I need you to find a way to get my shares sold in ways that will not attract attention to either of us.”

Brandon absorbed this news while waving to Preston who would be waiting on them. “Preston, Mr. Chunduren will have a double Dewars on the rocks and the lady a glass of the house Chardonnay.” “Yes, sir,” Preston replied, “anything else?” Brandon shook his head no and proceeded to head towards the stairs. Brandon caught her last sentence as Theo said, “I swear if there was some way to stop her, we might want to find it.”

“Calm down, cousin!”, Bodhi said as he laid his hand on her arm. “You’re probably making a mountain out of a molehill. Let’s begin at the beginning and see what’s going on here. Oh, and before I forget, Carol says hi and wonders if you’d like to join

us this weekend on the yacht. We're driving down tomorrow afternoon to overnight and then head out on Saturday."

"I can't, Bodhi. This is the big weekend at the Foster estate. We have over 250 people flying in from all over the world for the big reveal and that's what I'm trying to tell you. One of the areas of focus is on Big Pharma and the opioid crisis. The goal is to take down Big Pharma and especially those who have played a big part in opioid distribution. That means R&K, Bodhi and that means financial ruin for me unless you can find a way to get me out of that stock immediately. You might be able to withstand this loss, but I'll be in debt up to my neck forever."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa....okay, now I'm hearing you.", Bodhi said. He sat back in his chair and rubbed his forehead as if he was beginning to get a big headache. "This is bad but let's think about some options here. How soon will the news get out about this and even if it does, it doesn't mean it's going to take effect immediately." Bodhi took a big sip of his Dewars and let himself run a few scenarios through his brain.

Bodhi continued. "Well, I can tell you that Brook Foster would be turning in his grave if he realized the power he unleashed in one woman to destroy him. Or not him obviously, but me, and people like me. I'm sure he had no intention that his funds would do that. And oh, I'd have a big hole in my financial boat if this goes through, so don't think you're the only one at risk right now." Bodhi was interrupted by Preston who walked in to take their orders. "Another Dewars sir? And are you ready to order dinner?" Bodhi nodded yes to the Dewars and then looked at Theo. "Do you know what you'd like for dinner, Theo?"

"I swear, I'm almost too upset to be able to eat. Bring me another Chardonnay and I'll take the soup of the day and a Caesar's salad."

"Very good, ma'am. And, Mr. Chunduren? Would you like to hear this evening's special?"

"No, I'll have the prime rib dinner with a side Caesar, thank you." Preston nodded and said, "Very good choice, sir. I'll go place your orders and return with your drinks."

Theo didn't bother to wait for Preston to finish his sentence when she said to Bodhi, "Well, like it or lump, she's got the power to destroy both of us. Now we've got to figure out how to get her before she gets us."

Preston walked out of the private room thinking, "Just goes to prove, money does not buy class." He headed to the bar to get their drinks.

Chapter 28

Sydney drove into the circle drive at Williamsburg Inn. The big event would happen on Friday so she'd decided to get away Wednesday afternoon as she needed some quiet space for her final preparation. She would spend the night and be back on Thursday with plenty of time to do the final check in before Friday's 9 am start. The mansion was filled with people doing all the necessary work to set up for the event. She knew Margaret was more than capable of overseeing it all so she'd decided to get away and gather her thoughts.

Williamsburg was only forty-five minutes down the road but walking into the Inn was like walking back in time. She loved the historic ambiance and knew it would be the perfect place for some peace and quiet. As well, it was an easy walk through historic Williamsburg and she could pretty well expect that she would not be noticed there amongst the tourists. If any crisis arose, she could quickly return to Richmond.

The valet opened her door. She popped the trunk as she got out of the car. They went through the typical niceties—*welcome to the Inn, your bags will be delivered to your room, here's your ticket, please call the desk 5 minutes before you need the car again and it will be waiting for you.* Sydney said thank you and headed to the front desk, checked in and as she got on the elevator, so did her bags carried by a front staff member. Within 10 minutes of arriving she was in her room and unpacking the few clothes and toiletries she's brought with her. She walked over to the window and looked out to see the pool area. There were a small number of guests—it being just after Labor Day weekend. With all the kids back in school, things were considerably quieter in historic Williamsburg and that was another plus for coming down and getting a little quiet time.

Sydney opened her bag and pulled out the presentation package that they'd been working on for the last month. It was complete now. She and the team had made numerous changes so the presentation would flow and hopefully all the attendees would easily grasp the plan. Now she needed to memorize it all so that she would have all the data at her fingertips. There would be many questions and comments after the presentation and she wanted to be fully at ease with her responses. This would be important because she would need to project confidence that all of these decisions were based on good data and that the implementation of all this had been figured into the decisions as well.

She sat down at the desk with the goal of reading through the entire 88-page report before she headed over to historic Williamsburg and a lunch at King's Arm Tavern. She'd made a reservation before she left Richmond and was looking forward to doing her second reading there. She was halfway through when her phone buzzed and she saw the phone number was the one she was waiting on. All other calls and

texts she had ignored but as she clicked the accept button, she was excited about what she was hoping to hear.

“Good morning, Mr. Iverson. I’ve been looking forward to hearing from you. How are you doing today?” said Sydney.

“I am quite fine this morning, Ms. Oliver and have been able to secure the information you were needing. Is this a good time for you—it may take about a half hour to share how Mr. Moorish has responded to your request.” Mr. Iverson worked for Mike Moorish’s office in Palm Beach, FL.

When Sydney hung up the phone, she had a broad smile on her face. She let out a deep breath just then realizing that she’d hardly breathed at all during the call. The tension in her shoulders and body began to relax. She was pleased with this turn of events.

Mike Moorish had been an Attorney General when he had taken on Big Tobacco back in the 90’s and won. The settlement was for billions and had forced Big Tobacco to admit that they’d lied for decades and that they knew their product was addictive and deadly. As a result, millions of lives had been saved and deaths due to tobacco use had dropped dramatically. Now, as a private attorney, he was about to take on Big Pharma and the opioid crisis. He wasn’t only after the manufacturers but more importantly the distributors like R&K. He was working with 30 states and their attorney generals. His passion was pure and the data was on his side. The manufacturers and distributors of oxycontin had created a crisis that was killing over 70,000 US citizens a year and leaving families and communities devastated. Both entities were responsible for this crisis.

Sydney’s focus had come to this of course through Brook’s daughter Maia’s death. She was shocked when she discovered that Brook owned a huge portion of R&K stock. That stock would be sold as one of the first actions Sydney would take and several billion would be deposited within the \$49 billion portfolio at her disposal. Using that money however came with a moral dilemma. The foundation stood to profit mightily. The decision to take on Big Pharma as one of the areas of focus that she was about to present on meant that many other stockholders would suffer losses. That meant that while the Foundation had profited massively, other stockowners would not be that lucky. Many would lose huge sums because once the Foundation took action to expose Big Pharma, the stock would drop. Sydney knew there would be an uproar when people learned that the Foundation had profited while others were hurt.

Then Sydney had learned about Mike Moorish and realized that the Foundation would be able to see their desire to take down Big Pharma materialize without them lifting a finger at all. All she wanted to confirm through Mr. Iverson was how this was progressing and if Moorish’s office would use the stock proceeds from the R&K

sale to pay for the lawyers, office space and whatever else he could use while preparing the case.

Sydney had been confident that this would all work out well. So sure was she that she had taken this section out of the last printing of the presentation. Even her team was not yet aware of it, as she had left for Williamsburg before they arrived at work this morning.

This project had been the outlier of all the ideas that the 30 teams had worked on. Sydney could see its value and agreed to its inclusion, but she much preferred to spend the \$49 billion on building new systems instead of tearing down failed systems. Yes, Big Pharma was a failed system and it was hurting many, but with so many other options available to build new systems, that's where she wanted to keep the focus. Besides, despite having \$49 billion at her disposal, the truth was even that would only go so far. In a perfect world she needed about \$700 billion to implement all the ideas needed to create the course correction so desperately needed in the world. The offer to Mike Moorish and his team was minor in the big scheme of things but they had appreciated Sydney's offer. But they too felt it was best not to touch those funds and they were well on their way of accomplishing the goal without anyway help from the Foundation.

Sydney grabbed her bag, threw the presentation package back into it and said out loud to herself "Time for lunch!". She double-checked she had her room key and with a jaunty skip in her step headed over to the Kings' Arm Tavern. She was looking forward to a good bowl of peanut soup and pottage pie.

Chapter 29

Brandon woke up with a slight headache around 3 am. He'd been tossing and turning wondering what he should do. What he'd overheard from Theo and Bodhi left him conflicted on so many levels.

Overhearing these types of conversations was not unusual for Brandon. Twenty years at TCR and the last ten as head Maître'd had put him in many awkward positions of hearing things he was not supposed to hear. Richmond was the capital of Virginia and TCR was a short walk to the State house, so TCR was often filled with politicians, lobbyists and corporate heads doing business behind the scenes. He had long ago resolved that anything he heard he would never speak about to anyone. It had proved to be a winning strategy because practically every Legislative session he had found himself in the position to divulge juicy information. Journalists at the Richmond Times Dispatch were constantly trying to pick his brain for any tidbit that might expose a story that would win them a Pulitzer! He would have none of it and it had paid off handsomely. Everyone trusted Brandon and appreciated the ability to relax in their private conversations without the fear of finding it on the front page of

the morning newspaper. That silence was greased with a knowing cash flow that benefited him, politicians and businessmen.

But what Brandon had seen and heard last night was far more troublesome than the usual political intrigue. Theo had been oblivious to Brandon or anyone for that matter. Her anxiety over Sydney's plan to expose Big Pharma and the financial ruin as R&K's stock fell had left her impervious to anything but her own dilemma. Her rudeness to Brandon extended to the waiter and Bodhi had finally had to tell her to sit still and shut up for a second. But it only lasted for a second before she began again to express her fear and beg her cousin to somehow solve this for her.

Bodhi too became upset and throughout the multiple drinks and dinner the two of them had begun to talk about drastic measures they might need to take. Theo realized that if she attempted to sell her stock, it would, due to the quantity of stock she owned trigger a price fall and so she was stuck between a rock and a hard spot. Bodhi on the other hand couldn't sell his stock at all. Most of his remained in stock options but as an employee of R&K he needed permission to exercise those options and he knew it was unlikely he could get it without it creating bigger problems for himself. His mansion in the Hamptons and the new yacht were tied to those future earnings and without them, he could one day find himself unable to make payments. He'd extended himself one luxury too far and was as angry at Sydney as Theo was scared at what might happen once Sydney announced this.

Brandon had been shocked when he heard them as he passed by their private dining room while escorting another couple to their table. The alcohol had loosened their tongues and their panic had jostled their brains into exploring ideas that would never have made sense to them before. He'd caught only the line from Bodhi saying "the explosions could take out so many more than Sydney but it would for sure disrupt everything for a long time to come."

Brandon had made a point to come back by their private room. Waiting for as long as he could without attracting attention to himself, he'd heard Theo say, "But it has to happen in the next day or two, Bodhi, because once this is out of the bag, it will be too late." Bodhi had said with extreme anger in his voice, "I've got this, Theo—I know some people who know some people so to speak. Let's get out of here. I need to set this in motion." Within seconds they had stood up to leave. Brandon, not wanting to give them any reason to think he'd heard them made a beeline to the stairs and took them two at a time to the first floor. Then he watched a few minutes later when they exited the brass elevator and headed to the valet for their cars.

Now he was home alone and the quiet of night was screaming at him to do something. He reached over and picked up his cell phone and dialed his friend Ray. Ray was a voice of reason and Brandon was pretty sure he'd pick up. Ah success! "Ray, I've got a dilemma, can you help me with it? I might be crazy, but I trust you'll know what I should do." Brandon shared a brief synopsis with Ray of what had

happened at the restaurant and what he'd overheard. "Uh, huh—yeah, I can do that. Okay, that makes sense, Ray—thanks....I'll do it by 7 am. I'm sure she'll be up and about by then. Thanks again. I'll see if I can get a little more sleep now that I've got this off my chest. Good night. And a complimentary drink next time you stop by the bar, okay?"

Brandon hung up and felt better as he lay back down in his bed. For sure, preventing a bomb explosion and potential death seemed like the time to break his silence strategy. Ray had said what Brandon had been thinking anyway. He would call Sydney in the early morning and tell her what he'd heard. Finding the number was not a problem since it was Brook's home phone and Brandon had had that in his file system for decades.

Brandon had hoped to get a little more sleep but that had proved impossible. The whole situation had rocked his world so he finally gave up and got up by 5:30 am. He made himself a stiff coffee and knew his whole day was going to be thrown off. His eyes rarely saw 5:30 am unless it was from the not yet gone to bed side of the morning. By his third cup of coffee, he decided it was time to call. He couldn't stand the tension anymore.

Margaret had answered it after several rings. Brandon asked for Sydney and Margaret had told him that Ms. Oliver was busy right now—could she please take a message? Brandon had then said that he had an urgent need to talk with Ms. Oliver and could she please get her to the phone. Margaret had gotten this type of call repeatedly over the last few months. She informed Brandon that Ms. Oliver was not at home at this time so he needed either to give her a message or call back later. There was exasperation in her voice and Brandon realized that his urgency had not translated into even a concern for the woman at the other end of the phone. He hung up and wondered what he should do next. Go to the mansion, call the police or what? He decided to take a shower first and clear the cobwebs from his head. Besides, maybe Bodhi had thought the better of it overnight and nothing was going to happen anyway.

Chapter 30

The room had been filling slowly for the last thirty minutes. The group of about two hundred fifty people were finishing up breakfast and heading to where Sydney would make her presentation. The room had been set up with comfortable chairs and tables. At each seat laid a package in a cloth bag that they would take with them at the end of the weekend. The package had the full details of what Sydney was talking about today. On the cloth bag was the logo of the new cooperative foundation that Sydney would be launching with Brook's funds--Wisdom Lives!

The talk was scheduled to begin at 9:30 and as expected there was high energy buzzing throughout the room. Sydney had not attended breakfast with the group as

she had wanted them to reconnect and dialogue together and she felt she would be a huge distraction to that. And she had been right. As she watched from the closed circuit TV, she was happy to see everyone excited and engaging with one another. While the presentation was the kick-off for the weekend, this group still had a lot of work in front of it. The plan would be presented but it would be this group that would hammer out the final details of implementation. Ultimately they were all going to be the ambassadors for this as they went back out into the real world. It was necessary that they put their final stamp on it as it was presented into the larger world.

At around 9:20, a fairly loud gong chime was rung as a way to get everyone's attention. Theo was at the microphone and said quietly, "If everyone can begin to move to their seats, we'll begin in 10 minutes." Seating had been arranged to place people in the small groups they'd worked with months earlier and as they moved to those seats there was another round of greetings and hugs. At 9:30 the gong rang again and everyone sat down.

Sydney walked on to the small stage and there was light applause by the group. She smiled and sort of waved the applause away. As she arrived at the podium, Theo was by her side and making sure the computer was set up and ready to go. Behind them was a large screen for all to see.

"Good morning all!", said Sydney, in a voice that showed her own enthusiasm and excitement for what was about to unfold. The group responded in-kind to her. "I'm going to go ahead and get started. Since you've all been here before, you know that if you need to get up to go to the bathroom or step outside to take a call, please do so through the door on the left. And in the back of the room there's more coffee, tea and so let's begin."

Behind her the logo of Wisdom Lives! appeared. She smiled at the group and said, "It has been five months since last we were together. We have all done a tremendous amount of work and my appreciation for your assistance in this project can never be sufficient. Every one of the thirty groups sent me their report by August 15th and I've read each and every one. I cannot tell you how joyous it was and what incredible solutions and ideas were generated."

"One of the main themes that emerged from all of these reports was that while we have tremendous amounts of information and technology, what is missing is a solid base or foundation from which to use it." "Little by little, as I read, what stood out is that we are steeped in an information age but it has not proved to be the panacea many thought it would be. In fact, what we've discovered is that information without wisdom has led us to a very precarious place. There's no denying that anymore. Data has taken over and as it has, humans and life have become relegated to be minor players in order to achieve a strange outcome—a world that believes it is successful while it is standing knee deep in crisis. We've convinced ourselves that

the data shows the system of unlimited production and growth makes fantastic wealth yet we don't have the wisdom to see that our definition of wealth is killing the planet and us."

Sydney continued, "Behind me is the logo for Wisdom Lives! What I hope is that today, this event will one day be seen as the day that the Information Age ended and the Wisdom Age began. As we begin to implement the plan derived from the 30 reports, it will be from this foundation of wisdom and consciousness.

There are many pathways that we can take to achieve this and I believe it is imperative that in this next ten years we must apply ourselves intensively to achieving this or else we are staring at global collapse. That said, I want to confirm what has been much rumored. I will be spending all of the \$49 billion within the next two to five years. I know, typically a Foundation like this would only spend 5-10% and reinvest the rest. And if we had the luxury of decades to work on this crisis, I might concur. But we simply don't. These funds are needed everywhere to make the changes we need to survive as a species and as a planet. We must put everything into it now. And the truth is, we need \$700 billion to apply to this problem so \$49 billion is just scratching the surface. But I hope with your help today, we will determine the best ways to use these funds to get us started."

Sydney watched the faces of the audience as she told them she would spend all the money in such a short time. There was surprise on some faces, big smiles in others. Just a few scrunched their eyebrows with a seeming distaste for doing something so radical.

"And let me clear up a couple of other rumors that have been floating around." Sydney started to chuckle. "I saw one that said I was working to cancel Mondays. That is not true although I do think it is a very good idea. Let's face it, no one likes Monday! All it does is ruin a very good Sunday. Yes, I did look into it, but it turns out even with \$49 billion, we are stuck with Monday!" By this time the audience is laughing heartily and the mood has lightened again.

"The other big rumor floating around is that I was going to take on Big Pharma", said Sydney. This quieted the laughing and cocked a few heads, including Theo who was standing by the door. "That too is not true. Though many of you know that I have a huge problem with Big Pharma, what I've come to realize is that all of our energy needs to be spent on creating new systems." Sydney walked around the podium and got closer to the group. As she did, Theo slipped out the door with a look of both relief and panic on her face.

"One of my favorite quotes is from F. Buckminster Fuller who said, *You never change things by fighting the existing reality. To change something, build a new model that makes the old model obsolete*" And that truly is the mantra for what our work at Wisdom Lives! is going to be all about. So no, I will not be taking on Big Pharma.

Besides, it doesn't need me to anyway. Turns out Mike Moorish who took on Big Tobacco is well on his way of taking on Big Pharma. And he wouldn't accept a dime of our money anyway!

"So, anyone else have a rumor I need to dispel? Sydney waited a second to see if anyone raised a hand. "Alright then, let's begin building Wisdom Lives!—a new model that I hope will make the old model obsolete."

Chapter 31

Theo couldn't believe it. How had she missed hearing that Sydney was not going to proceed with her intent to attack Big Pharma? As she ran down the hall towards the bathroom, she was flipping through the handout package to see if it had been removed and sure enough, it was gone. When had Sydney done it and why hadn't she heard about it or seen that the package had been changed? Then it hit her that she'd left early on Wednesday to meet Bodhi and it must've happened while she was gone. And she hadn't bothered to look at it this morning, thinking it had remained the same as the last time she'd seen it.

But there wasn't a minute to think about this now. Whatever or however this had transpired, the change meant she had to reach Bodhi immediately. She put her hand on the bathroom door but found it was locked when she went to pull the handle down. She panicked and was instantly trying to think of where else she could get a private space when she heard the man inside say "I'll be out in a second!". And almost before he finished saying it, Ian opened the door.

Ian had a small smile on his face as he said, "Ah, Theo, good morning, nice to see you. How are you doing this morning?" Theo had all she could do to maintain her composure and not push him out of the way. She smiled back and said, "Doing great, Ian! But I've really got to pee and then rush back to the presentation. Excuse me if you don't mind!", and then she slipped in and locked the door.

Ian was a bit thrown off but knowing that Theo was an integral part of the team, he took it in stride that she'd rushed past him. That's when he realized that he had left his package on the table in the bathroom so he would have to wait for her to come back out. Thinking it would be a quick in and out for her, he stood by the door and waited.

That's when he heard Theo talking and his ears perked up as he could tell by her voice she was upset. "Bodhi, pick up! It's Theo. You've got to stop it. Whatever you've done, call it off. Everything is going to be fine. She changed her mind and it isn't going to ruin us. So, please call me back and let me know you've gotten my

message and that you've put an end to our madness!" Theo sat down on the toilet and waited for Bodhi to call back. She was also waiting for her heart rate to go down as it felt as if her heart was coming out of her chest. On one level she was relieved knowing that Sydney's intent had changed but until she knew for sure that Bodhi had heard her message, she knew she could not completely relax. Several minutes passed and no call from Bodhi only increased her tension. She could feel a headache beginning to form.

She knew she couldn't stay in the bathroom any longer. She would be missed if she didn't get back. She shook the phone and screamed at it "Call me back, Bodhi!", but that didn't produce the magic she'd hoped. She finally gave up and got ready to leave. She opened the door and was surprised to find Ian waiting outside. Ian's face no longer had a smile on it but Theo was too nonplussed to notice it. She lied to him and said, "Phew—just in the nick of time!", and then headed straight back to where Sydney was presenting. Ian stood there for a second looking at her back as she walked away. He walked into the bathroom and found his package right on the table where he'd left it. His mind wasn't sure what to do with what he'd just heard.

Ian walked slowly out of the bathroom and looked around. It was impossible for him to ignore what he'd just heard but what had he actually heard? Was something terrible about to go down? Should he find someone with security and what, what would he tell them? That he overheard a woman talking in the bathroom about calling something off? Calling off what? He'd feel like a total fool if he made a big deal out of something that sounded major coming out of Theo but turned out to be something minor after all. And besides, whatever it was, Theo had made it clear that it wasn't going to happen anyway. Ian took a deep breath and decided to just let well enough alone. It was a fluke that he'd heard it anyway and it just felt better to him to act as if he didn't have this knowledge after all.

He headed back to the presentation area and walked in from the side door. Sydney was pointing at one of the power point slides. He could see Theo at the table with the computer and other audio-visual equipment. She was sitting quietly and looked relatively calm. He thought—"whatever it was, maybe it has passed." He walked back to his table and sat down to hear Sydney say, "So you can see—you've explored a big picture view through these 30 submissions and with overlap on some and then the return on investment computation, I have narrowed it down to these four primary directions. In a perfect world with \$700 billion dollars we wouldn't have to narrow it down at all. But let's take a short break and give everyone a chance to go to the bathroom, get some more coffee and stretch a bit before I begin the next part of this presentation.

Quickly people began standing up and talking with their tablemates. Others were heading outside to the air-conditioned port-a-potties that were certainly as nice as the one Ian had used inside. Ian contemplated going to talk with Sydney, but as he did he saw Theo talking on the phone and her body language seemed to be saying

she'd finally heard back from Bodhi. Ian said out loud to himself "Let's not make a mountain out of what was probably a mole hill anyway!" and then headed to get himself another cup of coffee. As he got near the coffee area he saw two of his team talking and sidled up to hear their thoughts and promptly forgot his bathroom adventure!

Chapter 32

Sunshine was pouring into the room and it seemed to set the tone for what was happening right now. Sydney was talking to a couple of people and they were laughing and shaking their heads in a way that showed a high energy for today's event. The room began to refill as people returned to their tables and continued their conversations. But then, without any notice at all, the room became quiet and everyone turned their attention to Sydney once again.

She had returned to the podium and nodded appreciation for the crowd quieting. She said, "We are all aware that the future in front of us offers us tremendous challenges and incredible opportunities. There are two major challenges that I see could create such disruption that I want to address them and show you how, in the pathway that Wisdom Lives! is going to take, they are a crucial part in directing the choices we are making."

"The first is Artificial Intelligence. It's here, it's not going away and it could make almost all of us obsolete. We could literally create a world where only a few humans are seen as necessary to run a functioning economy. The rest are either eliminated or treated as if they are consumption units or even worse, relegated to marginal lives of intense poverty. I think many of you in this room wonder and worry when your jobs will be eliminated and you'll be left on the sidelines. Currently, our obsession with data coupled with a form of capitalism that has humans working for the economy instead of an economy working for humans leaves us in this precarious position. The anxiety that AI is creating for the future of humans cannot be ignored and could lead to much suffering."

"The second challenge is a fundamental flaw that humans made about 10,000 years ago and unless we expose and remedy it, humans could very possibly go extinct. I believe once we correct that flaw we will discover it resets the human journey with a meaning that will give us direction for the millennia ahead of us and will also help us address the AI issue as well. So if you'll indulge me a bit, I'd like to talk about these two issues and show you how Wisdom Lives will deal with them."

"Humans, as a species, have been on the planet for several million years. And we obviously are an evolving species with a history that shows tremendous change over these years. For the last 100,000 years or so, we have lived at an intelligence level that has continuously expanded and enabled humans to be creative and innovative

in millions of ways. We can look at the cave art of 45,000 years ago and see that our ancestors were quite talented. For 90,000 of this last 100,000 years, we were basically small hunter-gatherer tribes moving slowly but surely across the continents from Africa and by 10,000 years ago humans had somehow managed to make it all the way to the tip of South America. We know in the United States, native populations were here at least 14,000 years ago and by the time Columbus arrived in 1492, there were an estimated 9-20 million humans living in the Western hemisphere. We are a rambling man kind of species for sure! It's obvious we must've been smart enough to figure out how to survive all these different environments that we've adapted to. It's quite a feat, although some days I wonder if the ants were doing the same thing and they're as smart as us but we were too vain to notice!" The audience chuckled a bit at that point.

"At the end of this 90,000 years, life seemed to be in flow. Humans, animals, plants and the planet were rolling along. About 10,000 years ago, humans added one new innovation and that was farming. This ended our days as hunter-gatherers pretty much and with a relatively steady supply of food along with the ability to stay in one place permanently it quietly altered our relationship with the rest of the community of life. For the first 90,000 years we lived as if we were a part of the community life, but once we started farming, we slowly began to believe and create systems that reflected a new belief—that we were the only valuable species and everything else was here to serve us. We disconnected from living an integrated life with other humans, animals, plants and the planet."

"Now we stand at the end of these last 10,000 years and we are staring at the possibility of our very own extinction. Maintaining a belief that humans are a species separate from the rest of the community of life is no longer viable. We can now so easily see that we are intricately inter-dependent on and integrated with the rest of the community of life. Look at something as simple as water and you can see how inter-dependent we are on it. If we continue to poison it with pollution while increasing populations who will have no access to it, you can quickly see how dependent humans are on clean water and sufficient quantities for a population."

Sydney continued, "The fundamental flaw we made 10,000 years ago was to separate from the community of life and think we were better than the rest. Do the math people. For 90 of the last 100,000 years humans lived as part of the community of life. Then 10,000 years ago we switched to the idea that humans were above and separate from the rest of the community of life and now we are faced with extinction. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to add that up."

"Yes, the last 10,000 years have also been the most incredible expansion of innovation and creativity. We've flown to the moon, we've created incredible art, we've figured out how to stop dragging suitcases across airports and put them on wheels." Sydney stopped for a second and looked at the audience. "Why did it take us so long to do that, right? We landed on the moon before we made roller-bags."

How is that possible? It makes you stop and realize that humans as a species have brilliant moments at times and then at others an innovation opportunity is staring us in the face and we can't see it!" This created a good laugh and helped take down the tension of the moment. People were looking at each other and agreeing—how *did* that take so long?

Sydney moved on. "And that's where we are now too. There is an innovation opportunity staring us in the face. Ten thousand years ago we separated from the community of life and we didn't see it as a flaw. Then, as we became ever smarter, creating computers, flying to the moon, and building artificial intelligence, we still could not see the innovation opportunity in front of us. Just like we dragged those damn suitcases across the airport until 1970 despite having created the wheel in 3500 BC, our fundamental flaw has been staring at us for all these years too! And here it is; that instead of separating from the community of life, our greatness was to see us as the stewards of the community of life. It is building systems that enable every species on the planet—plant, animal, human, earth, water and air to work together so that each part of the community of life can achieve its highest form. We have only just begun to realize the incredibility of every other species and the learning and reconnection ahead of us will keep us all very busy for a long, long time."

"Let me give you just one simple example—trees. We take trees for granted. They give us shade, sometimes food, they make beautiful floors and forests. Trees give us a lot and it would be a terrible planet to live on if we did not have trees. But we have only just become smart enough to realize that trees are so much more than that. We've discovered that trees actually have a communication system under ground that enables them to talk to each other. We know that when there's an infestation, info is sent from one tree to another to trigger the uninfected tree to produce chemicals that will protect it from infestation. We just barely understand all this and so for the last 100 years, we ignorantly spread fertilizers or herbicides around these trees without realizing for a second what it is doing to the underground communication system of trees."

"This is just one area where humans have so much to learn. It is one of the millions of opportunities before us as we re-discover our connection to the community of life and find ways to live in a new harmony for us all. It will keep us very busy, it will help us heal the planet and ourselves. It will also help us transform our economy from one where humans serve an economy based on money and the quantity of stuff to one where the economy serves humans and helps us create a quality of life for the entire community of life. This is the most exciting opportunity in front of us and it is what I am committing Wisdom Lives to as we spend the \$49 billion back into healing the entire community of life—human, animal, plant and planet."

"The power in this shift will also help us reorient the value of Artificial Intelligence so that it serves the community of life instead of nullifying life in the pursuit of

artificial wealth that benefits only a few thousand humans. Brook was one of those humans and at the end of his life he could finally see this. Brook wrote me a letter that expressed this awakening and I would like to share that letter with you now. But instead of my reading it to you, I'm going to ask my friend, Amelia Carter to do this. Amelia is 90 years old and in my life she has been a source of much wisdom and I think represents what Wisdom Lives! is all about. Amelia was also the impetus for Brook's deep-hearted change at the end of his life. I know many of you think it was I, but it was not. It was Amelia and so I think it is fitting that she share his words with you. Amelia, if you will come up please."

Sydney was surprised when a spontaneous applause broke out and at first she thought it was for what she had just said. Then she realized they were clapping for Amelia and that gave her more joy than she could ever have imagined.

Chapter 33

Amelia was on her way to the podium and smiling as the crowd continued to applaud her. When she got there, she and Sydney hugged each other and Amelia slid behind the podium. Sydney handed her Brook's letter and said, "Thanks for doing this." Amelia nodded her head to Sydney and then turned to look out at those gathered. "Ah, we best get this started. At my age, it's important to use time efficiently. And as I start this, let me say that I'm grateful that Brook, not knowing of course that I would be called on to read this, is a man of few words. So, I shall be able to complete this and still have enough energy left for the great lunch I know is coming. Let's face it, this constitutes a pretty busy day for me now!" Amelia said.

The audience chuckled lightly as they received her warmly. They were keenly interested in hearing how she had been able to influence Brook so much. Many in this group knew Brook and realized his life moved with the 1% elites and had for decades believed unequivocally that those who created businesses deserved their rewards. He had never wavered or apologized for this and when he attended events like Davos Economic Forums, he walked comfortably amongst others who believed as he did. But something had changed or they would not all be sitting here today. And quite a number in this audience were, as Brook had been, still deeply committed to the current systems and believed that it just needed a solid tweaking and all would be well. Clearly Brook has moved past this belief and thought a major overhaul was in order.

Amelia unfolded the letter that Brook had written. She decided she wanted to read from the original so people could see it was in his handwriting and had his telltale signature on it too. She looked up and out at the group and said, "Thank you and first, let me give you a little backstory on how I came to talk to Brook at all. I ran into

Brook at the hospital just minutes after he'd learned that he had a terminal brain tumor. He was sitting quietly in a sunspot shining on the fountain near the elevators. I was just coming off the elevators after seeing my doctor. Now, I know Brook because of Sydney, though he and I have only had the briefest of conversations. Still, I recognized him and though his eyes were closed at the time, it was obvious that something serious was going on so I walked over to offer some support. I hoped that he'd recognize me, and he did. You'll see from what he wrote, it was a fortuitous turn of events for us all and I mean all of you sitting here too. Now let me share what he wrote."

With that, Amelia pulled out her reading glasses, cleared her throat and said, "Dear Sydney. By the time you receive this I'll be dead. It's okay. I had a great run and with my passing my entire estate to you with the intent of you using it to change the world, really—what's left to stick around for anyway. I've lit the fire, you tend it."

"You and I fought lovingly over these ideas and beliefs for thirty years but it was your friend Amelia and a look at the abyss in front of me that enabled me to let go of my attachment to a story I'd gripped tightly to since I was 11. I was rewarded handsomely as a white male in this culture to learn that story and write its next chapter and I did it with wild abandon. I loved every minute of it until that day when I had to finally admit, I was perpetuating a story that had run its course. Not only was I running out of time, the entire planet was running out of time and a new story was either going to be written immediately or there would be no story left to tell at all. With intense grief, I could see that my legacy was going to be as one of the people who had prevented the new story from being told and within the ruins of what this could mean, Amelia helped me flick the switch."

Amelia looked up from the letter and waved her hands with a 'who knew' and then looked back again to the letter.

"Here's what she said as I informed her that I had maybe 6 to 12 months left on the planet. She told me that it was time to work on a different project and determine how to further my impact from this new vantage point. She helped me leap past self-pity and straight into seeing the gift I'd been given. I wasn't going to spend time on logistics—I had plenty of staff to do that. I was going to finally look at what I'd refused to see for so long—something I know that almost all of us in the 1% deep down inside also know but refuse to see and that is that the system is set up to benefit the few at the expense of the many. For those few of us who have benefited so extraordinarily, we've learned to paint elaborate stories to justify what we were doing and convince ourselves it was for the best. We became obsessed with more and more money being the determinant of our value. We convinced ourselves this wealth gave us the freedom to keep the system going and everyone needed us to do this. But as I stand here looking out to the future, I realize I wasn't free because my freedom came only at the expense of everyone else's freedom. And as you have

taught me Sydney, it isn't only freedom for humans but freedom for the entire community of life."

"When Amelia and I separated and I headed to my car, I knew a shift had taken place and I never felt happier in my life. I was about to feel real freedom because I could finally say what I had kept squashed down inside me for fifty years. When I lifted the weight of that old belief system, love flooded in and I could see how that weight had prevented me from living fully. It had cost me my daughter, my marriage and if it continues on, it will cost us the entire community of life. I cannot get back my daughter or my marriage but I hope and pray that by passing on my massive wealth to you Sydney, you'll be able to prevent the loss of the community of life and I can rest in peace."

"One time long ago, you quoted John Bogle who started the Vanguard Group and it has come to haunt me. It was right after the 2008 crash and he said, "When did making money on making money become what America makes?" When I first heard it I thought—that's a good thing, America is a leader. Little by little I realized not only America was doing this, but all of us in the 1% group were attached to this way of living and working. I finally realized why this quote haunted me so much. Because if I'm honest with myself, this isn't a good thing, it is a terrible thing. We should be committed to making life and not just making money by moving it around on computer networks under the delusion that it is valuable wealth. So, take this money Sydney and make life. Do whatever you can to make it so that the entire community of life flourishes again. And thank Amelia for me because our brief moment in time was a catalyst for my lifting the veil and see light and life again. It has made my death so peaceful."

Love to all. Brook Foster.

As Amelia finished reading she looked up at the audience. They were all sitting there taking it in and trying to process it. And then they started to breathe again and shake their heads in acceptance. A few people began to clap and as others joined in and it was just about to become a crescendo, someone stood up and said, "Oh my God, Bodhi Chunduren has just been arrested for trying to have us all blown up!"

Chapter 34

Amelia was standing at the podium and unsure what to do next. She had no idea who Bodhi Chunduren was but clearly many in the audience did. Everyone started talking at once, grabbing their phones or Ipads and searching for a link to find out more details.

Sydney approached Amelia with a furrowed brow and said, "Sorry, this is not the way I thought this would end but thank you, you did a very nice job. Let me get you

back to your seat and see if I can get the group back on track.” Amelia shook her head in agreement and as they headed towards her chair another commotion at the back of the room redirected their attention. Rushing into the room came six Federal agents in uniform. Four of them headed towards Theo while the other two, accompanied by Margaret headed towards Sydney.

Sydney got Amelia situated and turned back to meet Margaret and the agents. She looked at Margaret with a ‘what the heck is going on here’ look. Margaret looked at the agents and said, “This is Sydney Oliver.”, then she looked at Sydney and said, Ms. Oliver, these gentlemen are from the FBI.”

The silver haired agent reached out his hand to her and said, “Ms. Oliver, I’m Agent Mark Caddy and this is Agent Ray Berna. Can we find a quiet place to talk with you?”

Sydney nodded her head but at the same time realized she had 250 pairs of eyes staring at her and wondering what was going on. Simultaneously she could see Theo being handcuffed in the back of the room. Sydney raised her hand and said to Agent Caddy, “Yes, of course, but first I need to know are we safe? Can I let my guests here know that they are in no immediate danger?”

“Definitely, Ms. Oliver”, said Agent Caddy. “If you’d like, I can give them a quick assurance and then we’ll go talk.” Sydney stepped back and Agent Caddy walked to the microphone on the podium. As he began to call for the audience to give them his attention, Sydney turned around to Margaret and said, “I have no idea what’s going on here but I don’t want this to spiral out of control. We were just about to break for lunch anyway. Is that ready and can I dismiss them out to tents to have lunch? Margaret said, “Yes, we’re ready to go so once Agent Caddy tells them all is okay, you tell them to head outside. All the wait staff and servers are already in position so there will be no delay and it will be a smooth transition. The timing is actually kind of perfect for once! I’ll go now and make sure everything is moving smoothly.”

Margaret turned around and headed straight out the doors to the lawn. Sydney heard the last of Agent Caddy’s words, “Everyone is safe.” Sydney then took the microphone from Agent Caddy and said, “Thank you, Agent Caddy, for protecting us and the work we are doing here today. Everyone—while I meet with them and learn more about what is going on, the good news is that lunch is ready to be served. I will share what I’ve learned as soon as I can but in the meantime, if you’ll proceed outside, a buffet lunch has been prepared for your pleasure. You are free to leave your materials here as we will reconvene back within one hour.”

The audience not knowing what else to do but somehow absorbing the knowledge that they were safe quickly got up and headed outside. There was a bit of a stunned silence as they marched out but it wouldn’t take long for that to change. Every news outlet they clicked on was discussing it. There was a constant repetition of video showing Bodhi being arrested and escorted out of his office at Rosatti & Kearn.

Fortunately, the media had not yet realized it was happening at Sydney's gathering so they were not outside storming the gates so to speak!

Agents Caddy and Berna followed Sydney as she took them into her private office. Once the door was shut, she looked at them and said, "What the hell is going on?" Agent Berna cleared his throat and said, "Ms. Oliver, do you know a man named Brandon Covington?"

"I know a man named Brandon who works at the Tobacco Company Restaurant. Is that who you mean? I'm not sure I know his last name but it is the only Brandon I can think of off the top of my head." Sydney said this with a look of incredulity on her face. How in the world was Brook's favorite waiter mixed up in this?

"Yes, ma'am, that's the one." Agent Berna was now doing the talking. "Mr. Covington is an old friend of mine and last night he called me and told me of a conversation he'd overheard from your staff member Theo Briggs and Mr. Bodhi Chunduren of Rosatti & Kearn. I had suggested he call you this morning, but after we hung up, I knew I had to act on this information and immediately put out some calls to my network. Almost instantly I had a hit and heard that Mr. Chunduren was trying to have someone place a small bomb here on the property. Fortunately Mr. Chunduren is not very skilled in this type of thing and his contacts were mostly laughing at what he was attempting. You can't pull something off like that in a matter of six or eight hours. My contacts said they had no intention of doing anything but they had let Mr. Chunduren have the opinion that something was in motion to make it happen. All the same, we have arrested Mr. Chunduren and Theo Briggs for attempted crimes. We haven't quite figured out the exact charges at this moment. What I can tell you though is that you are safe as are your guests and you can continue on as you had planned.

Sydney looked at Agents Caddy and Berna and just shook her head. "Do you even know why they were wanting to do this? I don't personally know Mr. Chunduren and I have no reason to believe that Theo held that kind of animosity towards me. What was this about?"

Agent Berna looked at his partner who shrugged his shoulders. Agent Berna said, "We don't have a lot of the details yet, but something about Big Pharma and how that was going to impact the stock price of R&K. We'll delve into this more and tomorrow we'll ask you to come down to the station to talk with us so we can all learn more. But that's all we know right now."

Sydney took a really deep breath and shook her head in disbelief. "Well, all I can say is that I'm grateful that Mr. Covington called you, Agent Berna. And I thank you for handling this situation so quickly and professionally. I'm even more grateful that it has not led to my having to cancel this event since I have people here from around the world so getting everyone back together again would be a nightmare. I'm glad

we'll be able to finish our work today and over the next two days. She took another deep breath and then said, "If that's all you need from me now, what time would you like me to come to your offices tomorrow? "

Agent Caddy handed her his business card and said, "The address is on this card. Why don't you call me in the morning and we'll see where we're at. I know you're quite busy here obviously so if we can do it by phone or a time that won't make it too onerous for you to come down. By then we'll know a lot more and hopefully not have to take up too much more of your time searching for information."

"Can do!" Sydney said. The agents nodded and said, "We'll just show ourselves out." They turned and left the office. Sydney sat back in her chair and started to laugh to herself. "Well Brook, apparently you were watching out for me again. Thanks, but don't forget, I wouldn't be having all these crazy things happening to me if you hadn't dropped \$49 billion in my lap in the first place. It's a good thing you're gone right now or I'd have to kick you in the butt!"

Sydney picked up the phone and called the main kitchen. Once Margaret got on the phone and confirmed that lunch was well on its way and the group outside seemed fine, Sydney said, "Can you fix me a small plate and bring it to my office? I think I need to have a little quiet time before the afternoon event starts. And would you check on Amelia to make sure she's okay? If she's by herself you could ask if she wants to join me here but if she's engaged with others, just let her be." Sydney hung up the phone. Calm was restored and she felt like everything was going to work out just fine.

Chapter 35

The group began to return to the room after lunch. Everyone looked a little overwhelmed as even without the commotion of having FBI agents and a potential bomb threat, the morning had been filled with lots to think about. Most were carrying a cup of coffee as they felt the need to stimulate themselves with a bit of extra caffeine.

Sydney was talking with Amelia who was at her chair. "Amelia, after I share with the group about the arrests of Bodhi Chunduren and Theo Briggs, then I'm hoping to come back to you and what you were doing before everything went kind of crazy. I had expected that once you finished we would talk a little about it before heading to lunch. We may have lost that momentum but I'm still going to start with asking if anyone has a comment or question about what you shared from Brook's letter. I just wanted to give you a heads up before I get started." Amelia nodded her head and said she was prepared to answer any questions.

Sydney looked up and saw that Sharon was standing by the small gong that they used to call everyone to attention. Sydney nodded in appreciation and realized that once they moved to breakout groups, she'd need to talk with Sharon, Karin and Ricky about what had happened with Theo. They must be quite shocked to see their co-worker hauled off in handcuffs. But she was pleased that they were jumping back into their professional roles as she very much needed that at this point.

The warm gong ringing throughout the room brought everyone to silence. Sydney walked to the microphone, tapped to make sure it was on and then smiled at the group. "Well, that was quite a morning we had, don't you think?" She looked at the audience and heads were bobbing up and down yeses. "To start, let me share with you what the FBI was able to tell me. Even they don't know everything because this was all happening in real time. But apparently, Bodhi Chunduren of Rosatti & Kearn and my employee Theo Briggs are cousins. Both of them have a huge portfolio of R&K stock. Based on the rumor that I was going to take on the opioid crisis and Big Pharma, they feared that this would have a huge detrimental impact on their stock value and put in motion a crazy scheme to disrupt it. Fortunately someone who became aware of this acted from the premise of "If you hear or see something, say something" and as a result this plot was disrupted and we are all fine. And that's about all I know at this point. "

"I do not want to waste another minute of our time on this and would like to return to our work. I'll start with asking if anyone here had any questions or comments to make in context to Amelia reading Brook's letter. Amelia or I would be happy to answer them. Sydney looked at the crowd and was pleased to see a couple of hands go up. "Yes, let's start in the far back corner there. If you'll state your name, what organization you're with and then your question or comment. "

"Hi, I'm Jessica Chang from Doctors without Borders. My comment is in reference to Mr. Foster's saying that he could see the old story had run its course and his concern that he was one of the people preventing the new story from being written and the legacy of this would be ruin for us all. I think this is an enormous admission for someone in his position and just wish I could personally thank Mr. Foster for this. My only hope is that others in his position may come to the same conclusion."

Sydney nodded to her and said, "Yes, Ms. Chang, I wish I could thank him personally too. But I know the best we can do now is to use the funds he's given us to make that new story come alive. Um, I see one other hand, so I'll call on you sir and then we'll move on."

A man sitting in the middle of the group stood up and cleared his throat. "My name is Trenton Powell and I, like Brook Foster, would be considered one of the 1%. I am the CEO of Marianna Industries and have been a long time friend of Brook. It is very difficult for me to hear what he wrote as my gut reaction is to say, I don't think he's correct. But I also have great respect for him and so I just want to say that I'm trying

very hard to keep an open mind and hope that this afternoon's exploration gives me an opportunity to understand how he arrived at this position."

"Thank you, Mr. Powell. I can certainly appreciate where you are coming from as I've long heard this from Brook as well. But if he can change, perhaps you can too. So, keeping an open mind is the perfect segue to what we're going to work on this afternoon." Sydney looked behind herself and nodded at Karin to open up the power point so all could see.

"This afternoon we're going to go into breakout session around the four major areas that the funding is going to be geared towards. If you pull out this handout from your package, turn to the second page and you'll see which of the four breakout groups you've been assigned to. These four areas emerged from the work we did last spring and the 30 reports that were generated. I'm going to give a brief rationale of each. Within your specific packet you'll see options for implementation and your group will work to determine what are the next steps. "

Sydney tapped her computer and the first of the four areas came up. "You see I've chosen Whole Person/Whole Community development as the number one direction we'll need to take. Wholeness is a foundation for every human on the planet to head towards conscious growth on a personal and family level but just as importantly it sets the stage for our reconnecting to wholeness within the entire community of life. I believe this is a crucial component of our ability to all work together to write the new story of an integrated system of the entire community of life."

"The second area we'll focus on is food systems whereby we begin to create much more locally produced food using innovation and technology within closed-loop systems. This is not to say that we won't continue to have some industrial scale farming for some products but the days of growing and shipping food everywhere will be transplanted, yes, sorry, pun intended, with new ways of growing food."

"The third major area we'll be investing in is energy transformation. The time for renewables to takeover has come and yet, as the reports I read clearly showed, this transition has been stymied due to the large investments in the old fossil fuel system. A complete transformation to renewables while great on one level would cause huge disruption for whole countries or states. That simply cannot be ignored. So, this transformation must take both sides of this equation into consideration. You'll see that the solutions being suggested acknowledge this and offer some unique ideas."

"And the last direction will be in transforming the monetary system to enable new ways of exchange and ways of investing back into the community of humans and the community of life. We currently have a monoculture money system and it is what has limited our ability to see wealth as a far more diverse function of the community of life than what has been defined just by money. I believe as we broaden this view

of our monetary system, you'll see that it actually supports the first area—whole person/whole community development—in such a way that humans will be able to successfully take on areas two and three.”

At this point, Sydney tapped the last slide and it showed a Venn diagram of how all of these four directions—whole person/whole community development, food systems, energy transformation and monetary system expansion become an integrated process for writing the new story.

“Okay everyone, it is time for us to all go to work. In your packages—you'll see the group you'll be working with and the area of the mansion where you can meet. We will work for the next four hours in these groups and then come back together for cocktails and dinner. Then tomorrow morning we'll continue to meet in our small groups from 9-12. This gives you plenty of time to work and a chance for ideas to percolate overnight and make changes. Then we'll break for lunch. Finally then, we will reconvene for reports at one-thirty tomorrow afternoon. My hope is that from these final implementation reports I will be able to announce how the \$49 billion will be spent in order to make this all happen. Any questions on the schedule for today and tomorrow? No? Fine then, off you go!”

Chapter 36

The last 24 hours had, thankfully, gone off without a hitch. Like a well-oiled machine the groups had split off to do their work. Last night's dinner had been a very high-energy event. There was excitement in the air and the work continued as the groups intermingled throughout the evening.

A band played after dinner and a magician had also been hired to move amongst the crowd. It brought a lightness and relaxation to the latter half of the evening that most appreciated. But by 11 pm, most everyone had headed back to their rooms so they would be fresh for the morning gathering.

Now everyone was coming back from lunch. This final afternoon would be the sharing by each group of an implementable plan for their particular focus. Sydney was talking with Ricky, Sharon and Karin. Each had been assigned to work with a group. Sydney had taken the first group with its focus on whole person/whole community development. Karin said, “Are we ready, Sydney? Shall I ring the gong?” Sydney looked out at the room. Her heart burst with joy as to how these 250 people had worked so wonderfully together to create solutions for a new story and a new future. Sydney shook her head yes and said, “I think so, Karin. And then why don't

each of you return to your group so when it is time for them to report you can come up and join whoever has the task of presenting.”

Once again the peaceful ringing of the gong silenced everyone. “Thank you, one and all,” said Sydney. “Just a reminder, we’re keeping presentations to a half hour with a general overview so the rest of us can be aware of what direction the investment will be taking. As well, you’ll provide the date when your completed package will come back to Wisdom Lives! and the implementation can get started. Now, for the first group, Marsha Lamb from Pew Charitable Trusts will present on the Whole person/ Whole Community development focus.

By the time all four groups had completed their presentations there was a palpable awareness of how each of them integrated with the other. The design by the whole person/whole community group to create an organization called “Integrative Community Ventures” that would employ residents in human capacity development set the stage for inter-connecting with what the food system group had in mind for local food production based on the success of the work already happening in Holland.

The energy group had taken a radical tact and decided that it was impossible to build a renewable energy system without also addressing the huge financial collapse that would result for current investors in oil and gas. They created something like a Marshall Plan that would balance this transition with building the new systems. As the presenter commented, “Bodhi Chunduren is an obvious example of what happens when an investor seeks to lose millions in stock investments. It’s not pretty and we can’t unleash this kind of chaos on a global level.”

And then finally, the last group tied it all up with a look at how a much more diverse money and exchange system could be created. They discussed the launch of public banking, Universal Basic Income, Blockchain exchanges and local currency. They identified and outlined 14 projects with a projected cost of \$21 billion but only \$11 billion would need to come from Wisdom Lives! All of these funds were directed at local communities around the world.

Sydney now returned to the podium. “Wow. I mean really, this is incredible. Thank you, everyone for all your great work. Looking at the dates you’ve all committed to finishing your packages, we at Wisdom Lives! will be ready to move forward within a month. Right now I want to introduce to you the 10 person teams that have been employed to receive these final packages and to immediately set in motion these plans. As well, these four teams will be able to work together to integrate the synergies that I think we can all see are possible.”

As Sydney began to turn around and wave up the four teams behind her, Ron Tyler stood up and shouted out, “Sydney, could I have a word before you do this?” Sydney turned back to acknowledge Ron. “Ah, yes, Ron. For those of you who don’t know,

this is Ron Tyler from Tyler, Barker and Cane. He was Brook Foster's attorney and he has been helping me with the implementation of Brook's will. "

By this time, Ron had walked up to the podium. "Thank you Sydney. Thank you also to everyone who has participated in this weekend. I think we can all agree it will go down as one of the most incredible weekends of our lives. I know it has been for me. And to top it off, I have just been handed these notes from 17 different people—some are here with us today and several have contacted me from the outside world in the last few hours. Essentially what I have here is a commitment by all of them to add to Sydney's investment in Wisdom Lives! that will enable an even greater impact. All told we have an additional \$283 billion being offered for a grand total of \$332 billion."

Sydney's eyes went wide as she covered her mouth with a muffled, oh my god, and gave Ron Tyler a huge hug. The reaction by the audience was a standing ovation as they realized what had just happened. Sydney and Ron talked while the applause continued. Sydney walked to the microphone and said, "Well, this is utterly fantastic and I can't help but think that Brook is looking down on all of us to see what he has set in motion. "

Sydney stepped back, took a deep breath and kind of shook her head with a wow expression as she took it all in. Then she returned to the microphone and said, "One of the conversations that Brook and I used to go round and round on was about the GI Bill. I insisting that it had been a catalyst for the huge transformation of the US from a nation of renters to a nation of homeowners, a nation of high school graduates to a nation of college graduates. It had sparked a huge increase in the sciences and technology and the boom times of the 50-80's. But Brook was always insistent that it had forced people—taxpayers—to invest in something they had no choice in and it would've been better if we had all been able to keep our money and do it with what we want. I had argued that the scale necessary for this change would never have coalesced from the individual level and produced the incredible results that the GI Bill did. But at this moment, I'm struck with the irony that the \$332 billion that has just been committed to our work is actually, as Brook said, coming voluntarily from the private sector. It's as if in this new time, it is PI instead of GI....Private Investment vs Government Investment. I stand here hopeful that the impact of this private investment around the ideas we've all worked on this past year will be as significant as what happened after WWII with the GI Bill. If it does, I honestly believe we can heal the planet, make a huge shift in human consciousness, and build new systems that will carry us forward in a way that supports the entire community of life—human, animal, plant and planet."

There was another round of applause. Ron Tyler left the podium area and as things began to quiet, Sydney said, "Okay then, let's get back to business here—let me introduce you to the four teams as the final act of this weekend. She turned again to wave the groups up.

Chapter 37

The Wholeness Rocks! catering van pulled out from the mansion, little noticed by the media that had been parked outside for the last week. There had been a large group of news trucks during the weekend gathering but now that everyone had left, just a couple of local news trucks had remained hoping to get a last-minute story.

Sydney was sitting in the back of the van and happy to leave the mansion and not be seen by anyone. She was heading over to the restaurant and once they turned the corner, she slipped up front into the passenger seat and said, "Thanks! It's nice to get out and not be noticed and I'm dying to see the restaurant and catch up with everyone for a few minutes." The driver smiled at her and said, "I know everyone will be happy to see you again. We've missed you so much!"

Just twenty minutes later the van pulled into the alley behind Wholeness Rocks! Sydney jumped out and walked inside. She had timed it so that the lunch rush was over and dinner prep just beginning but she hadn't called ahead. These days she was diligent about preventing leaks as to her whereabouts because it always resulted in a media rush. So, as she walked in there was the expected surprise response and lots of so glad to see you again's, how are you's? from everyone.

The visit lasted just long enough for Sydney to talk with everyone while waiting on an order of food to go. Just as the food was being put into coolers, Ian walked in to pick her up. They were heading to Amelia's home for a quiet dinner and some much needed privacy. Living at the mansion for these months meant living in a home that had constant activity and it was next to impossible to feel like it was really a home.

When they pulled up to Amelia's, she was sitting on the porch and waved to them both. Sydney skipped up the stairs while Ian gathered the coolers with the food. Before he headed into the kitchen, he said, "Shall I get this ready to eat now or do you want to wait?" Amelia smiled and said, "I've got some wine and Margaritas here so why don't we have a short cocktail here on the porch and eat in a little bit?" Ian responded, "Sounds like a plan to me. I'll be back in a few minutes, but go ahead and pour me a Margarita!"

Sydney sat down next to Amelia and said, "How thoughtful, Amelia. You know how much I love cocktails on the veranda with my favorite aunt. I'll take a glass of wine. Can I pour you a little more to top off your glass?"

"Yes, my dear, that would be nice. And I'm just glad you were able to sneak away and join me here. I'm sure the rest of this week you've been terribly busy getting everything tied up from the weekend event."

Sydney poured herself a Chardonnay, then added a bit to Amelia's glass. Finally she poured Ian a Margarita and set it down on the side table where he would sit. "Cheers, Amelia!" Amelia raised her glass and gave Sydney a big smile. They both took a sip and relaxed into their chairs. Then the screen door opened and Ian returned, picked up his glass and added a second "Cheers!"

"How are you feeling about it all, Sydney?" Amelia asked. "Personally I thought it was a terrific event and am so grateful I was able to be a part of it. I know there's a lot of work ahead, but it had a great beginning."

Ian was nodding his head in agreement and looking at Sydney too. Sydney said, "I do agree with you, Amelia, I thought it went very well and obviously the commitment by 17 others to increase the funds to over \$300 billion was a terrific outcome. It is about half of what is really needed but my fervent hope is that as we begin to implement all of these projects around the world, more will step up to keep it all going. Right now my four teams are working to put together a cohesive presentation and I plan to hit the road and sell this new story to the world. I expect to be gone for at least the next two months or so."

"Wow," said Ian. "It is really happening isn't it? You feel your teams will be ready to support the system implementation that quick?"

"I do, Ian. First, we aren't working in a vacuum. Over this past year while all of the work was being done and now with the completion of this weekend's work, we've been in touch with and networking with so many others who are deep into projects that easily align with what we're planning. What the \$300 billion has done is enable us to have a solid core path to work from but much of that will coordinate with other groups who are already on the ground working. We will piggyback on hundreds of these groups instead of starting everything separately on our own. The key here is finding the synergies and then integrating them. The funding also enables us to network and make this network very visible to the world population so the story becomes visible and makes it possible for local people to participate."

"Well darling niece, I have to say, I think Brook would be quite pleased with how this is all coming together. I reflect back on those few minutes he and I talked that day and I doubt either of us imagined we would be here within a year of his death. It is quite incredible when you think about it!" Amelia took a sip of her wine and just shook her head in a way that said, I can hardly believe it myself!

"Thank you, Amelia. I agree. I think Brook would be pleased. Even the mess that happened with Rosatti & Kern and Bodhi Chunduren I think would've shocked him but he would accept the need for that company to be dissolved. The rock that Big Pharma has been hiding under now for decades is about to be lifted and that will lead to many good things too.

“So, Sydney,” said Ian “I guess we’re through the hurting time then? Seems like that halfway world between old and new has made a big shift to the new. “ Ian looked at Sydney with big smile and said, “I don’t know how you made this happen, but once again, your optimism comes shining through. That quote has stuck with me ever since you mentioned it and yet, here we are with the new story about to begin. We are definitely out of the bog and it almost feels like we’re walking on clouds!”

“Oh my gosh, Ian. I’d totally forgotten about my telling you that quote but yes, good point, I’d agree, we are out of the hurting time. We now know what to choose—the Community of Life. It includes us all and it will keep us very busy for at least a generation or two. Busy for sure for all of the lifetimes of us three sitting here!” Sydney laughed as she said it and looked at Amelia who was nodding in agreement.

Ian’s face then got a little frown on it. “What happens when we get there then? Will we arrive at a time when these massive problems in front of us are resolved and this transformation is complete? Will we know what to do then?”

“I don’t think we need to worry about that now, Ian. The human journey has just sloshed out of the latest bog and our energy now is focused on solutions and this new beginning. This has happened over and over again throughout the human journey and I doubt we’re going to be that last wave, especially if we are successful in the work we’re initiating. But our time is now and it’s about the new story. If and when in the future there comes another hurting time, then those humans will have to deal with it. It will be their own time of the in between the no longer and not yet and it is impossible to know what that will be just as we didn’t know. For now, let’s see how Wisdom Lives! can bring the new story forward. That will take up all our energy and be a great adventure.”

“And on that note, “ said Amelia, “let’s have dinner! “

Sydney turned her head towards Amelia and laughed. “Ah, the voice of wisdom speaks!” The three of them stood up, gathered their cocktails and went inside.

The end of the beginning.....