

"Success"

by Hugh McGovern

Second Draft

Part I - Trionics

Chapter 1 – Opens with Nicholas at home before work

Nicholas Martin, Fulbright scholar, graduate cum laude University of Chicago and, top producer, Stephen's & Co was close to his goal.

He woke before the alarm, deep in his queen-sized bed. He rubbed sleep-encrusted eyes, before tossing back the covers. The carpet was warm to his naked feet as he strode across the room. He glanced quickly through the balcony doors. A winter's sun was rising from the lake.

He sat at his computer, massaging his nose, snorting loudly to clear phlegm from his throat. Trionics was unchanged. The market hadn't opened yet. He struck a key. A graph of the week's closing prices flashed up on the screen: a steady upward curve. Satisfied he got up and walked to the bathroom.

The tiles were cold to the touch. He rested two suntanned hands on the washstand staring into the mirror. He brushed back short black hair with his hand. An irrepressible smile spread across his face. Another month, two at most and that would be it. Nothing could stop him now.

He quickly shaved, and showered, throwing on his favorite suit from the closet. It was Armani; one Sonia had picked out. Soon he would have as many as he wanted.

The street was bleak and windswept when he left the building. He stiffened against the cold. He joined a line of other pedestrians their bodies hunched against the sweeping wind.

He walked the few blocks to the station. It was crowded when he arrived. Commuters converged, forming a line that stretched onto the street. He merged with the

crowd, thrusting his fare at the attendant when he passed through the turnstile. He climbed a rusting, metal stairway, dank with litter and leaves. He stood on the platform shielding himself from the wind behind a billboard.

A train screeched into the station in a shower of sparks. He boarded, pushing his way into the car.

He took the elevator to the twentieth floor, when he got into the building.

"Early again. You're the dedicated one."

It was Ryan. He stood outside his office, constrained in his newly pressed shirt. He pushed out his chest making him look bigger. He must have cut himself shaving. There were bloodstains on his collar. He was wearing the same shirt for two days in a row now.

"Not when there's money to be made" he said, throwing his bag on the chair in his office. "How's the syndication?"

"Which one?" said Ryan.

"InterMedia."

"Don't look at me. Warren's still figuring out our participation."

"What's there to figure out? We should take at least two hundred thou. That shit's going through the roof."

"I told you. That's Warren's call." He shrugged letting his shoulders sag.

"Does he have to sign off on everything?"

His face clouded over. "What are you a genius? Since when did you know everything?"

"What?"

"Warren has a lot of experience. He's been doing this stuff since you were in diapers."

"It's got nothing to do with experience. It's business."

"I know. My hands are tied." He was quiet. "By the way, the old man really liked your speech. He told me to tell you."

"On high-tech stocks? That was nothing."

"I'd take the compliment if I were you. You won't get too many around here."

He turned to walk into his office, placing his hand on the door handle. "Warren wants to see you."

"What for?"

"Why don't you go ask him?"

He walked down the corridor, passing through thick, mahogany doors. He crossed over the company logo, emblazoned on the carpet. The old man insisted upon it: a predatory eagle, stock certificate grasped in one claw. He walked quickly across the trading floor. It was quiet. Most of the brokers did not arrive for another hour. Peter looked up from his computer and waved as he went by. He passed through administration and the main reception area. The old man's office was empty. He rarely came in before noon. Mostly now he just slept at his desk. He was great in his day.

Warren was on the phone, leaning back in his chair, glassy eyes half-closed, one hand wrapped around his head, a nicotine-stained finger exploring his ear. His large belly was hidden from view tucked under his desk. Thinning hair was greased and combed over his crimson pate. A moment later he hung up.

"Hot shot, what a pleasure. I was just thinking about you. Come in. Have a seat."

He stood in the doorway.

"What's up Warren?"

"You still making your budget."

"That and more. I'm twenty per cent over this month. You know that."

"Did you call Rob Kruger at Goldman?"

"Of course."

"What did he say?"

"He'll take ten thousand for now, at twenty and a quarter."

"Good."

"We should do at least two hundred thou of InterMedia. It's rock solid."

"Say's who? You?"

"You know I'm right."

He coloured rapidly. "Don't tell me what I know and don't know. I'm the one making the decisions around here. "

"If we don't move fast, we'll lose the deal."

"Who do you think you are? You come in here with your degrees and your big attitude. You don't know shit. It's all theory and formulas to you, Mr. MBA. I've got twenty years experience in this business. Twenty years of sweat. When you've got that behind you, then we'll talk about what you know."

"Can I go now?"

"No, you can't." He leaned forward in his chair, resting his elbow on the desk. He jabbed the air threatening with a pudgy index figure. "You're up to something, hot-shot. I can smell it. I've been around long enough to know. What ever it is, it had better be legal

and above board, because if I find out it's not, I'll come down on you hard, so hard that your next job will be flipping burgers in McDonalds." He sat there for a moment, glowering. "Now you can go."

Nicholas turned and walked back down the corridor, without saying a word.

He busied himself with his work as soon as he got into his office. There was a pile of paper on his desk. Ryan must have dumped it there, before he got in. It was all trivial, administrative crap. Now he had to keep tabs on the new brokers. He glanced out the window. The sun had burnt off the fog. He could just see the Sears Tower behind the building opposite.

It took him several hours to clear his desk.

After a while the phone rang. It was Sonia. She sounded husky. It was her morning voice.

"Did you just get in?" he said.

"Yeah. Why?"

"You sound it."

She laughed.

"Did you check it yet today?" she said.

"I just looked at it a few minutes ago."

"What's it doing?"

He leaned forward in his chair, keying the code word into his computer. "It's up a half already."

"We should cash in soon. I've got a bad feeling about it."

"You've got to give it more time, Sonia."

"But we've already made a killing."

"It's not enough. We can make more."

"As soon as it starts falling, sell out."

"I know. I know. You don't have to tell me." He pulled up another stock, making sure Trionics was no longer on the screen. "Warren's getting suspicious."

"What could he know?"

"He doesn't know anything. He's just fishing for information."

"What's there to worry about? It's all legal, right?"

"Of course it is."

"I have to go. I'll call you later." She hung up.

After the market closed, he took the elevator down to the lobby, going into the restaurant near the entrance. It was an antiseptic and plastic place. Bare fluorescent tubes cast a white glare down on a windowless dining area. He loaded up a tray with food and found a table at the back. He saw Peter coming in his direction. He ducked his head down. It was too late.

"Don't mind if I join you, Nick?"

"Help yourself."

He sat in the seat opposite. He was a florid, plumpish man in his early thirties, his face split by a permanent, idiotic grin.

"So what's the latest?"

"What do you mean?"

"You know. What are the hot tips, the hot stocks? What are you getting in on these days?" A piece of food flew out of his mouth and landed on the table. He carried on eating unaware.

"You got to figure that out for yourself."

"Come on, Nick. Give me a tip. My sales are really down this month."

"Have you tried high-tech stocks?"

"Which ones?" He leaned forward, eagerly.

"That would be telling."

"Oh, come on."

"I could tell you about a few stocks that would make you a lot of money, but..."

"But what?" Red-rimmed eyes widened. His jaw hung down. There was a morsel of food stuck between his teeth.

"How can I put it?"

"What? What?"

"I could...but I'm not going to."

"You know sometimes you can be a real ass-hole."

"That's right."

Peter took a huge bite from his sandwich, talking with his mouth open. "You still seeing that girl?"

"Which one?"

"Don't give me that. The one you talk to on the phone all the time. Sonia, right?"

"Yeah, I'm still seeing her."

"She's pretty."

"Well, that's no surprise." He stood up, picking up his tray.

"Ass-hole" said Peter.

He smiled and walked over to the trash dumping his tray. "See you, later" he said, walking out into the lobby.

The day went in quickly after that. There were the details of a new syndication to be arranged. There were calls to be made to the syndication partners. There were some new proposals from companies going to the market for the first time.

At seven the phone rang. "Are you ready, yet?" said Sonia.

"Almost. When are you leaving?"

"Next ten minutes or so."

"Okay, come round front. I'll be waiting outside." He hung up. He took another look at Trionics. Fifty cents up today alone. Three dollars on the week. Another few days were all he needed.

He stood, buttoned up, on La Salle Street, waiting until he saw her. She pulled up at the sidewalk abruptly with a screech of brakes.

"Francesco's?" she said, when he got in the car.

"Sounds good."

"Well." She tied back long blonde hair, while they were stopped at the traffic lights. One perfectly varnished nail scratched her large nose.

"Well, what?"

"How is it?"

"Will you relax?"

"What are you waiting for?" She crossed Michigan Avenue, accelerating on amber, scattering pedestrians with the liberal use of her horn.

"You're going to get a ticket," he said, putting on his seat belt. "We can make more, that's why. Do you know how much we make every day it rises?"

"I know how much we stand to lose. It's a crapshoot. You've said so yourself."

"I know I said that."

"I'm just worried, that's all."

"Will you just leave it with me. I know what I'm doing."

"I wouldn't mind, but for my mother. Did you have to get her involved?"

"It's a good deal. That's why I got her involved."

"I know, but if anything happens. She thinks the world of you. You know that."

"Sonia, listen to me. Nothing is going to happen. In a few more weeks we'll cash in. We'll be set. You can quit that bogus job. We can get the house we looked at. Life's going to get a whole lot better."

She shut up after that but still was not satisfied. She parked the car, slamming the door loudly, when she got out. He ignored the gesture avoiding her pointed look.

Francesco was writing in the ledger when they arrived. He looked up and smiled.

"Mr. Martin, good to see you." He brushed back a large mop of hair, straightening a stained waistcoat. "Ah, bellissimo. A pleasure, yet again."

Sonia laughed. "I bet you say that to everyone."

"Only you. Only you bellissimo."

They followed him through an archway, into a darkened room. He directed them to a secluded booth. A waiter came and lit the candle on the table, handing them two menus.

She was quiet, staring into her menu.

"What is it?" he said, after a moment.

"It's this whole thing," she said, looking up. "I just see a part of you that scares me. It's always been there, but never this strong."

"What is it?"

"I don't know, a compulsion, a demon, something driving you."

He said nothing.

"Are you ready to order yet?" The waiter had come back. He stood notepad in hand, trembling with eagerness and zeal.

"Not yet, thanks," said Nicholas. He left, leaving a carafe of wine and a strong smell of cologne behind him.

"You're all I want," he said, quietly.

"Am I, though?" Her blue eyes glimmered in the candlelight. "You say that, but I wonder if you'll ever be satisfied? Why do we need this? We both make good money.

We're doing just fine, as we are."

"It's not enough."

"How much is enough?"

"I can't piss my life away on a miserable hundred grand a year. You know that. If I take a risk now, I can eliminate a life-time of work."

He poured himself a glass of wine, and sat back, resting one arm on the back of his seat. He picked up his glass, savoring the acidic liquid, letting it linger on his palate.

"It's not just money is it?"

"The money is incidental. This is about me Sonia. It's just something I have to do."

"It's a lot more than money."

"At least it will be over soon," he said, after drinking from his glass.

"I know."

"After this, let's go on a long vacation."

"Where?"

"Anywhere. Doesn't matter what it costs. You name it. Somewhere warm. Far away from all this."

"I'm sorry. You know how I am," she said. She took his hand and squeezed it.

"That's all right."

"Let's not talk about it anymore, tonight."

"Okay."

They ordered, sitting back to watch the couples at other tables. She cut her pasta with into small, precise pieces, eating each, a spoonful at a time. He was hungry, concentrating on his plate, barely looking up, until everything was gone. He was done, long before she was finished. He leaned back, suppressing a belch, and poured himself another glass. The waiter came and cleared the dishes away.

"What are you thinking?"

"I'm tired," she said. "Let's go soon."

He nodded, calling the waiter back for the check. They both got up. Francesco was gone when they passed through the lobby. It was a short, bitter walk from the restaurant to the car. The temperature had dropped, and they walked quickly now to avoid the cold. The car was cold. He buried his hands deeply in the pockets of his coat, when he sat in the passenger seat. They shivered while they waited for the heater to kick in.

"Do you want me to come over?" she said.

"Sure."

"You're not too tired."

"No. I'm okay."

Traffic was light on the highway. They merged with the other cars, joining a furious millrace of humanity. He could see the lake, vast and grey its shoreline in arctic freeze. Great ice-rafts were pushed upward, compelled by pressure from within.

The marina was deserted; its boats stowed until the thaw. No pedestrians braved its promenades. Lights sparkled on the pier, an illusory sign of life. The Ferris wheel was motionless, waiting for summer and tourists to bring back to life.

He looked into the other cars. The different faces sped by. Accountants, security guards, stockbrokers, students, doctors, lawyers, pizza drivers, cops, mothers and children, teenagers in daddy's car, seniors in sedans.

She rested a hand on his leg. It was warm to his touch. She moved the car over to the exit lane, slowing as they came off the ramp. She came to a complete stop at an intersection. It was a couple of blocks to his apartment building. She parked in the underground lot, and they took the elevator to his floor.

He threw his bag on the chair, after he unlocked the door. "Do you want something to drink?" he said, opening the fridge door.

"What is there?"

"Beer, wine, orange juice, milk."

"Orange juice."

He closed the fridge door, and poured her a glass. Next he went into the bedroom, hanging up his jacket in the closet. He walked over to the balcony door, closing the blinds. He sat on the bed, taking off his shoes.

"This room smells," said Sonia. She came and sat on the bed. "Do you ever open the window?"

"I don't think of it in the morning."

"Well, it's too cold to open it now." She put her glass on the floor, and lay back on the bed, stretching out. She kicked off her shoes.

He got up and walked over to the closet. He took off his trousers and shirt, hanging them with care beside the jacket. He walked back to the bed and sat in his vest and shorts.

She sat up and picked her glass off the floor.

"You can take them off, too, if you want" she said, smiling.