

"A Delicious Read!"

Sue Zelickson, Minnesota Monthly

FAT PROFITS



A THRILLER

One explosive secret
could kill his family.

BRUCE BRADLEY

divisions as a reward for her outstanding performance. She was in the fast lane, and her first trip on the corporate jet proved she was making it.

Becky arrived at the Minneapolis/St. Paul International Airport at 5:15 a.m., but struggled to find IFM's corporate hangar and executive lounge. Dawn had broken, but with only a glimmer of daylight in the sky, it took several drive-bys along a deserted stretch of road to finally see the discrete, unlit International Food & Milling sign hanging on the chain-link fence securing the building. Upon entering the driveway, she buzzed the office to announce her arrival, then a large, metal gate lumbered open, rolling sideways.

After parking her car, Becky grabbed her bags and walked into the hangar's lounge, only to be disappointed by the absence of any executives she could chat up. Determined to build her network, Becky quickly toured around the building and managed to meet the pilots for her flight. She wanted to know them. Becky had plans to be a frequent flier, and it always made sense to grease the skids.

In a matter of minutes, Becky learned all about Jim Donns and Mark Jonicus. Combined they had been flying for the company for over forty-four years. When Jim started, IFM only had two corporate jets. After eight acquisitions and impressive growth, IFM's fleet now numbered twelve jets, more than their archrival, Nutrisense, the largest food company in the world. These and many of IFM's other corporate toys were thanks to Aidan Toole, its CEO. He had the biggest ego on the block, and materialistic symbols like planes and a lavish headquarters helped him compensate for still being number two to Nutrisense and for the unsophisticated reputation of IFM's hometown, Minneapolis.

"So give me the scoop, guys. What are the rules on board this jet?" Becky asked. "This is my first flight, and I don't want to screw it up."

"Rules? No rules. Just relax and enjoy the flight."

"Come on, how does it work? Who sits where? Is there food on board? Who serves it?"

“Calm down,” Jim laughed. “There are no assigned seats, but the most senior people usually sit toward the back. And don’t worry, there’s always some food. You don’t think IFM would let anyone starve, do you? Morning flights usually have catered plates with fresh fruit, a bagel, and yogurt. And of course there are always IFM snacks, cereals, candies, juices, and soft drinks.”

“Is there a flight attendant?”

“Not unless Mr. Toole is on board one of our larger jets for a longer flight. It’s all self-serve. Usually someone junior ends up seated toward the front and passes back the food and drinks.”

Becky had no intention of doing anything menial, so like any meeting, getting the power seat was crucial.

“How about cell phones? Can we use them?”

“Well, the FCC and FAA say no, but we sure won’t be policing that. We’re up in the cockpit. But watch out for the reception. As soon as we get up around twelve thousand feet, you’ll start losing your signal.”

Within thirty minutes, all of the passengers had arrived. Craig Bonesteel, Derrick Bates, and Ginny Lawrence were Becky’s counterparts. As Directors of Health & Nutrition at IFM, they each managed a portion of the company’s vast \$98 billion food empire. Although they weren’t lawyers, they ensured all IFM businesses complied with food handling, packaging, and marketing regulations. The fifth and final passenger was Vicki Trease. She was the lawyer of the group and headed up IFM’s Legal and Regulatory team.

As they crossed the hangar, Becky quickened her step so she could board first. According to the pilots, the plane was a Citation III. It was IFM’s oldest and smallest jet, but to Becky it was a whole new class of living. Adorned with cappuccino leather seats, plush satin tan carpeting, mahogany cabinetry, and six personal flight entertainment systems, the jet smelled of luxury and excess. Becky jockeyed herself into the rear of the plane, settled in, and then immediately got to work on her cell phone. After all, there was no better way to show off her newfound importance than to make a few phone calls from the corporate jet.

She decided to call Andrew Hastings, the Marketing Manager for Uncle Chuck's new, healthy line of B-Lean salty snacks. It was too early for him to be at his desk, so a voice mail would have to suffice.

"Hey, Andrew, this is Becky. I'm heading out of town for an urgent meeting. Keep this to yourself, but we've hit a real snag. Some old research just surfaced that may cause a big delay for Redu and your B-Lean Snacks lineup. I'm taking the corporate jet to DC for a strategy meeting with our legal team. I'll let you know more when I can. Please, keep this quiet."

Craig Bonesteel couldn't help overhearing Becky.

"What are you doing, Becky?"

"Oh, just updating the team a bit. We have some crucial deadlines in front of us, and I don't want us to be caught holding the bag."

"You're crazy! Chloe just reminded us again yesterday not to leak a word to anyone about the trouble with Redu until we've come up with a plan to handle this mess."

"I know, I know," Becky said in a dismissive tone. "Let me worry about how I handle it."

The jet engines had started and the plane quickly taxied into position. Everything seemed to happen so much faster on the corporate jet. No security checkpoints, no lines to board, and before Becky knew it, the plane was streaking down the runway, its nose quickly lifting into the air.

As the plane gained altitude, Becky saw Lake Nokomis below and then moments later Lake Harriet. Then, when the plane banked to the south, she spotted her neighborhood and remembered she needed to call her husband. It was a few minutes after six and Bill was undoubtedly up with the girls by now. A faithful and dedicated househusband of two years, he managed the home since Becky was working ten-hour days and weekends as she rose up the corporate ranks of IFM.

"Hey, hon, how's it going?"

"Ah, good here," Bill replied. "Lizzie and Maureen are up, and

I'm just getting breakfast ready. So where are you now? It sounds awfully noisy."

"I'm flying high. Right over our house in fact! Honey, you wouldn't believe this. It's so cool. You can bet not just anyone gets to take a ride on the corporate jet."

"That's great, Becky," Bill said smiling, genuinely proud of his wife. "You've worked so hard for this. You deserve it and a lot more. Want to say a quick hello to the girls?"

"Sure, put them on. Oh, one sec though. I realized on the way to the airport that I left some papers I need on the nightstand. Could you scan and send them to my gmail address? I need them for my meetings, and Chloe would kill me if she knew I left them at home."

"Tell that boss of yours to just relax. She has you so scared. You've barely said two words to me about this crazy project."

"I know, I know. But I've told you, this is IFM's biggest new product initiative ever."

"Blah, blah, blah. I'll get your stuff to you. Don't worry. Love you. Here are the girls."

"Cool, put them on speakerphone." The phone made a click, and Becky's voice jumped up an octave. "Hi, sweeties. Mommy is in a cool plane flying on a trip for work."

The noise and commotion of the kitchen buzzed in the background and nearly droned out the faint sound of the girls.

"Hi, Mommy. Can you see any birds?"

Becky strained to hear her daughter Maureen's voice. Just a month shy of five years old, Maureen was a typical first-born child—reliable, conscientious, and she didn't like surprises. Lizzie, on the other hand, was her mischievous, rule-breaking three-year-old. Bill and Becky kept hoping Lizzie would calm down as she got older, but she showed no signs of easing up any time soon.

"No, no birds, but I could see the lake a minute ago. I was right over our house."

"Wow. Can you see me, Mommy? I'm waving..."

“Yes, yes, honey . . . I can see you. But where’s Lizzie?”

Becky waited for a response but could only hear the buzzing of the speakerphone and some crackling noise as the signal began to fade.

“Can you hear me? Kisses to both of you. Mommy loves you up to the sky.” She waited again but could only hear static. “Losing the signal here, Bill.” More static. “Okay, bye.”

After hanging up, Becky took a brief moment to look out the windows. The plane had completed its turn southeast, and acres of corn streamed below as far as the eye could see. It was tough leaving Lizzie and Maureen overnight, and she knew it would get worse when they got older and needed more quality time with their mother. But Becky didn’t want her mind to go there now. Instead she settled in for the flight and turned on her laptop.

As she started to dig into her e-mails, the plane groaned and listed to the left as an ever-so-slight aroma of something burning wafted through the cabin. At first Becky cast it off, unwilling to appear as an unseasoned traveler. She glanced over to the in-flight monitor that was tracking their progress to DC. Everything seemed fine. But just as Becky started to refocus on her work, the plane groaned again and shook, and her nerves got the better of her.

“What’s happening?” Becky exclaimed, reaching her arms into the air looking for a call button.

The other passengers shared Becky’s concern. They were just doing a better job of staying calm.

“I’m sure it’s nothing,” Craig replied. Becky stared at him briefly, not knowing whether to trust his opinion.

The plane rocked again, this time much more severely than before, and now the screen for her in-flight monitor went dark. Becky looked around in a panic. It wasn’t just her monitor. The whole cabin had lost power.

Just as she was going to announce her latest discovery, alarms sounded and flashed in the cockpit.

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“What the hell is happening?” she cried, looking out the window for clues.

Suddenly, the plane dropped rapidly with a violent plunge from the sky, and Becky’s laptop flew through the air and slammed into her forehead, knocking her out. The chaos continued briefly as blood started to drip into her eyes. Then, the plane exploded and the sky glowed with a blazing, intense red light.

Chunks of metal and bodies blasted out concentrically toward the horizon, then fell to the earth far below.

Yes, everything happened faster on this corporate jet.

TWO

**IFM Headquarters
Wayzata, Minnesota
Wednesday, June 2
7:00 A.M.**

A COOL SUMMER MIST hung over Lake Minnetonka as birds skimmed near the surface looking for their morning meal. The water was calm. It was early and most boats were still docked alongside their multimillion-dollar estates or at one of the many marinas that dappled the bays and coves of the lake.

IFM's headquarters was just coming to life. A shimmering gem placed right next to Lake Minnetonka, it was composed of three glass, steel, and slate buildings that hugged the shore, while another six buildings and two parking decks sprawled across the rest of the property. All the buildings were interconnected with skyways or underground tunnels to allow their inhabitants to move freely year-round. After all, in the dead of winter, weeks of subzero temperatures were the norm, and the powers that be

wanted to keep their people attending meetings, working hard, and selling their products.

The sixty-acre campus was meticulously maintained. The landscaping was a beautiful, natural outcropping of the lake. Gardens and statuary adorned the grounds and created the appearance of an idyllic corporate paradise. Although many locals didn't approve of large, five-story commercial buildings situated right on the lake, in this town, what IFM wanted, IFM got. Even if it took a while, careful planning and the right donations always succeeded in getting the public to line up with IFM's interests.

Andrew Hastings walked up to the employee entrance at seven o'clock. Many office lights were already on in the Sales and Operations floors of headquarters. They were the early birds at IFM. Marketers like Andrew were notorious for rolling in well after eight, but their hours were grueling and they often worked late into the night. At food companies like IFM, Marketing ran the company. Well-educated MBAs from the best schools in the world, these marketers were not only responsible for driving great advertising and promotions, but they were also the so-called hub of the wheel, leading cross-functional teams to build and grow IFM's brands. Yes, they would collaborate with Sales, Operations, and R&D, but ultimately Marketing made the decisions.

"Good morning, Andrew," greeted Barney Fisher. Barney had been with IFM for over twenty years. Although he was officially part of IFM's campus security, he was much more than a guard. He was affable, well-dressed, and knew everyone by name. Employees like Barney were the heart and soul of IFM—hardworking, caring, and determined to do their jobs better than anyone else.

"Good morning, Barney. How's it going?" Andrew asked.

"Great here. How's Ethan? He must be with your ex today? You aren't usually in so early on Wednesdays."

"Ethan is great. Thanks for asking. Yep, just me today. I traded some time with his mom, so I am getting in early to work, work, work. Have a great day, Barney."

Andrew walked down the main corridor of the employee entrance. Bright and filled with glass and chrome, it led to

a multimedia extravaganza with product displays, community outreach efforts, company club kiosks, and flat-screen televisions showing reels of IFM's most recent and classic commercials. Then the hallway opened up into a grand space called the Commons. Here all the basic needs of any IFM employee were met with a credit union, coffee house, dry cleaners, convenience store, company store, cafeteria, clothing store, doctor's office, dentist's office, three of IFM's largest fast food chains, and a concierge service center to cover anything else that wasn't available. IFM had been written up in *Moms at Work*, *Corporate Weekly*, and *Riches* magazine as one of the top companies in the world to work for, and the impressive headquarters and special perks made it easy to see why.

Five minutes later, Andrew had made his way up to his office. The massive main building, almost twice as big as the two wings that flanked it, housed all the domestic operating grocery divisions, except for Beverages, which shared a separate building with the Restaurant, Foodservice, and International Divisions. The executive wing, legal, and other corporate level functions were on the fifth floor of this main building.

Andrew got off the elevator on the fourth floor, home of Uncle Chuck's, IFM's Snacks Division. Snack foods were at the core of the company and its heritage. In 1932, IFM introduced the first nationally distributed snack, Corn Crunchers, and after years of new products and line extensions, IFM was the category leader with over 40 percent market share. But over the last twelve years, Nutrisense had made inroads and IFM was now on the defensive. As the Marketing Manager for Uncle Chuck's transformational new products, Andrew intended to reverse that trend with his new, healthy, salty-snacks initiative. Part of a broader B-Lean brand launch that spanned IFM's snacks, cereals, desserts, food-service, and fast food businesses, Andrew's project was likened to what Diet X-cite cola did for IFM's Beverage Division back in the 1980s. This was Andrew's shot to make director, and he knew it. Failure was not an option.

Andrew settled in to prep for his nine o'clock meeting with Sales. He knew the drill. Sales didn't like to rock the boat or

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make their accounts nervous. They only wanted to sell sure bets. A tasty product that scored well with consumers with some great advertising wasn't enough. If a new item was going to be successful, great product scores had to be accompanied by lots of trade dollars to buy shelf space and fund jaw-dropping sale prices and displays.

Sure, being innovative and on-trend was important, just as long as you weren't ahead of the times. Yes, perfect timing was also imperative. But almost more important than anything else was guaranteed product availability. Grocers planned their shelves and sale circulars months in advance. Selling them a product that you couldn't deliver on time or supply enough of was a salesman's nightmare, even worse than an item that didn't sell. Today's meeting objective was to reassure Sales that the B-Lean Snacks launch would have plenty of supply, because if Sales got spooked, they wouldn't sell aggressively.

As Andrew fired up his laptop, he noticed his voice mail light glowing. Hoping it was a message from Dan Murdock with some feedback on the draft for today's presentation, he picked up the phone, only to shake his head in disbelief as he started to listen. It was Becky Clausen, the team's top regulatory contact, and she was giving Andrew a heads-up on more problems. Just what he needed. The sky had been falling so many times on this project he could hardly count them. But rather than get rattled, Andrew got back to work and decided to deal with Becky later.

Within thirty minutes, he put the finishing touches on a five-page PowerPoint presentation full of pictures, graphs, and a great product availability story to pitch to Sales. Heading over to the printer to pick up copies for his meeting, he saw Stephanie Kingston, his administrative assistant, running toward him.

"Good morning, Steph. Why the rush?" Andrew asked.

"Go to the lobby. There was a plane crash. It was one of our jets. It's all over the news."

Steph dropped her stuff at her desk, and Andrew ran with her toward the main reception area on the fourth floor. Despite the early hour, a crowd of more than thirty people gathered around the flat-screen television, watching the live news report.

The images were bleak and horrifying. The smoking wreckage of a plane was strewn across a cornfield. As the camera panned, Andrew saw jagged chunks of smoldering debris scattered in a vast radius among verdant green seedlings. The on-the-scene reporter, Heidi Pearson, stammered then paused briefly to get control of her emotions.

Andrew stared into the reporter's compassionate eyes then finally asked, "Do we know who was on the plane?"

"No. No details yet," replied Steph.

As they watched in horror, Andrew whispered to her, "I just got a message from Becky this morning. She was on her way to DC on the corporate jet. This could be her plane."

"Oh my goodness, no. Doesn't she have two little girls at home?"

"Yes," Andrew replied, biting his lip and shaking his head. *No, this can't be her plane. IFM has lots of jets*, he thought, trying to convince himself that Becky was all right. *Maybe I should call Bill and see if he knows anything*. But he decided that would only make the poor guy worry, so he did nothing, at least for the moment.

The television broadcast shifted back to the newsroom where the anchor went on and on, reporting the same few facts again and again—an IFM corporate jet crashed southeast of the airport—early that morning an IFM corporate jet crashed shortly after taking off from Minneapolis—breaking news, an IFM corporate jet crashed in a field northeast of Zumbrota—all interspersed with footage of the sparse, hideous remains of a plane. Human tragedy had once more been transformed into the latest ratings game.

THE PLANE CRASH dominated the chatter throughout IFM. From break rooms to the cafeteria, the talk was constant. But work had to go on. Meetings had to happen. Deadlines couldn't be moved. Andrew knew the possible loss of a friend and coworker wasn't enough to call off his meeting. Regional sales directors were in town. If canceled, rescheduling it could take weeks. This was a command performance.

As the fourth floor conference room filled up with over twenty attendees, Andrew passed around copies of the presentation. The morning light reflected off the lake so brightly that it blinded half of the room. As he greeted a few stragglers, Andrew walked over to the command console and lowered the blinds to help ensure a comfortable, attentive audience.

Despite it already being five past nine, Andrew decided to wait a few minutes longer. Art Jacobson, President of US Retail Sales, and Dan Murdock, Andrew's temporary boss and Chief Operating Officer of US Retail, had not arrived yet. His real boss, Angie Green, who would normally lead this meeting, was out on maternity leave. A hard worker and dedicated businesswoman, Angie had agreed to an abbreviated, six-week maternity leave in exchange for a guarantee from IFM to hold her prized position as Transformative New Products Director.

Although there was much speculation over this unusual plan, Andrew was glad to pinch-hit. Angie was a single mom and needed all the help she could get. Andrew also knew that her maternity leave was his big chance to step up. Most managers would kill to report to Dan Murdock since he was arguably on a very short list to succeed Aidan Toole as CEO of IFM. But working for Dan was very challenging, since he was extremely busy, rarely available for input, and always hypercritical—a deadly combination for any boss. Today's meeting was no exception. Andrew had sent Dan an e-mail outlining the key objectives of the meeting and attached a well-crafted draft of the presentation. After waiting for Dan's input for over a week, he finally gave up. It was all Andrew's to win or lose.

Andrew looked around the room as he got ready to present. *Impressive*, he thought. You couldn't assemble a group of smarter, better dressed people if you tried. Although IFM had adopted a business casual policy years earlier, the upwardly mobile sales managers and directors in this room didn't use that as an excuse to look shoddy. The men looked like they had walked out of a Brooks Brothers catalog with their gabardine dress slacks, neatly pressed long-sleeve, cotton shirts, and an occasional sport coat.

The women flaunted more color and variety, but they were equally professional. But what stood out more than anything else was that there wasn't an average-looking face in the crowd. IFM had an affinity for recruiting not only the brightest, but also the best-looking candidates.

In many ways, Andrew fit IFM's bill. At six foot two, his blond-haired, blue-eyed good looks were classic. Andrew ran, biked, worked out, and loved to hike and camp. Graduating from the top of his class at Carleton College, then getting his MBA from Stanford, his credentials were impeccable. The only stain on his career had been a messy divorce.

Four years into his career, Andrew's wife, Lydia, had left him. They had drifted apart—their relationship compromised by their stressful jobs. But what proved more damaging was Lydia's growing frustration with Andrew's slow climb up the corporate ladder. Lydia had high aspirations, and when Great Sioux National Bank promoted her to City Executive, she realized Andrew was holding her back. Finally, after deciding Andrew would never have the drive to be an executive, Lydia just wanted out.

Her demands were simple—full custody of their son and all of their assets. Two years and many legal battles later, Andrew emerged poorer financially, but much richer as a man and father. With the support of friends and a great boss, Andrew restarted his life with joint custody of his son, a used car, and \$10,000. But no matter how much things returned to normal on the surface, Andrew found it hard to trust anyone again, especially Lydia. While he could accept his failure as a husband, he could never understand why she tried to take his son away from him.

The divorce had certainly set Andrew back on the promotion track. Six members of his hiring class had already made it to director. While that bothered him on some level, Andrew realized his priorities were different. IFM had been good to him, but it wasn't his life. He knew there were more important things than work. But today, right now, he had to knock it out of the park.

Finally, at eight minutes after nine, Dan and Art wandered

in chatting together. As they found their seats, the room quieted and Andrew quickly took control of the meeting.

“Good morning. I know we all have a lot of things distracting us right now with the horrible news of the plane crash, but we need to press forward and discuss our exciting new snack launch.”

No one was smiling, but at least he had their attention. He went on.

“As most of you know, we’re ready to transform the way Americans eat with our new B-Lean Snacks. These snacks contain IFM’s proprietary Ultra-Hi Resistant Starch blend called Redu. IFM will be introducing B-Lean items across its vast food holdings, and in so doing will truly revolutionize how we eat and lose weight. The Snacks, Cereals, Desserts, Bakery, Foodservice, and Fast Food Divisions will all be flooding the media with B-Lean advertising in January. In order to be on shelf by then, we’re targeting a November 1 start ship. We expect to receive final FDA approval by June 15. Sales materials and sales samples are set to ship shortly after, on June 21.”

Before Andrew could move on to his next page, Scott Tishman, head of the Central Region, jumped in and asked, “Yeah, excuse me, Andrew. But how in the world are we supposed to get retailers on board with resetting shelves during the busy holiday season?”

Caught a bit off guard, Andrew hesitated. “Well, we agreed to that date months ago. Our timelines are very aggressive.” Realizing that a defensive stance never worked with Sales, Andrew leaned forward, and started selling. “Scott, I don’t underestimate the challenge of the job. We know it is very difficult. But I also know we have the best sales force out there. With a great product, and your team’s salesmanship, I know you can get retailers to do just about anything we ask them.” Andrew was no fool. He knew some pandering thrown in there to feed the egos of his audience wouldn’t hurt. “You know our job is to sell this as a once-in-a-lifetime launch. And we all know weight-loss season kicks off every January with New Year’s resolutions.”

Art piped in. “Scotty, Andrew’s right. This is a make or break deal for IFM. Our leaders have invested millions in developing

and bringing this technology to market. We've leapfrogged the competition. We have patents. We're ready."

"Yes, I get that, but I'm still concerned." Scott's tone changed. It was easy to slice up a marketing guy, but Scott wanted Art's job someday, and to get there he needed to show Art respect, courage, and some modicum of intelligence. "The FDA hasn't approved Redu as a food ingredient, yet here we are supposedly selling these various product lines in less than two weeks. First, are we sure it's really going to get the green light? And second, are we prepared to launch it when it does? Do we have the appropriate inventory on hand to supply such a big launch?"

Andrew jumped in, desperately trying to make sure the meeting didn't spin out of control. "Scott, we're confident that we're on the path to FDA approval. The FDA-appointed Food Advisory Committee recommended approval back in April. The Regulatory Decision Team, or RDT as the press likes to call it, should make its recommendation to the Commissioner anytime now, with a final decision promised by June 15. All indicators are positive. As for being prepared, I can assure you we're ready."

"Assure?" asked Scott. "What's that supposed to mean? We need solid facts to answer retailer questions. Our first top-to-top is with Klout here at headquarters on June 21. They're the second biggest retailer. There's no screwing around with them. I mean—"

Andrew interrupted. "I understand, Scott. I promise to answer all your questions. Please, give me a chance first. Let's move on to page two." The papers around the desk shuffled, and Andrew moved on quickly to his other points.

"As you can see here, IFM has been producing supplies of Redu since last crop year. Already over two hundred million pounds of corn, wheat, rice, and barley have been processed into Redu. Sales sample quantities of all B-Lean Snacks are ready to ship June 16. After the FDA's approval, manufacturing of retail sale products will begin in late June. If you turn to the next page, you will see that by early October, four months' supply of each variety of B-Lean Snacks will be on hand. By start ship, over six months will be on hand. If we oversell our expectations, which I believe

we will, we have the capacity to produce over 50 percent more and maintain 100 percent service levels.”

These numbers were staggering to Scott and the rest of the team. Typically IFM started shipping new items with two to three months of supply. If the items were a hit, logistics would start cutting orders. Service levels of 50 percent or below were not unheard of on blockbuster new items. The problem was, customers like Klout hated when orders got cut. Their precious shelf space would be empty, selling nothing. Or even worse, they might advertise a hot price point and plan for end-cap displays, only to curse IFM for not having enough inventory to keep up with consumer demand.

“How can we afford all this? We’re always told it’s too expensive to do things this way,” commented Joe Spenz, who held Scott’s position in the Eastern Region.

“Well, Aidan Toole and his leadership team have pulled out all the stops on this launch. It’s expected to be the biggest new product introduction in IFM’s history. No expense has been spared. The grain alone processed in advance of this year’s production cost an estimated \$20 million.”

Undeterred, Scott jumped back in, “This all sounds great, but again, how can we be so confident the FDA will approve Redu? Aren’t we betting the bank on this?”

Just as Andrew hesitated for a breath, Dan Murdock jumped in.

“Hold on, guys—no offense to you ladies,” Dan said, flashing his sparkling smile to the ten or so women sitting around the table. “We’ve tested Redu. It’s passed all the tests. Without a doubt, it’s safe. The FDA’s approval is on its way. We’re just working through some final red tape.”

“But what about all the objections I read in the news? The Ethical Food Coalition and other watchdog groups say they won’t let this stuff get onto America’s plates. I mean, these EFC guys are hard core.”

“They’re a bunch of radicals,” Dan snapped back, “and the FDA sees them for what they are. I can’t put it any other way, Scotty. I know I’ve done my job. You have a healthy, delicious, weight-loss

product to sell. We're light years ahead of the competition. Now just get off your ass and sell."

Silence filled the room as the sales team glanced over at Scott to see if he was up for another round with Dan. But Scott settled back in his chair, eyes looking to the floor like a scolded dog.

"Thanks, Dan. We get it," proclaimed Art. "You can count on us to get it done."

Not knowing exactly what to do next, Andrew stepped in, walked the group through the last couple pages, and asked for any other questions. By this time, the deal was done. Sales was on board, in part because of his work, but mostly because Dan told them to just do it.

Soon the meeting was over, and the room started to empty. Andrew chatted briefly and personally thanked some of the attendees. As he walked with Joe Spenz to the door, he saw Steph waiting outside the conference room. With a mere glance, he could see she'd been crying, so with a final shake of hands, he said good-bye to Joe, picked up his things, and hurried out of the room.

"What's wrong, Steph?"

"You were right, Andrew. It was Becky's plane that went down. They just announced that she and six other employees were on the plane."

Speechless, Andrew's thoughts quickly shifted to Becky's family.

"Steph, I'm sorry, but please excuse me. I need to call Becky's husband. He must be devastated."

Ducking into a small, empty conference room, Andrew grabbed his cell phone and found Bill's home number. Andrew was sure he would get the Clausen's voice mail, but he had to at least try to reach Bill.

"Hello?" a dry, raspy voice answered.

"Bill? This is Andrew. I just heard about the crash. I'm so sorry."

Bill cleared his throat unsuccessfully a couple times, trying to find his voice. "Andrew, I just don't know what I'm going to do without her..."

Andrew could hear the muffled cries as his friend tried to be

strong. “Bill, I’m going to come over right now. Can I bring over anything for you or the girls?”

“No, Andrew, please don’t come right now. Becky’s sister, Hope, is here already helping me with the girls. My in-laws and Becky’s brothers will be here any minute,” Bill paused and took a deep breath. “I’m going to be okay. I just need to be strong for the girls.”

“Well, what can I do? Can I bring over dinner this evening?”

“One of our neighbors has already offered, but thank you.”

“I’d still like to help. Let me organize meals for the next couple weeks. I’m sure plenty of Becky’s coworkers and friends from church would love to help out.”

“That would be great, Andrew.”

Andrew could hear some commotion in the background.

“Andrew, I need to get going. Becky’s mom and dad just walked in the door. Thank you so much for your call.”

“Please, Bill, don’t hesitate to call me for anything. You hear me?”

“I promise. I’ll talk to you soon.”

**WMSP-TV Headquarters
St. Louis Park, Minnesota
Wednesday, June 2nd
10:00 A.M.**

WMSP-TV’S HEADQUARTERS was located fifteen minutes west of downtown Minneapolis in the suburb of St. Louis Park. The building was classic 1960s architecture with flat lines and exposed concrete and metal. Tall antennae, satellite dishes, and weather radar littered the roof, giving it the look of a galactic junkyard.

Despite years of complaints from the neighborhood association, the time for improving this eyesore had passed. The recession

had hurt the station's advertising revenues badly, and the news business was bleeding out as the digital age put the screws to their outdated business model. Five rounds of layoffs over five years made it a tough place to work. But for Heidi Pearson, Minneapolis was her home, and she was willing to gut it out to stay near her friends and family.

Heidi stared out of the conference room windows overlooking the newsroom, watching as Erika tried to gather the group. It was almost comical. Getting reporters into a room was like herding cats, but it could be done. It just required some leadership and charisma, two qualities Erika sorely lacked.

Erika Braker ran the early news shift. She was intelligent enough, but she was very green with less than three years of experience. The news world was littered with Erikas now—young, poorly paid journalism majors with no true understanding of running a newsroom or reporting ethics. The industry just didn't have the time or money for the luxury of better qualified personnel anymore.

Finally, after ten minutes, Heidi, out of sheer frustration, took over and corralled the renegades.

As the group got seated around the table, they looked to Heidi to get things started. She was a natural leader. Her enthusiasm and energy were contagious, and she could rally the team to do just about anything. With gorgeous blond hair, incredible blue eyes, and an unflappable personality, Heidi had been recruited to be a news anchor on several occasions. But she hated the idea of being tethered to a desk, so she always politely refused. Her independent streak often put her at odds with news directors and producers, but when she stood her ground, she usually had good cause. Today, she was just a reporter, and she wanted to get to work.

"So, Erika, where do you want to begin?" Heidi asked, hoping to get the group focused on the task at hand.

"Well, as you all know, one of IFM's corporate jets crashed just southeast of the airport early this morning. This will be our lead story for the evening news. I've shared our latest briefing

with each of you. It includes the names of each of the victims, addresses, and any family details. I have assigned each of you a family to cover. You know the deal. Tearful, emotional tragedy or anger makes great news. Heidi, you will play point. I also need you to interview officials at IFM, the National Transportation Safety Board, and other local authorities.”

Erika looked around the room to make sure everyone was following her, then she asked, “Does anyone know if any videos of the actual crash have surfaced?”

“We interviewed several witnesses while we were down in Zumbrota, but so far we haven’t found anyone that videoed the crash,” Heidi replied.

Just as Erika was about to ask another question, the glass door to the room flew open, causing her to jump in her seat. “Rusty, really? Do you really need to do that?” complained Erika.

“Yes ma’am,” Rusty said, although his tone denoted anything but respect. “Well, I thought you’d be interested in this, Erika, but if not, I’ll just leave.”

Heidi interrupted. “Rusty, stop the games. We don’t have time for it today. What do you have?”

“Whatever,” Rusty said, looking at Heidi. “I just picked this up off the wire. Looks like the Ethical Food Coalition is claiming responsibility for the plane crash.”

“What? Let me see that.” Heidi spun around in her chair and grabbed the paper from Rusty’s hands. As she read it, her brow furrowed with intensity.

“What are you thinking, Heidi?” Erika asked.

“I’ve reported on EFC in the past. They’ve clashed plenty with IFM over the years, but they’ve always adhered to a non-violent approach.”

“Yeah, but they’ve been associated with blowing up plants and derauling trains,” Rusty added.

“There’s a violent, fringe element that claims to be part of EFC, but it really isn’t. EFC has been forced to clarify this issue constantly. That said, even this fringe group doesn’t believe in the loss of human life. Remember in that Nutrisense infant formula plant explosion,

when a bomb threat was phoned in and the entire factory was evacuated? No one was injured in the blast. To kill seven people on this plane just doesn't add up."

"Could the crash have happened by mistake?" Erika asked. "Maybe they meant to blow the plane up in the hangar when nobody was on board."

"That's possible, but then why are they so anxious to take credit?" Rusty responded.

The briefing continued with more questions bantered back and forth. Finally, Heidi sent every reporter in the room out to cover some aspect of the crash location, survivors, the EFC, and both the criminal and safety investigations. Heidi stayed behind, setting up appointments over the phone. Calling and meeting with the victims' families was the hardest part. Most reporters exploited their fragile state to get the interview. Heidi refused to become a pushy, hearse-chasing journalist. Instead, her down-to-earth, honest style genuinely touched people, and helped them open up. People usually trusted her, and that always gave her an edge.

Within a few minutes, Heidi had scheduled interviews with Becky Clausen's husband, Bill, and her sister, Hope. Twenty minutes later, her day was set, and Heidi gathered her crew and headed out of the building. As she crossed the newsroom into the daylight of the employee entrance, Erika flagged her down.

"I just got word the network is looking to add your story. They're especially interested in the possible EFC involvement. Keep me posted and let's check-in before three."

"Will do," Heidi said, hoping the network brass wouldn't screw it up.

IFM Headquarters
Wednesday, June 2nd
11:30 A.M.

IFM POSTED a story about the plane crash on their company intranet site, and all televisions across headquarters were tuned into the local news for the latest details. Except for the names of the passengers and crew, not much was known.

After talking to Bill Clausen, Andrew had trouble getting back to work. He couldn't get Becky and her family off his mind. He talked with Steph for a while at her desk then decided to join two of his team members for lunch. Lourdes Perez was an Associate Marketing Manager who reported to him. She had been on his team for eight months now. She was sharp, hardworking, independent, and stunning with dark hair cut in a stylish, long bob and deep brown eyes that danced when she smiled or laughed. During her two years at IFM, she had earned a reputation for getting things done quickly, with her cross-functional team behind her the whole way. Lourdes was just the type of marketer that IFM wanted.

Rachel Sears, the team's Market Research Manager, was Lourdes's best friend. They ate lunch together most days and often socialized outside of work. A former college lacrosse player, Rachel was six foot one, lean, and wore her shocking red hair in a short pixie cut. Known as "the Belle" thanks to her North Carolina accent, Rachel was resourceful, funny, and outspoken. For the most part, Rachel's style was a nice change of pace, but occasionally her candor ruffled feathers and required extra work to pacify hurt feelings.

The cafeteria seemed busier than usual, and it took some hunting to find a place to sit. Perhaps everyone was lingering longer as they shared the latest news on the crash and played their own sick version of six degrees of Kevin Bacon, trying to make their most direct links to the victims. For Andrew's table, there was no game to play, no gossip, just sadness. Becky had been an original

member of their cross-functional product launch team, and she continued to play a pivotal role even after her promotion. She was helpful and full of energy, and Andrew had always been able to count on Becky's can-do spirit to help rally the team to go the extra mile.

"It doesn't seem real. It's like some nightmare," said Lourdes.

"I know," Rachel replied. "Just last week Becky was laughing about her girls. She was telling me about how her husband had fallen asleep on the sofa watching television after dinner. Their younger daughter, Lizzie, took lipstick from Becky's bag and smeared it all over Bill's face. Becky couldn't stop laughing, and she had posted pictures of Bill on her Facebook page." Rachel started to tear up again as she laughed. Through her sniffing, she asked Andrew, "How close were you to Becky and Bill? It seems like you saw each other outside of work pretty often."

"We're good friends. We all go to the same church, so I see them most Sundays. For the past couple years I've chaired the annual family camp-out, and Bill has been great about getting involved and helping out. So I've gotten to know him well through that. He's a super nice guy, loves his girls, and adored Becky."

"Can you imagine being a single parent to those two little girls? A friend of mine who's divorced says being a single parent is impossible." Just as she said it, Rachel immediately wanted to take it back, and there was a long, awkward silence.

"It's okay, Rachel. Yes, I'm a single dad. A single, divorced dad. But Ethan still has both his parents. Even if his mom and I don't get along that well, we're both still there for him. Every kid deserves to have two parents, and now these poor little girls have had their mom taken away. It's just not right." As his lip trembled, he bit it and fought back a wave of tears. Whenever he talked of family, Andrew's emotions ran close to the surface. Family was sacred to him. He had lost so much during the past six years.

THREE

Plymouth, Minnesota
Wednesday, June 2
5:00 P.M.

AT FIVE O’CLOCK, a flood of people left IFM’s headquarters. The average employee had been there since eight o’clock and was ready to get out and enjoy a sunny Minnesota evening. Although most of Marketing would typically leave well after six, on Monday and Wednesday nights Andrew slipped out by five thirty to coach Ethan’s soccer team. It was just a rec league, so it was a great way to spend time with Ethan and get to know his friends and their parents.

Andrew’s drive home took less than fifteen minutes. His home was built in an older neighborhood in Plymouth. Andrew scrimped and saved for eighteen months after his divorce to afford the down payment. After living in a cramped, two-bedroom apartment for over three years, he was ready for a home, even if it came with a hefty mortgage.

Although Andrew’s house was the smallest on the block, it

was still very comfortable with three bedrooms, two and a half baths, and a walkout basement. Most of his neighbors had three-car garages to store their jet-skis, boats, or snowmobiles, but a house with a two-car garage was all that would fit on this lot. The extra bay wasn't important to Andrew. He was more concerned about being near Ethan's friends and mom.

What finally sold him on the house was that it backed up to the Luce Line, an old railway that had since been converted to a path that led west past Lake Minnetonka and east toward downtown Minneapolis. Andrew loved to bike and run, so the added convenience of a great trail in his backyard sealed the deal.

Right now, there was no time for a bike ride or a run. His stop at home lasted less than ten minutes. After changing, he grabbed his soccer bag and drove to Parkers Lake fields where the boys practiced and played most of their games.

When he arrived a couple minutes after six, kids of all ages already covered the fields. Parents and siblings were busy setting up their chairs and blankets along the sidelines of each field. Trying not to be too late, Andrew started jogging to the field and spotted Ethan's tow-headed blond mop of hair in the sea of children. Of course Ethan's mom had him at practice on time. She made the high-powered working parent routine look so easy.

"Hey there, Ethan," Andrew shouted. "Can you give me a hand?"

Ethan turned his head, ran over, and gave his dad a big hug. Andrew dropped his bag and reached his arm around Ethan, giving him a squeeze.

"Hey, Dad."

"Can you take two of these balls over to center field?" Andrew asked as he unzipped his duffel bag. "I'll be there in a second. Get the guys arranged in two lines for a passing drill. Okay?"

"Sure."

Andrew dashed over to the sideline, greeting some parents along the way. Upon seeing his ex, Lydia, he gave her a friendly wave before setting down his bag, grabbing a drink of water, and running back onto the field.

Practice lasted an hour. During the first forty minutes the boys

worked on several drills. Afterwards, they scrimmaged in a game of eight on eight. One side was short a player, so Andrew filled in as a fullback. Ethan and the rest of the boys loved nothing better than outmaneuvering their coach, and it was happening more often. The past couple years Andrew wondered if he should quit coaching since the kids' skills were quickly outpacing his, but somehow Ethan convinced him to do it again and again. And as long as there wasn't someone more qualified volunteering, Andrew was willing to keep doing his best.

"Okay, guys, let's head in," said Andrew.

Slowly the kids walked to the sidelines where one of the parents was breaking out some snacks. As soon as the kids saw the ice cream sandwiches being passed out, the field cleared quickly. Andrew picked up the soccer balls, zipped them up in his bag, and walked over to Ethan, who was goofing around with his best friend, Mack.

"You guys were awesome tonight, Mack," said Andrew.

"Thanks, Coach Hastings."

"Are you going to be here for our game next Monday?" asked Andrew.

"I think so."

"Well, good. We need you out there. Hey, I need to talk to Ethan for a second, but we'll see you next week. Maybe you can come for a sleepover one night when we get back from vacation?"

"Sounds great, Coach. See you, Ethan."

Andrew turned and put his arm on Ethan's shoulder. "How was your second to last day as a fifth grader?"

"Boring."

"Are you excited about graduation tomorrow?"

"Kinda," Ethan paused. "It should be fun."

"Well, you should be proud of yourself. You've done a great job in elementary school. I still can't believe I'm going to be the father of a middle-schooler. It just sounds like crazy talk.

"Oh, before I forget, do you understand our schedule for the next week? Remember, it's a little different. Your mom and I made a couple trades so we can go on our trip to Hawaii."

"Yes, Dad, I know," Ethan said impatiently. "I'm at Mom's

this weekend, so I won't be back to our place until next Monday night, right?"

"You got it. But I'll see you tomorrow afternoon at graduation. Okay, buddy?"

"Deal." The two hugged, and Andrew kissed Ethan on his sweaty head. As they turned around, Andrew was startled. Lydia was standing right behind them.

"Oh, you scared me. I didn't realize you were right there."

"How are you, Andrew?" Lydia managed a faint smile. "Let's go, Ethan — time for dinner."

"Ethan and I were just chatting about the schedule for the next week, and his graduation tomorrow. I'm sure I'll see you there."

"Yes, of course I will be there," she replied.

"Well, see you tomorrow, buddy."

As Lydia and Ethan walked to her car, Andrew watched her put her arm around her son. She really did love him. For the most part, he and Lydia did their best to work together. But as hard as they tried, there was always something missing — trust.

Andrew collected his things, picked up some trash left on the fields, and walked toward his car. Fumbling in the side pocket of his bag, he grabbed for his phone. It was only a little past seven, and he could use some real exercise. With a few taps of his finger, he called his friend Josh.

"Hey, hey, mister. You doing okay?" answered Josh.

"It's been a hard day to say the least. Any chance you're up for a run?"

"You bet. I'm still here at IFM's crystal cage." Josh's slang for headquarters. "You want to run out here, or in the city?"

"Let's go in town and run Lake Calhoun. If we have time we can add on Lake Harriet as well."

"Great. Maybe we can even get a bite to eat?"

"Let's say outside your place at eight."

"Perfect."

Madison, Wisconsin
Wednesday, June 2
7:00 P.M.

LIA MERRIMAN savored the last spoonfuls of a delicious, Ethiopian peanut stew at a divey, bohemian restaurant in the heart of Madison. She liked visiting university towns. Not only did they have plenty of alternative restaurants that catered to her vegan diet, but they also had a vibrant energy that renewed her sense of hope and optimism—something she desperately needed today.

After dinner, Lia strolled down by Lake Mendota to rest and enjoy the view. It had been another long and difficult day, and it wasn't over yet. In a few minutes she had to deliver more bad news to her boss, Ken Luger. Today's meeting with Wally Babin, a former researcher on the Redu trials at Iowa Agriculture & Technology, had been a huge disappointment.

Lia worked for a Washington, DC-based consumer watchdog group called the Ethical Food Coalition. During six years plus of employment, Lia had traveled all over the United States and the world trying to improve the safety and quality of the food supply. Most days she felt good about her work. Although progress was slow and sometimes the wins were too far apart, she knew she was making a difference. But her current assignment seemed to be nothing but dead ends, and she was feeling defeated. She agreed with her bosses that something was up, but finding evidence to substantiate their instincts seemed impossible. Although Ken tried to keep her motivated, Lia could feel the growing desperation. The pressure was on to prove Redu was not safe, and EFC was running out of time.

Lia felt her cell phone vibrating in her pocket, so she quickly pulled it out and glanced at the caller ID. "Hi, Ken," she answered. "How are you?"

"I'm fine. And you? Any good news to report?"

"I'm okay," Lia replied, "but no good news here. Wally Babin appears to be another dead end."

“Really? I thought you were on to something with him.”

“So did I. The details surrounding his sudden move to Madison certainly caught my attention, but I pressed him as hard as I could, and he didn’t give me a thing.”

“Damn!”

“I’ve run out of ideas here, so I’m heading home to DC. When I’m back I’ll start digging again at the FDA and around congressional offices. Hopefully I can uncover a lead somewhere.”

“At this point I’ll take anything. We’re running out of options.”

“Agreed,” Lia replied.

“By the way, did you hear about the IFM plane crash?”

“Yes, and the news reports are saying we may be involved,” Lia replied, shaking her head.

“Well, you know those reports are a lie.”

“I know, Ken. I wouldn’t work for EFC if I thought we did business that way.”

“I’m curious where these reports are coming from. Can you ask around?”

“Sure. I’ve got some connections. I’ll see what people are saying.”

“Thanks, Lia. It’d be great to get to the bottom of this if at all possible.”

“No problem.”

“Well, you travel home safely, and please keep me posted.”

“Will do, Ken. Good night.”

Just as Lia was about to get up and walk back to her hotel, the phone vibrated again. *Must be Ken*, she thought. *Maybe he forgot to tell me something*. But when she checked her caller ID, it displayed Gus’s Car Wash with a Maryland area code. Although it was likely some telemarketer, screening calls wasn’t an option in her line of business.

“Hello, this is Lia Merriman.”

Lia could hear sounds on the other end of the line, but no voice.

“Hello?” she repeated. “Can you hear me?”

“Ms. Merriman,” a hushed voice replied.

“Yes. I can barely hear you over that noise. Can you speak up?”

“No, I can’t. I’m calling from a public phone. I’m afraid.”

“Who are you? How can I help?”

“My name is Danielle Haley. We met several months ago. I work for the FDA in Director Epps’s office. You gave me your card.”

“Oh yes, Danielle. I remember you,” Lia played along, although she honestly couldn’t place her face.

“I was cleaning up some files the other day and found something regarding Redu that seemed strange.”

“Really, what?”

“I don’t want to say any more over the phone. I’d rather meet in person.”

“When?”

“Can you meet tonight?”

“I’m in Wisconsin right now. How about tomorrow?”

The voice on the other end was silent.

“Danielle, are you there?”

“Yes. I can’t talk. Someone is coming. I’ll e-mail you a time and place. I’ve got to go.”

Minneapolis, Minnesota

Wednesday, June 2

8:00 P.M.

JOSH’S CONDO SAT on the corner of Lake Street and Knox. Although a bit too modern and flashy for Andrew’s tastes, Josh’s sixth floor, northwest corner unit was very spacious and had one of the best views of Lake Calhoun and downtown Minneapolis in the city. And even though Josh never bragged, Andrew figured it must have cost over a million dollars, especially given how it was furnished. But that was nothing to Josh. He was single, earned six figures as an IT Director at IFM, and had an ample trust fund.

Although he liked to downplay it, Josh was an heir of the Sargent family, one of the founding families of Minneapolis. In 1872, Josh’s

great-great-great-grandfather, Joshua Klout Sargent, established Klout, a local trading and mercantile business. Over the years, it grew into the second largest grocery chain in the country. When the family sold the business ten years ago, they netted over \$50 billion, with Josh's portion a mere \$6 billion. Fortunately for Josh, his father refused to let his children become trust fund kids. Instead, he required that Josh and his two sisters have summer jobs in high school and work their way through college. By the time they were out in the real world, they understood the value of hard work, and each of the three children had jobs and became successful in his or her own right.

Josh came down from his condo at precisely eight o'clock. He was the antithesis of any IT nerd stereotype. Wearing Nike shorts, a tank top, and his latest hi-tech running shoes, he looked like he had walked right out of the pages of some fitness magazine. Although quite average in height at five foot ten, his body was perfectly sculpted. His brown hair was short, neat, and receded slightly at the temples. Deep brown eyes flecked with gold, dimples, a cleft chin, and a scruffy beard set off his square jaw and angular face.

"Are you ready to sweat?" asked Josh.

"Let's do it," Andrew replied.

As they ran across the street and down to the runner's path, Josh asked about Becky. He knew she was on Andrew's team, and Josh could tell Andrew was upset. But after Andrew gave several one- or two-word answers, Josh realized Andrew really didn't want to talk about it, so he quickly moved on to a happier topic.

"Are you and Ethan getting excited about your trip?" Josh asked.

"Yep. I can't believe it. We leave a week from this Friday. By the way, don't forget I'm still waiting for your recommendations on things we should do while in Maui and Kauai."

"I haven't forgotten. I'll try to e-mail you some stuff by this weekend."

"Thanks," Andrew replied. "I know it's crazy to take a vacation right before this big B-Lean launch, but if we don't go now, we

won't have another chance this summer with all of Ethan's sports camps and his vacation with Lydia."

"What about soccer? Who's going to coach?"

"Oh, another father has volunteered to help out. While we're gone, there will be three games and a practice. Practices are the only thing it takes any effort to plan."

"And how is Lydia dealing with the whole vacation thing?"

"No different than usual. We even brought in our mediator. I understand she doesn't want to be away from Ethan that long. I don't like it when he's gone either. At least we're handling it like adults and keeping Ethan from feeling like he's caught in the middle."

Halfway around Lake Calhoun, they decided to make it a seven-mile run and ran through Berry Park to Lake Harriet. By this point they were both dripping with sweat, so they stopped at a water fountain for a drink then pulled off their shirts and wiped down their faces and chests. Although Josh's single life certainly afforded more trips to the gym, Andrew was also quite fit and his muscular, neatly-trimmed chest and abs shimmered in the golden light of dusk.

In just over an hour, they had completed their circuit, picked up some takeout from Chang Mai Thai, and were back at Josh's condo eating and watching the last hour of the Celtics-Lakers NBA finals game. Not fans of either team, they still enjoyed the close finish with the Celtics ultimately winning.

Andrew got up and took their dishes into the kitchen. "I should get going. I need to get into work early since I'm leaving after lunch for Ethan's graduation."

Lying on the couch, Josh continued watching television and muttered "Uh, huh." By now the news was on, and just as he decided to get up the lead story caught his eye. "Andrew, get back in here. Heidi's covering the crash."

"What?" Andrew wandered back into the room. Immediately Heidi's voice caught his attention. Her story was moving and meticulous. It included video of the crash site, eyewitness accounts,

statements from IFM, and initial information from local police and the NTSB. When Heidi interviewed Becky's sister, Hope, her genuine concern and empathy transformed what could have been exploitive into a thoughtful, genuine story of a family experiencing unbearable loss.

Then as Heidi's story came to a close, she spoke briefly with Bill Clausen. Reaching out, she squeezed his hand and said, "I know you're struggling to even comprehend your loss, but if you can, what would you like us to know about your wife?"

Bill struggled to maintain his composure and swallowed hard. "Where do I begin?" he replied, looking forlorn and washed out. Then a smile crossed his face, and his bloodshot eyes glimmered toward the camera. "Becky always amazed me at how she could be a successful business woman and a great mom and still make me feel so loved. Although she died doing a job she adored, Becky was never afraid to let everyone know that it was her family that lit up her world."

Andrew took a deep breath. It felt like he had been holding it during the entire story.

"Have you spoken to Bill yet?" Josh asked.

"I called him this morning. Becky's family was coming over to the house, so he couldn't talk very long."

"How do you keep going after such a loss?"

"I don't know," Andrew replied. "He and Becky were so in love. They were the perfect couple."

Josh nodded as he picked up his dishes and walked into the kitchen. Raising his voice slightly so Andrew could still hear him, "I mean, those last words that Bill shared about Becky. How does Heidi get people to open up like that?"

"Heidi's pretty amazing, you know that," Andrew replied, following Josh into the kitchen.

"Yes, we both do." Josh paused and then asked, "So how long has it been since you've seen her?"

"Oh, I don't know. Probably six months."

Heidi had been a classmate of theirs at Carleton College. They met at freshman orientation, and quickly became best friends.

But by the time they left for summer vacation, Andrew knew he wanted to be more than just friends. He tried calling her over break, but she was never around. It wasn't until they returned to campus that Andrew realized why. Heidi had a new boyfriend, Tyler.

For months Andrew was depressed. Although he was still good friends with Heidi, he couldn't shake the feelings he had for her. So to help boost his best friend's spirits, Josh invited Andrew to a party his sister was throwing across town at St. Olaf College. It was there that he met Lydia. She was quick-witted and petite with beautiful emerald green eyes and highlighted blond hair. There was an immediate chemistry between the two of them, and Andrew enjoyed Lydia's aggressive pursuit. It was nice to be chased. Then after three years of tumultuous romance, Lydia wanted a ring. Andrew hesitated but finally relented to Lydia's determination. By the end of Andrew's senior year, they were engaged, and then married a year later.

It didn't take long for Lydia to try to re-cast Andrew's life. Jealous of his friendships with Josh and Heidi, Lydia made it increasingly difficult for Andrew to see them, especially after Heidi finally broke things off with Tyler. Ethan's birth and the pressures of fatherhood, work, and marriage reduced their friendships further. Andrew and Josh still got together for lunch and the occasional run at IFM, but gone were the days of hanging out with Heidi. Then, more than six years later, Andrew bumped into Heidi outside the Hennepin County Family Justice Center. Heidi was there covering a story. Andrew was coming out of family court. He was a broken shell of a man, having just been ordered to move out of his home within ten days.

Heidi invited Andrew and Josh over for dinner that weekend. They laughed about old times, and Heidi and Josh consoled their dear friend. Step by step they helped Andrew rebuild his life. From finding and furnishing his new apartment, to supporting him through a bitter divorce that threatened to leave him a father in name only, Josh and Heidi were there for Andrew.

Three years later, Andrew had persevered and flourished. The

divorce was behind him. Ethan was thriving, spending half of his time with his dad, and half with his mom. Andrew had bought a home, and he threw a holiday party to celebrate his good fortune and to thank his friends. As Heidi helped Andrew clean up after the party, she kissed him, and turned his life upside down. He was in love.

The next nine months were wonderful. They agreed to take it slow, and just enjoy being together. Andrew still felt the scars of a bad marriage, and Ethan's well-being was his primary concern. He knew Ethan would love Heidi as a step-mom, but what if things didn't work out? Andrew didn't trust his instincts anymore, and he couldn't bear to have Ethan suffer another breakup. So to Ethan and much of the world, they were just friends. But as time passed, Heidi began pressing him for a commitment. She grew tired of keeping their relationship a secret. She was ready to get married, and although she adored Ethan, she also wanted kids of her own. Andrew felt pressured, and his fear of commitment grew. Finally, after they had dated for a year, Heidi forced the issue, and when Andrew said he wasn't ready yet, she ran.

"You haven't seen her in six months?" Josh knew to tread lightly. The topic of Heidi had been off limits for Andrew since they broke up, but Josh had successfully maintained friendships with both of them, mainly by minding his own business and trying not to meddle.

"We met a couple times to return some personal items to each other. Heidi was angry, and I was hurt. It was awkward."

"You know she still loves you."

"Really? Did she say that?" Andrew asked.

"No, but I can tell. I think she feels badly about what happened. Patience isn't Heidi's strength. She knew you needed more time."

"Well, that's all history now."

"Why do you say that?"

"I don't know. It's hard for me to trust anyone again after what I've been through. If there's anything I've learned from marriage, it's that I want a woman who will be there, no matter what." Andrew paused and asked, "How is she doing?"

“Okay. She’s much more of a loner these days.”

“Why do you say that?”

“She just doesn’t talk much about doing stuff with other people—even her family. It’s like work and exercise are all there is. You should give her a call.”

Andrew couldn’t make up his mind if Josh was right or not, but it was late, and he had to get going. So after cleaning up the last of the dishes, Andrew said good night and drove home, lost in thought.

IFM Headquarters

Wednesday, June 2

10:00 P.M.

AIDAN TOOLE’S OFFICE was a showplace. Perched atop IFM’s headquarters, the view it provided was unrivaled. It was originally planned to be only a fraction of its current size, but Aidan had halted construction after visiting a grad school buddy’s office in Manhattan. Not to be outdone, he worked with designers to reconfigure plans for his executive suite. He made space for his expansion by moving the chief counsel’s office and a conference room to the opposite end of the floor. He didn’t want a lawyer as his neighbor anyway.

The office had been built before “green” and “sustainability” were buzzwords, so Aidan had gotten away with furnishing it with rare Brazilian Ipe hardwood floors and handmade mahogany furniture from Peru. It was also constantly upgraded with the latest gadgetry, including three large flat-screens gracing the walls and the latest computing and video-conferencing accessories. The bathroom alone was larger than most IFM conference rooms, and it made quite an impression with gold plated fixtures, Persa Blue granite walls and countertops, a cedar sauna, whirlpool tub, and steam shower enclosure.

Aidan deserved it. Or at least he thought so. After all, he had sold his soul for this company.

Aidan stood by his desk, looking out over Lake Minnetonka. Peggy, his wife, chattered on and on over the phone, and Aidan did his best to listen and throw in the occasional “yes, dear” so as not to get called on the carpet for being uninterested. Aidan adored his wife, but tonight he was distracted, and she demanded more attention than he could muster.

They had celebrated their silver anniversary the previous summer, more a tribute to Peggy than him. His minor contribution was keeping his pants zipped when it came to the ladies. He figured it was the least he could do. Truth be told, he didn’t consider himself a ladies’ man. Although he was handsome, his short five-foot-six stature and balding blond hair weren’t every woman’s dream. To compensate, Aidan ran or swam most days and lifted weights at least three times a week. The result was an exceptionally fit fifty-eight-year-old man. Impeccably dressed and sporting dark tortoise shell glasses that hid his steel blue eyes, there was an air of mystery and self-imposed isolation to Aidan. Perhaps that came with leading a Fortune 100 company for almost ten years. However, on some level, Aidan was painfully aware of his own deep-seated insecurity that festered within his very core.

As Chloe Stiles knocked and entered his office, Aidan quickly muffled “I love you” and “good night” to Peggy and greeted Chloe.

Without even the briefest hello, Chloe asked nervously, “Have you heard from her?”

“Calm down. Laura is a professional,” Aidan replied. “Let’s wait for Dan.” Glancing at his watch he went on, “Where the hell is he anyway? It’s ten o’clock. He should be here.”

Chloe opened Aidan’s wet bar fridge, helped herself to a Diet X-cite cola, and sat down on the leather sofa. “Well, I’m sure it’s not easy to get out of the house this late with five kids and a wife.”

“Hell, you’ve done it.”

“Oh, Aidan, I have two teenage boys, and they’re at my ex’s. It just makes life easier if they stay there during the week.”

Chloe crossed her legs and sat nervously on the couch with her

right leg fidgeting as if she was suffering from a case of restless leg syndrome. Her skittish behavior was hardly the image one would expect from IFM's President of Innovation, Technology, and Quality. But this was not a typical week for Chloe.

A beauty pageant star as a child, Chloe was now forty-eight and hanging on to her youth for dear life. Although certainly still beautiful, the telltale signs of age were gaining ground. Yoga, Botox, and countless surgical "procedures" weren't working anymore. Her long, straight, raven hair, once sleek and supple, had grown more brittle as dyes and age took a horrible toll. To complicate matters, Chloe still hadn't come to the realization that maintaining her size-two figure made it even harder to cover her age. Her face was drawn, her skin sagged, and her hands and arms were bony with prominent veins bulging to the surface. Yes, she could still fit into ultra mini-skirts and revealing tops, but her age-inappropriate fashion choices frequently made Chloe the butt of jokes.

Her love life was just as amusing. Married and divorced three times, Chloe was a woman who needed a man by her side but grew tired of his company quickly. There were a few who knew that there had actually been a fourth marriage, but it had lasted less than two weeks, so she didn't count it. Husband number two fathered her two children. They separated when the boys were three and five. Chloe left for a ski trip one weekend and never came back. These days she was single and sported such a constant flow of younger men on her arm that she earned the "Twin Cities Cougar of the Year" award from the local gossip rag—a title Chloe was secretly quite proud of.

Aidan continued pacing along the wall of glass overlooking Lake Minnetonka. The sun had set, and only the occasional blinking lights of a boat could be seen crossing the main channel. Finally, Dan Murdock walked into Aidan's office.

"Hi, sorry I'm late. The regional retail sales directors are in town, and I took them to Manny's for some drinks and steaks. I wanted to make sure they understood what a big deal the B-Lean launch is."

"What are you hearing from them?"

“They’re impressed but still a little skeptical.”

“Really, why?”

“I think they’re so used to us saying this is our biggest launch ever, they don’t understand we really mean it this time. But when they hear how much we’re investing behind it, their eyes open and they start to see big bonus payouts.”

“Well, that’s good. Just as long as we have them on the hook to deliver big volume.”

“Oh, we do. Art’s signed them up for a forty million case increase. That alone will help us reach double-digit retail sales growth.”

“Fantastic. I’ve always said there was money to be made in getting the bastards we’ve fattened up to slim down.”

“Yeah!” Dan replied. “Now we can make money on the yo-yo dieters as their scales go up and down!” They both laughed.

Chloe got up from the sofa as it became apparent Aidan and Dan weren’t coming to sit down anytime soon. She was growing tired of Dan taking all the credit. “Aidan, it’s fantastic to see what we’ve been working so hard for the past nine years come to life. We’ve created a revolution in food, and we stand to reap huge rewards.”

“Well, as you both know, we aren’t at the finish line yet,” Aidan said. “And after this morning’s events, I know we’re all anxious.”

Chloe’s face tightened, and she started to tap her foot.

“Let’s go sit down.” Aidan motioned to his desk then sat down facing Dan and Chloe.

“So, have you talked to her, Aidan?”

“Yes, Chloe. Laura called me earlier this evening. It looks like a clean hit.” Chloe’s eyes darted to the floor when Aidan said the word “hit.”

“I knew Laura could do it,” added Dan. “She’s tough and reliable.”

Chloe shifted in her chair. Still on edge, her shoulders drooped slightly as she digested the update.

“The news is reporting that EFC has claimed responsibility. What’s that about?” she asked.

“Oh, Laura came up with that twist. She thought it would be

helpful to throw a red herring in the mix to use as cover,” Dan replied.

“Well, I still don’t like how all this went down,” Chloe muttered. “I told both of you I could contain the issue with my people. Then you go off killing them.”

“Hey there,” Dan was getting upset and Chloe could tell. “Wait just one second. We agreed yesterday that too much was riding on this. What if your people started talking? Could we really afford to take that risk? Just one wrong word could have led a reporter or some EFC operative to uncover that damn early research from Dr. McNaulty.”

“But I’ve made a lot of improvements since those early trials.”

“That’s great, Chloe, but don’t you get it? We don’t need to give anyone an excuse to go nosing around. Hell, so far we’ve hidden research, falsified trials, bribed government officials, and blackmailed researchers. If news of any of that leaks out, you know where the three of us will be? Jail. That’s right! And that’s not all. What about our big payout? Gone! We each stand to lose \$250 million or more from our stock options alone if Redu goes down the tubes. So don’t go pointing your finger, Chloe. You were there when we decided to take care of these loose ends.”

“These so-called loose ends were people, Dan. You guys ganged up on me last night long after you and Laura had hatched a plan. I didn’t have a choice.”

“Oh, give me a break—”

Tired of the arguing, Aidan interrupted.

“Chloe, you know as well as I do, Dan is right. If the slightest inkling of impropriety were to get out, the press and food cops would treat it like blood in the water. It wouldn’t take long for our transgressions to catch up with us. I agree with Dan. I don’t want to end up in jail, and my guess is, neither do you. So stop the bickering. What’s done is done. It was unfortunate but necessary. We need to move on quickly to make sure these actions weren’t in vain.”

“Yes, Aidan. You’re completely right,” Dan agreed.

Chloe stared at the floor. Aidan was right, but she still couldn't believe they had actually done it.

"First let's make sure our trail is clean," Aidan said. "Laura's very concerned about this. After all, that's how we got in this mess in the first place. She wants her chief IT person to do a complete and thorough audit of our networks and databases. Anything questionable will be isolated. Once a document has been quarantined only one of us can release it."

"Do we trust Laura?" Chloe asked. "I mean, she's brilliant, but she's also ruthless. Do we want her touching all of our data?"

"I don't think we have a choice," Aidan replied. "Our only other option is to bring our IT team into the mix to resolve this."

Dan rolled his eyes. Rick Dunlop was IFM's Chief of Information Systems. He had risen through the ranks quickly, but more for his golf game than for being smart or skilled. "Yeah, Rick's a nice guy and everything, but he's an idiot. Not only do I think he could screw this up, but I don't trust him."

Chloe turned to Dan. "It's refreshing how quickly you throw your buddies under the bus."

"What do you think we should do, Chloe?" Dan asked.

After squirming in her chair, she threw up her hands in disgust and shook her head. "You're right. We don't have a choice. I'm just scared of Laura. I'm convinced she would eat her own young if she had to."

Dan chuckled. "Well, you're right about that. She's tough, but that's what we need to get this done. Do you want me to follow up with Laura on this, Aidan, or do you want to handle it?"

"No, you can, Dan. You and Chloe are closer to what document vulnerabilities may exist. I expect a complete review by the end of this week so we can feel secure. Understand?"

"Perfectly."

"Good. Oh, by the way, I've called an emergency leadership team meeting for tomorrow morning."

"Yes, I saw that come through on my phone," Chloe said approvingly.

"In that meeting I will announce to the leadership team our

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go-forward plan in light of the crash. Given the crucial nature of the B-Lean launch, I'm going to appoint both of you as special project chairmen. You will have the complete authority to pull in any resources necessary for the launch. My expectation is that you will personally lead this project through completion. Chloe, this means you need to pick up the reins. The FDA approval must happen by June 15. Got it?"

"Yes, I'll be in DC next Tuesday to make sure it happens."

"And, Dan, you need to have Marketing and Sales ready to make this our biggest launch ever."

"We're on it, Aidan," Dan said reassuringly. "Don't worry."



HowlingHound
P R E S S

Published by Howling Hound Press
P.O. Box 46012
Minneapolis, MN 55446

or contact via e-mail at:
info@howlinghoundpress.com.

First Edition: August 2012

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Publisher's Cataloging-In-Publication Data

Bradley, Bruce.
Fat profits / Bruce Bradley. -- 1st ed.

p. ; cm.

ISBN: 978-1-938053-07-8

1. Food industry and trade--Corrupt practices--United States--Fiction.
2. Divorced fathers--United States--Fiction. 3. Conspiracies--United States--Fiction.
4. Lobbyists--United States--Fiction. 5. Minneapolis (Minn.)--Fiction.
6. Washington (D.C.)--Fiction. 7. Suspense fiction. I. Title. II. Title: Fat profits

PS3602.R23 F28 2012

813/.6

2012938674

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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