

## CHAPTER - ONE

### *The Sum Total – “The Premise”*

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When I was young— and for much of my life— I wrestled with writing. My spelling was horrendous, and I remain a terrible speller to this day. What I didn’t know then was that spelling and writing are two entirely different ways of communicating. It took me years to realize I actually had something to say, and that words would flow freely in poems, stories, or in the work I love.

That gift of storytelling came from my father, Ed Smith—“Smitty” to his friends and my mother, Ansley; “Uncle Sunny” to his nieces because his mother called him Sonny Boy. To me and my sisters, Gwynne and Laurie, he was simply Dad. He was full of sayings drawn from his own life, and he was the first person I thought of when I coined, “We are the sum total of our life experiences.” I still hear his voice in my head, especially when

I remember his favorite line: “If God made anything better than sex, he kept it to himself.” I’ve often joked I should put that on a T-shirt.

When I set out to write this book, I doubted I could explain what I’d seen or felt—or that anyone would get it. Then one night I sat at my makeshift L-shaped desk—a butcher-block countertop from Home Depot with legs from The Container Store—in a sloped-ceiling room on my second floor in Nashville. I rolled up in my chair and told Alexa to play some smooth jazz. She cued up “Just the Two of Us” by Grover Washington Jr., our road song for every long drive. No accident. I paused, listened, and tears came. In that moment I knew my father was with me, telling me, “Michael, I’ve got you. Proceed.”

Those are echoes—messages sent through the universe that land softly if we’re willing to notice. In my life as an investigator, I’ve come to believe there are no coincidences. Everything happens for a reason—earthly, metaphysical, or otherwise—and we’re always in the exact place and time we’re meant to be.

Dad used to say, “If you can’t accept the premise, you shouldn’t watch the film.” At the time, I didn’t fully grasp what that meant. My mother, for instance, didn’t believe a man walked on the moon. She saw it on TV but refused to accept the premise, so she didn’t watch. She wasn’t wrong—she simply chose not to believe. That taught me belief is a choice. We’re hard-wired to trust what we can see, smell, touch, and taste rather than risk the unknown. Isn’t that human?

“For every move we take and every dream we make... is created by choice.”

Self-awareness arrives early—when we bite our hands to comfort ourselves or recognize our reflection for the first time. Once that moment comes, we can't pretend life just happens to or around us. Two fundamental truths emerge: why we make decisions and how we make them. As children, our choices may be small, but they reveal what feels safe and what brings joy: the room full of laughter, the grown-up who listens, the story that sparks our imagination. Those experiences plant seeds of possibility, whispering what happiness can feel like. We also learn how to adapt to pain—when to be silent, when to perform, when to retreat, when to step forward. These aren't failures but intelligent survival responses, and joy still finds a way in.

As adults, our decisions grow more layered but follow the same pattern. We choose careers that reflect our values—purpose, creativity, stability, service. We choose friends who lift us up, routines that bring peace or excitement, moments of happiness even when caution tempts us to hold back. We choose love, sometimes bravely, sometimes imperfectly—partners who understand, challenge, inspire us. We repeat old patterns and learn to choose differently when awareness replaces instinct. Under the guise of practicality, we're really choosing alignment and meaning, shaping the life we want to live.

None of this is accidental. Pain teaches us what we don't want; joy shows us what we do. Awareness doesn't strip life of its mystery—it deepens it. It lets us recognize when a moment is not just pleasant but meaningful, when a decision is not just convenient but aligned. Then choice becomes intention, and life stops feeling random. Happiness stops being stumbled-into and starts being something we allow.

Before awareness dawns, we blame pain on bad breaks and chalk up joy to luck. But awareness strips those excuses to reveal a deeper truth: we have always been choosing. Every step, every pause, every retreat, every dream we embrace or abandon is a choice—some bold and unmistakable, others nearly invisible, made in silence or hesitation. Even believing we have no choice is itself a choice.

This realization doesn't condemn the past; it clarifies it. We are not spectators in our lives; we are co-authors. We may not control every circumstance, but we shape how the story unfolds. The pain, love, detours, awakenings, heartbreaks, and healing we experience are not random. Each moment exists because somewhere along the way we said yes, no, or not yet—sometimes deliberately, sometimes blindly, from fear or hope, but always from choice.

Dreams aren't chance fantasies; they're quiet agreements between who we are and who we're becoming. If we can imagine a dream, some part of us has already chosen a path that makes it possible, even if the courage to act hasn't arrived. That is accountability not as punishment but as power—the understanding that we were never powerless but

learning how to choose, how to hold on, how to let go, how to tell fear disguised as safety from truth disguised as discomfort. In that learning, every choice shaped the man I would become—the man who sees patterns, recognizes echoes, and remembers who he is beneath the story he once told himself.

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And yet another question arises: what if we already knew everything we needed to know? If every answer were handed to us in advance, would we be less human? Would certainty rob us of risk, make us love more cautiously, hesitate to step into the unknown?

Some moments in life feel too precise for chance: encounters arriving exactly when needed, pain too specific, love too familiar before it even has a name. We call these things luck, timing, fate—but the explanation feels thin, as if we’re skimming the surface of something deeper. At times it seems these experiences aren’t earned but assigned, part of a larger design we can only perceive in hindsight.

I’ve wondered whether choice begins later or earlier than we think. What if our most important decisions were made before we even arrived here, before language, memory, or conscious intent? What if we agreed to certain lessons, relationships, heartbreaks, and awakenings before our first breath, knowing understanding would follow? What if choice, as we normally define it, never truly existed?

That question wouldn’t leave me alone. Once I let myself consider it, the patterns in my life fell into a new kind of sense. What if decisions happen before our first cry, with awareness flickering and choice meaning possibility more than outcome? When my father said, “If you can’t accept the premise, don’t watch the movie,” he was really saying, “Why not?” Sometimes we must be willing to believe the unbelievable, the supernatural, the metaphysical.

As you read these pages, I ask only this: Why not? You don’t have to agree with everything here—these are my truths and my experiences. I offer interpretation, guidance, and what I’ve learned. I’m simply asking you to accept the premise for the length of this book. When you’re done, decide for yourself whether man really did land on the moon.