

CHAPTER ONE

“Your Highness, you’ve got to listen to me. Lives are at risk. People think they are losers. But they’re not. You’ve got to help. Everyone has to think he’s a winner.”

“Your Eminence,” the cardinal of New York said quietly.

“What?” Bob asked, confused by the cardinal’s first words since Bob had cornered him near the altar of St. Patrick’s Cathedral.

“I’m Your Eminence, not Your Highness,” the cardinal explained.

“Hell, I don’t care if you’re my little brother. What I care about is—”

“A casino. I did hear you correctly, didn’t I? You want to build a casino in Las Vegas.”

“That’s right. But not just any casino. Captain Bob’s Casino. Where everyone is a winner.”

“And you want the Holy Catholic Church to give you two million dollars—”

“To get started—”

“To get started. Right. And then how much?”

“Oh, I don’t really know, but I think a few hundred thousand a month should be enough.”

“And where are we supposed to get that kind of money? Do you think we have millions just sitting around waiting to be given away to the first half-wit who asks for it?”

“Of course not. Of course not. But you could sell a Michelangelo or two. No one will miss them.”

In response the cardinal stared silently at the stone floor while touching his forehead with his left index finger, as if he were thinking over Bob’s suggestion. Two of the cardinal’s aides noticed and be-

gan moving slowly towards Bob Edwards, fighting the flow of the crowds leaving after Mass. When the cardinal saw his aides were approaching, he politely resumed the strained conversation.

“Mr. Edwards—or may I call you Bob?”

“Bob’s just fine.”

“Well, Bob, you are to be congratulated for having concocted the most sublimely ridiculous idea I have ever heard. And I’ve heard quite a few. But I’m afraid the Church will have to pass on this opportunity to—”

“Holy God! Mother of Mary!” Bob cried out in despair. “What the hell’s wrong with you people? I thought charity was supposed to begin in the Church, or something like—”

Profound gasps of disapproval interrupted Bob. He turned around and saw three elderly women sitting together in a pew, staring open-mouthed at him. They pointed mutely at the cross above the marble altar, attempting to make clear Bob’s obvious error.

But Bob ignored their distress and turned impatiently back to the cardinal just as the cardinal was starting to make his escape. That was when Bob noticed the two aides moving in his direction.

“OK. OK. We’re going, aren’t we Hoover?” Bob said loudly, apparently to no one in particular. “But I’m telling you, people are in desperate need of help. And I can’t help all of them all by myself.”

Bob reslung his dark blue sportsbag over his shoulder and then walked briskly past the cardinal’s aides. But as Bob passed the pew where the three elderly women were sitting, the women first glanced at each other and then spoke in unison, with deep conviction.

“Young man, we’ll pray for your soul.”

This stopped Bob dead in his tracks. He turned around again and studied their wrinkled faces for a moment. With equally deep conviction he responded.

“Ladies, you ain’t got the time.”

CHAPTER TWO

One month later Bob Edwards was sitting in a large upholstered chair waiting for his meeting with the directors of the Carnegie Foundation. He was wearing a white shirt, a red tie, and the dark blue wool suit he had bought at Brooks Brothers the day before. But Bob could never have been mistaken for the astute man of business he was trying to imitate. Although Bob had dignified flecks of gray throughout his brown hair, his hair always looked wild and unkempt within minutes after he had combed it. Whenever he was thinking hard about one of his ideas he ran his fingers through his hair, and he was always thinking hard about one of his ideas.

As he waited, Bob's thoughts raced along even faster than usual. He was starting to get nervous that his appointment might be canceled and he would never get a Carnegie grant to build Captain Bob's Casino. His confidence slipped further away with every passing minute. The high he had felt when his grant proposal writing instructor, Ms. Buford, had screamed with delight about his Carnegie Foundation appointment was now only a distant memory.

Bob's racing thoughts began tumbling out of his mouth. But he caught himself quickly and realized what he had to do. Fortunately no one else was in the waiting room, so he pulled his dark blue sportsbag out from behind the chair, set it on his lap and unzipped the top wider. A cold black nose and two sad eyes peeped out. The light tan, almost golden head of a small cocker spaniel pushed its way through the opening in the sportsbag.

"Hoover, what do you think? Are we finally going to get the money or not?"

Hoover looked at Bob curiously for a moment and then raised his right front paw in the air.

“Paws up you say,” Bob laughed. “And I thought these old Carnegie misers wouldn’t—”

When Bob said the word Carnegie, Hoover quickly put his paw down again.

“Hey, make up your mind, Hoover,” Bob complained. “Will they or won’t they?”

Just then Bob heard a click as the knob of the conference room door began to open. He set the sportsbag down quickly and Hoover hid inside it, away from the unzipped opening. It was a game they had played many times.

A woman in her late fifties, with short silver hair, stood in the open doorway. “The directors will see you now,” she said without smiling. “Please come with me.”

Bob followed her through the doors into a long, narrow room. At one end was a large fireplace and a portrait of Andrew Carnegie. The portrait overlooked a conference table that was nearly as long as the room. Numerous pictures of former directors hung on the mahogany paneled walls. The ten current directors, mostly in their sixties or seventies, all sat at one end of the table, beneath Andrew Carnegie’s portrait.

The chairman spoke first. “Have a seat, Mr. Edwards,” he said, but he sounded as if Bob’s sitting down was going to ruin his day.

Bob looked around for a chair near the directors, but there was only one unoccupied chair in the entire room, and it was way down at the other end of the table. Bob went to get it, so that he could move it closer to the directors, but he soon discovered that it was screwed to the floor. Bob hesitated, looking around the room once more to make sure this was the only available chair, and then sat down in it reluctantly.

The seat was set so low that he felt more like five feet tall than almost six feet, so he got up and twirled the chair around to make the seat higher. But when he sat down again the seat sunk even lower. Bob literally had to sit on the edge of the chair, and prop himself up on the table with his elbows, just to see the directors.

The chairman sitting at the other end of the table cleared his

throat. "Are you comfortable now, Mr. Edwards?" he asked coldly.

"Uh, sure," Bob replied.

"Good, then let's get this over with. The directors voted, against my will I might add, to arrange this meeting because of the unusual nature of your grant proposal. Several of the directors were very eager to hear you describe, in person, this plan of yours. Or should I say scheme? In any case, we have several questions for you, if you are willing to answer them."

"I'd be happy to," Bob said, realizing immediately that his only hope for success was to keep a majority of the other directors on his side.

"Then," the chairman continued, "as you very well know, the Carnegie Foundation only awards grants to those institutions and individuals who can demonstrate to our satisfaction that they have a well-thought-out plan to help alleviate an important social problem. Now, in your own words, please tell us, what is the social problem which you feel needs your special attention?"

"The problem is that so many people feel like they are losers. That is what I want to change," Bob said emphatically.

"Now let us grant, for the sake of the argument, that that is a deplorable, unfair, unjust and despicable situation. How do you intend to alleviate it?"

"By building Captain Bob's Casino. Where everyone will be a winner."

"But Mr. Edwards—"

The chairman was politely interrupted by a thin, nearly bald man seated to his right. "Mr. Chairman, may I ask Mr. Edwards a few technical questions before he continues?"

"Certainly, counselor."

"Uh, Mr. Edwards," the directors' lawyer began, "have you registered the name *Captain Bob's Casino* in Nevada?"

"Not yet."

"Oh my," he said dismissively, pausing briefly before continuing. "Well, can we at least assume that you are a captain in the army?"

“Not really.”

“In the navy?”

“Nope.”

“Were you ever a captain?”

“No, but—”

“Are you a liar, Mr. Edwards?”

“Of course not,” Bob blurted out. “It’s just that captain and casino sound nice together.”

“Well what about Bob?”

“That’s my name.”

“We know that. But—”

“I just think Captain Bob’s Casino sounds like a great name. That’s all there is to it.”

“Well then, that explains that, doesn’t it? You must be an advertising executive.”

“No. I’m not.”

“Excuse me, Mr. Edwards, but if you’re not in advertising, how do you know Captain Bob’s Casino sounds like a great name?”

“I just think it does.”

“Oh,” the lawyer said, momentarily confused by such a simple answer. “Then I have no further questions at this time.”

Bob felt relieved. He hoped a more sympathetic director would ask the next question, but the chairman took up where he had left off.

“So, Mr. Edwards, in what way do you feel society is harmed by people feeling like they are losers?”

Bob answered passionately. “Well, first of all, it’s perfectly obvious no one likes being a loser. So society would be completely different if everyone knew they were winners. People wouldn’t be so grouchy, so malicious, so often. They would be generous to each other. And then everyone could relax knowing they wouldn’t run into any grouches all day long.”

The lawyer interrupted. “But doesn’t that imply that all grouches feel like they are losers?”

“Well sure. They must,” Bob said confidently.

“I hardly think you are standing on solid ground with that argument, young man,” the chairman said, clearly annoyed. He glanced imperiously around the table at the other directors, as if to say that that should be sufficient to satisfy their curiosity. Then he continued.

“I think, Mr. Edwards, that we have now heard enough about Captain Bob’s Casino to reach our decision, so let us get down to the business at hand. In your grant proposal you asked for four million dollars, correct?”

“Uh, yes,” Bob quickly explained. “Ms. Buford at NYU said to always ask for twice as much as you need, so you can compromise and still get what you want. She said that’s one of the secrets of grant proposal writing.”

“I see. So you really want two million.”

“That’s right.”

“Well, I’m sorry, but we really can’t give you that much.”

“That’s OK,” Bob said, “one million will do for now.”

“I see. So you really want one million dollars.”

“No. I really want two million, but they told me to ask for four million. Don’t you see?”

“Oh, we do. We do. But we’re awfully sorry, we just can’t give you that much.”

“So, I said that’s OK,” Bob said, getting impatient to find out how much he had been awarded. “Just give me what you can and I’ll work with that.”

“That is very generous of you, Mr. Edwards,” the chairman said.

“Thank you,” Bob said, missing the ironic tone in the chairman’s voice. “So how much can you give me at this time?”

“At this time,” the chairman said, pausing for effect, “nothing.”

“And later?”

“Also nothing.”

“But they said at NYU that just getting an appointment with you guys was—”

“Mr. Edwards,” the lawyer interrupted, “was that NYU’s day school or the night school?”

“The night school.”

“Well, there you see, Mr. Edwards—”

“But I passed!”

“I’m sure your mother is very proud of you,” the chairman said sarcastically, and then got up and left the conference room through the doorway next to the fireplace. The other directors all stood up quickly and followed the chairman out of the room. But as the last director walked through the doorway, he turned and smiled apologetically.

“We’re really very sorry to disappoint you, Mr. Edwards,” he said quietly.

CHAPTER THREE

Ten minutes later Bob was walking slowly down Broadway, resting one hand on the dark blue sportsbag slung over his left shoulder. Occasionally Hoover would push his head through the opening in the sportsbag and lick Bob's hand, but Bob remained lost in the thoughts which were racing wildly through his head. He had already been walking for nearly an hour when he realized he was on 6th Avenue, near 10th Street, so he turned left. At the third townhouse on the left side of the street Bob walked up the front steps, unlocked the three locks on the door, and entered the dingy stairwell. He didn't even bother to check his mail. That he only did once a week, on Sunday mornings, to discipline himself against entertaining unreasonable hopes.

Bob ran up the five flights of stairs, with Hoover's head sticking out of the sportsbag to enjoy the swiftly changing views. *The 10th Street Workout Club*, Bob called it. And in his own mind he was still *The Stairmaster*, as a long-departed neighbor had once dubbed him. Bob had run up and down those five flights of stairs for almost 30 years, ever since he had moved in as a senior at NYU. Although Bob did not think that he had begun to slow down yet, he had stopped timing himself years ago. And sometimes he felt that any day now he would wake up one morning and feel *It*. Although Bob was only 50, the *It* he had begun to fear was old age.

Bob ran right up to the door of Apartment 5C and then stopped to unlock, with four different keys, the four locks on the steel door. Once inside, he relocked them all and put the floor bolt in place. Bob was not particularly nervous about burglars. His apartment had been broken into once, but that was before he had bought the

steel door and the locks. Still, he saw no point in being careless. Over the years 5A had been hit four times, 5B six times and 5D three times. He didn't even keep track of the burglaries on the other floors, but he did remember the murder in 2A in the Spring of 1969 and the one in 4C on Thursday night, June 13, 1985, just one floor below him, and just a few hours before his 40th birthday officially began. Bob had no illusions that living in the Village was like living in Vermont.

He did, however, love living in the Village. And not only because his rent-controlled apartment still cost less than \$200 a month. He loved being near New York University. He loved walking down Bleecker Street. He loved the pubs that came and went over the years. He even liked Washington Square. And he never tired of using the NYU libraries. In one way or another he had always managed to hold onto his library card.

As Bob set the dark blue sportsbag on the floor near his bed, Hoover jumped out. Bob ignored Hoover at first, and began checking to make sure that the books on the top shelf of the bookcase by his bed were all due next Wednesday. Bob carefully rotated the borrowed books up from the lower shelves as their due date neared, but he still double-checked them occasionally. Hoover's continuing to run around in circles in the small room, though, soon distracted Bob.

"Damn it, Hoover," Bob growled affectionately, "what's up?"

Hoover sat down in front of Bob and raised his right front paw.

"Paws up? Hell, I haven't even asked you a question."

Hoover kept his paw raised.

"So you insist on paws up, do you? Is this a joke? Well I say we've hit bottom, kiddo. Let's just give up."

Hoover barked loudly. Loudly for such a small dog, that is. Then he raised his paw even higher.

"OK, OK," Bob said. "Have we hit bottom or not? Tell me that."

Hoover kept his paw raised high.