

## **Branded by Fate**

### **EXCERPTS**

#### Expert No. 1

As the woods came to a clearing, I reached the top and came to a dead stop. "What on earth. . ." I thought as I looked straight ahead facing a beautiful old house. It occupied the very top of the hill. I could not understand it. Just three months ago there had been no house, not even an indication that a house would ever be built up here in this wilderness. Yet this house looked as though it had been here for ages. How could this be?

Slowly I walked toward it listening for any sign of occupation. There was no street leading up this hill, no leftover building material, no sign of roadwork or ditches dug for electrical wires, water pipes or a gas line, no signs of recent construction at all. As I approached the house, all I heard were my own footsteps and my own breathing.

"Lou!"

I came to a dead stop, looking up at the house, trying to locate the voice that knew my name but could not see anyone. Puzzled I looked over my shoulder, first right, then left, but there was nobody. Slowly I turned in a circle scanning the entire area. I listened intently but heard only birds singing and the slightest movement of leaves high up in the trees.

"Lou!"

There it was again. The voice was sharp and this time I was almost certain that it had come from inside the house.

"Hello?" I called out. I ran around the entire house and noticed that there were no windows on the bottom floor. Who would build a house without windows on the bottom floor?

"Lou!" There was an urgency in her voice. "Up here!"

"Hello?" I called out again as I looked up but the large windows on the second floor reflected the morning sun and I could not see inside. "Who are you? Do I know you?" I asked. There was no answer.

"Do you need help?" I shouted and listened intently. I ran toward the front of the house and stood by the entrance door. There was no bell. The door was ornately carved from wood and without a door knob, appearing as though it belonged somewhere in Asia.

"Hello?" I called again. I held my breath as I leaned my ear against the wooden door listening for any noises inside the house. "Are you alright?" I asked but did not hear a response. I stepped back squinting my eyes in a futile attempt

to look inside the upstairs windows once again but the reflective sun blinded me. Wiping the sweat off my forehead with my left hand, I covered my eyes for a moment trying to regain my sight.

“Huhhhhhh,” I heard the woman’s voice breathe in as though she was frightened. My left arm dropped as I stumbled backwards a couple of steps.

“Lou, don’t leave! Please! Up here!”

The staccato voice sent chills down my spine as my overheated body continued to press moisture through the pores of my skin.

“What do you want me to do?” I shouted. “Who are you?”

“Come in!” the faint woman’s voice from behind the blinding window called out.

I waited a few seconds before I ran up to the house with quick steps, then paused, my body as still as the forest floor, my mind racing. “I’m coming in!” I finally said.

## Excerpt No. 2

“What do you want to do with your life, Lou?” he asked.

“What?”

“What do you want to do with your life?” he asked once more.

I stared at him with wide open eyes and swallowed. “The same thing everybody else wants, I assume: Get a big house, a beautiful wife, nice things. That’s why I studied to become an attorney, so I could afford a good life.”

“What exactly do you do in your career? I know you’re a lawyer. Do you defend the poor?” Uncle Ray asked.

“No.” I laughed. “I’m a corporate lawyer in a big firm. In most cases, we don’t deal with individuals. We focus on transactional law –buying and selling companies.”

“I see,” Uncle Ray said. “And is that satisfying?”

“Yeah!” I said. “I make good money. Besides buying and selling companies is a win-win situation. The seller wants to sell, the buyer wants to buy. The seller gets a ton of money. The buyer gets a new company. He can either add it to his existing business and expand or diversify or he can build on what he already has. Everybody wins, including me. I get paid well for my services. Everybody’s happy.”

“What do you like most about it?” Uncle Ray asked.

“The power, I guess. You have all the big players in the room.” I explained, quickly forgetting about the river. “Let’s say a big company is buying a smaller one in the same line of business. You’ll have the presidents of both companies

and the senior officers such as the chief financial officer or maybe a couple of vice presidents present. Both companies usually have outside accountants and each company has their own general counsel, that's us. They may also have in-house attorneys. All these people get together and negotiate the deal – the terms and conditions of the sale. It can get quite tense. You can feel the power in the room. I love it.”

“Is it power or tension that you love?” Uncle Ray asked.

“The power of course!” I replied. “It’s like electrical power lines that carry a strong current. Of course there is tension involved.”

“I see,” Uncle Ray said. “So your goal in life is to have power and to make a lot of money?”

“Yes,” I said with great conviction.

### Excerpt No. 3

As the ground came closer, I pulled the rip cord and after a quick jolt began to glide, safely dangling below the protection of the parachute. I could see the camping ground slightly to the left about one thousand feet below me. I pulled the side cords, directing the parachute to the left. Nothing happened. I pulled harder. Still no reaction.

The wind forcefully pushed me to the right away from the camping ground. I pulled the cord again. Nothing. My mind raced. I stared into the rushing water as it came closer and closer at an alarming speed. Two hundred feet, one hundred feet. . . With my last rational thought, I released my gear.

As I hit the water, the parachute and I disconnected. I held my breath as I catapulted into the deep waters of the river. Reddish muddy water surrounded me in every direction. I wondered if my friends would miss me as I tossed and turned in the rapids. Suddenly there was air and I drew a big breath, then water and more water.

I managed to come to the surface one more time by sheer luck just to see the water’s edge. The world’s largest waterfall was right in front of me. How could anyone survive such force? As the water bent, going down, I went down with it. Two hundred eighty-five feet. There was a strong involuntary push. The river pushed me off the edge.

I held my breath. The water hurt. I thought of all the ants I had killed in my California home by flushing them down the kitchen drain. Now I was the ant. The sound of the rushing water hurt my ears badly. I screamed but could not be heard. I could not see. My body ached. Then there was silence. Complete silence and calm. Darkness. Just a big dark void. I was no longer scared. I could no longer feel my body. Was I dead?