

CHAPTER ONE

“Hello, citizens of the world,” a spellbinding male voice bellowed from a small television screen. The pale blue light of the screen cast shadows over objects that resembled objects of torture. Opposite the television, along the surface of a couch, a large mass heaved. It was alive.

On the television the camera zoomed in for an extreme, grainy close-up of financial mogul Jonathon Spade in all his immaculate, superficial perfection—cleft chin; bonded teeth, without the unsightly gaps and crevices; and tons of makeup to mask lines of plastic surgery. The camera pulled back to reveal Spade with his trademark slick pompadour hairstyle. “You may know me from my reality shows *Pick the Pauper* or my other hit *Brag about your Billions!*”

The camera moved to a wide shot of Spade throwing his arms up in victory. “But let me tell you about my greatest accomplishment!” Behind him was the new Manhattan skyline—a theme park of monorails, Ferris wheels and roller coasters. Fireworks lit up the horizon.

Wearing a black double-breasted, pin-striped suit, Spade strode through a line of red-, white-, and blue-clad Rockettes as they high-kicked behind him and waved sparklers. He strode between tiny gymnasts who somersaulted and maneuvered around poodles on unicycles. “I would like to introduce you all to my Spade theme park extravaganza!” With a daring glance, Spade extended his hand, “Come with me . . .”

The lump on the couch, a young man of slender build with wildly disheveled curly hair, lifted his head and stared at the television. In a state somewhere between dream and consciousness, the young man reached out for Spade’s hand and allowed himself to be pulled into the commercial.

“Miss America opens her arms to all who cross before her,” Spade proclaimed over the scene of a tour boat passing the Statue of Liberty. Lady Liberty appeared to have been given a

makeover to match that of Manhattan's—a large bandage covered her newly constructed nose, her breasts appeared two sizes larger than before, and the word "Spade" flashed in neon lights on her crown.

The commercial cut to the excited energy at the New York Stock Exchange. Tickets floated from the ceiling like confetti. The young man, now playing the part of a stock market trader, grabbed a ticket, read the contents, and raised his arms in victory; he was a winner!

"In our land of wonder, every man is a rich man!" Jonathon Spade's voice echoed. "Our theme park is action-packed where visitors can be heroes . . ."

The young man circled the crowded streets of Chinatown. Vendors peddled their merchandise: fish, teas, and ointments. Suddenly black-garbed ninjas surrounded him with knives. A sword vendor bowed and presented his display. The young man picked his poison—a large, dragon-etched samurai sword. When the crowd dispersed, the ninjas threatened with their knives. The young man saved the crowd by taking out each ninja with the nimbleness of a cat and expertise of a great samurai warrior.

Jonathon Spade voice continued over the action, ". . . or villains."

Sitting at a cute little bistro table in Little Italy, dressed in a pin-striped suit, the young man sipped pasta through pursed lips and downed a glass of vino. A black sedan pulled up to the curb. The shaded passenger's side window lowered, and the tip of a sawed-off shotgun aimed through it. The young man removed a gun from his ankle holster and shot the villain in the passenger's seat. He then performed a duck-and-cover, somersault over the hood of the car to do in the villain in the driver's seat. After firing, he blew the smoke from his gun while two Italian beauties appeared at his side

"And let's not forget romance." On television, Jonathon Spade walked down the street with a beauty contestant on each arm. "Forty-second Street is the place to be, where hearts are always wild and Spade is always Trump. It's all here for you in *my* Manhattan."

"Jake!"

Jake immediately awoke to the sight of a lumpy figure haloed against the dim blue light of the television. Horrified by what he saw, he screamed. He widened his brown eyes to improve his vision in the dim light.

"What's the matter with you?" asked Judy Morgan, his beauty queen girlfriend as she flicked on the switch of a tilted floor lamp, illuminating the room and revealing the objects of torture as merely hand-assembled furniture. But this furniture was built by someone with unskilled hands—Jake. Judy's bleached blonde hair was spun in tight curlers and plastic moisturizing gloves covered her hands. Dried green mask cracked around her lips as she spoke. "Sweetie, I've been waiting for you to come to bed."

In the light Judy was more ghastly than her shadow and Jake wished she would turn off the lamp and step away from the television. She was blocking his view. "Oh, I fell asleep on the couch," he said.

"On that dilapidated thing when you could've been in bed with *me*?" Her attention turned

to the television.

On the screen, Jonathon Spade broadcasted over the end shot, “Come with me on a journey that will stir your senses—sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch—to a place where you can dream the American dream. For information call 1-900-55-SPADE. That’s 1-900-55-SPADE.”

Jake reclined back on the couch staring dreamily at the television. “That could be me someday, Judy.”

“Yeah, and I’ll be your wife—Miss Universe—and we’ll live happily ever after in paradise.” Judy kissed him on the forehead, leaving behind a smudge of green mask. “Now, can you come back to bed? You have to be up early for your presentation.”

Looking at her discouragingly, he wiped away green traces of facial mask from his forehead “Right on.”



The morning sun struggled to shine through dawn’s haze and cast only a faint light across Jake’s face. Opening his eyes to the dimness, he couldn’t help but see it as a premonition for the whole day. He had waited his entire life for this moment—the end of his college days and the beginning of his life—only to wake up to a dreary day. He thought: *If the sun has such a hard time shining today, what chance have I got?*

Jake Kramer had been ready to enter the workforce since he was first able to count change at age five, but his destiny was predetermined at birth. He, like everyone else in his family, would eventually work in the family’s furniture business. Although several members of the Kramer family had gone on to different occupations, most had stayed. Family was so paramount to the Kramers, that even the workers in their factory were considered members of the family. In fact, it was even written in the company handbook “Every employee is treated like one of our own. Stop by and have some pie!”

But since Jonathon Spade’s reign, things had changed in America. It was now easy to distinguish the haves from the have-nots and everyone lived agreeably in accordance with his corporate status. A man’s life was defined by his corporate standing, whether he was a worker cog, a manager, or an executive. Coming-of-age in the Spade era, Jake was determined not to become just another cog in the corporate wheel.

As a child, Jake possessed a strong entrepreneurial streak that at first excited his parents but they later found to be a little obnoxious. During Kramer Furniture company picnics, Jake sold lemonade—diluted lemonade. He learned at an early age how to spread his resources for more profit and his customers were too polite to criticize his product.

Jake continued his quest to earn money throughout his teenage years. As he saw it, everything was for sale. If he saw an opportunity to make money, he took it. He never wrote classmates’ term papers in school; however, he did help coordinate a skilled service. In the hallways, between classes and after school, he developed a business passing love notes between fellow students for those who couldn’t speak for their own heart. Wherever there was a need or a desire or lack thereof, Jake was there to profit.

After high school, there was little doubt Jake would attend Spade Corporate College

where he excelled in sales and marketing. During his freshman year, Jake won Spade Corporate College's Diamond in the Rough Award for Most Promising Upstart Entrepreneur.

At the heart of Spade Corporate College was teaching students what made a person successful—not taking no for answer, how to manipulate people based on fear, and how to sell someone something they didn't really want or need.

Jake was a straight A student and excelled in every class. However, on the morning where his dreams and hard work will become a reality, a knot of uncertainty formed in his belly. This was especially strange, because he had never before been insecure about his abilities or aptitude; neither had he been prone to worry. Shaking himself free from the dismal, Jake rose from the bed and lumbered to the bathroom where Judy, fresh from the shower, was covering herself with a thick layer of moisturizer.

Judy organized the bathroom like a backstage beauty pageant prepping area with makeup lights and every cosmetic produced by man. Her beauty regiment was similar to a businessman's Filofax—if everything was not arranged, organized, and outlined, she might miss a portion of her daily routine. Horror was when she'd forget to use toner or under-eye mask; her whole day would be ruined. Smiling at Jake in the mirror's reflection, she glued on false eyelashes. "Shower's all yours, sweetie."

"Thanks." Removing his robe, Jake stepped into the gardenia-scented, steamy shower.

The spirited scent of his manly soap helped neutralize the fragrance of Judy's lotions. He wiped the steam from the mirror in the shower, shaved his face, and plucked a few nose hairs that were coming dangerously close to protruding out of his nostrils. Appearance was, of course, paramount to financial success. After all, who did business with a person with unsightly moles or blemishes? How could one have a successful business pitch if he had an imperfect physical appearance?

Freshly clean, Jake went to the closet and pulled out a hanger containing a suit, still wrapped in a plastic bag. He ripped it open as though it were a Christmas present. There was nothing better than a brand-new suit. The pressed seams and the smell of new polyester gave him the inspiration that on this day anything was possible. While admiring his appearance in the mirror, he plunged his comb into a carton of goo which he then used to slick down every wet curl on his head. He buttoned the jacket of his navy, double-breasted, pin-striped suit, straightened his red polyester tie, and then inserted a red-, white-, and blue-striped handkerchief into his left breast pocket. He was ready to blaze his trail.

Many neighborhoods still showed devastation from the economic downslide—pothole-filled roads, ill-working traffic lights, run-down houses, and unkempt yards. Driving down the unsponsored street was like entering a black-and-white movie. Here in this dull, colorless street was where the "cogs" lived—those whose fate was to turn the corporate wheel.

It wasn't until the upper-class neighborhood of Kellogg Street that color returned to life and Judy settled into the bucket seat of Jake's sports car. The dinginess of the uninspired cogs made her uncomfortable. Only those deemed worthy of corporate sponsorship had any chance of

a decent life—access to brand-name products and credit. The thought of going through life using generic products and services ran a shudder through Judy’s perfectly postured spine.

Despite her discomfort in the company of cogs, Judy volunteered helping unsponsored women with makeup and hygiene tips. Her slogan: “It doesn’t cost a lot to make a profitable impression.” For one event she made T-shirts and coffee mugs to promote her humanitarian side, which was now a big part of her résumé, and her interview pitch: “Working with the needy looks good.”

“I think we should buy one of these cute little houses. It would be a starter home, of course. We’d have to start small. It wouldn’t be tasteful for us to buy a mansion as our first house.” She turned toward Jake with a competitive gleam in her cornflower blue eye. “You know, Kathy and Marc’s first baby is going to be sponsored by Gerber. How exciting. I’d like Johnson & Johnson to sponsor our first. I love their lotions.” She admired her hands. “My hands are as soft as a baby’s bottom.” She placed the back of her hand against Jake’s cheek. “See?”

“Soft, but I’ve never felt a baby’s bottom against my cheek.”

“That’s why I love you—not only upwardly mobile, but funny, too.”

Looking ahead at the clean streets of the corporate-sponsored neighborhood, Jake knew marriage and a family would be a part of his future, but it was never a dream. To him, marriage was a job: find a woman that suited his skills and abilities, negotiate the terms, and then sign the contract. He studied Judy thoughtfully. With her looks and poise, and his ingenuity, *surely* they would find someone to sponsor their adult lives. He grinned; his future was only a block away.

A large neon sign with large flashing bulbs welcomed all to the Spade Corporate College. Inside the faux gold-trimmed lobby and marble-like tile floors, scantily dressed models served sparkling wine and cocktail wieners on pewter trays. Meanwhile, future Spade graduates passed out business cards, marketing their individual services to one another.

Ashy, curly-haired Gustav Kramer arrived to the lavish lobby unaccompanied. His missus left him years ago for reasons he could never bring himself to mention—not even to his son Jake. Throughout the years, Gustav grew accustomed to attending functions alone and even if a date offered him her company, he would politely refuse. Gustav was a loyal man and remained true to the deepest part of his heart—his wife.

Making his way through the polished and politicking students, he accepted every business card, profile, and résumé he received. When the students learned that he was the owner of the family-run business, Kramer Furniture, the business cards, profiles, and résumés were immediately revoked.

Judy, a spokes model student, handed Gustav her sexy—yet professionally attired—glossy 8”×10” photographs of herself. “Mr. Kramer, you should use me as a spokes model to promote Kramer Furniture. I look good on wood.”

Gustav hesitated to take her photograph. “Very lovely, Judy, but we at Kramer Furniture take pride in our furniture selling itself.”

She pitched a perfect smile. “But I can make it look more comfortable. Maybe after you

see Jake's presentation, you'll change your mind."

"Maybe," Gustav muttered softly.

"Dad!" called Jake as he made his way through the crowd. "I didn't know you were coming."

"It is my son's graduation. Wild horses couldn't keep me away." Gustav hugged Jake.

Jake patted Gustav on the shoulder and pulled away. "Well, glad you could make it."

An irritating screech echoed through the lobby. Everyone turned their attention to Dean Middleton, a balding, gaunt man, dressed in a sharply tailored suit. "May I have your attention? There will be plenty of time for networking and self-promotion after the presentation."

Jake, Judy, and their immaculately dressed fellow graduates found their seats in the front rows of the auditorium. In the dark, people sitting in the recesses of the gallery and the nosebleed balcony watched family and friends of the Spade graduates.

Dean Middleton lifted his arms. "Please rise for the pledge of allegiance."

Graduates stood up with their hands pressed over their hearts. "We pledge allegiance to the Plutocracy of America and to the Corporation for which it stands . . ."

Parents and guests of the students could be seen mouthing the words while others in the audience didn't dare to speak, ". . . one nation incorporated for profit and prosperity for all."

Afterward, Dean Middleton once again took center stage. "Family, friends: welcome. This is a grand day for students of Spade Corporate College. Before we start the presentations, I am proud to announce that Jonathon Spade has sent a special message for today's graduates."

Center stage, a grainy hologram of a mechanical statue of Jonathon Spade materialized. "Congratulations, Spade College graduates of your specific city and/or state," the statue said in an inarticulate robotic voice. "You are on your way to walking in my rather large and oversaturated footsteps. By this time, you have memorized my books: *Be a Man, Make Money* and *The World is Yours; if You Can Pay for It*. Now it is *your* turn to make money!"

The graduating class sprung to its feet, cheering loudly. Dean Middleton stepped into the middle of the hologram as it disappeared. "And now our future business leaders of tomorrow will present their senior assignments."

A highly fashionable, emaciated young woman promoted a straw basket with her vitamin crunch cookies. "I invented the recipe by replacing the flour with a bottle of crushed multi-vitamins. All you need to eat is one of these delish cookies." She walked into the audience and gave each person a taste of a dry, crunchy cookie. "It will give you your vitamin requirements for your entire day and has enough fiber to fill your tummy so you'll never feel hungry. And for an extra added treat, try one of our peanut butter or carob chip flavors."

Fellow classmates and family coughed and choked down her cookies and nodded appreciatively. The young woman smiled proudly. "You will never have to eat anything else again."

Next, a pimply young man in a suit demonstrated a statistical graph on a large monitor. "How many times have you presented a claim to your insurance company, but they never pay. Well I have a solution for you—*Insurance* Insurance. Twenty dollars from every paycheck is a

small price to pay to insure your insurance company.”

Dean Middleton stepped to the microphone. “Next we have Jakob Olaf Kramer who will present his Eterna-chair.”

The audience applauded politely as Jake walked across the stage. At the same time a few of his classmates lugged onto the stage what looked like an average, everyday recliner. Jake stood beside the recliner and clasped his hands. “Time is money. Every businessperson knows that taking time for lunch, or even walking from the office to the kitchen could waste valuable time and money. I have invented the Eterna-chair that takes care of all your entrepreneurial needs without ever having to leave your seat.” He waved his hand. “Now for someone who needs no introduction, but would like one anyway, my girlfriend, Judy Morgan, who graduated valedictorian in the Spokes modeling department.”

Judy posed with one hand on her hip, accepting applause from the audience, and presenting Jake’s chair with the other. She sat with perfect posture in the chair.

Jake winked. “She does make the chair look comfortable, doesn’t she?” A few whistles and hoots arose from the audience. “Why would anyone so comfortable want to get up from their work?”

With a flirtatious smile, Judy elbowed the left arm of the chair and up popped an embedded laptop. She pressed her hands to her cheeks in mock-surprise, and then pretended to start typing.

Jake grinned proudly. “You might work so hard, that you work up an appetite.”

Judy leaned seductively forward and tapped the bottom of the chair. A door flew open and she tossed in a bag of popcorn. With the press of a button the popcorn sizzled and crackled under her butt. She spread her legs to open the trap door under the seat and retrieved the bag of steaming popcorn. She tossed a popped kernel into her mouth. “Mm.”

“That looks very tasty,” Jake said, “but you may need something to wash it down.”

Judy kicked the side leg and out slid a small cooler, loaded with sodas. With a perfect smile, she flicked back the tab of the can and took a drink. “Now *that’s* refreshment,” she said.

The audience sat forward, entertained by every feature that Judy presented of Jake’s chair. He knew he had the audience in the palm of his hand. “And now for Judy’s favorite feature,” he smiled.

Judy strapped an electric belt around her waist and thighs. She pulled a lever and the seat began to vibrate, causing Judy to wiggle and jiggle.

“Instant abs and thigh sculptor—a workout . . . while working!” Jake proclaimed proudly.

Oohs and aahs erupted from the audience. And then, unbeknownst to Jake and Judy, smoke started to plume from the back of the chair, forming a mushroom cloud. The oohs and aahs turned into cries of “Oh no! Look out!”

Suddenly flames shot out from the back of Jake’s Eterna-chair. Judy leaped from the hot seat and into Jake’s embrace. He could only watch in despair, as he saw his presentation and his future both go up in smoke.

Dean Middleton dowsed the senior project with a fire extinguisher. “What are you trying

to do, Kramer, bring down capitalism?”

Laughter and boos burst from the audience. The fire alarm blared. Sprinklers rained down on the audience. Chaos ensued as the crowd rushed to the exit.

Dean Middleton shouted over the alarm, “I suggest we exit quickly as the flames may spark any faulty electrical wires in this facility!”

While students rushed and pushed in the most orderly manner, Gustav helped with the charred, foam-covered Eterna-chair. They dragged it outside where fire trucks arrived to put out the flaming electrical inferno.

A corporate CEO, impeccably groomed in a pin-striped suit approached Jake. “Sorry, kid,” he said solemnly, “there will be no sponsorship for you; you’re too much of a liability.”

Gustav placed a supportive hand on his son’s shoulder. “The idea was very ingenious. You just didn’t have all the details perfected. It’ll come.”

“You don’t understand—I’ve failed. No corporation will sponsor me now. I won’t be able to rise to management status. I will forever be a cog.”

“There is nothing wrong with being a cog.” He put his arm around Jake. “We’re all cogs at Kramer Furniture and we have great fun. It’s a good life.”

Jake sighed, “Dad, the family business? There’s no job security working for the family.” He looked at his father in earnest. “You know it’s only a matter of time until you’re bought out.”

Gustav revealed a serene smile. “Then I will make the most of that time.”

Jake grumbled, “There isn’t much hope or future for a young man without a corporate sponsor.”