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CHAPTER ONE

The Practice of Risk-Taking

The simplest way to understand the practice of risk-taking is to start with a story.

Early on in our research, we met Alton Butler. Alton's life has all the risk-taking twists and turns that you could possibly envision. Alton is the living embodiment of the Risk Paradox.

There's no way Alton Butler should have made it.

The only son of a womanizing, abusive father and an abused mother, he grew up dirt poor on food stamps in rural Alabama. Alton's father was a truck driver. Alton slept in the same bed as his two older sisters.

"When I was nine years old, my dad stabbed my mom while we were sleeping in the next room. We heard the screaming and ran in to find Dad standing over Mom with a big hunting knife. I

jumped across my mom to protect her, worried she was going to die. My dad was in a dire state. My older sister hit him, jarring the sense back into him, and he realized what he was doing. My mom was seriously hurt, but she ended up surviving.”

Alton’s parents split up, then got back together, saying it was “for the kids,” even though Alton and his sisters knew it couldn’t possibly be good for anyone in the family. The marriage broke apart for good a year later.

By the time his mom married his stepfather, his older sisters were out of the house. Alton says his stepfather is “a man who was never hugged by anyone.” He was the bouncer at a local bar.

“When I was in the eleventh grade, I got home and saw my mom with a black-eye, and we got into a huge argument. Back then, I was a little wiry guy, but getting bigger. I tried to get my stepfather outside . . . I ended up telling my mom, ‘Listen, I can’t do this. I’m going to move out.’ I was going into my senior year of high school. She said, ‘No, I’ll divorce him.’ I said, ‘Look, don’t do that. I’ve already got a scholarship. I’m going away to college. And then I’m never looking back, so don’t do that for me.’ I ended up moving out, living on a guy’s couch during my senior year. After that, I went away to college and played football.”

Playing football was Alton’s only ticket out of rural Alabama. His only scholarship offer was to play defensive back for a junior college, but that was good enough. He made it from the junior college to Jacksonville State University where he was a starter. After college, he even got a tryout with the Atlanta Falcons, but unfortunately, he lacerated his kidney, ending his pro football career.

Football got Alton out of rural Alabama, and he was definitely not going back. He picked up an unconventional side job in college. There was a dance club in Birmingham back then called Gippers

that was—technically speaking—a male strip club. Alton loved to dance, and one night he won \$1,500 in a dancing contest at Gippers—a lot of money for a twenty-two-year-old jobless athlete.

Alton started his own dance company traveling to the major tourist haunts of the South: Myrtle Beach, Panama City, and even up to Canada. For a few years Alton had a house in Panama City Beach where he and his team danced four nights a week at a club every summer. The money was good and the female company was easy to find, but Alton knew that dancing couldn't—or shouldn't—last.

Alton faced a Moment of Truth when he realized his dancing career needed to be over. He was listening to audio tapes over and over from the motivational guru Tony Robbins. Alton decided to take a shot at making it as an actor. As he says, "I loved to act and loved the limelight and, obviously, I'm not a shy guy at all."

This was enough of a plan. In his mid-twenties and desperately not wanting to go back home, Alton rented out his house in Panama City, left his girlfriend behind, packed his car, and drove to Hollywood with his dog and his best friend and enrolled in acting school.

Alton paid his way through acting school, found an agent, and got several acting jobs. Acting was paying the bills but was hardly steady work. Alton discovered that he hated auditioning. It was rarely about talent; more often it was about how you looked, and it was too political to be anything he'd want to do for the long term. Plus, Alton realized that he was a bit of a control freak, and as an actor he never really had control of his destiny.

Then Alton caught a few of the kind of breaks that . . . well . . . they make movies about. One day, a guy on the set asked Alton to join his flag football team. Flag football is a big deal in LA, and the guy knew that Alton used to play football for real. In exchange, the guy agreed to let Alton work behind the camera. Alton realized

that working behind the camera was steadier work than working in front of it, and he was looking for steady work.

During filming breaks, Alton hung out with the young production managers using stage equipment, such as folding chairs, tables, and the tents covering the shoots. He noticed the equipment was often in bad shape, and the production managers—who were mostly women—were being treated shabbily by the equipment suppliers.

“I was friendly and started doing due diligence—asking how much they paid for this gear, who they got it from. I researched that company, then I went to the guy I was working with and asked, ‘Why don’t we put in fifteen hundred bucks each and buy this stuff? I’ll talk the production coordinators into giving us a shot to rent it. I’ll store the equipment at my house,’” Alton recounted.

“I asked the production managers, ‘Listen, if I had my own gear, would you give me a chance? If you don’t like it, you never have to pay me a dollar, and I’ll never mention it again. Right now, you’re getting this beat-up shit from this company, and they couldn’t care less about you.’ They gave me a chance. I ended up getting a job from one production team, and then I got another one, then I got another one. It just exploded.”

A few years later, Alton’s equipment rental business had eliminated its major competitor. Alton even hired some of their former managers to work for him. He gave up on his acting career, realizing he was never going to be George Clooney anyway. With the equipment rental business, he was in charge—whereas acting jobs were subject to the whims of directors.

Around this time, Alton noticed an attractive Armenian woman who worked at his local bank. For some reason, she was always the one who helped him when he went through the drive-through window. Then he ran into her at the health club, and they started

dating. Being from rural Alabama and all, Alton thought Armenia was a city in northern California rather than a country in western Asia. Today, that woman is his wife of nineteen years, and they have two teenage children.

In keeping with the Risk Paradox, Alton didn't stop when he achieved success with his equipment rental business. He just kept taking risks. He moved his equipment rental business right in the middle of the Hollywood media district. Next door was a beat-up old building—Hollywood National Soundstage. Alton started hanging out with the owner, Dick, and he asked about buying the property. One day, Dick told him he was tired of the movie business and wanted out. He asked Alton if he wanted to buy the soundstage.

Alton made calls to the producers; he was researching how much business he could generate. The producers were willing to give a shot to the nice guy from Alabama. Alton didn't initially have the money to buy the soundstage, so he leased it from Dick for \$40,000 per month. Eventually, Alton convinced the banks to give him credit for the building improvements he made as a down payment on a mortgage, making his monthly payments much less than the \$40,000 lease.

Alton worked hard to rent out the soundstage, and he had figured out that the most reliable production money was in filming commercials rather than movies. Eventually, three out of every four commercials shot for TV in Hollywood were shot on his soundstage. When Apple shoots a commercial, they rent out the entire facility.

In less than ten years, Alton's equipment and soundstage rental business became a major player in Hollywood. He still has his deep Southern accent and—especially when he can't remember something he feels he should—he regularly refers to himself as a

redneck. At the beginning of our interview, Alton warned us that he can talk until the moon comes down, but the more he talks, the more delightful the conversation becomes. It's easy to understand how Alton wins people over.

Alton kept taking risks. Next, he bought a ten-acre piece of land in Burbank, where almost no commercially zoned land is available, and he decided to open the first new soundstage in Hollywood in fifteen years—a 240,000-square-foot facility. The property wasn't zoned for commercial use, but that didn't stop Alton. He spent three years getting sued by residents, but he ultimately worked with the city to change the zoning laws. He sold some of his other properties to finance the deal.

We finally asked Alton about all the risks he took.

"To be honest with you, I never saw any of those decisions as risky, because I felt like they were calculated. Now looking back . . . Holy shit, yes, those were *huge* risks. But at the time, you don't look at it like that because that gives you an opportunity to fail. I only had one way out. Rappers rap to get out of the hood. In rural areas, country boys play ball to get out of the country. We've got no other opportunity."

We thought we are done talking with Alton about risk (*What else could there be to talk about?*) when Alton called us back. What he had to say was a fascinating insight into another form of risk altogether. One about relationships, not money.

Alton decided to reconnect with his father. Yes, the guy who stabbed his mother when Alton was nine years old. It wasn't that he excused his father's actions. He wanted to understand what happened, to heal wounds buried deep in his psyche. It was about forgiveness.

Reconnecting with his father wasn't simple or straightforward.

At first, he bought a house back in Alabama where he moved his father in with his uncle. Then the uncle committed suicide. So, Alton did what might be unthinkable to anyone who knew his life story: he moved his father out to Los Angeles. He moved the parent who caused him so much pain practically into his own backyard.

What Alton learned in the process about his own father's upbringing, and about his paternal grandfather, stunned him.

"I wanted to dig down to find out why my dad did what he did. I didn't want to live with this hate. So, I went back home. When I did, I found out about the way my dad was treated, and I was heartbroken. His own dad, who died before I was born, was the biggest piece of shit ever," he explained.

"They did not have electricity until my dad was sixteen. They didn't have running water. He didn't have a pair of shoes. I don't think he even knows when he quit school. My dad had to plow the fields with a mule named Doc, and that mule was his best friend," he said.

"My granddad made my dad sleep in the barn. He would beat my dad with a hot poker when he got to be nine or ten. My grandfather even tried to trade my dad for another mule. He tried to trade a human being for an animal. Mentally, what does that do to you?" he asked.

"Today, my dad is the gentlest and kindest person you could be around. We have made our peace."