

Pain is inevitable.
Suffering is optional.
~Author Unknown



Had I looked, I might have seen the first punch coming. But I never had a clue about the knockout.

The sun was just beginning to warm the house on that cool, clear Sunday morning in late spring as I sat in my kitchen reflecting on my good fortune.

Gazing out through the broad glass doors, beyond the manicured lawn and glistening swimming pool to the beauty of San Diego's Mission Bay, I was one with the limitless ocean that stretched away to the pale horizon.

A spectacular 180-degree view. It cost a bundle, but my law practice paid for it. Life was good.

My wife's striking reflection appeared in the glass as she came from behind to stand between me and the view. Turning to face me, she looked beautiful as ever.

Her long blonde hair was pulled back to show off her magnificent bone structure. The quality cut of her pale blue silk blouse accentuated the sleek lines of her body.

I smiled.

She did not. "I am getting a divorce," she announced.

Her words bounced off me. "From anyone I know?" I quipped, setting my coffee down on the table.

She sighed. "Sam, why do you always do that?"

"Do what?"

"The wise-guy answers. You're always making a joke. You don't take me seriously."

Intent on maintaining the peace and contentment I'd felt just before she released her thermonuclear device, I shifted my gaze to take in the blue of the ocean and the two or three fluffy white clouds hovering above the horizon.

"I take you very seriously, Cindy," I said, reconnecting with the steel of her eyes. "But I can't believe you're serious about this. You want a divorce? Why?"

"Oh, I am serious. I want a divorce. Now. And I just told you why."

The note of finality in her voice cut right through me. "But how are you going to live?" I objected, still reeling from the blow. "I mean, before you met me you shopped at Target. Now you shop at Nieman Marcus and Sax 5th Avenue."

I regretted the words as soon as they left my tongue.

"I want you out of the house," she said. She turned and walked away, heels clicking on the hardwood floor.

That was the first punch.

My head spun. She wanted me to move out? It wasn't going to be as simple as that. Nothing was going to be simple.

We had three children, after all. What about them? How would they feel about seeing their dad kicked out of his own house?

I sat there for a few minutes, struggling to get my bearings. Finally I got up and crept upstairs to the

bedroom, where I knew I'd find her.

Sure enough, there she sat, leaning toward the mirror over her hand-carved mahogany dressing table, fixing a smudge in her eye makeup.

"Cindy, can we talk about this?" I ventured.

"There's nothing to talk about. I've made my decision."

"But—what about the kids?"

"They stay with me, of course."

"Look, Cindy ..." I sat down on the foot of the bed, looking at her image in the mirror. "I love my kids! And they love me. You can't just break up our family like this," I pleaded. "It's not right. No matter how you feel about me, you have to consider the kids."

Anchoring her hands on the edge of the dressing table, she turned slowly in her chair and looked straight at me, her eyes cold as polar ice. "Samuel, I am thinking of them," she said.

Ach, Samuel. I hated it when she called me that.

"No, you're not," I countered. "You're only thinking of yourself."

"Hah! How would you know who I'm thinking of? According to you, I don't think at all."

She had a point there. Very little that she did had ever made sense to me. In the beginning I'd been so stunned by her beauty that it hadn't mattered.

It hadn't really mattered later, either. I had learned to live with it. I didn't expect her to make sense.

She turned back to the mirror and resumed playing with her makeup. "I repeat: I want you out, now."

"So ... we're going to share the kids?"

She didn't answer, and I plowed ahead. "You can't stop me from seeing my kids, you know."

She shrugged. "No problem. I know how attached they are to you. You can see them as often as you like. I'm the one you can't see. I'd be just as happy if I never saw you again."

What could I say to that? I turned to go back downstairs to make sense of this encounter with Cindy. We had never been a stellar fit.

She liked caviar; I preferred chips and dip. She liked five-star hotels; I preferred rustic bed and breakfasts. How had we managed to build a life together?

From the first, she had enjoyed the benefits that came with having a lawyer for a boyfriend. And I had been awed to find that a woman with her matchless looks would be interested in me.

Finally, after three years of dating, she had wanted more. "When is the big day?" she had asked.

"Every day is a big day," I'd countered. Sarcasm was an old habit, my first line of defense when I didn't know what to say. That time, it made her laugh.

Three months later, I woke up married. Fourteen years ago ... or was it fifteen? I counted. Fifteen.

Looking back, I saw that the last half of our marriage had been edgy. Nearly adversarial at times. There had been clues. But I had been too wrapped up in my career to pay attention.

The realization that she wanted me out had knocked the wind out of my sails. But, being a practical sort, I took a deep breath and regrouped. I was going to have to find a new place to live.

I went out to my car to get my cell phone and grabbed a property management firm's business card I had stuck in the visor.

Rather than go back into the house, where I obviously wasn't wanted, I gave them a call. They had an apartment they thought I'd like.

I turned the key in the ignition and set off to have a look.

*If you don't understand it,
I can't explain it.*
~Robert Shrum,
Democratic Strategist

2

The sun blazed so hot I could feel it burning my back and neck as I sat in an aging deck chair at the edge of an apartment swimming pool, doing my best to read every line of a lease agreement.

It was hard to see through the emotion. This was only a one-year lease, but twenty-five years as a litigation lawyer dictated that I read every word.

Amelia Lopez, the leasing agent, stood in front of my chair, staring. “Mr. Weisman, are you all right?”

She was a petite, dark-haired Spanish woman with just a barely detectable accent that showed up more in the cadence of her speech than in the actual words.

“Yes, I’m fine, Amelia,” I said. I wasn’t, but I didn’t like wearing my feelings on my sleeve. “I’ve just had a surprise, that’s all, and I’m not sure what to make of it.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. Usually, an employee is terminated at the end of the day on Friday, or on Monday morning when they come to work.”

Amelia frowned. “Excuse me?”

“Today is Sunday,” I explained. “So I can’t decide whether I was terminated, or exterminated.”

Her eyes widened. “Have you lost your job?” she asked.

I laughed to put her at ease. A light breeze flapped the green and white umbrella on the round metal deck table as she sat down in the chair next to me.

“No,” I said, realizing she must be wondering how I was going to pay the rent. “I don’t have a job. I have a law firm.”

Her face relaxed. “Oh, good. Well, I think you will like this complex. There is a vacancy on the second floor with a view of the pool,” she said. “Exactly what you asked for.”

She was probably in her late thirties, I judged, with a pleasant face and a nice figure. I couldn’t help admiring her long black hair, the way it reflected the sunlight.

An apartment complex certainly was not where I’d expected to be at this stage in my life, but it would do for now. “I’ll take it,” I said.

“Good, good!” Her smile was warm. It brightened her whole face and made her big eyes glow.

Doing my best to appear sharp and lawyerly, I picked up the agreement and thumbed through it.

“Everything looks pretty standard as apartment leases go,” I said, “but I do have a question about the Lease Addendum.” I pointed to the page. “It’s about these three words.”

She pursed her lips. “Our lawyer put that in there to protect us. Everything is about liability these days. No one cares about responsibility anymore.”

“My concern is, I have young children, and I don’t really want them to see anything of this nature when they come to visit.”

“You’re married?” Her eyebrows shot up in surprise. “I mean, it’s nice to see a concerned parent.”

I gave an offhand wave of the hand, as if I were speaking about a client whose problems had nothing to do with my life. “She asked me to move out.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.”

My mouth was dry and my stomach hurt. Oh well. This was no time to be focusing on that. “So tell me about the Lease Addendum,” I said.

She drew in a breath and pointed across the pool, beyond a group of young men and bikini-clad girls I took for college students, and two gray-haired men, all busy batting a large ball back and forth in the pool.

Caught up in my own preoccupation, I hadn’t even noticed their laughter and conversation. Now I noted that they seemed to be having a lot of fun.

I couldn’t remember the last time I’d had fun. And not just in my marriage. It had been a long time since I’d laughed in my career, too.

“Mr. Weisman?” Amelia was calling me back from my thoughts. “Over there, on the far wall?”

A large white sign with red letters on the other side of the pool bore the three words I was concerned about in the Lease Addendum: ‘NO NUDE SWIMMING.’

I felt my lips twist in something between a smile and a frown. “So ... nude swimming is a problem here?”

She leaned toward me with a serious expression on her face and spoke as if in confidence.

“On weekends, the college students go clubbing downtown until past two in the morning, then come to the pool to swim and hang out after drinking and partying. They used to go into the pool, and even the Jacuzzi, in the nude.”

She hesitated briefly and leaned closer. “And they would have sex.”

Despite the concern I’d expressed about my kids, my first thought was that I should have moved here sooner.

“Isn’t that why parents send their children away to college?” I asked. “So they don’t do it at home?”

“The college students were only part of the problem,” she said, keeping her voice low. “Our real concern is with the older residents in their late sixties and seventies, our senior citizens.”

“Ah,” I nodded knowingly. “The seniors were offended.”

“Not really,” she replied. “Senior citizens don’t often need eight hours of sleep. Or sometimes they go to bed so early that they wake up at four in the morning. Some of the harder ones would go to the pool, or the spa. They would swim in the nude, too. And,” she said, leaning closer again, “they would also have sex.”

She looked at the pool for a moment, then back at me. “One of the older men had sex with a college coed and suffered a heart attack. It was a mess. The gentleman was okay, but the owners were terrified. If it happened again and one of the seniors died, the apartment complex could be sued as a contributing factor in a wrongful death claim.”

“I see,” I said, still wondering what it might be like to swim in the nude with college girls.

My cell phone rang. I didn’t recognize the number. “Hello?”

“Hi, Sam. This is Alfonso Lechuga.” I had no idea who Alfonso Lechuga was. “I know your father from the plastics business,” he explained. “Your dad told me about that guy you defended, the ultralight airplane manufacturer.”

“McBairm. Yeah, so?”

“How you dug and dug until you found the evidence that showed how they’d set him up.”

“Yeah, he was framed. Very savvy scheme, but they missed one little detail.”

“And you found it.”

“Okay. So what about it?” I didn’t know what this guy was after, but I knew I didn’t have time for it now.

“You saved his business. He was going down, and you didn’t let it happen. That took guts, and determination. Very impressive.”

“And? So what’s that to you?”

“Your dad told me to call you about a legal problem I have.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “Who are you again?”

“Alfonso Lechuga. Your dad said I should call you. He told me you would do a friend a favor.”

I couldn’t keep the irritation out of my voice. “It’s Sunday, Mr. Lechuga. Please call my office next week.”

I put the cell phone in my pocket. “I keep telling him not to do that.”

Amelia looked confused. “Telling who not to do what?”

“My dad has people call me for legal help,” I said. “Then he tells them I’ll handle their problem for free. It makes my father look like a great guy to his friends. But it takes up my time, and I lose money. Of course, like a schmuck, I always do the work.”

“At no charge?”

I nodded, frowning. “At no charge.”

“I think it’s very generous of you to help people who are less fortunate,” she said.

“You don’t understand,” I snapped. “These people can easily afford my fees. They’re cheap, and they don’t want to pay for my services. If I asked them to do something for free, they would say no. They would want to get paid full price for what they do.”

Amelia’s cell phone beeped. “Yes?” She listened, then said, “Tell him to come down to the pool.” To me she said, “There’s someone at the office for you. They sent him down.”

A well-built man in his thirties, wearing dark slacks and a gray polo shirt, strode directly up to me at the table. I’d never seen him before.

“Are you Sam Weisman?” His voice was low and forceful, his eyes sharp.

“Yes,” I said, getting to my feet. “Who are you?”

He shoved some papers at me. “You’ve been served.”

I glanced at them and turned to Amelia. “My divorce papers.” I paused. “We were married for fifteen years. And we celebrated six of them. The rest? For the kids, I guess.”

I shook my head in resignation. “And now this.”

She said nothing.

“You know,” I went on, “what’s hers is hers; what’s mine is negotiable.”

Amelia’s eyebrows went up, but she didn’t say a word.

Realizing that the process server had not moved, I frowned at him. “Anything else?”

“Yep. I have another one.” He whipped out a second set of papers. “You’ve been served again.”

I read the first page. My knees didn’t turn to jelly. And I didn’t collapse back into the chair. I managed myself from pushing him into the pool.

“How did you even find me?” “We have our ways.” Turning away, he walked briskly to the front gate.

“What’s the matter?” Amelia asked with concern as I flipped through the second set of papers.

“My partner. He’s suing me for dissolution of the law firm,” I said. “He’s alleging that, per our partnership agreement, we split the debt and he retains all the assets and the clients.”

“Oh, no,” Amelia sympathized.

“Well, it’s Sunday. Nothing bad can come of this in the next twenty-four hours.”

John Lennon's voice blasted out "*Money –That's What I Want*"- on the cell phone in my pocket. *The best things in life are free- But you can keep them for the birds and bees- Now give me money that's what I want*

"It's my father," I told her, grabbing the phone. "He has this thing about that Beatles song, so I set his calls to *Money- that's what I want.*"

Opening the phone, I held up my hand for her to wait a second. "Yes, Dad."

"What's the matter with you, Sam?" His usual frontal direct attack. "She's a gorgeous girl, best thing that ever came your way. What happened?"

"I don't know what happened."

"What do you mean, you don't know? Why didn't you listen to me?"

"I did listen to you. I gave her the big house, the pool, the Mercedes. Look, this was not my idea. She's the one divorcing me."

"You're crazy," he said. "I'll call her, see if I can straighten this out."

I tried to slow him down. "I'm taking care of everything," I said. "I found an apartment with a view of the pool. And, yes, I'll talk to the kids. Haven't had a chance yet. They weren't home."

I listened for another minute with the phone held away from my ear. "Okay, Dad. I'll talk to you later." I put the phone back in my pocket.

Amelia still looked sympathetic, but her voice held a hint of disapproval. "I'm sorry for eavesdropping, but does your father always tell you how to live your life?"

"He doesn't tell me how to live," I retorted. "As a matter of fact, I've gotten some of the best advice ever from him. You wouldn't believe the experiences he's had."

Amelia said nothing.

I sighed. "At least he hasn't found out about my partner suing me. He thinks I'm still on the ropes, but that was the knockout punch."

I shifted in my chair, puzzling over my predicament. Things hadn't felt right in the office the last few weeks, I realized. I'd been feeling a peculiar distance with James and his staff, but nothing I could put my finger on.

My cell phone started singing in my pocket: *The best things in life are free- But you can keep them for the birds and bees- Now give me money (that's what I want)!*

*When in danger, when in doubt,
Run in circles, scream and shout*
~Author unknown

3

Driving to the office, I felt surprisingly good for a Monday morning. The car's climate control maintained the exact temperature I liked.

I pulled into the parking lot, turned off the motor, and sat staring for a moment in the warm silence.

It was a classy looking southern California rancho style office—two stories, white stucco, with a red tile roof and black wrought iron stairwell, shaded by overhanging palm trees and surrounded by giant orange and blue Bird of Paradise plants. Just seeing it reassured me.

My marriage might be over, but I still had my work, my clients, my career. Surely the lawsuit threat had just been my partner blowing off steam.

He was the excitable type. A misunderstanding, a surge of emotion between partners. Definitely not a knockout. I had overreacted.

Now that I'd been served, though, I thought about some of the terrible situations I had seen break up some attorney and business partnerships.

No, James couldn't be serious about this. I had given him everything he'd wanted. This was just a bump in the road, a wrinkle that would be easily ironed out.

After all, we were people who argued, screamed, and shouted for a living.

I grabbed my leather briefcase from the back seat, straightened my tie, locked the car, and walked briskly up to the stairs.

I would get through it fine. We'd had our ups and downs before, my partner and I, but I had been a litigator and trial lawyer for a long time. I was used to setbacks.

I hopped up the stairs, practically whistling. Pushing through the glass doors, I headed past the front desk.

My partner's office door was closed. Must have an early client meeting. I shrugged, opened the door to my office and walked in.

I stopped cold.

Other than my custom-made, specially contoured, back protecting, lumbar supporting, kidney massaging therapeutic desk chair, there was not a piece of

furniture or a client file in sight.

No desk. No file cabinets. No couch. No client chairs. No lamps. No plants. No pictures. Nothing.

“Beware the furniture movers,” I heard myself quote from the movie *Head Office*. One of my favorite movie lines.

I dropped my briefcase on the floor and dropped like a stone into my chair.

I stared into the blue space out the window, where the tops of the palm trees shivered in a slight breeze. This had gone too far.

Flipping open my cell phone, I dialed the police and explained the situation. “My partner has served me and locked me out. He had my furniture moved out,” I said, keeping my voice as level as I could.

“Has he committed any act of physical violence in the last thirty days?” the detective asked.

“No, no, but this is my office. He’s just a partner I brought in. He can’t do this to me.”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Weisman. There is nothing we can do. This is a civil matter, not all that different from a divorce, and unless there has been physical abuse we have no jurisdiction. We cannot get involved in a feud between two attorneys. I’m sure you can understand.”

I didn’t understand, but nothing I said would sway him. I closed the phone.

“What are you doing here?”

I spun around in the chair. James Watkins, my partner, stood in the doorway, arms folded over his polo shirt.

Tall and good-looking in a sporty, country club sort of way, he embodied the essence of what I like to call “the other three S’s”: Shallow, Self-Absorbed and Stupid. (Fitting stand-ins in for the standard “Shit, Shower and Shave.”) His posture was relaxed but his expression was firm.

“It’s my office,” I said.

“Not any more. We’re not partners any more, Sam. Go home.”

“James, we need to ...”

He held up a hand to stop me. “You know I can’t talk to you, Sam. We’re adversaries in a lawsuit. Someone will be in touch with you.”

He turned and walked away.

“But James, you can’t...” I was too dumbfounded to put a sentence together. “The furniture. Where...?”

I heard his office door close.

Silence, except for the echoing sound of a printer running and phones ringing

down the hall.

I stood up and looked around at my office, until this moment the office of a highly successful lawyer. Now all I could see were the deep creases left in the carpet when the movers took the sofa and the credenza and bookshelves out.

My next thought was that his mother had raised a moron. I was going to prove it but didn't know how and when.

He had the jump on me. The element of surprise. But he wasn't going to get away with this. Who the hell did he think he was?

"I brought you into this law firm, James," I said softly, addressing the bare wall. "I started this firm. I did all the hard work before I ever thought of bringing you in."

I turned and stormed out into the hallway. My throat was so dry I could hardly breathe. I felt the blood pounding in my neck.

At the water cooler, I grabbed a cup and drank two glasses, one after the other, gazing around, struggling to get my bearings.

Suzi Moreno, the paralegal, was at her desk, busily thumbing through briefcase law. She glanced up at me over her black-rimmed glasses.

"Suzi—" I started.

"I can't talk to you, Sam. I'm prohibited." Her attention went back to the book, ignoring me.

Funny. When I'd hired her, years earlier, she'd thought I was the greatest attorney in the United States. Maybe the greatest in the Western hemisphere.

Now I was invisible. This would not do.

I walked down the hall to James's office, threw the door open and charged in.

"Get out," he ordered, his eyes cold and mean as he rose from his desk and came at me. "Leave now, Sam, or Annalee will call security."

"James, this is my f*%!ing lawfirm!" I yelled. "You can't take it away from me! Where did you get such a crazy idea?"

"No, Sam, it isn't your law firm. It's *my* law firm. It hasn't been yours in a long time. Partners, remember? Well, I've terminated the partnership. By the terms of our agreement—which you signed, if you recall—upon termination, it became *my* law firm.

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. "That's crazy. You're a nut case, James. What the hell are you talking about?"

James frowned. "Sam, you agreed to all the terms and conditions. You signed the agreement. It sounds like you didn't even read it." His voice was even, measured. Patronizing.

"Of course I read it. I'm an attorney!" I fumed. "I know what it says! Get it out,

and I'll show you!"

"Where's your copy?" he countered.

"In the office file." I turned to go get it.

"Hold on, Sam," he said. "It's right here." He held it out to me.

I reached for it and opened it to page three. "There," I said, pointing to the relevant paragraph.

"Oh? Read it to me."

I read: "In the event this partnership is unilaterally terminated, all debts shall be evenly divided between the two parties to this agreement, and all assets and all clients and cases preexisting this Partnership Agreement shall remain the property of the terminating partner.' What?!"

Livid, I turned to the final page. My signature at the bottom hit me square between the eyes.

James shook his head. "Get out, Sam. And get yourself a lawyer. You're going to need it."

Realizing that my fury put me at a disadvantage, I took a deep breath.

"I am a lawyer, James," I said softly. "And the last thing I need right now is advice from a scoundrel. I don't know how you did it, but you..."

I turned on my heel and strode toward the main door. On the way I passed Annalee, James's gorgeous assistant. She glanced up at me with a slow shake of her head.

I nodded and walked on by, aware in spite of myself of the delicate scent of her perfume. It had affected me so profoundly that I had bought it for my wife for Christmas.

I couldn't think about that now.

At the front desk, Patty was transferring a call to James's office. Wearing her headset, she managed to look cute and businesslike at the same time.

I made my best attempt at a smile. "Hi, Patty."

A look of sadness came over her. "Oh, Sam..." she said, her voice tremulous with compassion. "I'm so sorry. I can't talk to you because of—you know."

"You're in on this?" I shook my head in disbelief.

"You were always so nice to me, Sam," she said softly. "You remembered to ask about my mother's condition. You brought me flowers—and not just on Secretary's Day. I just want you to know... well... thank you, but..."

"Oh, screw it, Patty," I said.

The office phone rang, and Patty hit the button. "James Watkins Law Firm," she intoned.

I couldn't stand it. Turning to leave, I stopped short. Two things struck me: first, that I'd forgotten my briefcase, and second, that my name had already been razored off the front door. It read: THE WATKINS LAW FIRM, not WEISMAN AND WATKINS LAW OFFICE.

Stomping back into my office—or what had been my office—I grabbed up my briefcase from the floor, next to the chair.

My chair.

Hesitating for only the briefest instant, I threw my case into the seat and rolled the chair forcefully out of the office, down the hall toward the front doors.

“Mr. Weisman!” Patty protested. “I don't think...”

I ignored her and burst through the doors and out onto the landing. Bang! Bang! Bang! Down the metal stairs I went, all the way to the sidewalk and parking lot below, shoving the chair with every ounce of determination I had. The wheels roared across the asphalt.

“Sam! Sam! Stop!” James shouted from the balcony. I kept going, undeterred.

“Hey!” I heard him pounding down the stairs. I pushed harder. His shoes slapped on the pavement as he ran across the parking lot behind me.

“Sam, hey!” He caught up and stood in front of me, forcing me to stop.

“What?” I demanded.

“What are you doing?”

“It's my chair!” I said. “And I'm taking it with me.” I felt like a dog with a ball in its mouth. I would not let go.

“It's not your chair.”

“Are you kidding? It cost me nearly four thousand dollars, James! I love this chair. I paid for it. It's mine.”

“The firm paid for it,” he said. “It's our asset. You know that.” He took hold of the opposite side of the chair and pulled. I yanked back. The chair mamboed between us, back and forth.

“Give it to me!”

“I won't. Get your hands off it!”

He let go of the chair and lunged at me headlong, butting his head hard into my chest. I reeled, inadvertently pulling the chair out from under him, dropping him flat on his face on the cement. He didn't have a chance to put his arms out to break the fall.

“Oh, f-me!” he groaned, bringing his right hand up to cover his nose and lip as he rolled onto his back, his knees in the air now.

Somehow I had managed to keep my feet. Too angry to care that he might

have broken his nose, I wheeled the chair to my car.

I had left the top down. Well, at least something was going right. I tossed my briefcase into the passenger seat, then picked up the chair and laid it on its back in the back seat.

Hoping James wouldn't recover and be hot on my heels, I jumped over the door into the driver's seat and turned the key in the ignition.

A glance over my shoulder told me that Annalee and Suzi were rushing to his aid. Great. Now I had become the villain.

I shot out of the parking space and sped past them before I caught myself and slowed down on my way to the exit.

My mind whirred. What the hell was going on? Had that clause been in the agreement when I signed it? No, it couldn't have been.

Though I couldn't recall reading the agreement before signing it, of course I had. And it had been drawn up by Allen Martin, an old-time lawyer my father had used before I passed the bar.

Martin would never have put in anything unfavorable to me. I missed that old guy. He had passed away a few months earlier.

My stomach hurt. I realized I was breathing fast and shallow, and my heart raced.

The sound of squealing tires, rending metal, and busting glass came from the boulevard in front of the law office. Two cars were stopped at the intersection, one plowed into the other.

Clouds of steam poured out of the car behind. The driver of the front car staggered out, one hand holding his neck and the other gripping his lower back.

Quickly, with a glance back to make sure James wasn't coming after the chair, I stopped and got out of my car and walked through the palm trees lining the street.

When I reached the man, I took out a business card and wrote "witness" on the back and handed it to him.

"You've got a great case," I told him. "Call me if you want me to handle it for you."

I knew I shouldn't have said that. It wasn't kosher. Too late. It was done. And it gave me an odd sense of satisfaction.

The guy looked at me, his face contorted in pain. He looked pale and weak. "Right now, just get me some help," he said.

I forgot about James. "Here," I told him. "Have a seat." I helped him over to the low block wall in the shade of the palm trees.

Whipping out my phone, I called 911 and gave them a description of the accident

and explicit directions to the scene.

Closing the phone, I told him, “They’ll be here in a few minutes. Don’t worry.” He nodded, glassy-eyed, still rubbing his neck.

Walking back to my car, I glanced up at the office. My office. It had always been mine, and it would be again.

“Take that, Watkins,” I said with a smile, flashing my fingers in a Victory “V” up toward his office window, where he would have gone to lick his wounds.

Why had James decided he needed to get rid of me? Was it just greed? Or was it his way of trying to prove himself to himself?

I had taken him on in a moment of weakness. I’d been producing enough work for three attorneys, and had a regular flow of case files to offer an attorney who would relieve me of my multitude of responsibilities.

A mutual friend had told me about James, touting him as an experienced trial lawyer, the rainmaker at the firm he was with. We had set up a partnership.

James had brought no case files with him, but that hadn’t struck me as a problem, since I had an overload. I was the rainmaker. In the two years he was with me I gave him files valued at more than a hundred thousand dollars.

But James had turned out to be a disappointment as a partner. Although he was a competent attorney, his surly and demanding disposition made him unpleasant to work with most of the time.

I had toyed with the thought of terminating him as a partner. Hah! I should have. It doesn’t pay to be Mr. Nice.

My cell phone rang as I was opening my car door. I pulled it out of my briefcase. “Sam Weisman,” I answered in my lawyer voice. It might be someone calling with a legal problem.

“Hello, Sam. It’s Alfonso Lechuga! Your dad said to call you? I tried your office, but they told me you no longer worked there.”

“Ahh—I’m in the middle of something right now, Alfonso,” I said as I turned the key in the ignition. “Call me back later.” He was still talking when I closed the phone and dropped it onto the seat.

All I could think was: Why had I ever gone into law?

Yet Alfonso’s call came as a reminder that I was an excellent attorney. What was it he had said? Guts and determination. Yes, and a quick mind. I worked hard to protect my clients. I made sure they got the best deal.

Still, uncertainty gnawed at me. Could I really have been so stupid as to sign an agreement that gave away my clients and all the firm’s assets? I tried to recall looking over our agreement. Had it been a client’s case, I knew I would recall every

word. But my own? Maybe I'd gotten sloppy.

*The dogs bark,
but the caravan moves on*
~Arabic Proverb

4

There's something tranquil about bodies of water. Even a pond or a swimming pool can have a profound calming effect.

I sat on a cloth-covered chaise lounge on the warm pool deck at the apartment complex, soaking up the sun and suntan lotion.

A gentle breeze cooled my chest, blowing across skin speckled with droplets of water where my kids had splashed me a moment earlier.

"Rachel!" I called out to my oldest. "Make sure the boys have enough sunblock on, especially Ryan. He burns easily."

"Yes, Dad," she replied with that theatrical gesture of boredom thirteen-year-old girls major in.

Rachel was a beautiful blonde like her mother, but with so much more composure in the face of life's ups and downs. Off-the-scale bright, she had character and fortitude to go with her intellect and class.

The boys were my hellions, especially Ryan, the youngest. He thrived on being the baby.

Adam, the second child, was our rebel. Like a lawyer, he would invariably answer a question with a question. Cindy insisted it was because I was a lawyer; she said it had rubbed off on Adam. I thought he was just trying to define himself by rejecting me.

Adam was almost twelve, but he had started rebelling at age three.

At the moment he was lying on a towel about twenty feet from me, wearing dark sunglasses and black trunks. The trunks went well with his deep tan and good looks, he'd told us, not to mention his James Dean mysterious facial expressions.

How he knew anything about James Dean was beyond me.

I watched Rachel chase Ryan around the pool with her tube of sunblock. He let her get close, then giggled and splashed her before bounding away.

Ever the dutiful, responsible sister, Rachel followed after him.

"Hi, Mr. Weisman!"

I turned to see Amelia Lopez walk past with a prosperous looking couple and what appeared to be their college age daughter, a slender, striking girl with a black

pageboy haircut.

I waved to Amelia. I wanted to say hello, but she had already gone on with her tour, touting the features of the apartment complex to her new client.

Ryan let out a screech from the pool. I straightened up from the chaise lounge to see him covering his face with his hand while Rachel stood by the edge of the water with her hands on her hips.

“Rachel,” I called out, “what’s going on?”

“She hit me!” sobbed Ryan.

“No, I didn’t.” Rachel rolled her eyes.

“She rubbed that cream in my face on purpose!” Ryan blubbered. “It stings! I’m going blind!”

“Ryan,” I told him, “settle down and get out of the water.”

He climbed out of the pool, dripping on the hot concrete.

“Come here,” I said. I stood and wrapped my arm around him. “Now take your hand away so I can see.”

His eye looked fine. “There’s nothing in your eye. It’s on your face. Here, put the sunblock on yourself. Then you can go swimming again.”

He took the tube and stomped off, glaring at Rachel.

“What happened?” I asked Rachel.

She leaned toward me. “Nothing. He just likes to complain and make a lot of noise.”

“Okay,” I told her with a half laugh. “Enjoy the pool.”

She beamed, and then turned to Adam with a twinkle. “Hey Jake, when Ryan’s done, you need to put some more on too.”

“Yes, Sarge,” he groaned, and then turned over to lie on his stomach, ignoring her.

She looked back to me. I gestured for her not to worry about it and took my seat again.

Pulling my sunglasses down over my eyes, I lay back to simmer in the warm, moisture-inducing sunlight. I caught a bare hint of salt on the offshore breeze.

I tried hard not to think about my soon-to-be ex-wife, my office, my father, or my house. It all threatened to shatter my peace of mind.

Behind me someone said, “You’ve got beautiful children, Mr. Weisman.” The slight Spanish accent told me Amelia had come back.

“Thank you.” I smiled at her. “Have you met their father?”

She smiled.

“Sometimes, they really push my buttons.”

“Oh,” she laughed, “they are young. That is their job.” She squatted down right next to my chair, almost kneeling. “You are very good with them. Firm, but not too demanding.”

“Well,” I said, “with three of them you get used to the noise. They can hit a hundred decibels in a heartbeat.”

Her face took on a serious expression. “They know you love them. And they know you are the boss. You should be proud.”

I looked away for a moment. Rachel was watching me with Amelia, but I knew she couldn’t hear our conversation. The other two were far enough away as well.

“I made myself a promise,” I told Amelia solemnly, “I wasn’t going to do to my kids what my father did to us. I’ve gone to great lengths to be involved in their daily lives and show affection.”

“That’s very nice to hear.” Amelia reached up to tuck her dark hair behind one ear with a lovely feminine gesture. Then she looked past me, and her face changed.

“I’m back, Sam.”

The voice of the woman who seemed to want me to sing in soprano came from behind my lounge chair. I could feel her plan to destroy me: Cindy had returned to pick up the kids. She looked nice in her tennis whites, short skirt and hair tied back.

“Cindy,” I said, “this is Amelia Lopez, my leasing agent. She found me the apartment.” I started to explain to Amelia, but she had already risen to her feet and was brushing the wrinkles out of her skirt.

“Pleased to meet you, Mrs. Weisman,” she said formally, and then turned to me. “You have my business card, Mr. Weisman. Let me know if you need anything.” With a glance at Cindy, she walked off toward the front gate of the complex.

Cindy tilted her head at me, her voice dripping with implication. “Sam, put your ego back behind your zipper, where it belongs.”

“Kids!” I stood up. “Your mother’s here. Time to go.”

Adam did a slow rollover and sat up. “We just got here,” he muttered. “What’s the rush?”

I bit my tongue to keep from saying, “Ask your mother.”

Rachel was trying to round up Ryan, who had splashed away from her at the other end of the pool.

“Sam,” Cindy said, “I’m having trouble paying for the yard maintenance, the pool, the Jacuzzi, the utilities and everything. It’s just too much.”

“I make the mortgage payments,” I said, making an effort to control my temper, “plus both car payments, the insurance, and all your miscellaneous bills.”

She sailed right on. "I've found a house for me and the children, but I'm going to need part of your proceeds from the sale of our house to pay off my debts so I can qualify for the mortgage."

She lowered her chin a bit, looking up at me with a forlorn twist of her lips. "It's for the children."

"I'll think about it," I said, honestly considering that they would need a good place to live.

Rachel came up with Ryan in tow, wrapped in a towel and squawking at his sister about something. He grinned at Cindy. "Hi, Mom!"

Adam sauntered over and stood in dark silence for a moment. "Beware the furniture movers," he said.

"That's not funny, Jake," I said, scowling at him.

"It's what you always say," he answered with a shrug.

Cindy just smiled.

I turned to Rachel. "You have everything? Towels? Sunblock? Flipflops?"

"Yes, Dad," she said. She puckered her lips and gave me a kiss.

"Love you, kids," I told them.

We said our goodbyes and Rachel herded the boys toward the front gate. I couldn't help but admire her initiative.

Cindy walked after them. Over her shoulder she shot back at me, "I meant what I said about the proceeds from the house, Sam."

I practically bit my tongue in two, determined not to argue in front of the kids again. Then the wrought iron gate banged shut behind them, and they were gone.

It was not yet noon and the pool area was empty. A rich, endless blue sky arched overhead.

My patience had been stretched to a tiny thread, and I lay back down on the chaise lounge in the sunny warmth and tried desperately to find that elusive sense of peace I had felt earlier.

"At least I have a pool," I said softly to no one in particular. Out here there were no irritating phones ringing with people asking for free legal advice, no adversarial confrontations, no lists of demands.

Well, Cindy had a demand, I reminded myself. But all in all, it was quite pleasant. I could feel my muscles growing less tense. My eyes closed in peaceful repose.

Yap! My eyes flew open. Yap! Yap! I sat up. Yap! Yap! Yap! I stood up and looked around. Yap! Yap! Yap! Yap!

Right above me on the apartment balcony overlooking the pool stood Mrs.

Larson's tiny Yorkshire terrier, fiercely determined to state its territorial claim. Apparently I was in its view.

"Be quiet. No barking, please," I asked nicely.

Not only did the yapping not stop, it grew faster and louder. This was ridiculous. What was wrong with this dog? Was it a battery operated barking machine?

I wanted to march up to Mrs. Larson's door and demand she take the dog inside, or maybe I could complain to the manager's office.

But she had paid the pet surcharge, and the complex rules allowed animals on balconies until ten. I had found that out when I'd complained the first time.

Yap! Yap! The dog challenged me with a tiny growl. I closed my eyes, feeling the red cloud of rage rising. "Shut up!" I said. "Stop barking!"

Yap! Yap! the dog answered me, and growled louder.

"Stop barking!" I repeated. "Stop it! Stop it! Stop it!"

The dog continued to bark, even faster. My commands fell on deaf ears. The dog was really getting on my nerves.

"I told you to stop barking!" I was shouting by now. "This is the last time!"

For just a brief moment, the dog cocked its head and looked at me. I thought maybe I had gotten through.

Then it started barking again. This time, it didn't stop.

"What's wrong with you?" I yelled. "Don't you understand English?" Whoa! I caught myself. My emotions had swung out of control. Of course the dog didn't understand English. It was, after all, a dog.

A young string bikini-clad coed with a towel wrapped around her waist walked into the pool area at that moment.

It was the slender, black-haired girl from before, the one with the family Amelia had been showing through the complex. She was startlingly attractive, pale and imperious.

"Don't use people psychology on a dog," she said, her tone powerful and self-possessed. "Use dog psychology. Be a pack leader."

She glanced up at the dog. "Don't you watch *Dog Whisperer* on the History Channel? Cesar Millan is the man, the dog man. Don't yell at the dog. Do the 'Shush!' It shocks the dog's brain and makes it submissive."

She looked right at me with a gaze that felt like a cold laser. "I use it on my boyfriend all the time," she confided, smiling with a wicked gleam in her eye, sizing me up. "He does whatever I tell him to do. Boyfriends, dogs, they're all the same."

She sashayed on past me, letting the towel fall away to reveal a delightful southern exposure.

I didn't say anything. All I could do was mumble to myself, "Yes, ma'am. I'd like a burger to go with that shake."

The girl looked up at the dog as she passed under its balcony. "Love you, pup," she said to the dog, her voice a silky purr. "Shush, boy, shush! Be a good boy. Do what I say. Lie down. Don't move. Stay."

The dog grew quiet and lay down with his head on his paws. Total submission. With just a hint of triumph, she glanced at me and walked away toward a chaise lounge set near the Jacuzzi.

"Money (That's What I Want)" Startled from my daydream, I grabbed my phone off my towel.

"Hi, Dad."

"Sam, I talked to Cindy about this mess."

"Don't talk to her!" I said. "I'm taking care of it."

"Hey, I got the whole story," he blazed on. "You're a nitwit. You don't treat her right. I tried to tell you, but you've got a bowling ball for a head. She's a girl. You gotta be a gentleman with her. But no, not you. You talk to her like a railroad worker. You give her orders. You never listen to her."

"Dad, I don't do that..."

"I'm telling you to give the girl a break, Sam."

"She's breaking me!" I stammered. "I'm spending a huge amount of money—covering my bills, and all of her bills!"

"And why haven't you called Alfonso back?" my father went on. "He has a real estate deal for you."

That was it. "For what?" I bellowed into the phone. "A space in some apartment building in National City? I'm tired of you sending me deadbeats! I can't afford to work for free for your friends and customers. I went to law school so I could get paid for giving legal advice. You're asking me to give away my time, Dad. My time is my life!"

The dog was up and barking again with ear-piercing intensity.

"But, Sam..."

"There are no 'buts'!" I was practically screaming. "Stop sending these people to me for free legal services!"

The dog was barking with such violence that it bounced around stiff-legged on the balcony, each yap producing a short hop. It looked like a bunny having an epileptic seizure. Yap! Yap! Yap!

"Just think over what I said," he said.

"I'll talk to you later." I closed the phone. I could hardly catch my breath. My face was red, and I could feel the veins pulsing in my neck.

The dog continued to bark, its yap even more shrill than before. It would not quit. I thought about calling the dark angel to work her spell again. But instead, I gathered up my belongings and trudged back to my apartment.