

1

When Justin Cummings got up for school that morning his eyes were swollen and he had a bad case of the sniffles.

He couldn't remember ever feeling such a terrible pain. It cut like a knife turning deep in his gut.

He supposed his mother would say that life was filled with pain and joy and that at only fourteen years old, he had a lot more of both to look forward to. That didn't make him feel any better.

He was losing the great love of his life and there was nothing he could do about it.

Grams had a cold, for God's sake; it was just a simple cold. Or so they thought, before the doctor took that damn chest x-ray. Now they said she was dying.

It was inconceivable to Justin that a body could be snatched away when it was still so full of life. One day he and Grams were hanging out and laughing, and the next it was all coming to an abrupt end.

He had his entire life in front of him, as everyone liked to remind him. So why did he feel like he was at the end of his own rope?

Six months max was what the doctor had told the family; Grams should spend that time telling her family what she had intended to tell them over the next ten years. His mother, who knew everything, told him hope was not an option. Death was inevitable and it would not be pleasant.

He put on his gray pants and white oxford shirt. He pinched the knot of his navy and green striped tie, skewed to the side. He looked into the gilt-framed mirror at his gilded life now tarnished almost beyond recognition.

2

“I’ve got some bad news,” Kyle said, walking into Helene Cummings’s dressing room.

The makeup artist dusted a last blast of powder on Helene’s nose as she unsnapped the protective apron covering her clothes.

“Don’t use too much of that,” Helene said. “It makes me look old.” The makeup artist smiled and nodded amiably.

“So what’s up, Kyle?”

“‘Bup’ is up 2 points – a 19 rating and 34 share. Now the suits will definitely want to move it to five days a week.”

“Bup” was Kyle’s pet name for Battle Ultimo Prime Time, an elaborate interactive tournament game that had been growing its numbers steadily over the first three months of its life. Born as a handheld video game played in cyber space, it was the first such game to move to television – a big risk that was paying off big-time for the network.

Helene looked into the lighted mirror and smoothed the makeup under her eyes with her ring finger.

“So what?” she said. “We’re the lead-in to whatever show they have in that timeslot.”

“I find it difficult to believe the network would want an adult talk show leading into an edgy new show for video game addicted teenagers. We’re just not the same demo.”

Helene knew he was right. The only thing more important than the ratings was the demographics, and Bup was a godsend for advertisers targeting the elusive 18-49 year old male who usually only frequented extreme sports programs and teenage reality shows. It was the network's best hope for revamping its fledgling primetime line up.

"Kyle, we're the hottest show on the air."

"Last season we never slipped below a 35 share. Last week we hit a 28."

"It was a re-run!" Helene protested.

"It was still a 28. Anyway, one of the studios has a talk show with a bunch of twenty-somethings under development. It would probably make more sense as a lead-in than us."

"We created this time slot," she yelled.

Getting a talk show into a network's prime-access time slot was itself an amazing feat, accomplished only after the New York station Helene worked for lost its network affiliation and in a desperate scramble for programming put her show on in the coveted 7 p.m. slot. Her news background, coupled with some gutsy shows on terrorists, escalated the numbers and her stock to such heights that one of the networks grabbed it up in syndication. But Helene knew too well that she could be on top today and be yesterday's news tomorrow. Her life was lived in contractual increments, dictated season by season by how many households with TVs were watching her show – the rating – and how many people watching TV were watching her show – the share. "You're the senior producer. What are you suggesting?"

“We need to push the envelope. We need some hip, edgy shows to send a message to the powers that be – that you can be just as current as those twenty-somethings.”

“We need to show them we’re strong enough to be a great lead-in to anything.”

“Exactly,” Kyle said, sounding relieved.

“Don’t worry. We’ll do what we have to do to stay on top. I’ve taken this class before. What’s everyone talking about today?”

“The United Nations meeting; we’re already all over that, however we could use some new angles. And the crying Virgin Mary statue in Harlem.”

“So let’s do something on that.”

“Everyone’s doing it. We need to be different. I want the statue in here under controlled circumstances to see if it really cries. I also want the woman who owns it, but I can’t get a response.”

The stage manager stuck his head in the door. “One minute to air,” he called out.

“Go on,” Kyle said. “I’ll talk to you in your IFB. And don’t forget to keep the energy up. We’re taping three shows today.”

IFB stood for “interruptible feedback.” It was an earpiece Helene wore in her right ear, so the producer could give her information and suggestions from the control room during the show.

“I’m right behind you,” she said to the stage manager, as she walked the long corridor to the studio.

“Think edgy,” Kyle yelled.

Helene walked past the flashing red “on air” sign and into a studio the size of a gymnasium. Her set was in the center – a circle surrounded by floor to ceiling black retractable curtains. Half of the circle consisted of the stage and backdrop. The other half had risers with chairs. The audience was packed.

“Hello, hello” she said. “Thank you all so much for coming. It’s a pleasure to have all of you here today.”

She scanned the crowd for young faces. She knew Kyle was in the control room doing the same thing.

“So, we want edgy,” she said quietly into the microphone clipped to her lapel, as she looked out at the mostly well kept, middle aged women and men.

“Looks like the same group that comes to shake their booties every time we have an old rock star on,” Kyle’s voice said, as six manned studio cameras took their places in and around the perimeter of the set.

Helene couldn’t help but smirk. At forty-six she was part of a generation that refused to get old, relinquish control, or admit they were losing their grasp on the reigns of the future.

She took her seat in the big round yellow chair on the stage.

“Twenty-somethings my ass,” she whispered into the mike.

3

“If anyone in the world has something to be depressed about, it’s me,” Claire said out loud. “But I won’t allow it. I’ll fight this damn thing to the bitter end.”

She propped herself up on the pillows of her hospital bed, raised the back a notch on the mechanical hand control, and attempted to drift off into her daily meditation. It wasn’t so easy today.

She pictured her insides being eaten away by pasty brown globs of cancer cells. She tried to envision them flushed with healing flood waters of white light that cleansed them and turned them pink again, but she couldn’t get that image to stick in her mind.

She just kept remembering that cough; a simple cough, a chest cold like she’d had a thousand times before. How was it possible that this time could be so different? She didn’t believe it, not when Dr. Cohen pointed to the mass on the chest x-ray, not when he pulled out the CAT scan and said, “You also have multiple tumors in the liver. You’re in a fairly advanced state of cancer. Our options are limited at this point.”

“Our options are limited,” kept floating in her head along with a thousand other words and pictures – images of her childhood, her child’s childhood, her grandchild’s childhood. She remembered the sensation of breast feeding, how the baby’s mouth clung to her nipple with a warm, vacuum-like suction that tickled and taunted and wouldn’t let go. She could feel the milk flowing through her glands and then, as if the milk were a narcotic, the infant’s eyes would roll in the back of its head and the baby would drift off to sleep. Some women hated breast feeding. Not Claire. She loved the feeling of oneness with her child. Now, her child was a huge TV star who exceeded every dream Claire ever had for her.

I just can't believe God would bring me this far to drop me off now.

She returned to her mantra, gently chanting silently in her head, *ah-eng, ah-eng, ah-eng*, until it was all there was. She had been meditating for a long time, back to the days when the Beatles were hanging out with the Maharishi and Transcendental Meditation was a popular path to enlightenment. Claire had always been interested in her higher consciousness. She once trekked off to Nepal to meet an ascetic who lived on the top of a mountain; the locals had said he could levitate. When she got there, he said levitation was a not a spectator sport.

She had visited the ancient ruins of Machu Picchu, high in the Andes of Peru, a vortex some believed, with a special energy, possibly left behind by visiting space aliens.

She took vitamins and ate mostly organic. For a while, she was on a strictly macrobiotic diet with brown rice and tofu and raw vegetables, modeled after eating habits in Asia, where many types of cancer barely existed. The diet was supposed to cure cancer, though the husband and wife who developed it both died of the disease.

So maybe the doctors were right. Maybe nothing could cure cancer. Or maybe tofu, the white tasteless glob of soybeans, and the staple of macrobiotic diets, was the culprit. After all, soybeans were one of the most genetically engineered foods on the planet.

It wasn't even possible to find a purely organic soybean anymore; cross-pollination saw to that. While everyone was arguing about whether to allow genetically engineered foods into the food chain, a few farmers planted genetically engineered crops in close proximity to organic crops, and the birds and the bees and the bugs did the rest.

It was the business of nature to maximize efficiency and the nature of business to maximize profits. Claire knew that some things couldn't be undone.

The thought of bees reminded her of the stinging in her chest.

Her torso ached from the damn tube that was stuck between her ribs, sucking fluid from her lungs. She opened her eyes to take a sip of medicinal green tea, and there stood the man who reminded her of all her troubles – patiently watching her from the doorway.

She hated him. She knew it wasn't his fault, but she still hated him.

“My beautiful Claire,” Dr. Cohen said. “How are you today?”

“I'm in pain. I'm in a lot of pain. My side hurts, it's hard to breathe, my brain is like mush. I just hurt all over.”

“It's from the operation, Claire. It's called 'pleurodesis,' or 'sclerosis of the pleura.' It always hurts, but at least the fever is gone. We drained some fluid out of your lungs, and that should make you feel better. It should make your breathing easier too. We put some talc in, to keep the fluid from coming back, but that always makes it hurt more. I'll get you some more pain medication.”

“No, never mind. I think I like the pain. At least I know I'm still alive.”

“I don't want you to be uncomfortable. Lung cancer is a tough one to tackle.”

“I'm fine, Steve. I'll let you know if I need anything.”

Dr. Cohen sat down on the side of the bed and took her left hand in his. “You know, it's really hard for me to see you hurting. We've been friends for a long time. You're one of the kindest, most admirable people I know. Your honesty, integrity, and character have been an inspiration to me for a long time. I don't know why things like

this have to happen, but I want you to know that I truly wish we didn't have to go through this.”

“But we do, Steve, and it's okay.”

“And now we have to decide what to do next.”

“It's not like I have a lot of choices,” she said, coughing and wincing in pain with each exhalation.

“But you do have choices, Claire. If the chemo works, you can pick up three or four months.”

“Three or four months? My ex-husband used to take that long just to make a decision. I want to be immortal. Can you make me immortal?”

Dr. Cohen grimaced. “No, Claire, I can't make you immortal. Unfortunately, in this battle it's the cancer cells that are immortal. I know three or four months doesn't sound like a long time, but a lot can happen in four months. The closer you get to the end, the more important those months will become.”

“A lot can happen, huh? Like a cure? Is four months going to bring me a cure?”

“No, it's not.”

“Then it's just four months of looking and feeling like shit, of looking and feeling like I should be dead but I won't be. I don't want my grandson to remember me that way.”

“I understand, Claire, and it's entirely up to you. But Justin and Helene will love you no matter what you look like. The drugs today are really good. They only kill the divided cells. The problem is, that includes the blood cells, so you get fatigue, nausea, diarrhea, maybe some numbness in your fingers and toes.”

“And hair loss. Don’t forget the hair loss.”

“Yes, hair loss. Well, I know a great wig maker.”

“No thanks, Steve. I have my herbs and green tea and homeopathics. I’ll meditate and do yoga and find my inner source to take over the healing. I’m going to make my exit my own way, with whatever’s left of my own hair.”

Unless, of course, my long shot comes through.

4

Robert Morgan could have been anyone, sitting on a newly refurbished park bench in Central Park, but he was someone, he told himself, fighting back the tears of depression that had come to define his life. He was looking out at the most beautiful part of the city. Central Park still had the breath of summer in its soft breeze – Indian summer they used to call it when he was a kid. But the best part of this corner of the park, on Fifth Avenue and 58th Street, was that he could sit amidst the trees and look out at the city – his city – the city he had always fought to protect. It wasn't that Bergdorf Goodman's was the most beautiful store or even had the most beautiful clothes, but it was her favorite store, or that the Sherry Netherland was the most elegant of hotels in a city known for elegant hotels, but it was home to Cipriani's, her favorite place to meet him for lunch. He missed Maria so much.

He had always wanted a daughter who would look just like her, but time had slipped away so quickly. He had always thought there would be more time.

He looked out at a group of children playing in the grass and thought of the children he would probably never have. Not because at 53 he was too old to be a father, but because children didn't seem to be a priority anymore. He couldn't envision himself with a woman so young that her desire for children would be his motivation. He couldn't envision himself with anyone, ever again. He knew the thought was ridiculous; there were plenty of eligible women in Manhattan and he was still handsome, when he didn't have big bags under his eyes. He was a successful partner in a security firm and still famous from his days as Chief of Police. He knew he needed to stop drinking and he fully intended to do that someday. He knew he wasn't supposed to mix alcohol with his

medication, but somehow he couldn't help himself. That was also something he was working on. After all, it wasn't like he was drunk all the time. In fact, most of the time he couldn't even tell the difference until he tried to stand up.

The security business had been good to him. There was always a terrorist threatening all that Americans held sacred, a new computer virus to shut down an industry, or a billionaire who needed protecting. He missed being in the thick of things, but he was proud to be the spokesperson for his firm and was frequently called upon by the media to discuss security issues. And he never drank before a public appearance – at least not much.

Still, with all he had to be happy about, he couldn't stop the negative thoughts. That's what the medication was supposed to do. So, why didn't it work?

He closed his eyes to rerun the security plan for the upcoming United Nations conclave. It would have to run flawlessly. He knew he could have devised a better plan if Lockhart had consulted him earlier. But he hadn't. So Robert worked the angles in his head, looking for any critical flaw that might bring the whole thing down.

He could hear children laughing around him, and before he knew it he was drifting off to sleep, re-entering a dream that had plagued him for weeks.

It all started out innocently enough. He was working a security plan for the city, going over details with his colleagues, when all of a sudden a giant dragon appeared, moving through the streets of the city like Godzilla in an old movie. Only the dragon didn't hurt the buildings or the shops, it just devoured the people. They screamed to Robert for help, one after another, as they were chomped in half and thrown, some into the east river and the others into a huge fire. There were legs and arms that had been

bitten off and strewn around the streets, and there was nothing Robert could do about it. He stood powerlessly watching the beast as it consumed all human life. He knew he was next.

He woke with a start as a child's ball bounced off his park bench.

The children laughed and jumped as they kicked and chased after the bright orange ball. One little girl always kept herself apart from the group. She looked to be about six or seven. Her beautiful blond curls were blowing in the warm air but never seemed to get mussed. The curls bounced as she leapt up and down, and her perfectly pressed pink jumper revealed a lacy underskirt as she turned to look at him. The ball rolled his way again and she came toward him. He tossed it back, right to her, thinking at least she'd have her chance at the ball. But she let it roll past her feet and just kept walking closer to him.

"He's coming," she said with a laugh. "I promise you, he's coming."

"Who's coming?" he asked.

"You know," she said and she just kept walking, right past him. He followed her with his eyes until he lost her in the rush of 5th Avenue foot traffic.

5

Justin hated hospitals, had never had to stay in one, and couldn't imagine why women had their babies in them. He walked through the second floor of Manhattan Mercy Hospital, glancing in the rooms of sick people lying there in those awful gowns, mouths open and drooling with wrinkled skin and fear in their eyes, a step away from a ventilator or worse. What could be worse than having a tube shoved down your throat, unable to speak or breathe on your own? And that smell, he hated the smell. He prayed Grams wouldn't go that way.

He loved her more than anyone he had ever known. She was always ready to laugh and play. She craved fun and excitement and to learn new things – not at all like his mom who only learned new things for a living.

Justin considered himself long past the kid stage, but he didn't plan on ever being in the fully adult stage like his mother. Life was so serious for her. Work was so serious to her. The more successful she became the more she was afraid to lose her success.

He peeked around the corner of the door, hiding flowers behind his back. "I have a special delivery," he announced, affecting a British accent, "for the most beautiful old lady on the floor."

"Well, young man, I suppose that would be me," she said, clicking the remote to mute the volume on the TV.

He pulled the roses out from behind his back.

"Oh my, lavender roses," Claire said, holding her breath for a moment so as not to endure the pain of coughing.

"Purple," he corrected.

“Purple would be darker. These are lavender. Either way, not a color found in nature, at least not on roses. So much more fun, I think. Thank you, my love.”

“They were the brightest, most beautiful flowers at the Korean deli,” he announced as he leaned over her bedside and kissed her on the cheek. Suddenly Natasha, a small red dachshund, poked her head out from the backpack over his shoulder.

“Oh my God, you smuggled her in! Don’t let anyone see her, they’ll have a fit,” Claire said.

“I won’t. I stopped home and she wouldn’t let me out of the door without crying. She just really wanted to see you.”

“Oh, put her down here,” Claire said excitedly, nodding toward her bedside. She began to caress Natasha’s head.

“What are you watching, Grams? Yu-Gi-Oh? I didn’t know that cartoon was still on.”

“You used to collect all the cards, remember?”

“Sure. We’d do battle with the monsters. I always won, of course.”

“That’s because you had all the Egyptian god cards,” she said

“Well, you let me have them.” He laughed.

“Because it was more fun to see you win than to see you lose.”

“I’ve never been a particularly good loser, have I?”

“So, just resolve never to lose. That’s what I’m doing, and so help me, I’m gonna beat this thing.” Tears suddenly welled up in her eyes.

“If anybody can do it, you can, Grams.”

“Do me a favor, Justin. Go over to my suitcase and bring it back here for me.”

Justin walked over to the small closet, door ajar, where Gram's overnight bag rested on the floor. He wheeled it to her bed, laid it on its side, and unzipped it.

"There's a book at the bottom," Claire said. "Will you get it out for me, please?"

He rummaged around, pushing aside her makeup bag and a few tee-shirts and sweat pants neatly folded and stored in plastic Ziploc bags.

It was an old book, leather bound and worn, dark brown almost black, with tissue-thin pages.

"This, Grams?"

"That's it," she said extending her hand for it. "This is a very special book." She took it with her right hand and caressed it with her left, pushing away imaginary dust. It was well-worn, yet pristine. It had been carried many places, but never read.

"It's a bible, my bible, my only bible for that matter. It was given to me many years ago when I went on a spiritual retreat upstate. You see, there was this very handsome young man, and I fell very much in love." Tears came to her eyes and she stopped speaking for a moment, covering her mouth with her hand. "He was so handsome and we were so in love and so young and everything was so intense and glorious and miserable all at the same time." She smiled through her tears. "I'm sorry, sweetie, I don't mean to cry. Memories bring out funny things in me lately. Anyway, I want you to have this."

"Me?"

"Of course, you," she said. "Who else would I give it to, your atheist mother?"

"An agnostic, Grams. She's an agnostic."

“Whatever you say. Anyway, you’re the only one who has the sense to read it, or the brains to understand it. Lord knows, I don’t. I tried reading it once, but it never made much sense to me, all those ‘thees’ and ‘thous.’ It was so confusing. He loved it though. He read it all day and all night sometimes. He got so much meaning from it, so much comfort. I wish I could get that from a book, but I never understood.”

“So, what happened to you guys?”

“The usual, I guess. We were young, we hadn’t found ourselves. I certainly hadn’t, and he wanted to be a priest. It seemed like a stupid thought – considering we were in love, unconsummated mind you, but still in love. I told him if God had wanted him to be a priest he wouldn’t have fallen in love with me.”

“What did he say?”

“‘The devil goes after those he fears the most, and he uses your greatest weakness.’ I’ll never forget that. He meant me. I was incensed. I was also flattered, I suppose. I was his great weakness, and he believed the devil was using me to keep him from his God. And I have no idea why he thought the devil feared him so much.

“Nonetheless, it was pointless after that, very romantic, but pointless. It was pretty amazing though, to be viewed as someone’s great, but forbidden temptation. Very Casablanca. So, I went back to Michigan and fell in love with your grandfather.” She laughed. “That was a helluva choice.”

“Wow,” Justin said. “You’ve had some life, Grams. So what happened to him?”

“He became a priest – Father David,” she said wistfully. “We kept in touch for a while, but I got sick of him trying to convert me. Anyway, he was a good man. He found something very special inside this book. Maybe you’ll find it too. He always

wanted me to read it. He said, 'A particular religion is not as important as finding your own personal relationship with God,' and this is where he found that relationship. Personally, I prefer meditation, but you'll let me know if there's anything important in there, won't you Justin?"

"Of course I will, Grams. You know I'd do anything for you."

"I know."

"But you don't mind if I leave this here for now, do you? I've got a Battle Ultimo game at a friend's house and I don't think...."

"Of course," she said as the phone rang. "I wouldn't expect you to walk in somebody's house with a bible. And leave the backpack. Your mother is on her way over. She can take Natasha home."

"Great. Thanks Grams. Oh, don't tell mom about the game...I mean, she thinks I'm studying."

The phone rang and she picked the receiver off the nightstand. Justin placed the bible next to the base of the phone.

"Hello." Her eyes immediately lit up. "Of course, of course. Tell me." There was excitement in her voice. "When? Tomorrow? I'll be here. Thank you. Thank you so much." She hung up the phone breathlessly. Justin could see her heart pounding in her frail chest.

Just then, Helene walked in the room. She rolled her eyes and shook her head in disbelief at the sight of Natasha's little head sticking out of the backpack. Before she could scold Justin for bringing the dog to the hospital, Claire hung up the phone.

"I have the most incredible news," she announced.

6

“Are you sure you don’t want to come?” Evelyn Clairborne said as she fastened the clip of a diamond earring to her right ear.

“I’m sure, dear.”

Archibald Claiborne was grateful to have some time alone in his apartment, when he would be left to the machinations of his mind and heart to make the most important decision of his life. It was a decision he made theoretically many years ago, never imagining he would actually have to choose in real life. But now the time had come, and he prayed he would be up to the challenge.

He watched adoringly as his wife of forty years moved gracefully through the bedroom in her long black gown. Soon she would be off honoring a long-since-planned commitment to a charity gala. It was one of the most important events of the year for the medical community; all the prominent physicians would be there, but not Archibald.

“What are you going to do?” she called out from the bathroom where she was putting the finishing touches on her hair.

“Read, relax. Maybe watch TV.”

“Are you sure you’re okay, dear?” she said kissing him on the cheek. “You really haven’t been yourself lately.”

“I’m fine dear. You go and have a good time.”

Archibald walked his wife to the front door. She turned to blow him a kiss as the elevator arrived.

She knew nothing of his dilemma. He had kept it from her out of love, at first. He didn’t want her fragile psyche to struggle with the inevitable. Later, he kept it from

her out of the hope that she would never *need* to know. She was a worrier by nature and worry would not alleviate the situation at hand. Now, he would have to tell the story – all he had learned – the dark secret he harbored, that would change so many things.

He hoped for a moment that he was wrong, that he could find some divine guidance to pull him through this phase, but he only felt forsaken. There was no where to turn.

He walked to his office and stood in front of the bookshelves filled with antique medical books. As he gazed at them, seeking the pleasure these possessions always offered him, he raised his right hand to his collarbone. He felt the thin gold chain around his neck. *Nothing* was right anymore. He had never grown accustomed to wearing a necklace. It might as well have been a shackle. He tugged on it, and when it broke, he hurled it to the floor. He glanced at his feet, but he didn't see where it had fallen. It didn't much matter. Nothing mattered anymore.

He was startled when the doorbell rang, although he half expected it. There were two imposing figures in black trench coats with hoods pulled over their heads; the kind you would find in a coven of witches. Archibald couldn't stifle a brief chuckle at the theatrics.

He surprised even himself when he calmly led them into the library. It was his favorite room in the house, with its oak paneled bookshelves and fancy moldings that announced to all who entered that he had done very well in life. Behind his desk was a very valuable, framed copy of the Hippocratic Oath, not the modern one, rewritten in 1964, but the original version, in Latin, as written by Hippocrates, the father of medicine. On it was the Staff of Asclepius; a single serpent entwined around a knotty tree limb, the

staff of the ancient Greek physician deified as the god of medicine. It was the traditional symbol of the medical arts.

To first of all do no harm, he thought. Despite popular perception, that line had never been part of the Hippocratic Oath. For the first time he found himself wondering why not.

He took his seat behind his desk. Without a word, the smaller of the two men took a seat in one of the chairs across from him, while the larger leaned against Archibald's wall of precious medical books. Archibald glanced over as the man pushed back his sleeves to reveal his massive forearms tattooed with skull and cross bones.

"I can't go through with this," Archibald said. The flame from the fireplace glowed with a reassuring warmth. "I just want things to go back the way they were."

"Think of what you're saying, Archibald," the smaller man said. "You're not being rational. You're not thinking clearly. Give it some time. You'll see, everything is going to be fine. You worry too much. Don't make a hasty decision when so much is at stake for all of us."

"I don't care. This is an unexpected development, and I cannot continue."

Archibald watched as the larger man pressed against his books. The man adjusted his arm and a rare volume sitting on the edge of the shelf fell to the ground with a thud. The man kicked it to the side.

"Are you contemplating suicide?" the man in front of him said.

Archibald looked back at him but didn't answer.

“You were greedy. You wanted it all,” the man said. “There’s nothing wrong with that. Everyone does. But you can wind up with nothing if you’re not willing to pay the price.”