

### Part III

9.

Mike Danzig was happy. Looking at himself in the cracked bathroom mirror of his East Palo Alto apartment, Mike could hardly believe that the rich, well tailored, groom-to-be was the same person as the poor, lanky virgin who had arrived in East Palo Alto only four and a half years ago, but it was.

The events since Omar's party had happened so fast that they had seemed like a dream. It was the act of writing a check for four hundred thousand dollars for a new house that convinced him that he wasn't dreaming. Antonia and Mike had selected a house on the upper part of Moody Road in Los Altos Hills. The house, which had five bedrooms, was relatively modest by the standards of hillside mansions. But they both knew it was the house for them from the first moment they stepped inside.

The house was set on two acres of steep hillside, but the house had two features that captivated them. The first feature was the house's new smell. The builder had finished the house just two weeks before they bought it. The freshly laid wood floors of the living room exuded a natural scent that permeated everything in the house. The second feature was the view of the valley from the large glass windows of the cathedral-ceilinged living room. The view reminded Antonia of the stories that her grandfather used to tell her about the valley when it had bloomed in a sea of flowers. Mike had no family history to make the view special, but he didn't need one. The sheer panoramic beauty of the scene was captivating enough.

Mike had suggested that they not spend the night in the house until after they were married, saying that it would make their marriage more romantic. Antonia thought it was an excellent idea and she readily agreed. But Mike had a darker, more superstitious reason for not moving into the house. He was worried that if he enjoyed his money too much he would lose it. The feeling had intensified since he'd lost his job at Rosetta.

While the financial consequences of not getting a paycheck from Rosetta were trivial, the psychological impact was profound. Thinking about being fired from Rosetta depressed him. He felt that Rosetta was still his company. He missed the daily contact with his friends. He felt proud of the work he'd done, but ashamed because the company had collapsed and he'd been fired. He consoled himself with the thought that he would find something to replace Rosetta, and he would have Antonia to help him find it.

He set aside two percent of his money as a reward for his hard work and sound decision making. He spent the money on a new red Ferrari 308 GT. The car was fast, sexy, and held the road like a cheetah. Although he loved the Ferrari, he was too sentimentally attached to his Pontiac to part with it. The old white car was now parked in the three-car garage of the Los Altos Hills house.

On the morning of his wedding day, Mike walked downstairs from his East Palo Alto apartment for the last time. But the sight of his new car on this perfect June morning and the thought of his bride-to-be waiting for him in his new castle banished all unhappiness from his mind. He started the car's powerful engine, gave himself a thumbs up sign in the rear view mirror, and put the car in gear.

Antonia opened her eyes. She felt like an eight year-old on Christmas morning. Planning the wedding had taken over her life for the last two months. Although they were only having a semi-formal wedding, Antonia was surprised at just how many details there were. Antonia found herself spending hours on the phone with caterers, photographers, florists, and musicians. Mike tried to help, but Antonia could tell he was at sea in the feminine world of a formal wedding. She tried not to let the stress bother her, but each new hassle brought her closer to her breaking verge. When she realized she was on the point of exploding, she called Tina, her best friend from high school, and asked her to help.

Tina had shared the stress of making the arrangements and the joy of getting fitted for their dresses. Antonia and Mike had decided to hold both the wedding ceremony and the reception in the house. Tina had even taken two days off work to help Antonia prepare the Los Altos Hills house for the Saturday's wedding.

"Remember when we were little and we promised each other that we would be different from our mothers when we grew up?" Tina said.

"I remember," Antonia said, "but from my mother's point of view she thinks I'm different. She's not too enthusiastic about my getting married. She wants me to get married in church. I agreed to have a small church ceremony when we get back, but she still thinks marrying Mike is just another step on my road to hell."

"We'll see how she feels once you have kids," Tina said.

"Please, I want to take it one step at a time," Antonia groaned. "The wedding is enough for right now."

"If you feel that way about it, maybe you shouldn't get married," Tina said, her voice heavy with concern.

"I was only joking. I'm looking forward to this. I really am," Antonia said.

Now as Antonia entered the house on her wedding day, she hugged her arms tightly to her chest and spun around in the huge undecorated living room. "This is going to be the best day of my life," she thought.

While the caterer, florist, and photographer set up, Antonia's friends and relatives began to trickle in. But Mike barely noticed them. He paced nervously and scanned the stream of wedding guests for the arrival of the people he cared about. He

searched the crowd for people from Rosetta. Brad said that he “would see about coming,” but Mike realized that it was Brad's way of saying no. He sent an invitation to Omar, but Omar had not RSVP'd.

The valet parking attendant opened the front door of Roger's rented Ford as he pulled up to Mike's house. Roger sighed and moved his bulk out of the car. He wished he weren't fat. He wished he didn't miss Evelyn so much.

Roger knew that breaking up with Evelyn had been the right thing to do, but he still couldn't get her out of his mind. He desperately needed female companionship. He hoped that he'd meet a girl at the wedding, but he knew he probably wouldn't. Besides, Roger knew that becoming involved with a woman simply out of need was not necessarily a good idea. Need was what had driven him to get involved with Evelyn, and he'd found himself stuck in the twilight zone between love and commitment, with the pain of both and the benefits of neither. He marveled at Mike's patience at waiting for “the one.” It was one of many Mike's ideas that Roger had once considered weird or naive, but that now seemed sound.

“I was afraid you might not come,” Mike said candidly when he saw Roger come through the front door in his rumpled suit.

“Why wouldn't I come?” Roger asked, noticing that there was something different about his friend's normally quiet self-confidence.

Mike did not want to explain how being fired had made him feel insecure and disconnected, so he just shrugged and said, “No reason I guess. Did you get the ticket I sent you?”

“And the money,” Roger said, “But I can't accept either of them. It's your wedding. The money's in the envelope along with my gift to you and your bride.”

“I know money must be tight for you,” Mike said. “I didn't want you to have financial problems because you decided to come to my wedding.”

“I flew out to see you get married because you're my friend,” Roger said in a tone that Mike understood meant that any more discussion would only lead to bad feelings.

Mike appreciated his friend's wishes and asked Roger about the latest advances in computer technology at M.I.T. Fifteen minutes later, Mike and Roger were still so involved in their discussion that neither of them noticed William and Jennifer standing behind them.

“This is supposed to be a day celebrating love, not programming,” William said dryly. “As your best man, I'm here to make sure that you don't get them confused today.”

Mike blushed, laughed, and made introductions. Mike laughed frequently and easily now. He was no longer the timid, colt like boy who had come to work for William only four and a half years ago. Mike had turned out to be Rosetta's most capable programmer as well as its best financial mind. William reflected that by acquiring wealth at such a young age, Mike had been spared the fate of so many Americans who spent most of their lives lusting after money.

The fall in Rosetta's stock price had undermined both William's financial security and self-confidence. William had held on to his stock well after its initial decline, certain that the stock would rebound. Although William had finally sold his stock for two million dollars, he had started out with ten times as much stock as Mike and had ended up with less money. William was not bothered that Mike had ended up with more money, but William could not forgive himself for screwing up so badly.

Losing a fortune was something that happened to old athletes, not to computer nerds, who were supposed to be smart. William had trained himself to be a good leader by learning to be honest and unemotional. As long as he didn't care if he won or lost, he found it easy to be honest and fair. Now, that detachment was gone. The collapse of his fortune along with Rosetta's stock had been too big a blow to shrug off. Jennifer's love had made the pain bearable. He was deeply grateful to Jennifer for her support, but he was still not ready to give up his freedom, not even for a woman who was able to match, and even extend, his repertoire of sexual acrobatics.

William didn't recognize most of the guests. They were probably from Antonia's side. Some of the female guests weren't bad looking. Tina came up to say hello to William and he started to flirt with her.

Jennifer watched William flirt. She got a glass of Dom Perignon and drained half of it in one swallow. The smell of fresh flowers and newly hewn wood combined with the champagne to give her a pleasant buzz. She didn't want to waste it on jealousy. She decided to give herself a tour of the empty house. She wandered through the empty rooms until she got to the deck of the master bedroom, which overlooked a small orchard of cherry trees. She liked the simple beauty of the orchard even more than the spectacular view from the living room. Some day, she wanted to live with William in a place like this, but she knew it was only a dream. William joined her at the window, and sensing her sadness, she squeezed William's hand.

"Hey, this is my bedroom. If you want to get romantic, get a room of your own," Mike joked.

"So now you're giving me advice on dating," Jennifer joked back, covering her melancholy with humor. "This a lovely house, and I know you and Antonia are going to be really happy here." She kissed Mike on the cheek. This time her kiss did not linger.

Paul and Tommy wandered into the bedroom and joined them.

“At Chinese weddings, every guest is supposed to bring a red envelope full of money,” Paul said. “It is usually the biggest gift a person receives in their whole life. Obviously you do not need money, so I bought you an ancient scroll instead.”

Mike unwrapped the package. The paper was brown and very old. There was an image of a man in a beautiful valley. The man was relaxing.

“Thank you very much,” Mike said. “You didn't have to.”

“I know I didn't have to,” Paul said. “I wanted to. Starting a family is the most important decision you can make. It looks like as usual you have chosen well, but it won't always be easy. Just remember to stick with each other through the rough times.”

Paul's words sounded a bit stern, but Mike knew it was Paul's way of expressing affection.

Tommy handed Mike a package, “It's Balinese wedding mask. I would have given you drugs, but you probably would have flushed them down the toilet.”

He looked at his friends. He was glad they were there. Mike had spent the previous night eating dinner with his family and his future in-laws. Both Antonia and Mike had expected their mothers to be the ones who would get along. The two women circled each other in polite conversation, but said almost nothing. It was their fathers who had carried the evening. Mike's father was more charming than Mike had ever seen him, and his infectious good humor had saved the party. Mike had pretended to enjoy himself, but he really felt alienated and lonely. These people were his family, but he really had nothing to say to them.

But now with Roger, William, Jennifer, Paul, and Tommy standing in his bedroom, he felt that the people who really counted were with him before his wedding. In some sense, these people were his real family, particularly Jennifer and William. Jennifer was the sister he'd never had. William was the kind of brother Mike had wanted Carl to be, wise and protective without being coarse or condescending.

The wedding ceremony began an hour later. Antonia was radiant in her white gown with a full train. She was a classic cover girl bride. To Mike she was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. He swelled with lust, pride, and love and he married her with an open heart.

The reception was a smashing success. Antonia stole the show by removing her train and dancing a slow dance with Mike that left everyone in the room envious of their wedding night. Antonia and Mike drank more champagne and their dancing got worse, but neither of them cared. Each wrong step made them laugh.

As he danced with his mother after the ceremony, she said, “Don't you think your wife's dress is a little revealing?”

“Mom, please don't start,” Mike said.

“I'm just thinking of your best interests. I'm not so old that I can't see why you're marrying her, but she's going to be the mother of your children someday and respectability will be important then,” she said.

“Who knows what will happen in the future?” Mike said.

“I don't want to hear anymore. Marriage is a sacrament Michael,” she said.

Mike didn't want to argue on his wedding day, so he said nothing. He was grateful when Suzanne came up to him and asked him to dance.

“Dancing at weddings is the only time we get to talk,” she said. “But I'll have to take it easy. I'm expecting a baby.”

“Congratulations! Why didn't you or Carl tell me before?”

“I just found out. We didn't want to take the spotlight off your wedding,” Suzanne said.

Mike was stunned. “I'm going to be an uncle,” he thought. In his daze he stopped dancing.

“You don't have to stop dancing,” Suzanne said, “just come back to the Bronx and visit us.”

“I will,” Mike said.

After the dance, Mike found Carl talking to Antonia.

“Nice going little brother,” Carl said, shifting his gaze meaningfully at Antonia.

“Nice going yourself,” Mike said. “Are you happy to be a father?”

“Surprisingly, yes,” Carl said. “It's changed my attitude about many things, including you. I was wrong when I said you'd settle. You held out for what you wanted and you got it. Congratulations.”

“Thanks, Carl,” Mike said, genuinely moved. He no longer felt like Carl's little brother, just his brother. It was the best wedding present he'd received.

Their father came up and joined them. “I'd like to speak to you Mike about a little proposal. You know, as a businessman.”

“Sure, dad,” Mike said. Over his father's shoulder, he saw Carl rolling his eyes.

“Well this friend of mine at work knows a guy that's selling his liquor store, and the beauty of it,” his father said, dropping his voice meaningfully, “is that it's in a real nice neighborhood fifteen minutes from the house. The only thing in the way is the twenty thousand dollar buy in.”

Mike saw Carl motioning frantically, “No.”

“Well let me think about it,” Mike said. “I'll call you when I get back from the honeymoon.”

“All right, but don't take too long. My friend won't wait forever,” Mike's father said.

Mike made a noncommittal gesture and escaped to look for Antonia.

Roger stood in the corner nursing a Diet Seven-Up. He desperately wanted to dance, but all his offers had been refused. He wasn't really surprised. Being fat seemed to be an even bigger liability in California than back east. He was glad that Mike seemed immune from the egotistical self-congratulation that many of the other Californians at the wedding seemed to have. He raised his glass in a silent toast to the newlyweds.

Antonia and Mike had another glass of champagne. They stared at each other over the rims of their champagne glasses in smiling lust. Their instincts took over and their mouths found each other, flowing together like melting ice cream.

“Let's go,” Antonia whispered thickly in Mike's ear.

Rice showered Antonia and Mike as they escaped from their reception to start their honeymoon. The rice tickled Mike's face as it fell on him. He hadn't been tickled in a long time.

Antonia and Mike honeymooned on the Hawaiian island of Kauai, a place that Antonia had always fantasized about. By the time they got to the bungalow of their hotel, they were pleasantly aroused by over seven hours of making out on the plane. Mike decided to be polite and not jump into bed right away. He took a shower, but when he got out, his bride was nowhere to be found.

“Cuddles,” he said calling her by her pet name. He waited, but received no answer.

“Antonia!” he said again, with real concern in his voice. “Stop playing. Antonia!” Still there was no answer. He was beginning to get genuinely worried when she emerged screeching from a closet.

“Fooled you!” she said, her face happy like a child's.

“Oooh, I'm going to get you for that,” he said, but his broad smile contradicted his harsh words.

“First, you're going to have to catch me,” she said.

He chased her through the suite before catching her and pinning her to the bed. She was still laughing and he tickled her to make her laugh her more.

“Stop,” she said between laughs. “I give up.”

He kissed her. She continued to laugh. He kissed her again. This time she did not laugh, but kissed him back instead. He unbuttoned her shirt and freed her breasts. He gently put the nipple of her right breast in his mouth. He probed at the ring of nerves below the aureole. Her hips began to undulate with pleasure. They moved together like they were singing the words to a favorite song. From the insides of her sex to the drops of perspiration on the nape of her neck, her body was a symphony of sweet juices. She came in waves, and he held himself back without effort. Neither of them wanted it to end. After it was finally over, they held each other in silence, and they felt the perfection of romantic love. Familiarity was replacing novelty, and it was good.

They spent their days lounging on the patio and exploring the island. They took walks along the beach, on the cliffs on the far side of the island, and in the rain forest on the sides of the volcano. Antonia loved the exotic scenery and brought her sketchpad everywhere they went. At night they ate candlelight dinners, drank Mai-Tais, took long walks, and made love. Whatever they did, they talked, and their intimacy grew with every new conversation.

“What are you going to do when you get back?” Antonia asked in a soft voice as they walked along the moonlit beach.

Mike momentarily bristled, not wanting to think about the future, but since he realized it was the woman he loved who had wanted to know, he knew he had to answer.

“I don't really want to think about it,” he said. “I wish I could stop time right now. I've got everything I ever wanted, a beautiful wife, a Hawaiian honeymoon, a mansion, a Ferrari, and almost three million bucks in the bank. What else could a normal person want?”

“You're not a normal person, that's why I love you. I know you miss Rosetta. You've got computers in your blood. You're only twenty-three. You've still got something to prove.”

Mike smiled and shook his head from side to side, “I keep forgetting you're as smart as you are beautiful. For all my success, I still feel like a nerdy high school kid in the Bronx who's having this great dream. If I think about what I want to do, I'm afraid it

will mean waking up from that dream. But I suppose you're right. I'll have to face my future when we get back. I guess I'll do something else with computers. Maybe I'll write computer games. Maybe, I'll go back to school. What do you think I should do?"

"I don't know, but I know that you'll know it when you find it," she said.

"What do you want to do with your life?" he asked. "You don't have to work at the bank forever. The money means freedom for both of us."

Antonia answered, "I still want to do something important. Something that says, look out world, here comes Antonia."

"What do you think that something is?" Mike asked.

"I don't know and I'm not going to spoil things by worrying about it right now," she said and gave him a soft passionate kiss. Mike returned the kiss, and forgot about everything except making love.