

WILL POWER

Mr. Dorrow, the lawyer for the Rockgirley estate, coughed discreetly. The four others in the room immediately ceased their idle chatter: each had a strong interest in what was about to transpire. They represented the surviving members of the Rockgirley family and were the natural heirs to the Rockgirley fortune. Mary Rockgirley and her brother Nelson were the son and daughter of the deceased, Ophelia and her brother Morgan, were first cousins to Mary and Nelson. While both men were in their early forties and both women in their late thirties, they looked years younger. Their dissipated life style had not caught up to them as yet. They all expected that the family fortune would be divided equally between them and to their credit no enmity was apparent. Samuel Rockgirley, the recently deceased and long time head of the family and its various business enterprises had brought up his niece and nephew as his own children when their parents, his brother and sister-in-law, were killed in a boating accident under some rather suspicious circumstances. The cousins had been reared as siblings and all had shared in a luxurious life style. Mr. Rockgirley was a generous man with keen business acumen. Since taking over the family enterprises, he had increased the family fortune by many orders of magnitude and had become one of the richest men in America.

Mr. Dorrow then commenced.

"Before proceeding with the reading of Mr. Rockgirley's will, which is the formal reason for this meeting, I wish to make some preliminary comments. First I would like to express my sincere condolences to the members of his family. I have known him for some twenty-five years and while we never socialized I developed a strong respect for his business insight, his generosity, his strength and his leadership abilities. We will all miss him.

Next, I would like to alert you to a rather unorthodox reading of Mr. Rockgirley's will. It is not I who will read it. Rather, it is a posthumous Mr. Rockgirley who will inform you of his wishes. You may not have noticed but this room has been altered. When I press this button, a most sophisticated computer, one with artificial intelligence, will convert this room into a virtual reality in which Mr. Rockgirley's holographic image will appear to present you with his last will and testament.

Finally, let me assure you that this has been authenticated by the best legal minds in the nation. There is absolutely no way that this will can be broken. While I am not aware of its contents, I do know that while being drawn, Mr. Rockgirley was being monitored by the best psychiatrists we could find and by his personal physician, a doctor of some renown. They are prepared to attest to the soundness of his body and mind. Do you have any questions?" There was a momentary silence which was broken by Nelson Rockgirley. "It would appear that we are in for a surprise, something father never prepared us for. Are you sure that the will cannot be contested, particularly if it is bizarre?"

Mr. Dorrow's reply was curt. "Any will can be contested. However, I can assure you that this will cannot be broken. Shall we proceed?"

There was silent acquiescence. Mr. Dorrow then pushed a button on the desk before him. With hardly any delay, the holographic image of Mr. Rockgirley with what seemed a

diabolical grin on his countenance appeared, facing the ensemble. Everyone gasped at how real the image was. It then addressed the group.

"I assume, as per my instructions, that I am addressing Mary and Nelson, my daughter and son, Ophelia and Morgan, my niece and nephew and Mr. Dorrow, my attorney. Actually, I know that I am. Let me elaborate briefly before proceeding with what is uppermost on your minds. As has been pointed out, I am a holographic image of the deceased made when I was alive. It is totally controlled by the most sophisticated computer ever made. Every gesture and verbal response I make is dictated by this device. It has been programmed to respond to a limited number of carefully considered comments and questions as well as conditions within these confines. When I was alive, I tested it personally and I can assure you that I gave serious consideration to just about any comment and question any of you may pose. Conversing with a holographic image of myself was a most peculiar experience. I am satisfied that this experiment will work.

Further, every inch of this room and everyone in it is being carefully monitored by a digital camera which is constantly feeding data to the computer. It has been formulated to recognize the five of you. If anyone else enters this chamber while the computer is in this mode, it will automatically shut down and the virtual reality that you are now experiencing will immediately disappear. If for any reason, anyone other than the five of you finds out about this room, you will all be dealt with in a most unhappy fashion. Now let us proceed with my will.

During my life, I very seldom had a chance to sit and converse with any of you. I deeply regret this because I felt that none of you were prepared to take over the family fortune and business in a responsible manner. On the few occasions when I tried, you either were to be too busy with some frivolous activity or you simply kept putting me off. Now, at least, you are a captive audience, since your future well being hangs on what I am about to say.

This is the first four sessions together. I will be meeting with each of you privately twice more and a final time with all of you. You will each be tested by me to determine which one of you is best suited to run the family affairs according to a set of criteria that has been programmed into the computer. Let me make this clearer. The person who wins this competition will inherit all, that is, the family fortune and the family business. The others will have to either go out and make their fortune somehow, or depend upon the winner of this competition for assistance. A reasonable yearly stipend or a salary for work rendered is perfectly permissible.

You may be wondering why I have chosen this approach. Simply, it is because none of you have ever had to go out and earn a living or have had to compete for your subsistence. At least now, you will be obliged to compete, for the first time in your lives, for something worthwhile. I hope this rivalry will not destroy the friendship you have for each other. If anything, it should enable each of you to garner some respect for your own abilities and those of your rivals. If there is any sign of collusion between any or all of you to alter the conditions of my will, by contesting this will, by surreptitiously dividing up the family fortune or by selling off any of the business assets, you will all be immediately disinherited. All business transactions and the disbursement of the family fortune will be carefully monitored by the computer. Mr Dorrow has been given explicit instructions in this regard. Of course you are free to discuss all this between yourselves.

Finally, I will announce the results of this contest at our final session.”

A Year Later:

Nelson Rockgirley sat musing about his lot in life in the very same room in which he had learnt that he had won the competition and had inherited the family fortune. Much had happened in the year following that event. He had met privately with the holographic image of his father five more times and was about to do so again. He remained continuously amazed at how real these meetings appeared to be, at the careful monitoring of all his business transactions and their results, and most importantly at the profitability of all of these deals which had been ordered in the form of directives. He had never failed to obey these decisive commands and as a result, he had become one of the richest and most powerful individuals in the world, directly and indirectly controlling nearly all major international corporations.

He finally appreciated what had driven his father to his achievements. The headiness of wealth and power made all his previous hedonistic activities fade into insignificance. He was also rapidly acquiring all the skills, many quite devious, necessary to make the decisions to enhance his position further. He was surprised at how Machiavellian he was becoming. To deflate any possibility that his sister and cousins would turn against him, one of his first decisions (actually based on a directive) was to offer them positions of corporate responsibility where he could keep his eyes on them. He had come to realize the importance of the old adage, “Keep your friends close and your enemies closer.” He was disturbed out of his reverie as the holographic image of his father suddenly emerged.

“My son, I am quite proud of you. We have accomplished more in this past year than I had thought possible. This is in no large measure due to you. You have picked up nearly all you need to know and coupled with your innate intelligence, there is no limit as to what you can attain. Thus, I think you are ready to continue on your own.”

Nelson had come to rely heavily on his father for advice. Agitatedly he entreated the image not to abandon him. “Why are you forsaking me? Have I done something wrong?”

“Nelson, Nelson” the image replied. “I am not deserting you. There is a limit to the program which has been counseling you. In any case, you are ready to stand on your own two feet and make your own way. I am very well aware that you have been enjoying the fruits of our collaboration in terms of wealth and power. Your gratification will exponentially increase as you, on your own, attain more power and wealth.

Now I have one final thing to convey to you. This is something that must remain a secret. It can destroy you if it ever gets out.

What we have achieved has been a lifelong ambition of mine. The only early rival that represented a threat was my brother, your uncle. Being older he would have naturally taken over the family enterprises, leaving me with no opportunity to realize my goals. I did what I had to do. I arranged for his accidental demise. Unfortunately, the hired assassin did not realize that the sole target was my brother, so that your aunt died along with him in the arranged misadventure. What a pity! She was a beautiful woman and I was madly infatuated with her. You see, by this time your mother and I had been divorced for about a year and I had hoped to take my brother’s wife as my own - shades

of Hamlet's mother. That is why I treated your cousins as if they were my own. Had they found out the truth, you would probably have had implacable enemies bent on destroying you. That is also why I advised you to keep them close to you. Despite this setback, I proceeded, with dispatch, to expand the family fortune. This was the first phase of my plan. Anything or anybody that represented an obstacle was eliminated unmercifully.

The second was the realization of untold power and influence. Actually I had meant to achieve this solely for myself. Unfortunately, I learnt that I had an incurable disease that would not allow me the time to realize my goal. I then decided to transfer my aspirations to one of you. While I am very glad that it turned out to be you, make no mistake, if I had felt that your sister or one of your cousins was better suited to the task, I would be telling this to that person. For me, the end result was paramount. However my bias was for you to inherit. You are my son after all. You won because you were the only one who tried to break the will by secretly attempting to break into the program. However, I had planned for such an eventuality. You would have succeeded had you had more time. As it turned out, you didn't need it.

You might ask, why was I so obsessed with these aspirations, which grew in intensity as I was preparing the computer program and the accompanying holographic illusion. It occurred to me that the three of us, I as your father, I as a holographic image and you as my son continuing in my footsteps should aim to become the modern incarnation of the biblical trinity, the father, the son and the holy ghost. Is there a more worthy goal?"

"But father," Nelson interjected. "What we have been doing is the exact opposite of what that particular trinity practiced and preached."

"That is certainly true," replied the image. "My final advice to you is that you should continue to preach their gospel as often and as loudly as you can. This will enable you to hide behind their popular rhetoric and proceed with all our more realistic plans to dominate the world."

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