

Preface

Carson Ingles the third smiled as Jack walked out of the Catalyst. He owed so much to Jack.

Once one of Silicon Valley's early moguls, Carson had fallen prey to his own desire to be better than he was. Cocaine, which initially made him even more brilliant, had been his downfall. He'd lost the love of his life, his fortune, and so many brain cells that he now had only a fraction of his former mental capabilities. Still, with Jack's help, he was no longer a homeless junky. The pending ten million dollar settlement would reestablish his strategic consulting business and put him back among Silicon Valley's elite. He'd been clean for nearly two years and he knew that finally, he could stay that way. The money wouldn't be his ticket back to the street this time.

Carson reached into his pocket and pulled out a cylindrical metal container. He really didn't know how he'd managed to keep it through the years in the gutter. He'd sold, pawned or traded his homes, his cars, his artwork, and all of his high tech toys for coke. But somehow, he'd managed to hold onto the last of the box of Cuban cigars presented to him by the president of Sony in celebration of successful completion of a high tech consulting project. Funny, it was the shortest report he'd ever written. True, it had taken months of research and countless hours of competitive product evaluations and late nights working with the Sony engineers to solidify the gadget's reliability, but he had delivered his three-word recommendation: Go for it. They happily paid his two hundred thousand dollar fee.

Sony took the restructured product to market and within a year, sales climbed to over one hundred million dollars. Carson smiled at the memory of just one of his contributions to the high tech world.

He took a sip of his brandy and removed the cigar from the tube. The aroma assaulted him and brought back memories of evenings with Nancy in front of the fire, sipping brandy and sharing a cigar, both in silk pajamas like a couple out of a thirties film.

Lost in reverie, Carson took out his lighter. He was brought back to reality by a gentle touch on his arm. The bartender nodded at the no smoking sign behind the bar, and then wordlessly lifted his chin, indicating the back door. Carson had forgotten about California's new no smoking policy in public places, which even included bars and restaurants.

He got to his feet a little unsteadily. The two scotches while talking to Jack and the subsequent brandy and a half cast a warm glow over the bar. They also seemed to be pressing on his bladder.

Carson put the cigar back into his pocket and made his way to the men's room with the gait of someone who's had a bit too much to drink, but isn't quite drunk. He stepped up to the urinal, set his brandy on the top, and felt the overwhelming satisfaction of release. It had been a good day.

His moment of solitary serenity was interrupted by a tall thin man in a leather jacket with slicked hair who stepped up to the adjoining urinal. He certainly wasn't a Santa Cruz local and didn't look like a tourist. He nodded at Carson, but Carson ignored him. They washed their hands and left the men's room. Carson turned left and opened the door marked exit with his shoulder. He reached into his pocket and pulled out his cigar. It was a crisp clear night, but a sudden gust of wind brought the stench of stale urine and rotting food from the dumpster from across the alley. Carson knew this wouldn't do. This was supposed to be a celebration and he wasn't about to light up in a dirty alley. Unfortunately, he couldn't think of anyone who would share this moment with him, but that time would come soon. Maybe he could even look up Nancy.

Carson turned to reenter the Catalyst. Suddenly he was slammed from the side and knocked to the ground. The brandy glass and cigar fell from his hand and Carson watched stunned as the glass shattered and its contents mixed with the oily water and disintegrating cigarette butts. He started to turn to look up but his head was seized in two vise-like hands and was slammed against the curb. Carson's last image was the delicate wrapped leaves of the Cuban cigar soaking up the filth of the alley.

Chapter 1

“What’s behind you doesn’t matter.”

- Jean-Paul Belmondo, after
throwing the rearview mirror out
the window of his stolen car in
“Breathless”.

1

The headstone was in place. The coffin had been lowered into the grave. Ignoring the shovel, I picked up a handful of dirt, dirt that would later cover the last remains of Carson Ingles. I looked around and was disappointed that I was the sole witness to Carson's interment. I'd hoped that at least a few of his coworkers would attend the meager funeral service. Carson had no immediate family and all the friends and colleagues Carson had known, all the people who owed their careers and success to Carson, and all those who once loved him had written Carson off as a drug addict and failure.

Once at the top of his field and world-renown, Carson certainly took a plunge. Yes, he had a fatal flaw that derailed his success, but he was back on track. He was under control and on the road to making a real difference. He would have been great again.

Carson deserved better than a violent death in a stinking damp alley among cigarette butts and discarded crushed bottle caps, his clothes soaking up the stale urine and vomit left behind by drunks and drug addicts.

Carson's rise, fall, rebirth and premature end touched the lives of so many people I've worked with in the Silicon Valley over the last fifteen years. Some of us made it, some didn't. Many worked hard; a few worked smart; some just stole what they wanted, slithering their way into the graces of those with vision and finding surreptitious means to skim monies or recognition from the truly deserving. And then there were those single-minded few, so convinced of their righteous missions that they would do whatever they had to, no matter how unethical, to succeed, to become legends in the Silicon Valley much like the Captains of Industry of the nineteenth century.

But Carson was different. Success came easily to him because people were drawn to his extraordinary intelligence and simple integrity. His soothing baritone voice and avuncular manner charmed even the most hardened executives while he pried open their minds to enable them to recognize their errors or to visualize new concepts. He had a gift for seeing simple solutions to complex problems and for being able to communicate those solutions with non-threatening credibility. The reputation of his honesty soon preceded him and he became one of the most famous and recognized technologists in the country.

Of course temptation can lead us all astray. What tempts you may mean nothing to me, but there's something out there that can seduce us all – money, power, success, notoriety, lust, love, even honesty and ethics. Too much of anything can become a trap from which you never escape.

After achieving so much from a life filled with early tragedies, who could have foreseen that Carson would fall victim to his own desire to prove himself worthy?

The police say Carson's death was an accidental homicide as the result of a mugging. I think I know better. No one is willing to pursue my theory that a major recognizable figure in our industry could have been behind the death of a simple computer consultant. It would be like saying Bill Gates did it.

I never imagined Carson's life would turn out this way. Of course, I never imagined my life would turn out this way either.

Like so many young people starting out in the Silicon Valley, I was confident. I knew I was smart, probably smarter than most, and I believed that I could not only achieve financial success, but that I could make a major contribution to improving the world around us by creating technology to make us more productive and to give everyone more flexibility and free time. I certainly relished my free time. I really thought I could have it all, working hard and playing even harder. Meeting Carson, I knew it was possible. I emulated him as best I could, but my own arrogance and blindness to the motivations of others less naïve than I certainly set me up for disappointments. I had a plan. It included success, reputation, and family. But ultimately, life got in the way.

I tossed the handful of dirt onto Carson's coffin. As I turned to leave the deserted cemetery, the impact of Carson's death sent me back. I couldn't help trying to understand the events that led me to Carson and both Carson and me to where we ended up.