

*A New Novel by*

**B O B   C O H N**

# *To Catch a Catch*

*When the  
Chase Is On  
All Bets Are Off!*



*A Tantalizing Story of the Search for  
Love, Romance & Happiness—Twice!*

# To Catch a Catch

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A New Novel By:

**Bob Cohn**



Strategic Book Group

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*To my wife Sylvia  
for her insightful contributions*

*To Ann Annovitz  
my agent and editor-in-chief*

*To JoEllen Lidov  
my creative advisor*



# 1

“Slow down and take it easy, Jack. She’s stabilized, and I need to keep her as comfortable as possible.”

The racing ambulance turned off its siren and flashers and fell in with the mid-afternoon southbound traffic, in the right-hand lane of Chicago’s snow and rain slicked north Outer Drive.

“Thank you.” The frail middle-aged woman spoke wearily, just above a whisper.

“No problem, Mrs. Howard. He’s new. And the way he drives in this freezing rain and snow scares me half to death.”

“Does my husband know yet?”

“I’m sure he does by now. Your housekeeper said she’d be calling his office, your folks, and your son and daughter, right after we left.”

Sandy Howard closed her eyes and drifted off into a semi-slumber as the paramedic turned her attention to the electronic monitors.

§ § § § § §

Brett Howard was a seasoned advertising agency executive-vice-president and a master presenter. His tall athletic body commanded instant authority, especially enhanced by his wife’s impeccable taste in his business attire. At fifty, with slightly graying temples and friendly but penetrating hazel eyes, he was an imposing figure, wrought by the innate self-confidence of a successful businessman.

Brett had also put forth considerable effort fine-tuning his resonant speaking voice to achieve announcer-like delivery. And by eliminating “ers” and “uhs” and other distracting speech habits, when Brett

spoke he was easy to listen to. He was also respectful of his audiences, always well prepared in their subject matter.

The presentation he was making was going well on behalf of his firm, Hunter Caldwell Morrison & Howard—a medium-size Chicago advertising agency, known by its initials as HCM&H. He was in the board room of Family Products Corporation, speaking to eleven people. It was one of his better days. “So it seems to us the situation is pretty obvious.” Brett spoke with carefully muted confidence. “The product positioning on FPC Hair Conditioner has been right on and solidly implanted for over ten years. But Sampson Industries is becoming a tougher competitor in several of your established markets and product categories with their new ‘Hair Support’ line. Which, by the way, is very good product, in well-done packaging, with smart merchandising for dealers and, unfortunately, at slightly lower prices than yours. So you don’t really have much choice. If you expect to retain the dominant market share you enjoy now, you’ll have to beef up everything you can and add a stronger, more memorable theme in all of your advertising so you get better brand recognition across all of your product lines.”

Brett reached behind him, took a 40” x 30” art board from its leather presentation case and stood it upright on the conference table. “Something like this:”

AT  
FAMILY PRODUCTS CORPORATION  
*HAIR CARE*  
IS A  
*FAMILY AFFAIR*

With a whimsical smile on his face, Brett quickly glanced at the frozen faces looking at the art board, then back at him. After several seconds of suspended silence, he continued, with a hint of laughter as he spoke “Your thundering applause tells me you’re all wondering if we’re kidding, or if we’ve simply lost it, because this theme and graphic are so hokey. But when you think about it, the message is also homespun, it borders on being downright corny, and it’s truly *memorable* for consumers of all ages. I also think you’ll agree that it sets up perfect positioning for FPC shampoos and conditioners by putting old and young adults, teens, children, toddlers and infants all under one

umbrella. And it separates FPC from Sampson and all of your other competitors, because FPC is the only company with a leading brand in every product category. All of which contributes *to* and draws success *from* your entire family of products. It also adds strength to the

advertising for each product line, and stretches every dollar you spend in every media, because it's a totally pro-active approach to filling a vacuum no one can compete with."

Daniel V. Evans, a Nordic man with a stern crew cut to match his equally stern face and deep set, penetrating eyes, methodically drum-rolled the fingers of his left hand on the highly polished rosewood conference table as he studied the art board Brett was holding. Dan had not seen it before, even though he had spent several months helping the agency prepare for their presentation to his Board of Directors.

After twenty-five years as Director of Marketing and Advertising for Family Products Corporation, Dan did not appreciate being surprised or second-guessed in front of the top brass of his company, all of whom were present. He was shocked by the underwhelming but perfectly positioned theme, but angry at Brett, because Dan had always made it crystal clear to the company's entrenched ad people and all of the hopeful ones—like Brett and the three people with him from his firm—that they were to work strictly through Dan Evans and obediently follow his direction.

"Brett..." Dan spoke without looking up. "...what makes you think..."

The conference room door opened softly. A young woman slipped in and stood very quietly.

"...that you know as much or more about our product situation than we do?" Then he looked squarely at Brett, daring him to reply.

The young woman moved silently along the wall to the head of the conference table and handed a folded note to William G. (Bill) Effington, Chairman and Chief Executive Officer of FPC.

Brett continued, slightly diverted by the intruding secretary as he responded to Dan's obvious challenge. "Dan, you personally, and FPC as a company, are the acknowledged top marketers in the hair care industry, and most of your other businesses as well." Brett was concentrating on Dan's eyes, aware of his expected anger over the new theme, which had purposely been withheld from him so he would not have the opportunity to shoot it down—as he had done repeatedly to far too many excellent creative ideas—before his FPC colleagues had ever had the chance to see them. "Neither do we profess to know the

ins and outs of the hair care products business the way you do. We're just bringing you a different perspective. A view from the outside looking in. A way to maximize impact with minimum advertising dollars so enough money will still be available in your existing budgets to answer the merchandising and reduced pricing challenges of Sampson Industries."

Bill Effington glanced at the note he had been handed and then shot a worried look at Brett.

Brett never flinched, but he tightened his grip on the pen he was holding. He hated distractions.

"Brett?" Effington's voice was troubled. "We just had a call from your office. Your wife is being taken by ambulance to Northwestern Memorial Hospital. Our company limo is downstairs, and it can run you right over there."

Brett froze, bracing his fingers on the conference table as he took a deep breath.

Fred Ross, Account Supervisor at the Agency, was sitting right next to Brett. He was Brett's working partner and closest friend. But unlike his boss, who was a self-driven powerhouse, everything about Fred was understated, including his warm brown eyes which seemed to radiate perpetual calm and confidence. Seeing Brett's reaction, Fred came up out of his chair and took his friend's arm to steady him. "Come on, Brett. Lew and Patsy can finish the presentation. I'll ride over there with you."

Lew Green rose quickly from his seat and picked up the art board Brett had been holding. The senior writer and Creative Director at HCM&H, Lew was a round and pudgy man of forty-five with bushy uncombed hair and a matching unkempt mustache. But his slightly wacky look concealed a quick wit and impressive writing talent.

Patsy Walker-Landon was also on her feet quickly, standing next to Lew. She was the art and graphics Creative Director at the agency. Young for her position at twenty-nine—but a seasoned, convincing professional—she handled herself well with clients and had already won over most of the principle operating people at FPC.

With Fred still holding his arm, Brett stood suspended, gathering his thoughts as he turned and faced his consoling friend. "Thanks, Fred. But I think I'd better go alone. The Hunters will be there. Probably the kids, too. If you can, come over with Ev later on. I'll be okay for now...and thanks."

Brett closed his briefcase, mumbled some apologies to the other ten people in the room, then turned to leave. As he reached the Con-

ference Room door, Dan Evans was waiting for him with his hand extended. “We can talk about the theme and the slogan later, Brett. I hope your wife will be all right.”

Brett shook Dan’s hand and sensed a tiny hint of sincerity, which surprised him. Dan had been the devil’s advocate and a first-class SOB throughout the agency’s many months of preliminary presentations. Everyone at HCM&H considered him to be the main stumbling block—and totally unreasonable—in their quest to acquire their first foot-in-the-door assignment at Family Products Corporation.

§ § § § § §

As Brett came through the street-level revolving door of the Family Products building, the long silver-gray limo with the discreet FPC logo on its right front door had just pulled up to the curb. The instant it stopped, the driver was out and around to the passenger’s side of the sleek automobile and had the door open so Brett never missed a step. Within seconds, they were wending their way through the midday Chicago Loop traffic.

Brett settled back in the comfortable glove-leather seat and let his thoughts wander. It was nearly eighteen months since Sloan-Kettering and Mayo Clinic had confirmed Sandy’s pancreatic cancer, giving her less than a year to live. Brett had been devastated by it. Sandy, their two children, Mark and Stephanie, her family’s advertising business, were his whole life...his only life.

To make matters worse, Sandy’s folks, Bob and Mary Hunter, had never come to grips with or accepted the fact that their only child was dying. They had been a problem throughout the entire ordeal, especially for Brett, who had worked side-by-side with his father-in-law for nearly 30 years. The agency was the place where Brett and Sandy had met, fallen in love and married twenty-eight years and seven months before. Nine years later, “Howard” was added to the Agency name, and its logo was changed first to “Hunter, Caldwell, Morrison & Howard” and soon afterward to “HCM&H.”

Brett and Sandy had a rock-solid, stable and loving marriage. Plenty of money, a big and lovely home on Lake Michigan—in Winnetka, an established wealthy suburb on Chicago’s North Shore—the country club, great friends and relatives. And good sex. Sandy was a warm and giving lover. Until she became too ill, less than eight months after her death sentence was confirmed.

Brett never ventured out. He remained willingly celibate without complaint.

The Howard's two children were their parents' pride. Mark was a fine athlete and a good student. At twenty-five, and a handsome male version of his very pretty mother, he was completing his MBA in marketing, at the Kellogg School of Business at Northwestern University, and thinking about either continuing his education, or joining the successful family business.

Daughter Stephanie, twenty-three, had a good and beautiful head on her equally lovely shoulders and was pursuing a modeling career, successfully. She had graduated from the University of Missouri with a degree in broadcast communications. Stephanie planned to use the extremely pleasant voice she had inherited from her father as an extension of her modeling, hoping it would propel her into a life-long career in television news, or other parts of the broadcast industry.

Brett's own career in advertising had been a credit to himself and everyone at HCM&H. It had taken him ten years to get over being a son-in-law. But since then, he and HCM&H had gone steadily upward, due mostly to Brett's ability to bring in new business. The Agency was billing \$160 million and looking at \$180 million, if they could finally land a small part of the Family Products account, which Brett, Fred and half the Agency had been working on for the better part of two years.

*What a lousy break!* Brett was thinking to himself as the limo made its way across the slush-laden Michigan Avenue bridge. The day was cold and damp, and as dreary as the situation he was being driven to. *To have to rush out of that goddamn meeting, just when everything was falling into place. I hope we didn't blow the fucking account. God! Two years of work. Too much time and money. And all of those months dealing with a bastard like Dan Evans who made us jump through flaming hoops like yo-yo's every time he shot down some of our best creative ideas.*

Then he was angry with himself. *Come on, idiot. The best thing in your life may be checking out, and you're worrying about a fucking client? Get your shit together, buddy, and do it now so you don't upset your amazing wife, your kids or your in-laws. Sandy certainly deserves the best you can give her, after all she's been through, and the way she's been taking care of everybody else while she's the one who's been doing all the suffering.*

Brett's anger with himself made him fidgety. The driver noticed it through the rearview mirror. "You okay, sir?"

“Uh...yeah...sorry.” Brett was embarrassed. Burdening others with his personal problems or emotions was something he tried never to do.

“No problem, sir. We’re only a block away. Would you like the main entrance or Emergency?”

“Probably Emergency. My wife may not be admitted yet.” Brett put both of his hands on his knees and took a deep breath. “Listen, I really appreciate the ride. Please thank Mr. Effington for me, will you?”

“Sure thing, sir. Good luck.”

As the limo pulled slowly away, Brett stood on the sidewalk staring at the Emergency Entrance sign. He felt as if he was about to enter the gates of hell.

§ § § § § §

Dr. Martin Levinson was one of the Chicago area’s top oncologists. He was also one of Brett’s tennis partners and had been his third- and fourth-year roommate at the University of Illinois, in Champaign/ Urbana. When he saw Brett come into the Intensive Care anteroom, Dr. Levinson immediately walked over to greet him. Speaking in a half-whisper, his usual hospital voice, he shook Brett’s hand and put his left hand on Brett’s shoulder. “Hi, Brett.”

“Hi, Marty. How’s she doing?”

“Not too well. The cardiologist just left and he isn’t optimistic. Everything is starting to shut down. Sandy’s been asking for you.”

“Can I see her for a few minutes alone, Marty?”

“Of course. I want to talk to the Hunters, and Stephanie and Mark anyway. They’ve been waiting for me in the main reception room. I’ll tell them you’re here.”

“Give us five or six minutes, Marty. Then we’d both like to talk to you.”

“Just push the nurse’s button when you’re ready for me.”

Brett walked the twenty-three steps to the cubicle where Sandy was lying with her eyes closed, being careful not to touch or brush against any of the tubes, bottles and other paraphernalia typically engulfing an intensive care bed. He gently touched her hand and kissed her cheek as she opened her eyes. “Hi, hon. Sorry it took me so long to get here.”

Sandy answered haltingly. “I’m glad you made it, darling. But did I make you screw up your presentation too badly?”

Brett was incredulous. *This is Sandy*, he thought. Always taking care of him, the kids and everyone else. Never worrying about herself, only complaining when her body couldn't stand the pain. Throughout their entire nightmare, Sandy had been selfless, preparing everyone else for her persistent decline and eventual departure.

He answered in a choked up voice. "I left just in time to keep from screwing everything up by punching out Dan Evans for making our lives so miserable right up to the very end."

Sandy managed a half-smile and squeezed his hand.

He instantly became more somber, more concerned about her. "Fred stayed behind to wrap things up with Lew and Patsy, who did their usual sensational job on the copy and graphics. So I'm pretty confident." He brushed her cheek lightly with the backs of his fingers. "How you feelin'?"

"Tired. Weak. They gave me something for the pain, so I'm groggy. But I'm better than I was. I kind of fell apart back at the house."

She raised herself up slightly and signaled for him to help her adjust the bed and the pillows so she could sit more upright. "You look worried, Brett."

"Aren't you?"

"Not anymore. I've really had it with all of this. I don't have any more fight left in me. It's time for you and the kids and everyone else to get on with your lives. I'm just ready for this horrible nightmare to finally be over."

Brett was fighting to hold back his tears. But it was a losing battle. "I thought we should both talk to Marty. Ask him..."

Sandy squeezed his hand, shook her head and interrupted him. "Let's not bother, Brett. We both know what Marty's going to say. I'd rather spend some time with the kids, my mom and dad, and especially with you, Brett. Then I want to get some sleep while nothing hurts."

§ § § § § §

The call came at 4:35 a.m. the next morning. "*Sorry to wake you, Mr. Howard. This is Northwestern Hospital. Your wife has pa...*"

Brett silently hung up the phone. Through his sudden burst of tears, he could not have responded to the gentle-voiced caller.

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