

THE MEMOIRS AND
TRUE CONFESSIONS
OF A
DISINFORMATION
WARRIOR

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While this story is loosely based on true events and well-known people, I freely changed details and telescoped events, and the main plot is entirely invented. This should therefore be read as fiction.

MY ARREST

It's a Hollywood myth that you only get one phone call when arrested. I called my wife, Susan. I could have called a lawyer as well, but I didn't bother.

I stood behind the counter of a garishly lit prison office. The room smelled faintly of tobacco. Standing next to me was the clerk who had booked me in. In a chair behind me was one of the guys who arrested me, a goon with a face that reminded me of a potato. By the time I was finally able to call Susan, I'd already been stripped of my dignity and reduced to a number. I was wearing prison garb—which turned out to be a black jogging suit and thin rubber shoes. At least I was spared the degradation of stripes. My prison identification card featured my name, Robert James Martin, and my number: 319. The clothes I'd been wearing when arrested and the contents of my pockets were in a locker. All my possessions had been cataloged on an inventory sheet, which I had signed. I gave permission for the money in my wallet, just over five hundred dollars, to be entered into a prison account that I could use to pay for extras and to make purchases at the commissary.

"Hello?" Susan's voice was groggy. She'd evidently been sleeping. The clock on the wall told me it was just after two a.m.

"I've been arrested," I told her.

"Wait, what?" she asked. What for?"

“I have no idea.”

“Is Sam with you?”

“Nope. I got as far as the airport parking lot.” I told her that visiting hours started in the morning at eight-thirty. I read the address of the prison from the packet of prison rules I’d been given. “Our car still is at the airport,” I told her. “To get here, you should take the train out of Manhattan and then rent a car. You can get our car later.”

“Okay. Eight thirty,” she said. There was a quiver in her voice. “I’ll be there.”

After we disconnected, the guy whose face reminded me of a potato rose out of his chair. “This way,” he said. I picked up the packet of prison rules and my identification card and went in the direction he pointed, down a corridor into a windowless room. The room was about eight feet square with a metal table in the center. Four chairs were arranged around the table. Extra chairs were stacked in the corner. A fluorescent bulb hung over the table and a camera was mounted over the door.

“Sit down,” he said.

I selected the chair facing the door. Even under normal circumstances, I don’t like sitting with my back to a door. As Potato Face settled into his chair, his jacket—a lightweight windbreaker that reached to his hip—opened to reveal a gun in a holster. I had the feeling he let his jacket open on purpose. That was when I suspected he was a punk and brand new to the job—one of the many Pike loyalists who Pike’s people had been moving into law enforcement positions.

Arnold Pike was the chief executive officer of Pike Enterprises, where I worked. He was also the president of the United States.

Potato Face seemed too earnest and too young. Really he was just a kid. He looked like an overgrown schoolboy with an

air of self-importance. He was stocky with the bulky arms of a guy who regularly worked out. He had pale hair, shaved around the side of his head with a tuft left on top. There was a tension in his jaw that gave him the look of someone who was always angry. The top of a tattoo showed on the base of his neck.

He took out a card and read me my rights. Then he said, “We won’t be questioning you so you may as well say you don’t want a lawyer.”

“I want a lawyer.” I didn’t really want a lawyer. If, as I suspected, this had something to do with Pike, there’d be nothing a lawyer could do to help me—but I felt the urge to be perverse.

“I didn’t hear that,” he said. “I specifically heard you say that you don’t want a lawyer.”

“Since you’re not going to question me, why does it matter?”

He shifted, annoyed. He obviously thought he could toy with me without pushback. To test my theory, I asked, “How long have you been in this job?”

“That’s none of your business.”

His defensive posture told me my guess was correct. “You’re a newbie,” I said.

He bristled. The last thing a guy like him wants is for people to think he doesn’t know what he’s doing.

Then, to spook him, I said—quietly— “You have been on the job for four months.” I watched the surprise come into his face. I’d guessed right. Four months earlier was when Pike began moving thousands of a particular kind of supporter into law enforcement positions: he went for the private militia guys, the ones he once called his “Second Amendment people.”

“It looks to me,” I said in the same deliberately calm tone, “like you haven’t learned the arrest procedure part of your job.”

“I’m doing what I was told to do,” he snapped. “I think you should shut up.”

To really rattle him, I smiled. It worked. He shifted in his chair.

Here’s one thing I knew about these guys: They were ridiculously easy to manipulate—if you knew how. I should know. I had been manipulating guys just like him for years. His type was particularly easy because they were ruled by their fears. You wouldn’t know it to look at him: He was husky and moved with a swagger and probably owned a few guns, but the men with the most bluster are often the most frightened.

I became aware of the noises in the building: the sound of air rushing through the vents and the intermittent rattling of a metal door in the distance. Water gurgled faintly in the pipes in the walls.

“What am I charged with?” I asked.

“I don’t know.”

“You told me you had an arrest warrant.”

He let a moment pass. Then he said, “I lied.”

That didn’t surprise me. So far, nothing had been done according to the required procedures.

The sequence of events that led to my arrest began just after lunch when Sam Bates called to tell me he was in trouble. Sam and I had been buddies since law school. He was the one who had brought me into Pike Enterprises. He said he was calling from Riyadh and was spooked. A scandal was about to break, and he was in the middle of it. I couldn’t get the story from him. He said he was afraid to talk just then because there were crowds around and he suspected he was being followed. Scandals were a daily thing in the Pike Administration, but it was only recently that my own friends were running into trouble.

Sam said his plane would land at JFK Airport at midnight,

local time. I told him I'd be there to pick him up, and we could talk then. After we hung up, I told Susan what was going on. I'm a late-night person. Meeting a friend at the airport at midnight didn't faze me, particularly a friend in trouble. There was always traffic in Manhattan, but at that hour, I could get to JFK airport in about thirty minutes.

I reached the airport at eleven forty-five. I turned into the short-term parking garage and swung into the first available spot. I heard an engine behind me. A police car had pulled up and stopped directly behind me, making it impossible for me to back out. I cut the engine and waited. Potato Face got out of the car and came to my window. He flashed a badge and ordered me out of my car. He then handcuffed me and ordered me into the back seat of the police car. He got into the passenger seat. I expected to be taken to the nearest precinct. Instead, the driver—whose face I couldn't see—merged onto highway 95.

None of this was making sense. I had, in the past, thought about what might happen should someone look too closely at how I'd earned my fortune—but arrest and prosecution had never occurred to me as a possibility. Yes, I'd bent and broken a few rules and behaved in ways that could draw disapproval and even moral censure, but I'd always made sure not to cross the line into criminal behavior.

I wondered if Sam had set me up but rejected the idea. It had certainly sounded like he had called from an airport. I'd heard overhead announcements in a language I didn't understand. He'd had to stop speaking several times because of background static. Besides, we'd been friends for years. Sam was a simple guy, grateful for the job working for Pike, happy to be my friend. It was hard to believe he'd set me up.

If Sam hadn't set me up, how had this goon known I was

on my way to the airport? Had someone been surveilling me? Tapping my phones?

I figured I might as well ask. “How did you know I was going to the airport?”

His answer was predictable. “None of your business.”

He could have arrested me in my condo or on the street. That, however, would have attracted attention. Arresting me in the parking lot of an airport at midnight was one way to make sure there were no observers. In my building or the streets nearby, someone might recognize me as a Pike Enterprises executive.

Footsteps came from the corridor. I sat up straighter in my chair. A warden opened the door. He could have been Potato Face’s cousin, with the same doughy skin and round face. “I’m taking him to his cell,” he told Potato Face. “Phillip isn’t coming.”

“Phillip McHugh?” I asked.

Phillip McHugh was the Senior Vice President and General Counsel at Pike Enterprise.

Neither responded. Instead, the warden pointed down the corridor. “That way,” he told me. “Go.”

I stood up, picked up the packet of prison rules and my identification card, and went in the direction he pointed. He followed behind me. At the end of the corridor was a staircase. He pointed, indicating that I should walk up the stairs. He walked behind me. The staircase was narrow and steep, with unpainted cinderblock walls and a single handrail attached to metal posts. The warden’s boots were so heavy that his footsteps echoed in the stairwell. Not much is creepier than walking up the metal staircase of a prison with a heavily booted man right behind.

When we reached the third floor, he directed me into the corridor, which was lined with heavy doors at approximately ten-

foot intervals, each with a spy hole and a plate with a number. The door handles were large levers, each with a deadbolt. The yellowed light in the windowless corridor gave the place a disturbing, otherworldly quality.

About halfway down the corridor was cell number 319. He unlocked the door, pushed it open, and gestured for me to enter. He waited as I stepped inside. Then he closed the door behind me. The key turned in the lock with an angry click and I was alone.

The cell smelled like wet pennies. The lighting, as in the corridor, was dim and yellowed. Along the wall to the right was a cot with two thin neatly folded blankets. The toilet was behind a low wall in a corner. Next to the toilet was a small metal trash can with a lid. On the wall across from the door was a stained sink. A board, which served as a table, was mounted to the wall. The chair facing the table was bolted to the floor. Also on that wall were three tiny windows slits about the size of a man's hand, covered with a metal grating. Near the basin was a single shelf with a plastic cup, a toothbrush, a bar of soap and what looked like cleaning supplies: liquid soap and a few rags folded neatly. I put the packet of prison rules on the desk.

I had the sensation someone was watching me through the spy hole, so I spun around and pressed my eye to the opening. The corridor, as far as I could see, was empty. My range of vision didn't extend past two doors across from mine, numbers 318 and 320. The moment I turned away from the door, the creepy feeling that I was being watched returned. I spun back around and looked out the spy hole. The corridor was still empty.

A door with a spy hole was far worse than a glass door with bars. With a glass door, or simply bars, you could see who was watching you. With just a spy hole, if someone in the corridor

walked softly—or if I happened not to hear the footsteps—I could be under surveillance and not know it.

From the window, I could see a concrete courtyard with benches. The courtyard, flooded with light, was empty.

I went to the sink, opened the tap, and filled the plastic cup. The water was lukewarm and had a slightly metallic smell—but I was thirsty, so I drank. Then I sat at the desk and read the packet of prison rules. This was a privately run prison contracted by the Federal Bureau of Prison. The rules themselves seemed typical, except that I'd heard federal prisons restricted visits to four hours per month—or perhaps that was after conviction. It could also be that rules no longer mattered. Meanwhile, I'd be allowed twenty hours per month.

This prison housed both short- and long-term inmates. I was being housed on an isolation floor. The unit I was housed in was known as a special management unit—a euphemism if ever there was one. Those in other parts of the prison lived in groups. I knew from the rules that most inmates—the “general population” inmates as opposed to the “special management population”—ate in a dining room. I would eat in my cell.

According to the prison manual, the general population inmates were the lucky ones, the ones whose background demonstrated that they could be trusted in groups. Obviously, I was here as some sort of warning, but I was fine alone. I needed to be able to focus. Besides, I didn't intend to be here long. I intended to get to the bottom of whatever was going on. Being locked alone in a metal cell was creepy, but I suspected that being surrounded by a bunch of strangers would have been infinitely worse.

I sat on the cot and removed my shoes. The mattress springs creaked. I laid down, wrapped myself in the blanket, and stared at the ceiling, which was streaked with rust-colored

stains. Each time I moved, the springs creaked under me. In the distance, I heard a metal door slamming shut.

The yellowed light in my cell and the knowledge that the door was locked from the outside gave me the eerie sensation that I was no longer part of the world of the living. I've heard it said that being imprisoned is like being enclosed in a tomb. I can tell you that it's true. I had the unsettling sensation that the world of the living could soon forget about me and go on as if I didn't exist. Oh, at first, people might think about me. The doorman of our building might wonder where I'd gone. My chauffeur would sit idle until Susan gently encouraged him to find other employment. (Susan preferred cabs. She said she couldn't get used to the feeling of a chauffeur waiting for her next commands.)

As I lay in the darkness, I had a heightened awareness of each sound: the air in the vents, the occasional gurgling of water in the pipes, a creaking somewhere in the building. The last thing I wanted to do was sleep—which, just then, felt like a kind of death. Sleeping meant that I could no longer be vigilant.

But I knew I couldn't face this ordeal unrested, so still wearing my prison-issue socks with my identification card in the front pocket of my jogging pants, I closed my eyes and gave in to the need for rest. I slept fitfully. It seemed as if every few minutes, my eyes popped open. Each time I woke up, I thought *there must be a way out of here.*

PRISON: DAY ONE

I was awakened by the sound of a key turning in the lock. The weak light streaming in through the small windows had that pale early morning glow. Instantly I felt wide awake. A heavy-set warden with the stubble of a dark beard opened the door and put a breakfast tray on the floor. Then without a word, he slammed the door and locked it.

I stretched and stood up. On the tray was an envelope. I put the tray on the table, sat in the chair, and opened the envelope. Inside was a list of prison jobs. According to the instructions, I could mark two selections and return the envelope with my breakfast tray. If I failed to do so, I would be assigned to a work detail. Work hours three afternoons each week.

Most of the jobs involved heavy labor: unloading boxes, making repairs, and helping with construction. Toward the bottom of the list were library clerk, commissary clerk, and adult literacy instructor, both of which required that the inmate have at least a high school diploma. The last thing I wanted was to try to teach any of the goons in this place. I'd rather sell them items in the commissary. I selected library clerk as my first choice and commissary clerk as my second and put the slip back into the envelope.

Also on the tray, under a clear plastic lid, was my breakfast: a scoop of oatmeal, scrambled eggs, toast with a pat of margarine,

a box of cornflakes, a cup of milk, and a cup of coffee. The food wasn't as bad as I expected. The eggs were buttery, and the oatmeal came with a packet of raisins and walnuts. The coffee was watery and weak, but the food helped me focus. When I finished breakfast, I put the tray on the floor near the door—which I knew from the prison rules was the protocol.

A distant memory came to me. I must have been about twelve when a buddy and I were in a donut shop. At the table next to us, two police officers were laughing and talking about how they used to go to the local jail and beat up inmates for fun. At the time I'd thought they were joking. Much later, I realized they weren't.

I'd read once that inmates should regularly work out, not just to remain healthy while confined but because prisons were dangerous places, and an inmate should at least look like he could defend himself. It occurred to me that jobs like warehouse worker, which no doubt required moving heavy boxes, might therefore appeal to some. The fact was, I wasn't going to scare anyone even if I worked out regularly. I was in my mid-sixties. As a child, I would have been described as wiry. Now, the word was "slight."

I felt restless so I paced my cell: three steps to the wall, pivot, three steps back. I often had that eerie feeling someone was watching me. Occasionally, I went to the peephole and looked out. Each time, the corridor was empty. Occasionally, I heard a faint tapping sound. I'd heard that inmates locked in individual cells occasionally tap on the walls to make contact with other inmates, but the last thing I wanted was any interaction with anyone in this prison.

A warden came for my tray—the same stubble-bearded guy who'd brought it. I assumed these guys worked in shifts. After he was gone, I went to the window and looked into the

courtyard. The sky was overcast, and the pavement was damp. About a dozen inmates were in the courtyard, some sitting on benches, others strolling around, some singly, and a few in pairs.

The other buildings that surrounded the courtyard each had four floors and a basement. The basement windows were covered by heavy metal bars. If the building I was in was the same size, there was one floor above mine. The courtyard was about the size of two basketball courts. The pavement was badly cracked in places and dotted with puddles. At the far end were a few shrubs badly in need of a trim. In each of the four corners was a watch tower. I saw barbed wire in the distance.

I resumed my pacing. Sometime later—I don't know how much time passed—a different warden unlocked my door and said, "You can use the shower room now."

This one had a mean-looking face. His head was shaved, and he had a scar just below his eye. His eyes were flat and gray. He looked like the type who would haul off and punch anyone who rubbed him the wrong way.

"Thank you, sir." I had enough sense to be exceedingly polite, under the circumstances.

I wasn't sure what to do. Should I just leave the cell and head to the shower room? I knew from the prison rules that each floor had a staircase on one end and a shower room on the other.

"Go on," he said and pointed with his thumb.

I walked in the direction he pointed. Several cell doors were open. I walked past them without looking in. Three inmates were already in the shower room. A warden stood, watching. I ignored the inmates and accepted a towel and safety razor from the warden.

Next to the shower room was a wall of shelves with stacks of jogging suits folded neatly, arranged by size. After my shower

and shave, I changed into a fresh jogging suit and dropped my used one into a hamper. I wanted to bring an extra suit in my cell. According to the rules, showers were allowed once daily, and I hadn't seen anything in the rules against taking a fresh change of clothing for the night.

I picked up an extra jogging suit. Nobody said anything. The warden with the shaved head stood in the corridor, watching. I returned to my cell and closed the door behind me. Soon I heard the key turn in the lock.

I put the extra jogging suit on the shelf and resumed pacing, three steps to the wall, pivot, three steps back. It wasn't long before the same mean-looking warden rattled the door open. "You have a visitor."

He directed me into the corridor and then walked behind me. Hearing his footsteps gave my stomach the jitters. At any moment I expected to feel a blow to the back of my head. As I passed the other doors, each with a spy hole, I imagined the inmates inside gazing out as I marched past their door with a heavy-footed, mean-looking prison guard behind me.

Once we were downstairs, he directed me to the front of the prison to a large room with about a dozen people milling about. The room was obviously equipped for visiting families. Children were playing on the floor. There were tables with chairs, and shelves with board games and toy boxes. A row of vending machines lined the back wall.

A prison guard sat at a desk just inside the door, angled so he could survey the room and keep an eye on the door. He seemed bored. On the desk in front of him was an open laptop and an old-fashioned desk phone, the kind that plugged into a wall and had a separate receiver. The phone must have been thirty years old. So far, every prison worker I'd seen wore the same uniform—crisp button-down gray shirts with black stripes

on their arms, and black pants. This guy was no exception.

Some of the inmates wore jogging suits—most black, some navy. Others wore a button-down green shirt with matching pants, a lightweight cotton material. Each had a white tee shirt showing near their necks.

Susan stood up and waved to me. She had pulled two chairs away from the others. You could see she'd had a sleepless night. Ordinarily, Susan was perfectly groomed. I rarely saw her out of the house without her makeup. Now she looked rumpled: Her hair was barely combed, her face was pale, and her lashless eyes gave her the look of a frightened rabbit. I wanted to take her in my arms and comfort her.

I waved, but before joining her, I looked over the room once more. A few pictures featuring landscapes were taped to the walls, which were made of cinderblock. A large clock, like the ones that hung in elementary school classrooms when I was a child, was on the wall. It seemed to me that the only surveillance was the guy at the desk.

I satisfied myself that there was no possible way our conversation could be monitored. Someone might see us if there was a hidden camera, but we were not close enough to any object that could hide a wire, unless every chair in the place was wired, which was highly unlikely. The fact that the idea even occurred to me showed you how paranoid I was feeling.

I walked over to Susan and sat down. I touched her hand lightly for reassurance—but covertly so as not to draw the attention of the clerk at the desk. We couldn't touch or hug—the rules were explicit about that. The prison offered a married couple's room where couples could be alone and more intimacy was allowed, but absolutely no touching was allowed in the common visitor room.

In her lap was a clear plastic bag containing her keys,

sunglasses, and a packet of tissue. I knew from the prison rules that all visitors were required to carry their personal belongings in clear-prison issue bags. Devices with Internet access were stored in lockers.

“W-w-w-hat is going on?” she whispered.

The general noise level was high enough so that he wouldn’t be able to hear a whisper from across the room. I leaned close to her and told her about my arrest. As she listened, I could see a change come over her. She was now alert and focused, staring at me, hard. Susan is nothing if not competent. I suspect that stepping into her usual brisk, businesslike self was probably what she needed just then. I concluded with, “I have trouble believing Sam would set me up.”

“I agree,” she said. “I found out where he is. He’s in a private prison in Manhattan.”

“Well, then, it’s unlikely he set me up—but I suppose still possible. We need to consider every possibility. Have you heard anything about a scandal in the Middle East?”

“No. I’ll try to visit Sam today to find out what’s going on. So, why are you in a prison and not a local jail?”

“This place is both a short-term and long-term facility. The feds usually don’t use local jails. I don’t know what’s going on, other than the fact that Phillip McHugh has something to do with this.”

“Phillip? The guy with the Bronx accent? The guy in charge of Pike Enterprises?”

“That’s the one.”

“Phillip is a thug.”

Just then, we were startled by a thumping sound. Then I realized it was the plumbing pipes knocking in the walls.

“This place is creepy,” she said.

“Yeah. Procedures are somewhat normal, except for the

fact that I was immediately put into an isolation unit. But nothing about my arrest was according to legal procedures.”

“What should we do?” she asked.

“Contact Ken and tell him what’s happening.”

“Not Charlie?”

Charlie was a top political operator and a member of Pike’s inner circle of trusted advisors. If any of my close friends had influence over Pike, it was Charlie.

I shook my head firmly. “It *has* to be Ken.”

Ken, like Sam, was a buddy from law school. Ken worked in the licensing department of the Pike Organization. I’d helped him get the job by recommending him to Phillip McHugh. A few weeks earlier, I’d talked him out of quitting. His wife, Eliza, was Susan’s best friend.

I looked around. Nobody was paying any attention to us. The clerk at the desk was talking on the phone.

“Find out everything you can about this prison and who runs it,” I said. “But you’ll have to come back to update me. I can take phone calls—they count toward visiting time—but my calls are monitored.”

“I’ll come back tomorrow morning. Tonight, I’ll take the train out of Manhattan in the evening, rent a car, and stay overnight in a nearby hotel. I can talk to you when visiting hours open. I’ll be able to get back to the city before too late.”

I nodded. It was a good plan. Just then, the room fell strangely quiet. It took me a moment to understand why. The rush of air in the vents had suddenly stopped. Afraid we’d be heard even if we whispered, Susan and I sat quietly, our knees almost touching.

“I should go,” she whispered. “I have a lot to do.” She gave me a long look that substituted for a hug. Then she stood up and walked from the room. The guard at the desk watched her

leave, and then picked up his phone and made a call. I assumed he was calling for someone to take me back to my cell.

Sure enough, a few minutes later, a guard with a nondescript face and brown hair appeared in the door and beckoned to me. I got out of my chair and approached him. “That way,” he said, pointing to the door. We marched along the now-familiar corridor toward my cell, his footsteps behind me. When we reached the third floor, I stood back while he unlocked the door. Then I stepped inside and listened to the key turn in the lock.

When Susan and I met, we were both in our forties, and both divorced. Susan had married young and ended the marriage when she learned that her husband was having an affair. “That’s the one thing I’ll never tolerate,” she told me not long after we met. That was an easy requirement for me. I, too, had been married, and I never once considered infidelity. I might have my faults, but I am loyal to the end—or, in Pike’s case, I’m one of the last to jump ship.

After Susan’s divorce, she became the assistant to a banking executive. As her boss climbed the corporate ladder, she went with him as a kind of super-competent super-secretary. She quit her job when we got married. Her boss was devastated. “You took her away from me,” he told me once. “I’ll never replace her.” After we got married, she took over running the household, including taking care of the household accounts and bills. It was immediately clear why her boss had been disappointed when she quit.

Sometime later, I was pacing my cell, when the same warden who brought me back from my visit with Susan came to tell me I could spend some time in the courtyard if I wanted to. I said I did. He directed me through the corridors to the courtyard.

Once there, I sat on a bench by myself close to one of the

walls. Some of the inmates wore lightweight green suits that looked like hospital scrubs. I figured there was probably a reason some wore jogging suits and others wore scrubs. I watched how the prison guards treated me, and how they treated the other inmates, looking for signs that there was anything unusual or different about how they treated me. As far as I could see, they treated me just the same as they treated any of the others. Nobody seemed to know who I was.

I had the feeling most of the inmates, even those who were clustered in small groups, were trying to blend in. The uniforms—either scrubs or sweats—helped with this. None had hairstyles or mannerisms that set them apart. No one swaggered or talked too loudly. What struck me was that the inmates entirely lacked individual identity. They dressed the same and moved the same.

It occurred to me that there is so much you can tell ordinarily about a person just passing him on the street—clothing, hairstyle, and even gait can give clues about a person's profession and personality. Here, everyone was bland. One might be a dark-skinned man, another light-skinned, and another might have thick curls—but the uniforms and the way each man tried to avoid calling attention to himself caused them all to blend. While there can be something comforting or even reassuring in uniformity, here the sameness and way each inmate seemed to try not to call attention to himself seemed dehumanizing.

Inmates came and went, each escorted by a warden. I must have been there about a half hour when a different warden came to lead me back to my cell.

I was on the cot staring at the yellow-stained ceiling when a warden entered with my lunch tray. I sat upright. The warden

put my tray on the floor by the door, and then turned and looked directly at me. With a jolt, I saw that it was Potato Face. All my internal alarm bells went off. In my confusion, I could not make sense of what it meant that I was seeing him here, now.

“You work here?” I asked.

“Nah,” he said. “I do this for fun.”

He gave me a look that could only be called a smirk. Then he left, slamming the door and turning the key in the lock.

I was alone again, reeling with shock. I could not think of a circumstance under which a prison employee would be sent to make an arrest. Surely it was out of the ordinary that he had both arrested me and was bringing my lunch tray.

I realized I was shaking.

I wondered if he was watching me. All those times I’d felt someone was looking in the spy hole—maybe he’d been there. I stood up and went to the door and looked out. The corridor was empty. Or at least I thought it was. My range of vision was limited. If he was watching, he would have seen me approaching and he could have ducked out of sight.

I stood watching, waiting. If my theory was correct, eventually he’d assume that I had gone back to my bunk or resumed pacing. Nothing. The minutes ticked by. I heard the same tapping sound I’d heard earlier, but this time it sounded more distant. The corridor remained empty. I heard faint sounds from elsewhere in the prison—the knocking of the plumbing pipes, the distant slamming of a door—but the corridor remained empty.

Stop, I told myself. If I persisted in such thoughts, I’d drive myself mad. I resumed pacing. I needed a way to identify him, but how? The only thing I could think of was that I’d have to wheedle more information out of him.

I sat in the chair and tried to eat another prison meal, a

cheese sandwich with potato chips and a fruit cup. A clanging sound came from above, I assumed from an inmate in the cell above me. It was hard to tell, from the sound, what he was doing. It sounded like he was striking a sharp object against the ground. There were at least twenty clangs before it stopped. The silence was a relief.

I wondered how I could learn Potato Face's name. He had a distinctive enough appearance, and I could describe him to Susan, but that wouldn't do much to help her identify him.

I finished eating and put the tray by the door. When a key turned in the lock, I assumed someone was coming for my lunch tray. Instead, a dark-skinned warden with silky black hair said, "You have a work detail today."

"Library clerk?"

"Yeah," he said. "Most boring job in the place."

"I like boring," I said.

"You're in the right place for that," he said and laughed at his own joke.

He directed me out of the cell, toward the staircase. Most of the cell doors were open, I assumed because the occupants had been taken to their work details. We went four floors down, to the basement. He directed me through what felt like a maze of corridors. None were longer than twenty-five feet, and each segment was set with security cameras. After one right turn and two left turns, we came to a door that was half-glass, half-metal, with "library" stenciled in bold white letters.

"Go on in," he said.

I was surprised by the normalcy of the library. It could have been any town library—well, except for the fact that the only people milling around wore dark-colored jogging suits, the person at the desk wore the prison employee uniform of a gray button-down shirt, and the windows were high and set

with metal bars. But the shelves were polished wood and the stacks were filled with books. Brightly colored posters featuring bestselling novels were taped to the walls. The clerk sat behind a counter instead of at a metal table.

“Number 319 will be working here, starting today,” the warden who had brought me told the clerk at the desk. With that, the warden turned and left.

The clerk, who sat behind the counter, was fat and balding with a double chin. “Not much to do today,” he said. “You can put those away,” he said, pointing to a pile of books on a nearby table. “If you picked library duty, you’re probably smart enough to figure out where they go.”

I picked up the top book—a bright yellow and red paperback called *The Bible for Idiots*—and looked at the spine. The series of numbers told me that the library used the common dewy system. It didn’t take long to find the row of similar yellow and red *Books for Idiots*. I glanced at the clerk and amused myself by wondering how he’d react if I said, I suppose *Jail Breaks for Idiots* is checked out.

It didn’t take long to put each of the books back in its place. I glanced at the clerk. He appeared to be reading from a screen. I figured I should just quietly busy myself. In the back was a table with an assortment of newspapers and magazines. Pushed under the table was a single school-house-type wooden chair. I pulled out the chair, sat down, and found that day’s copy of *The Washingtonian*. The familiar smell of a printed newspaper—slightly woodsy, slightly powdery—gave me a craving for normalcy: A fresh hot latte in a ceramic mug, the freedom to come and go at will.

The library was so quiet I was acutely aware of the rustling sound of the newspaper as I unfolded it to look at the front page. The front blared with the latest Pike scandal: He was

threatening to fire the head of another intelligence agency, which of course had everyone alarmed about his reasons. What had he done now? What was he trying to cover up?

The reporter was David Hock—a liberal and vocal critic of Pike. He was one of the columnists who understood that Pike deliberately reeled the country so quickly from one scandal to another that nothing he did could really sink in. There were those who insisted that Pike didn't have a plan and didn't follow a particular strategy. They said he operated solely from what were obvious personality and psychological defects. It seemed to me that both were possible. As far as I was concerned, it was a non-debate. I knew for a fact that people like Charlie and others who understood propaganda tactics coached Pike. Pike was also a natural—something that doesn't happen without a few personality and psychological issues.

Other news seemed almost shockingly mundane. An incumbent Senator announcing a reelection bid. An opinion piece made a case for mandatory gun liability insurance for gun owners. Vladimir Putin wanted to pass more anti-gay legislation. More spring rains were in the forecast.

At last, buried toward the end of the first I found a story about someone in Pike's circle trading-classified-secrets-in-Qatar scandal. This was obviously the scandal Sam was talking about. There wasn't much information. The article didn't indicate who was trading classified secrets or what they were trading for.

The library door opened. I turned to look. It was Potato Face. I assumed it was time to go back to my cell. He held the door open for me and stood back. I didn't bother saying goodbye to the library clerk.

Instead of taking me back to my cell, he directed me toward the front of the prison down a series of windowless corridors

to a room near the front of the building. In the center of the room was a reception desk where a prison clerk sat. Like the clerk in the family visiting room, he had a laptop and a landline phone on his desk. Along the wall facing his desk was a row of glass doors. Inside each room was a metal table and two chairs. Some of the rooms were empty. Others had two people inside, an inmate and a person in business attire. I assumed this was where inmates met with their lawyers.

The clerk pointed to the door on the end and said, “In there.”

I looked where he pointed. Inside, in the chair facing the door, was Phillip McHugh. The room was small enough for a man to reach out both arms and touch the facing walls. There was nothing on the walls.

“Come in and sit down,” Phillip said to me.

I remained standing.

“Sit down,” Phillip said again.

This time, I did.

“Phillip,” I said. “*What* is going on?”

“Apparently,” Philip said, “you were negotiating a deal to sell American military secrets in the Middle East. You were flying back home by way of Riyadh and you were arrested at the airport.” I had the feeling he was exaggerating his Bronx accent to sound tough.

That was the flight Sam was on—or the flight Sam told me he’d be on.

“I wasn’t on that flight, as you well know. I was arrested before that flight landed.”

“Not according to your arrest records. According to the records, after your plane landed, you were arrested and charged with soliciting a bribe and conspiring to sell state secrets.”

I sat back and looked at him. “You’re not going to get away

with this. There are procedures. What stops me from calling a top journalist and spilling the truth?”

“Oh, Bob, how did you manage to stay so naive? Sure, you can call a journalist. But what good will it do?”

“For one thing, you can’t keep me here without a bail hearing. I’ve been to law school, remember? I know the drill.”

“Did you know some courts conduct hearings until one a.m.? I had no idea courts were so helpful—but then, I suppose a lot of arrests are made late at night. Anyway, you had your bail hearing last night.”

“Oh, please.”

He reached into a briefcase on the floor beside his chair and pulled a small packet of paper held together with a large clip. He handed them to me. The top sheet was a printout from a court website giving my name, case number, and my charges: Soliciting a bribe and conspiring to sell classified information. My name was given as my first initial and middle name: R. James Martin. I assumed the first initial was to help keep my name from coming up in searches.

Next was a copy of my indictment with a description of the charges against me. Under the description was a list of my co-conspirators: Three businessmen from Qatar. I skimmed through the remaining pages in the packet. Sam’s name was not mentioned anywhere.

The final document in the packet was the transcript of my hearing.

“You *staged* my hearing?”

“To quote the great bard,” he said, “*all the world’s a stage*. To quote you, we are the creators of truth. If enough people believe a thing is true, it’s the same as if it actually is true.”

According to the transcripts, I’d pleaded not guilty and told the judge that I didn’t need a court-appointed lawyer; I said I

would hire my own. I was denied bail on the recommendation of the government lawyer, a guy named Tim Johnson, who presented evidence that I had recently moved millions of dollars to offshore accounts, which made me a flight risk. The judge, therefore, ordered me detained.

I wondered how Phillip had managed to stage a hearing. Pulling off something that complex seemed way beyond his abilities. Phillip was nothing more than a glorified gangster who knew how to strong-arm people. On the other hand, Pike had an iron grip on the Department of Justice. There were loyal DOJ lawyers willing to do his bidding. I figured that must have been how Phillip arranged this. This Tim Johnson guy was probably one of those pale, beady-eyed, toady Department of Justice lawyers eager to win Pike's approval. Guys without any brains or competence suddenly had a way to satisfy their ambitions: In the time-honored tradition of mob bosses, Pike elevated people who were both incompetent and completely loyal to him. That way they owed him their jobs—without him, they'd be nothing—and they'd do whatever he demanded. He often said he hired the best people. By that, he meant that they were completely loyal to him.

I put the papers down on the table. "How do I know these papers haven't all been forged?" I asked.

He handed me his phone and told me to Google the Public Access to Court Records website. I did so. Once there, I typed the name of the court and case number from the packet of papers Phillip had given me. There it was, right there on the court website: my name, case number, and the charges against me.

"I'll prove this whole thing is a farce," I said.

"Who is going to listen to you? What happens when your history is made public? The liberal left will dismiss you

as just another crook in Pike's orbit. They'll cheer to see you in jail. Besides, I have a lot of insurance. For example, I have irrefutable evidence that you helped spread the rumors that turned into Pizzagate."

That was true. I *had* helped spread those rumors—at Phillip's direction.

"Surely you know I have insurance as well," I said.

"What good will that do you?"

I understood immediately how this would play out, should I challenge this in court. I could pick up the phone and hire the best lawyers and private investigators. I could ask them to gather evidence that the accusations against me were absurd. Proving my hearing had been staged would be easier than proving that the charges against me were false—but even that would take time. Meanwhile, if I went public with an accusation against Pike, he'd turn on me and his supporters would believe anything he said about me, no matter how preposterous. The Pike haters, on the other hand, would not want to believe me because of my history. Some would probably cheer my downfall and even delight in the irony that the propaganda machine I'd helped build was now destroying me.

"There's an easy way out of here," Phillip said. "Pike needs a favor."

He pulled a manila envelope from his briefcase. From inside, he took out a single sheet of paper and handed it to me. It was a letter written by me to Pike.

The letter read:

Dear Sir,

I sincerely apologize. I was misinformed. I opened negotiations for a nuclear deal believing that this was something you wanted. I apologize.

Pike liked being called “sir.” I stopped reading and looked back at Phillip.

“All you have to do is sign,” he said. “Of course, you’ll also have to turn over your passport, at least until this all blows over. We can’t have you leaving the country and renouncing your confession.” Smoothly, as if it was an afterthought, he said, “We’ll also need a videotape of your confession.”

I sat back and looked at him. I knew he was lying. The videotape part gave him away. Signing that confession would not save my life. Once I was on videotape confessing, he could dispense with me. I looked at him steadily. He looked away. The noises in the building seemed to intensify. The water in the pipes rattled and groaned.

“I suspect,” I said slowly, “that what actually happened was that Pike or someone in Pike’s immediate circle, probably a family member, was feeling around for a deal to sell American military secrets. A reporter caught on. The story was about to blow up, and now Pike needed a fall guy.”

“That’s not what happened,” Phillip said. “What happened was this: You were trying to sell secrets and got caught. The question is whether it was an honest mistake based on a misunderstanding of what Pike wanted, or whether you were—*once again*—seeking to line your own pockets.”

“So you’d be okay with just ruining me, just like that?”

“If you sign, you won’t be ruined. You’ve lived under the radar. You’re a political nobody, so if you sign this confession and protect Pike from embarrassment, the whole thing will blow over in one or two news cycles. Nobody knows who you are so this will never become a big story. How will that hurt you? It won’t. Besides, Pike and I made you. Without us, you’d be nothing. What would you have been without Pike?”

Maybe you would have made partner in a firm. You could have earned a good living. But you wouldn't be living in a luxury Manhattan condo, moving millions into offshore accounts, and hobnobbing with the most powerful people in the world. You owe us this."

This was exactly the kind of transaction Pike would think up: He made me rich, therefore, I owed him a fake confession when he needed it.

Pike wants this scandal to disappear," Phillip went on. "Here's how the deal works. You sign, and I keep this letter and the video safe in case I need them. Most likely, I won't. Charges will be dropped because we'll present evidence that you meant no harm. We will present evidence that you misunderstood your instructions. It will be clear that you didn't have the necessary what-ever-it-is for a charge of conspiracy to stick, and the whole thing blows over."

"The legal term you're looking for is *mens rea*."

"Yeah, right," he said. "You didn't have the necessary *mens rea*."

The problem with all of this was that Phillip had a motive to get rid of me: I knew too much. Over the past few months, I'd tried to hide the fact that I was turning against the organization, but I knew Phillip suspected my loyalty was waning. Even if Phillip was sincere in his offer of my freedom in exchange for my videotaped confession, I had my doubts about whether Phillip's offer would even work. Pike and his people were good at creating trouble—like filing a false indictment against me—but they weren't very good at cleaning up their messes. Pike demanded loyalty, but he considered everyone around him expendable.

Besides, even if Phillip was sincere in his offer, and even if his people managed to clean up this mess, I didn't believe

if I signed the confession my life would return to normal. I'd be thrust onto the public stage. For the first time, and possibly the remainder of my life, I'd have to endure public taunts and hatred.

"I understand the desire to exploit your relationship with Arnold Pike in order to line your own pockets," Phillip said, "but it appears this caper of yours may suddenly turn into a public scandal, and we need to prevent that."

"So, tell me. What happens if I don't sign?"

"How about some straight talk? Jory Williams didn't commit suicide. He was murdered because he was about to talk too much."

Jory Williams—who had also happened to be a close friend and associate of Pike's—had been arrested for trafficking underage girls. Jory's name and the methods by which he lured the girls into his prostitution ring were all over the papers. Journalists immediately dug up images of Pike posing for cameras with Jory Williams. Stories came out of long weekends Pike had spent in Jory's offshore home. Then Jory was found dead in his cell. The official examiner said it was a suicide, but suicide raised questions. How could an inmate get the rope to hang himself?

I kept my face carefully blank, showing only polite interest. I needed Phillip to believe that I believed his lies and that all I had to do was confess to a crime I didn't commit and I'd go on as before.

"More likely," I said, "Jory bribed someone to bring him the rope. I don't believe he was murdered."

"That's your choice," Phillip said. "Accidents happen in prison."

"He wasn't murdered," I said firmly.

I could see from the glint in Phillip's eye that he had been

murdered—or, at least, Phillip thought he had been. It wasn't Phillip's style to order someone killed. Like Pike, Phillip gave orders through hints and innuendos. He would just find a way to communicate to his overzealous followers that I pose a special danger to the republic, and well, I was particularly vulnerable in a prison. It wasn't like I could hire a bodyguard. And as Phillip said, accidents often happen in prison. Phillip was a simple guy who tended to confuse chronology with causation: If he put out the word that he wanted something to happen to someone, and the person was found dead, Phillip would assume that the death was because he had ordered it.

“My job is to protect Pike,” Phillip said. “If this comes out, it will be embarrassing. The official story is a simple one. It came to the attention of the administration that you were looking to sell state secrets to line your own pockets. You were reported to law enforcement, who arrested you and did the appropriate investigations. As I already explained, if you confess your error, we will present the evidence to show how you reasonably thought you were supposed to enter such a negotiation, even though you were never given permission. Charges will be dropped and all will be well. See how simple it is? You sign. You take the blame. The whole thing blows over. And you go on as if nothing happened.”

It wasn't that simple, of course. But considering how thoroughly incompetent Pike's personal lawyers were, it seemed to me that they'd done a good job setting this up. *They don't actually practice law*, a friend once told me about Pike's lawyers. *Their job is to find a way around the law. They find a way to give Pike whatever he wants.* Using me as the fall guy wasn't a bad plan. My business practices made it believable that I would exploit my connection to Pike for profit.

“Confess and you'll be a hero,” he said. “Pike himself will

personally let you know that he owes you a favor.”

I nodded as if I believed him. I knew exactly what that promise was worth. Pike never did anything unless it benefitted him personally. If someone got into trouble doing his bidding, the person was out of luck—unless saving him would somehow benefit Pike. I handed back the letter. “Can I have a week to think this over?”

“I’ll give you until Monday. That’s all I can give you.”

Today was Thursday. That didn’t give me much time to figure out how to get out.

He picked up the packet of court documents. “Wait,” I said. “I can keep those, right?”

“You don’t need them. You have a simple decision to make.” He slipped the packet into his briefcase. He stood up. “Someone will be here to get you shortly,” he said, and then he walked out, closing the door behind him.

To my surprise, I felt no fear. I didn’t even feel the rage I should probably feel. What I felt was a clarity of purpose: I wanted to get out of that prison alive, which meant I had to figure out how to escape. Another desire came to me that was equally strong. I wanted to make the truth known. Not the truth of my arrest. Nobody cared about that. But I wanted the world to know how we had created the world’s most effective lie-producing machine—the very lie-producing machine that now allowed Phillip to ensnare me. I understood the irony of my desire for the world to know the truth: Who would believe the truth from a professional liar like me?

Footsteps approached and a warden appeared in the doorway.

“I’m taking you back to your cell,” he said.

“How do I send an email to someone?”

“Sending an email will cost you ten bucks.”

“Fine,” I said.

He took me back to the same office where I’d been booked in. A different clerk sat at a desk. The smell of tobacco made my stomach turn.

“Number 319 wants to send an email,” said the guy who had brought me in said to the clerk.

“Give me your identification. card,” the clerk said to me. I handed it to him. “Use that computer.” He pointed to a computer on a counter. The clock on the computer told me it was just after 7 a.m.

“I don’t know the email address,” I said. “I’ll have to do a Google search.”

I expected to be told that a Google search would cost me ten bucks. Instead, the clerk just shrugged. He watched me Google “Jessica Harris.” Jessica Harris was a rising star in the world of print journalism. The first page came up with her professional page with an email address for tips.

I composed a message telling her my name, where I was, and that I wanted to talk to her. To entice her into coming, I gave her my full name and enough information so she could find the court listing about my case. I told her that I had information about corruption at the highest levels of government. I had no idea whether she’d show up. I’m sure whackos send emails from prison every day of the week.

After I hit “send,” I turned back to the clerk. “I have a question. The prison rules say I get twenty visiting hours each month. Can I take all of those in the first week?”

“Yeah, you can. It would be stupid, but you can.”

“Thanks,” I said. Twenty visiting hours a month was a lot better than federal prisons, which allow only four. The rules also provided that during the first twelve hours after a person was brought to prison, he was allowed extra phone calls and

outside contact which didn't count toward his allotment for the month. These extra calls were even allowed during off hours. After all, when you yank a person from his life, there are matters that must be taken care of.

Time hangs heavy in a prison cell. Looking at steel walls and listening to the sounds in the prison set my nerves on edge. I'd been here less than twenty-four hours, and already I understood how incarceration can lead to madness. Each time I heard a sound from the corridor—usually the sound of boot steps followed by the rattling of a metal door—a jolt like a shock went through me.

The worst part wasn't the discomfort or the boredom—it was a constant and overwhelming feeling of helplessness. I was trapped—literally locked in a cage—waiting, but for what? I had no idea. I particularly hated the spy hole in the door. It felt like a pair of eyes were constantly watching me. I longed for the safe feeling of being in my own home with the doors locked and the windows closed, knowing that the world was shut out.

At home, I would sit for long periods of time, but I never experienced this kind of mind-numbing monotony. I often sat in an easy chair in the combination living room and dining area. My chair faced the floor-to-ceiling windows with a view of the Manhattan skyline. I could swivel the chair and push a button to reveal a large-screen television on the wall, or I could pick up the laptop that I kept on the table by the chair. Even if I chose to sit for an hour and do nothing but gaze at the lights of Manhattan, it was my choice. At any moment, I could go grab a snack from the refrigerator or head down to the bar in the lobby to see if my buddies were around.

Moreover, my chair at home was comfortable. Here I had the choice of a squeaky cot or a straight-backed chair.

Unlike me, Susan wasn't the type to sit for long: She was always busy cooking elaborate dishes, arranging flowers, or just adjusting pictures and pillows. The only time I saw her sit for extended periods of time was when she was reading a magazine or working at the office computer, where she did our household accounting. Back when I was working long hours, she catered to my needs. She made sure I had anything I needed—a fresh beverage, the temperature adjusted. Even after I reduced my hours during the weeks before my arrest, she continued waiting on me. "I can do these things now," I told her. She'd respond with: "No, you rest."

I was on my cot staring at the ceiling when a key rattled in the door. I sat up and watched as a warden, one I hadn't yet seen, put a dinner tray and fresh jogging suit on the floor. So I hadn't needed to take the extra one from the shower room that morning.

After I'd eaten and put the tray back by the door, there was nothing to do except get ready for bed. The lights never went out completely, but after ten, according to the prison rules, they were lowered to that ghastly yellow. I changed into the fresh jogging suit I'd brought from the shower room that morning, laid down on my cot, stared at the ceiling, and waited for the lights to dim for the night.

I woke up when the first thin light of dawn lit the window. I lay still and thought about how I could escape. I hobnobbed with the most powerful men in the country and even had access to Pike himself, but there were very few people I could call on to help me in this emergency. Most knew better than to openly cross Pike or go against his wishes. Nonetheless, I did have a good friend who was also an executive at Pike Enterprises.

I rose from the bed and paced the room. As I paced, a plan took shape in my mind. I walked until my legs felt shaky,

then I sat in the chair until that, too, became uncomfortable. I returned to the cot and lay on my back as the cell gradually brightened.

PRISON: DAY TWO

My second morning in prison followed the same routine as the first. A warden brought my breakfast tray. Another came to let me shower and shave. Then, the warden who brought my tray came back for it. I had only been here a day and the monotony was already mind-numbing: The same noises. Gray walls. Yellowed lighting.

When a warden came to tell me I had a visitor, I felt a quickening of anticipation. I slipped my prison identification card into my pocket. The warden stood aside as I walked out of the cell. He then closed the door and directed me down the stairs, then toward the front of the prison.

Susan was waiting for me in the large visiting room. The clock on the wall said eight thirty-five. Once again, she had pulled two chairs away from the others. This time, she'd selected chairs on the other side of the room. The same bored clerk sat at his desk. Two children were playing with a wooden train set on the floor. Air rushed from a vent. There were only a handful

of visitors so the room was quieter than the day before, but there were enough conversations going on that I didn't think anyone could hear us if we whispered.

I sat down, and we scooted closer together.

After we exchanged greetings, I told her about my visit with Phillip. She listened closely. Then I whispered, "Here's what I figure. If this whole thing was invented, we'll have to come up with a better counter-narrative, something more believable. Surely whoever Phillip arranged this with thought something was off."

I paused to listen to the noises in the room.

"What counter-narrative?" she asked.

"Our story is that a mistake was made and a few people are acting without Pike's approval. Most likely Pike hasn't gotten personally involved. He keeps his hands clean. He makes sure others do the dirty work so he has deniability and can easily abandon any plan that doesn't work. So, here's what you need to do. Tell Ken to find a way to trick Pike into saying that none of his executives are in trouble with the law. If Pike thinks journalists are onto a scandal, he'll say anything. This will lead credibility to our story. Ken then selects an administrator who was not likely to have had contact with Phillip and impresses him with the fact that Ken is calling from Pike Enterprises on behalf of Pike himself to straighten out a mistake made by one of his executives. Ken can make it appear as if the orders to let me out are coming from Pike himself."

I considered the irony that if I escaped, it would be because I out-lied the Pike lying machine.

I looked around again. The clerk at the desk was talking quietly on the phone.

"Orders from inside the Pike Organization will carry weight," I whispered. "Orders from the White House, if Ken

can manage that, would be even better. Whoever helps us will earn a hefty bonus and a thank-you from Pike himself. Of course, Pike will never know.”

“Should I use the accounts on the yellow ledger?” she asked.

“Yes.” Those were my offshore accounts. Susan had the passwords. “We’ll also have to figure out who in the prison is working with Phillip, and get around them or flip them.”

“Anyone would believe Ken over Phillip,” she said.

I agreed. Before coming to work for Pike, Ken was a top New York litigator known for his ability to take a witness apart on cross-examination. He was good on his feet and a good talker—and smart. Over the past few weeks and months, Ken, like so many others, had been growing disgusted with Pike’s entire operation. If anyone would feel an urgency to fool Pike’s people and get me out of here, it was Ken.

“But we need more information,” I said. “We need to know what’s going on. We need to know who is in on this and who isn’t. There is one guy who works here who seems to be also working for Phillip. He was one of the officers who arrested me, plus he is working here—which is odd. Either he’s an officer who Phillip placed here, or he’s a warden who was sent to arrest me.”

I gave her the best description I could of Potato Face and told her about each of my encounters with him.

“I’ll start by seeing if someone new is on the prison payroll,” she said. Then she whispered, “Yesterday afternoon I went to visit Sam. He definitely didn’t set you up. He was shell-shocked. He kept saying, ‘Tell Bob I’m sorry. I would not have called him if I’d known.’”

If Sam’s phone was being monitored, it was possible I’d simply stumbled into the situation: Because I had gone to meet

Sam's plane, whoever was responsible for me figured they'd better arrest me along with him.

"Can you find out from Sam whether he called me from a company phone? If he did, my guess is that his phone is being monitored and that's how Phillip knew I was planning to go to the airport."

"I'll do that," she said.

I looked around to make sure nobody was paying attention, then asked "What did you find out about Sam?"

"Here's what he told me. About a week ago, Pike Enterprises sent him to Qatar on an assignment. On his way back to his hotel one evening, a British reporter stopped him and asked him about a deal he was rumored to be negotiating that involved trading American nuclear secrets for a lucrative licensing deal. He denied the story. That evening, while poking around for clues, he checked Pike's Twitter feed and found a Tweet that wasn't getting much attention because it had no meaning to anyone but Sam. Pike had Tweeted, *I didn't give Sam permission to negotiate any deals.*"

She shook her head disapprovingly. She'd always been a fan of Pike's—until recently when things started off the rails.

"Anyway," she said, "Sam understood immediately that someone in Pike's orbit had been conspiring to sell state secrets, the scandal was about to break, and he was being set up to take the blame. In a panic, he got on a plane to Riyadh and called you from the airport. He was arrested when he stepped off the plane in New York."

"How is he holding up?"

"Not very well. He signed the confession and he's waiting to be let out."

"Oh, Sam." I groaned.

"He said he had known all along what he was getting into

when went to work for Pike. He understood the nature of Pike Enterprises. He figured he enjoyed the wealth and the perks, and this was the price he needed to pay.”

“Right,” I said. “In exchange for a lifetime of luxury and easy money, he signs a bogus confession when the boss demands it.”

This was exactly the kind of thing Pike did. He left wreckage in his wake. He casually ruined people.

“I hinted to Sam that there might be a way out,” Susan said, “and a way to avoid signing the confession, but he wasn’t interested. He said he was going to go along with what Phillip wanted, and that was that.”

I wasn’t too surprised. Sam was the kind of guy to take the easy way out.

I told her about Phillip’s visit. When I finished, she said, “If Phillip has Sam’s confession, maybe he doesn’t need one from you.”

“Maybe,” I said. “Or maybe I’m in too deep now and Phillip wants assurances that I’ll stay quiet. Or maybe it’s something else. Maybe Phillip knows I’ve been turning against Pike.” Sam had never given any indication that he was turning against the organization.

“Speaking of people turning against Pike, Larry called looking for you. I told him you weren’t feeling well. He didn’t seem to know that anything unusual was going on.”

Larry was my childhood friend. He was also a former Congressman and legal analyst. He and I talked regularly.

“Phillip is obviously keeping all of this quiet,” I said. “Nobody here seems to have any idea who I am. I don’t even think Potato Face knows exactly who I am.”

She pulled a clipping from her prison-issue bag and handed it to me, which was probably something she wasn’t supposed to

do. I resisted the urge to turn to see if the clerk was watching. Instead, I read what she handed me. It was a notice from an online news source that Sam had been arrested. The notice didn't provide much information, just that Sam Bates had been charged with soliciting state secrets and conspiring to solicit a bribe. There was nothing in the listing about the fact that Sam worked for Pike Enterprises.

She handed me a second clipping. Again, I resisted the impulse to turn around. This one was a notice of my arrest. It also was bare bones, revealing nothing about my connection to Pike Enterprises or Outreach Analytics. My name was listed as R. James Martin.

"I should go," she said. "I have a lot to do."

I wanted to squeeze her hand for comfort. Instead, I just watched her walk from the room.

Soon after she left, a guard came to escort me to my cell. I wasn't there long when another came to tell me I had a visitor. What he said was, "A lawyer is here to see you."

A lawyer?

Instead of taking me to the large visitor room where I had met with Susan, he took me to the reception area and the row of rooms where I'd met Phillip. The clerk looked up as we entered. He pointed to a door and said, "In there."

I looked inside. A woman sat with her back to the door. I knew, from her hairstyle—short and curly—that she was Jessica Harris. On the table in front of her was a plastic prison-issue bag. The rules said journalists must show press credentials, pass a background test, and sign an affidavit swearing that they don't know the inmate personally. I assumed that was why she could meet with me in a private room. The warden probably assumed she was a lawyer.

I opened the door and stepped inside. She turned around and said, “Hello.”

“Hi,” I said.

Before sitting down, I scanned the wall behind me—the wall I hadn’t been able to see from outside. There was nothing on it. There were only two places in the room to hide a wire: the vent on the wall or the table legs. I assumed that the only surveillance came from the clerk at the desk, who could look in at any time.

I sat down across from her. “You came,” I said. “Thank you.”

“I was curious.”

She looked even younger than in her profile pictures. Her hair was cut short. Her unruly curls gave her a slightly ruffled appearance. She wore large glasses and an oversized gray jacket.

“I am prepared to tell you my story—”

“Why should I care about your story?”

“I work for Pike Enterprises. I’m one of the founding members of Outreach Analytics—”

“If that’s true, why haven’t I heard of you?”

“My name is a common one and I’ve kept a low profile.”

“Or maybe you’re a lunatic making shit up.” She unzipped her plastic prison-issue bag and took out a pocket-sized notebook and prison-issue pencil. In addition to being flexible, prison-issue pencils were the kind that didn’t need to be sharpened. As the graphite wore down, a pull-string allowed more graphite to be exposed.

She pushed the notebook and pencil toward me. “Write down your full name, birth date and birthplace.”

I wrote *Robert James Martin, July 24, 1953, Baskerville Virginia.*

“I’ll be back,” she said. She stood up and left the room.

She returned about ten minutes later and sat back down.

“Okay,” she said. “You were one of the founding members of Outreach Analytics. You’ve been working for Pike Enterprises for almost forty years. Your luxury condo in Pike Towers on Fifth Avenue in Manhattan is worth thirty-five million dollars. You’re married to someone named Susan. You used to be married to someone named Rochelle.”

She looked for my response. I nodded. She had the basics.

“If all you’re being charged with is soliciting a bribe and entering a conspiracy to disclose state secrets, why aren’t you out on bail?”

“It’s a complicated story. I’m prepared to tell you.”

“Why me?”

“That should be obvious,” I said. “You’re one of the most respected journalists out there. Both sides think highly of you.” I wondered if she’d be spooked if I revealed how closely I’d followed her work and her career.

“Three years ago,” I went on, “you graduated summa cum laude from the University of Missouri School of Journalism. Last year you earned your master’s degree in journalism from Columbia University. While you were a graduate student, you had three bylines in *The Washingtonian*. You had an in-depth piece featured in *City Life Magazine* on the irregularities in the Justice Department. You are now working in both D.C. and New York, where you have access to the top editors. Despite all that, you still don’t have a full-time job. That means you’re good and you have time to hear my story.”

“Let me guess. You are totally innocent, and you were framed.”

“I’m not totally innocent, and yes, I was framed by top executives at Pike Enterprises. I will tell you everything, but I ask only one thing: Don’t publish my story until I am out of here and someplace safe.”

She considered this. I assume she was trying to figure out if I was, in fact, a lunatic making shit up. There was something steely about her. She exuded intelligence and had the air of a person who moved through the world with complete confidence in herself—a rarity.

“Why?” she asked.

“Why what?”

“Why do you want to tell me?”

“Maybe there comes a time when even the vilest of swindlers wants to set things right. Maybe personal redemption is a real thing. Maybe I want the truth out there—for anyone who still cares about the truth.”

She picked up her prison-issue pencil and tapped it against the table. When she noticed that I was watching her hand, she put down the pencil.

“Okay then,” she said. “I’ll hear your story. But I want the whole story, starting with a *David Copperfield* beginning.”

“What the hell is that?”

“*David Copperfield* starts like this: ‘Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show. To begin my life with the beginning of my life, I record that I was born.’ Then you take it from there.”

“You really want all that crap?”

She smiled. “Yeah. In fact, Holden Caulfield called it that *David Copperfield* kind of crap.”

I didn’t bother asking who Holden Caulfield was. “What you need to know is how we successfully manipulated so many people. If you don’t know how, you won’t be able to counter the effects.”

“I know how to counter the effects. Win elections so that we have enough ethical lawmakers who can pass legislation to

outlaw the kind of crap you and your friends pull. We need to expose people like you who take advantage of the fearful and ignorant.”

“Be careful. I also take advantage of people like you. I’ve successfully manipulated you. I’ve lured you to post on social media exactly what I wanted you to post.”

“I don’t believe you’ve ever manipulated me into posting things I didn’t want to post.”

“Of course, I didn’t make you post things that you didn’t want to post. I made you *want* to post them. I riled your fears of an authoritarian takeover. I had you shaking with terror. When frightened, you published things that riled and upset others like you.”

“Prove it,” she said.

“Think back to the piece you published entitled, ‘The Supreme Court Is Making It Possible for President Pike To Rig the Election.’ Think of the people responding to your article who, when shaken and terrified, wanted Democratic leaders to adopt authoritarian methods as a way to beat back authoritarianism. Of course, they didn’t call them authoritarian methods. They called them hardball tactics. They said they needed to imitate the tactics used by the Republicans or they’d be crushed.”

“I was wrong about what the Supreme Court would do. I shouldn’t have written what I did. Okay, you win. But I still want the whole story, from the beginning.”

“I think you’ll find it boring.”

“I expect I won’t, but we’ll see.”

She was nothing if not stubborn. I figured, why not? It wasn’t like I had much choice. I wanted my story out there. It wasn’t like I could start interviewing journalists. Besides, there weren’t many like Jessica Harris. I just didn’t see why my *David*

Copperfield kind of crap mattered. My childhood was completely ordinary. Moreover, I'm not much of a talker, but I had to be compelling enough to hold her interest until I got to the part about how we created a world-class disinformation machine.

"All right," I said. "How about this: It is unlikely that I will turn out to be the hero of my own life, but whether I will remain to be seen. To begin my life with the beginning of my life, I record that I was born in Baskerville, Virginia, in 1953." I paused and then asked, "Like that?"

"Exactly like that."

As I adjusted to the idea, I found I was not averse to telling the entire story. I suppose it's natural for a guy who is staring at steel walls and who recently received a death threat to feel an inclination to look all the way back. Prison is the perfect—and ghoulis—environment for contemplating morality, mortality, and the meaning of one's life.

Besides, what else did I have to do with the empty hours ahead of me? Even if Susan and Ken managed to get me out of here, it would take a few days—at least.

It also occurred to me that somewhere in my past were the explanations for what was happening to me now.

She took a small tape recorder from her plastic bag and turned it on. "We have some time now," she said. "Just talk. I will edit it down later."

* * *

APPLE PIE BEGINNINGS

I was born in the same white clapboard house where my father was born. Baskerville in the 1950s was a small rural town that had been left to dawdle, the kind of place where nothing much

had changed in the fifty years before my birth.

If you've ever watched those old sitcoms from the 1950s, you know what Baskerville was like: Neat houses with trim lawns. Quiet residential areas. Baskerville had a small downtown consisting of twelve cross streets. The town hall was flanked by a post office and a courthouse. Also lining the square was a church and a library. Men gathered to talk politics in the feed store the way they had when my grandfather was a young man. Many of the intersections were unmarked, so when outsiders stumbled upon our town, they often took a wrong turn and ended up at a dead-end in a cornfield.

I played kickball in the town square with my buddies. The girls played hopscotch, jumped rope, and played with dolls. The girls wore dresses and bobby socks. The boys in my school dressed alike: neat pants or shorts, short haircuts. The older boys wore crew cuts. Younger boys went to the barbershop and asked for a "regular," haircut short around the ears and back, with just enough hair on time to be able to comb or push to the side.

The post office and courthouse flew the American flag. The clock tower over the church was always accurate, to the minute. I grew up confident that America was the greatest, strongest, and wealthiest nation in the world.

The part they don't show on the old sitcoms was that there was another part of town—really, on the outskirts—rundown and poor, where the Black people lived. Most of them were farmers. Some worked in the N.P. Norton Steel Company. They had their own school and church, but they used our library. There was no longer a sign on the library that said, "Colored use rear entry" —the library removed it when I was in kindergarten—but the Black people knew to go around to the back. I didn't think about them much. They were always respectful when they came into the main part of town. When they weren't the sheriff

got them in line. They also knew not to swim in the public pool even though the law then required that all public facilities be integrated. “We pay more taxes,” my father explained to me once, “that’s why we have a swimming pool but they don’t.”

I was the youngest of three boys. My father went to work each morning in a tie and a button-down shirt. He drove his Ford three miles to the insurance office. I was not sure what he did all day except that it involved a lot of paperwork. Once I asked him if he liked working in the insurance office, and he said, “I should have studied engineering.”

By the time I was about eight, most families in our part of town had a television set. My father came home each evening, sat in his favorite chair in the living room, and turned on the television. He watched the news, and after dinner, we all watched sitcoms.

In my childhood, the lines were clearly drawn: America—the world’s greatest and most powerful country—was good. Our archenemy, Soviet Russia, was bad. America was about rugged individualism, carving a nation from a wilderness, personal freedom, and personal responsibility. Soviet Russia, in contrast, was evil. The government told people what they could and couldn’t do. The government even told people what they could say and even tried to control their beliefs. The Soviet government outlawed religion and invaded its neighbors with the goal of spreading their evil communism worldwide.

Soviet Russia wasn’t just some bogeyman. A few years before I was born, the Soviets built an atomic bomb. It was one thing to know that the United States had the capability to wipe entire cities off the map. It was quite another to think that the Russians could do the same, particularly when they aimed their nuclear warheads at us.

One of my earliest memories in school was crouching,

terrified, under my desk while we did duck-and-cover drills, simulating what we should do in case of an atomic attack.

Then, when I was in middle school, something shifted: Now, the enemy was within as well as across the ocean. The unraveling of America began when communist ideas took root and spread in the United States. Then in the 1960s, an anti-American counterculture erupted. I didn't understand how dangerous the situation had become because I never paid much attention to the dull droning of Walter Cronkite's voice. The guy was boor-*ing*. Back then, everyone got their news from two sources: Walter Cronkite on the evening news and the local newspaper.

One day—I must have been about fifteen, so we were well into the 1960s—Walter Cronkite showed a women's liberation march. The camera zoomed in to show women burning their bras. Both of my parents were in the living room. I wanted to ask why they were burning their bras, but I felt embarrassed.

Another time, Cronkite showed a newsreel that shocked me to attention: a group of long-haired protestors standing in a busy intersection in New York City burning the American flag. Some held signs that said, "Black Power."

The camera zoomed in on the protesters. Many were African Americans with large afros. The white people were dressed oddly with long shaggy hair, tee-shirts with images dyed on the front, and tattered jeans. Some carried signs that said "Stop the War!" and "We Demand Equality!"

My mother, who was watching from the doorway leading to the kitchen, said, "It's a few people making a lot of noise," she said.

My father stood up, marched over to the television set, and turned it off muttering: "Damn commies. This country is coming apart at the seams."

I understood why my father was calling them communists: The whole point of the protests was that they didn't want us fighting the communist North Vietnamese. They were just fine with the evils of communism spreading throughout the world. I thought the protesters were lazy, entitled, and repulsive.

"The way they dress," my mother said, "you can't tell the difference between the girls and the men." It was hard to tell, from her tone, whether she disapproved, or thought it was funny.

The next morning when I walked to school, I felt alert and vigilant, scanning the horizon for signs that angry people would come marching through the town—but all was quiet and tranquil. You'd think, listening to Walter Cronkite, that the entire nation was being torn apart by riots and protests. Baskerville, though, remained pristine.

My mother was the type to bake apple pies. Like my father, she rarely spoke. We weren't a chatty family. She was an excellent housewife. Our house was always sparkling clean, smelling faintly of lemon furniture wax. My mother did the grocery shopping, and cleaning, and cooked all of our meals.

I discovered my penchant for dirty tricks in eleventh grade when my buddy, Larry, ran for class president. Larry was the picture of wholesomeness. He had a cowlick that made his hair stand up a bit in front, a sprinkling of freckles on a small nose, and the kind of pale translucent skin that turns bright pink in the sun. My mother said he had the stamp of Ireland on his face.

Larry and I had been friends since kindergarten. He lived two streets over. We took each other almost for granted, like brothers. You might have even thought we looked like brothers. We both had reddish-blond hair and a lean, wiry build. Larry,

though, was friendly and outgoing. He had a quick easy smile. In a word, he was likable.

Baskerville was first settled in the late eighteenth century by immigrants from Ireland, so many of the kids in my school had the stamp of Ireland on our faces. My own ancestry was Irish mixed with German. In the latter part of the nineteenth century, that part of Virginia absorbed a wave of immigrants from Germany. In a funny bit of Baskerville history, the Irish inhabitants of Baskerville called the German newcomers Dutch. Why? Because when the newcomers arrived, they said, “Wir sind Deutsch,” and the citizens of Baskerville heard, “We are Dutch.” Eventually, there were intermarriages, and over the years, people from other towns settled in Baskerville as well, so there’s probably some Italian in the town mix, but all three churches in town were Protestant.

Larry’s opponent in the contest for junior class president, Missy Little, was the kind of girl nobody liked. For one thing, she was way too serious. She had a large unattractive face that reminded me of a horse, and frankly, she walked around with a chip on her shoulder the size of Texas.

One day after school, I went to the bus depot and bought a ticket to Richmond Virginia. The main office of the Virginia branch of the Communist Party was in Richmond, a ninety-minute bus ride from Baskerville. I had no second thoughts about what I was about to do. I viewed myself as a team player and a good friend.

I arrived in Richmond and walked three blocks to the commie office. Signs plastered on the window said, “Worker’s Rights!” and “Organize!”

When I opened the door, a bell jingled. A guy who had been sitting at a desk behind the counter stood up to greet me. I was struck by how ordinary he was. He, too, had the stamp of

Ireland on his face. He was neatly dressed with a short haircut—nothing like the radical hippies I saw on television. I absorbed the lesson: It's hard to tell at a glance who is an enemy.

“I want to make a donation,” I said, consciously deepening my voice. I handed him ten bucks.

“Do you need a receipt?” he asked.

“Make it out to Missy Little,” I said. “The donation is a gift.”

He filled out the receipt and handed it to me.

The next day, I slipped the receipt into the in-box in the office of the student newspaper. The newspaper printed the receipt. That was the most popular issue in the history of the Baskerville High Banner.

Missy was enraged. She said—loudly enough for a large group of students to hear— “Even if I had donated to the Communist Party, there would be nothing wrong with it. This is a free country!” She stamped her feet like a child. I believe that was the moment she sank her campaign.

Larry didn't know I pulled that trick, so when he said he didn't know anything about it, people believed him. Larry read Mike Wasser's *The Conservative Conscience*. He believed that politicians who pushed good conservative causes were doing the work of God.

He had these high-flown ideas. I was the realist.

I don't remember when I turned into what you might call a bookworm. I think I was still in elementary school. There were not many books in the house, but I read them all, mostly novels from the forties and a few detective stories. I even read my mother's copy of *Gone with the Wind*. My father made fun of me when he saw what I was reading. “Next thing you'll want to wear dresses,” he said.

After that, I hid my reading. I borrowed books from the school library, hardcovers. I removed the jackets and kept the jackets in my book bag. Hardcover basically all looked the same: plain covers, cloth-bound, mostly black, sometimes maroon or navy. Mostly I read murder mysteries and spy novels. In almost every spy novel I read, the enemy was Soviet Russia.

My two brothers and I shared a bedroom. We had one bunk bed and a twin-sized single. From the time I was born, my oldest brother had the top bunk. When I was about twelve I talked him into trading with me. The top bunk afforded me the most private spot in the house. I read books in bed, one after another, in private.

I discovered my passion for government and politics in my senior year civics class. I understood right away that despite the tame-sounding name of the course, civics, the subject was really power: Who wields power and how others seek to dislodge them. I understood by then the connection between bra burning and power.

That was the semester I read the classic works about government: John Locke's *Two Treatises of Government*, Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*, Rousseau's *Social Contract*, and Plato's *Republic*, and worked my way through much of the *Federalist Papers*. Because it was power that interested me, I read Machiavelli's *The Prince* and Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*.

Larry and I volunteered to work on political campaigns. We spent our afternoons stuffing envelopes and making phone calls. For my sixteenth birthday, my father gave me a subscription to *The National Bulletin*, or the "N.B." as he called it. I immersed myself in the worldview of its conservatism. The articles—brilliantly written and beautifully argued—expounded the reasons communism would destroy everything that was good

about America. From the N.B., I learned about the virtues of a free-market economy and the evils of government regulations getting in the way of free-thinking and innovative markets and businesses.

One evening at dinner at the start of my senior year of high school my father asked me what I planned to study in college. My two brothers were already at UVA. My parents assumed I, too, would attend UVA.

“Political science,” I said.

My father put down his fork. “What can you do with a political science degree?”

I had no answer. I figured I may as well tell them the rest. “I want to go to Benjamin Franklin University.”

“In Washington, D.C.?” my father asked. “That cesspool?”

“Larry also wants to go to Benjamin Franklin,” I said.

I knew that including Larry in the conversation would help my cause. Both of my parents liked Larry. When we were younger, my mother used to say, “He’s such a nice boy.” Recently she’d changed that to, “Such a nice young man.”

“You may as well attend college in a swamp,” my father said.

* * *

I stopped talking and looked at Jessica. “I understand wanting my whole story—but isn’t this too far back to matter?”

“Not at all. It’s fascinating. I’ve never seen one of your kind offer an honest history, even when they realize their errors and try to make amends. Besides, you have to admit, evil has a perennial fascination.”

“It wasn’t all evil. Larry wasn’t evil. You probably know who he is. Larry Raskins—”

“Larry Raskins, the former Congressman? The political analyst? He was your childhood friend?”

“The *former* political analyst. Guys like Larry had high ideals and lived by high standards. We thought we were protecting the sanctity of towns like Baskerville.”

“If you really wanted to protect the sanctity of towns like Baskerville, why did you leave? Why are you living in a thirty-five-million-dollar Manhattan condominium?”

“Those things are not mutually exclusive. It’s possible to do both. A person can live in Manhattan and work to protect the sanctity of towns like Baskerville.”

“You were stifled in Baskerville. Your parents were stifled there, particularly your mother. You were all trapped in a limited kind of life.”

“There was a comforting sameness in Baskerville.”

“There was a comforting *whiteness* in Baskerville.”

I bristled. The most annoying thing about liberals was that every conversation included at least one instance of them implying that you’re a racist.

“There was satisfying order in our lives,” I said.

“You were trapped,” she said. “All of you. You’re looking back through rose-colored glasses.”

* * *

Was I? Both of my parents were then deceased, and my childhood home had long since been sold. I hadn’t been back to Baskerville in years, but—as if I had been there yesterday—I could remember the pungent smell of the creek that ran behind the field just beyond our neighborhood.

When I was growing up, girls were expected to be polite and well-behaved, but it was understood that boys would get

into mischief. I was the leader of the mischief-makers. Sundays often found me and my buddies by the creek with comic books and bottles of Coca-Cola when we were supposed to be in Sunday school.

One time I went too far. I told two guys that a family of dwarfs lived in the basement of the bakery. They opened the storm door and climbed down to find out. The door closed behind them, shutting them in darkness. I couldn't get the door open. When Jerry the baker found them, they had knocked over a sack of flour in the darkness. They emerged covered with flour and furious. The baker marched me home and told my father what I'd done.

My father hit me on the side of the head, hard.

It occurred to me that maybe Jessica was right. My childhood wasn't all apple pie and white picket fences. Whenever anyone asked about my childhood, I said it was perfect: The ideal small-town 1950s American childhood. Mostly I believed it. Maybe being captured and locked in a steel cage and staring mortality in the eye is forcing me to look back honestly, without the rose-colored glasses.

My father was not the type to show affection. Sometimes he called my mother "sweetie" in an off-handed manner. He was a no-nonsense guy who bluntly spoke the truth as he understood it. I grew up thinking that I respected my father. Now I realize that what I felt was fear: We never knew when he would snap and hit one of us. Most of the time he was calm. Then, without warning, something would set him off—like the time my middle brother was holding me down and threatening to beat me up. My father happened to walk by our door. He stalked into the room and hit my brother on the side of his head so hard that my brother reeled and almost lost his balance.

Before you start talking about child abuse, I'll remind you

that spanking was commonplace back then. When that doctor in the 1960s—I forgot his name—published the book about why parents shouldn't spank their kids, my father joked that the only use for a book that thick was using it as a paddle.

My mother was as detached as my father, but she faked it better. Eventually, I realized she was faking it, but I pretended not to see it. She went through all the motions. We never really pulled together as a family. We were five people living under the same roof, but it was as if we were in a game of bumper cars. We bounced off each other but never connected.

Maybe we *were* all trapped in a limited kind of life.

I'd never thought much about my family. I always thought people who went to therapy and talked endlessly about their terrible families and horrible upbringings as excuses for their own failures were weak, pathetic creatures.

But now, something occurred to me: Maybe my life took the shape it did because my father was unpredictable, and my mother was cold. Instantly, I rejected the idea. No, I would not go there. I firmly believed in the bootstrap theory. We each lift ourselves up by our own bootstraps. Whining is not allowed. Blaming others—or worse, blaming United States history or something our ancestors did—was a sign of weakness.

Larry and I requested each other as roommates. Because some dorm rooms were triples, we filled out the questionnaire so we could be matched with a compatible roommate. We both wrote, “Conservative.”

On a warm day in late August, my parents and I drove to Washington, D.C. with our backseat and trunk full of my stuff. The year I started college, 1971, was the height of the left-wing protests against the Nixon administration's excursion into Cambodia. In May, three months before my parents and I

arrived, one hundred thousand demonstrators had descended on Washington D.C. for a march. You could still see the aftermath of the demonstrations. Anti-war posters were plastered on windows. Posters praising Nixon had been slashed.

“You should have gone to UVA,” my father said.

I didn’t answer. It was usually best not to answer him. What I thought, though, was that someone needed to be here to fight back.

Larry and I were assigned to a three-person dormitory unit: Our room contained three matching beds, dressers, desks, bookshelves, and closets. Our third roommate was Charlie Rocklin, who, of course, was from Connecticut—

* * *

“Wait,” Jessica said. “Your college roommate was Charlie Rocklin?”

“All four years,” I said.

She stared at me so long I assumed she was wondering again whether I was a lunatic making shit up. Then she said, “Right. Charlie Rocklin went to Benjamin Franklin. Okay. Go on.”

* * *

I had never heard of Charlie when I arrived at Franklin, although Charlie—with the bombastic manner he is well known for—acted as if everyone should already know his name. He’d been featured in newspapers all over New England as the high school senior who had helped mastermind the election of Congressman Sheldon Lessing. He’d even been featured in an article on the front page of *The New York Times*.

Even back then, Charlie was the kind of guy you noticed right away. He was tall, walked with a looping gait, and wore round glasses that made him look a bit goofy. He liked to talk.

More specifically, he liked to brag. Having a conversation with him was often like listening to a series of speeches.

Our first evening in the dormitory, I was sitting in my desk chair, watching Charlie pin newspaper articles about himself to his bulletin board. Larry was sprawled on his bed reading the politics section of *The Washingtonian*. An empty pizza box and dirty plates were on the floor.

“So,” I said to Charlie. “How’d you get that congressman elected?”

“We torpedoed the other guy’s campaign,” Charlie said. “We used a few dirty tricks. The opposition refused to respond. The opposing candidate, a pinko commie, said he was going to take the high road. What a chump. There was this local news station, and the newscaster there loved the Pinko Commie and hated Sheldon Lessing. So, I forged a letter from Sheldon Lessing trashing the pinko commie and slipped it to the news station. They didn’t check carefully enough and presented it as if it was real. They talked about how the letters showed Lessing to be unprofessional. Lessing of course denied that he wrote the letter, and we easily proved it was a forgery. We then accused the campaign and news station of corruptly passing off forged documents to get their guy elected. It was a scandal. Lessing played the final weeks of the campaign as a victim of the biased media.”

“I have a story,” I said. I told them how I had sunk Missy Little’s campaign in eleventh grade.

“You did?” Larry said. “That was you?” I could tell he was trying to decide whether to get angry.

Charlie lit up. He walked over and gave my arm a good-natured punch.

That was when I knew Charlie and I would be good friends.

The next morning, Larry put his breakfast tray down next to mine in the dorm cafeteria. “I can’t believe you did that, man,” he said.

“Think what it would have been like with Missy Little as class president. She was unbearable.”

“I know,” he said. “But still.”

After that, I was careful with what I said around Larry. I tried to remember that he was an idealist, not a realist like me and Charlie.

Larry and I joined a political group called The Right. The Right was organized, disciplined, and determined. We sat at a booth and talked to students. We hung fliers. We persevered even though we had actual hate directed at us from the liberals. They called us warmongers and worse because we supported Nixon and his efforts to rid Southeast Asia of communism. They conveniently forgot it was a liberal president who got us into the war in the first place. The liberals with their noisy marches and silly antics grabbed the headlines, but I knew we had the real strength.

During our first year of college, two candidates for office—one for U.S. Congress and one for mayor of a small town in New England—asked Charlie for help with their elections. Both campaigns gave him the title of “advisor.” Twice he flew to their campaign offices, but mostly he talked on the phone.

“I give them ideas,” he explained one evening. We were all three in our chairs. We were supposed to be studying, but we’d turned our chairs around to face each other, and were mostly just shooting the breeze.

“Come on, man,” Larry said and threw a pillow at Charlie’s face. “They hire you because they don’t have to pay you.”

Charlie threw the pillow back. “They hire me because I’m

good. I'll collect later.”

I wanted to major in political science, but math came so easily to me that it left me with more free time to do political work and just hang out in the dorm lounge. Computer science was a new major and the department was recruiting students who performed well in math.

Late one night toward the end of my first year, I sat at my desk filling out the forms. The overhead light was off because Larry had already gone to bed. Charlie, whose desk was next to mine, was scribbling an essay on a legal pad.

“Done,” I said, quietly enough not to wake Larry. I signed heavily. “Political science is where the power is, but what can I do?”

“Political science is where the power is now,” Charlie said. “Computers are where the power is going to be.”

At the time I thought he was trying to make me feel better. In fact, it was one of the most prescient comments anyone in my life has ever made. It also shows you that Charlie had natural talents and good instincts. There was more to him than bombast and a willingness to cheat.

The story about the burglary of the Democratic National Party headquarters broke during the summer after my first year of college. Nobody at the time had any idea how that would blow up. It seemed like a two-bit random robbery. In late August, when we all moved back into the dormitory, Nixon's reelection campaign was in full swing. The three of us—me, Charlie, and Larry—worked in the campaign office. Larry and I worked as volunteers. The campaign offered Charlie a small salary, so he reduced his class load to leave time for work. He became a member of the Committee to Reelect the President, known as

CREEP.

Charlie invited me to participate in meetings with a select group of CREEP members who took it upon themselves to devise dirty tricks. We met each Saturday in a diner near the campus where we could sit in a private room in a back room and talk freely. One day I told them about the trick I'd played on Missy Little. One of the more experienced operators said, "Brilliant. We're doing it."

Later in the week, Charlie told me that he donated to a Communist Party candidate in a local race in the name of a top Leon Cade staffer. The local race was one in which the Republican candidate essentially ran unopposed—no Democrat got in the race—so the only other candidate was a Commie. Charlie leaked the receipt to the press. Leon Cade had to spend time refuting the story.

A few weeks later, I sat in the CREEP meeting and listened as they devised a plan that I thought had no chance of working. They had persuaded one of their pals to apply for a job with the Cade campaign and they were working on the guy's application letter and resume. They wanted a spy in the Cade camp.

Charlie told me privately that the guy so persuasively impersonated a liberal that he was given the job of driving Cade around. So they had a plant inside the Cade campaign. Their plant submitted its spy reports each day.

"He gets plenty of rewards," Charlie told me. "We're paying him, and the Cade campaign is paying him. Plus, he's paid in satisfaction for helping the conservative cause."

The tricks were not necessary, though. Nixon was popular. The economy was strong. It was clear that Nixon would give Leon Cade a total shellacking. Charlie said the Nixon campaign was not taking any chances. "Nixon knows there are people

out to get him,” he said to me and Larry one night over a late-night meal of pizza and Coke in our dorm room. “Nixon says the intellectuals, the Jews, and the commies hate him. He’s sure they’re planning to sabotage him. So, we’re going to sabotage Leon Cade before he can get us. We’re not going to sit around like ducks with marks on our backs. We’re going to have some bare-knuckle politics.”

“I don’t like it,” Larry said.

“You don’t like what?” Charlie asked.

“Bare-knuckle politics,” Larry said.

“We need to win this,” Charlie responded.

“I still don’t like it,” Larry said.

The week after classes started, *The Washingtonian* reported that a \$25,000 check intended for Nixon’s reelection campaign had been deposited in one of the Democratic National Headquarters burglars. Then, in October—a few weeks before the election—*The Washingtonian* reported that former Attorney General Jonathan Carlisle controlled a secret fund for spying on Leon Cade’s campaign. There were rumors that the fund had paid the burglars who’d entered the Democratic Headquarters.

I bought a copy of the newspaper from the stand on the corner and returned to our dorm room. Neither Larry nor Charlie was back yet. I sat at my desk, trying to study, waiting for Charlie. By the time he returned, later that evening, Larry and I were studying at our desks.

When Charlie walked in, I showed him the newspaper. “Hey!” I said. “What do you know about this?”

“Who me?” he asked with fake innocence. “I don’t know anything!”

“Come on,” I said. “Out with it.”

“Look at it this way,” Charlie said. “The burglars got caught before they could get anything, so nothing they did helped

Nixon.”

“That’s not how it works,” Larry said. “If you break into someone’s house and you get caught before you steal anything, you still burglarized the place. It’s still a crime.”

“Yeah, but it was a small-time two-bit burglary. A dime a dozen. It won’t hurt Nixon’s chances of getting reelected.”

Charlie was right about that. Nixon cruised to an electoral college landslide. The victory party was held in the grand ballroom of the Hastings Hotel.

An advantage of having kept such a low profile with almost no Internet presence was that I could feel confident that Rochelle did not know I was in prison. So many years had passed since I’d spoken to her that most of the time, she no longer lived and breathed in my imagination as a real person. I carried her image more like a picture of perfect beauty, timeless and unchanging. Now I remembered her as she had looked the night I met her, at Nixon’s victory party.

Charlie was the one who got tickets for me and Larry to attend Nixon’s victory party. We spruced up in our best suits and ties and walked to the Hastings Hotel. The ballroom was lushly furnished, with glittering chandeliers, burgundy-colored curtains, and marble columns. A mouth-watering dessert table and trays of hors d’oeuvres were laid out in abundance. There was lamb and shrimp on skewers, mushrooms of olives, and fragrant curries.

Pure joy and relief emanated through the ballroom. Nixon had won. Socialism had once more been beaten back. Law and order would live to see another day in America. The band played upbeat light classical and pop favorites, including exuberant numbers from Rogers and Hammerstein—*My Fair Lady*, *Carousel*, and *Oklahoma!* The crowd was mostly older, or at

least, older from the vantage point of a college kid. Clusters of Franklin students were scattered through the crowd.

I had been at the party for a few hours and was starting to feel bored. Larry had already left. Charlie was somewhere with his campaign buddies. I was searching for familiar faces when I saw her for the first time. She was standing with a group of Franklin students, wearing an ice-blue dress and a silver ornament in her hair. Her hair was light brown, silky with a golden sheen, and so long it hung to the bottom of her back. Her face was sweet and heart-shaped with rounded cheeks and a delicate chin. There was something calm and unearthly about her.

I went to find Charlie. “Who’s that girl in the blue dress with the long hair?”

He looked in the direction I pointed. “I’ll see if I can find out. Stay here.”

He disappeared into the crowd. A few minutes later, he came back with another guy. “This is my friend Jeff,” Charlie told me. “The girl’s name is Rochelle Simon. Jeff’ll help you out.”

Jeff said to me. “What’s your name again?”

“Bob,” I said.

“Come on, Bob.” Jeff walked straight toward the group. I struggled to keep up, weaving my way through the crowd. When we reached the group, Jeff maneuvered so that I was standing next to Rochelle. “Hi, everyone,” he said, “This is my buddy, Bob.”

I said, “Hi,” looked around, and gave a little “hello” wave. I let a few beats of time pass so I wouldn’t seem too obvious. Then I turned to Rochelle. “And you are?” I asked innocently.

“Rochelle,” she said.

“Do you go to Franklin?” If she did, it was a wonder

that I'd never seen her before. She wasn't the kind of girl you overlooked.

"Yes," she said. "You?"

Just then Charlie appeared. To Rochelle, he said, "Rochelle's your name?"

"Yes," she said, startled.

"I'm Charlie Rocklin."

"I know." She gave a little laugh and said, "Everyone knows who you are."

Charlie grinned, pleased. He poked my shoulder and said, "This here is my buddy and roommate. Let me tell you about him. He's a genius. Brilliant. If you like smart, he's your guy."

The color came up in her face. It was possible this was helping. It was also possible that it wasn't. I shot Charlie *a get out of here* look. Charlie grinned and left.

"Okay," I said to her, "now you know my major thanks to that commercial from my infamous roommate. What's yours?"

It wasn't the world's most original question, but it was sort of foolproof—the college campus version of "How are you?"

"Marine biology," she said.

"Marine biology?" I repeated, taking care to hide my surprise. Girls in those days generally majored in English or education.

"I like dolphins," she said.

I wasn't sure what to make of that, but, desperate to keep the conversation going, I said, "I don't think I have ever even seen a real dolphin. Just pictures."

"If I were to come back in another life as an animal," she said, "I'd want to be a dolphin. Sometimes I think they're a higher form of life than humans. They're loving, loyal, intelligent, and playful. If we work at it, maybe we can evolve into dolphins."

I smiled, grateful that she tossed me such a perfect

opportunity. "I'm sure," I said gallantly, "that you are already all of those things."

"Which animal would you want to be?" she asked. It was a question that I was, to say the least, unprepared to answer.

I gave the first response that sprang to mind. "A lion." My next thought was wouldn't everyone want to be a lion? Then I remembered she wanted to be a dolphin.

"That is," I added, "as long as lions don't eat dolphins."

She gave her hair a toss. "Not to worry. If the lion tried, the dolphin would just swim away."

I took that as a challenge.

"Would you like something from the refreshment table?" I asked. "I see pink lemonade and an amazing dessert table."

"Sure," she said. "Lemonade."

I led her toward the table and then fetched two glasses of lemonade. As we sipped our lemonade, I kept up a steady stream of small talk. I learned that she was from a small town in southern New Jersey, she had two sisters and a brother, and she went home often to visit. She said she hoped that Nixon himself would appear to speak to us. He never did. Instead, one of his top campaign officials gave a victory speech. I don't remember any of it. I was too busy staring at Rochelle while trying to pretend I wasn't.

We danced for awhile. By then it was after midnight. The crowd started to thin out and the band packed up. She agreed to let me walk her back to her dormitory, which meant I didn't have to worry about trying to get her phone number: Once I knew which dorm she lived in, I could call the phone on each floor until I found her.

The air was crisp, the sky clear. I kept her talking by asking a steady stream of questions. She had a deliberate way of speaking as if thinking about each word. She was the type

who has no rough edges, which I thought made her perfect for someone like me, who had only rough edges. I thought that the light gathered around her.

When we reached her dormitory, I walked her into the lobby, which was now deserted. I had no intention of trying to kiss her too soon. I know how to play the game. I told her I'd call her, but I didn't say when.

I called her the very next day, even though Larry always insisted that the next day was too soon. His theory was that three days was obligatory—just long enough for the girl to wonder if you'd call, but not too long to appear uninterested. I had no intention of waiting. I asked her out for ice cream Thursday, after class.

On Thursday we sipped old-fashioned ice cream sodas in a shop with black and white tile floors and soda from fountains. I wanted to know whether she was an idealistic conservative like Larry, or a realist like me and Charlie. I tested her by saying, "There are no boundaries in politics. You have to do what works."

"Oh that's not true at all," she said. "A president like Nixon has principles."

I glanced at her to see if she was sincere. She was. I wondered how she'd feel when she discovered that Nixon, like me and Charlie, was a realist.

"He might be unconventional sometimes," she went on, "but remember, he was one of the first to try to expose communism and the enemy within."

I smiled at her. I had my answer. She was an idealist like Larry.

On Friday we went to a movie. As I walked her back to her dormitory, I lined up another date for the next day. Just before we reached her dormitory, I stopped in the shadows. I drew her close to me and kissed her for a long time.

I called her the next day, and we fell into a routine, talking each day after classes, and getting together in the evening if our study schedules permitted. One day, in January, after lining up a dinner and movie date for Saturday night, I returned to my dorm room to find both Charlie and Larry sprawled on their beds. Larry was reading, Charlie was writing in a notebook.

“I need you both to clear out of here by ten on Saturday night.”

Charlie sat up and grinned. “Does Rochelle know about this?”

Of course Rochelle did not know. “She’s crazy about me,” I said.

One memorable afternoon, I sat on a couch in the lobby of our dormitory, reading in *The Washingtonian* that Charlie and two other members of CREEP were accused of planting a spy inside Leon Cade’s campaign. I assumed planting a spy was a crime, but I didn’t for sure. I wondered if sitting in on meetings while a crime was planned was also a crime.

The lobby of our dormitory filled up with students looking for Charlie. By the time he walked in through the door, the lobby was crowded. Charlie walked in and raised his arms, spreading them wide, and making the double-V peace sign that Nixon had made famous.

“Yup,” he confirmed. “I gotta testify.”

The day he testified, a bunch of us—me, Rochelle, Larry, Charlie’s girlfriend Laura, and about a dozen others from the Nixon campaign office—waited for him in a pizza restaurant not far from the campus.

Charlie entered with a swagger, wearing a big, goofy grin. He slid into a bench next to Laura. “Nothing to it,” he said. “I told you all I didn’t break any laws.”

* * *

“He did, though,” Jessica said. “He did break laws.”

“Probably, but nobody could pin anything on him. He always insisted he was innocent.”

“You know he wasn’t. Did he think it was all a joke?”

“He thought he was doing what was necessary to save the nation from Leon Cade.”

“I have heard that one before,” she said. “It’s the same ‘the ends justify the means’ argument used by would-be authoritarians everywhere. Go on.”

* * *

All three candidates Charlie worked for—the two Congressional candidates and the mayor—also won their elections. It was the coattail effect. As Charlie liked to say, a rising tide lifts all the boats. Charlie now had national fame. He set up a lobbying business called Rocklin Consulting. Consulting, in this case, meant helping people get access to the officials he had helped elect. He even had contacts close to Nixon himself because some of the people he’d gotten to know on the campaign now had jobs in the administration.

Mostly Charlie conducted his business from a pay phone. Sometimes he used the dorm phone, located in the hallway not far from our door. I could hear him saying things like, “Sure, I can get you a meeting.”

Before long, Charlie was carrying around a thick roll of cash. When a bunch of us went out for pizza, Charlie picked up the bill. He didn’t exactly show off, but he didn’t try to hide his wealth either. He took his girlfriend on extravagant dates. He made large enough donations to campaigns to get the attention of candidates, thereby expanding his reach of influence.

One evening, he said, “Why shouldn’t I make a little money? It’s just lobbying.”

It was more than lobbying. I knew it and he knew it.

“Is your conscience bothering you?” I asked.

“Very funny,” Charlie said.

Larry said, “You’re probably breaking a few laws.”

“Nah,” Charlie said. “I checked. Besides, who cares?”

He picked up a large book from his shelf and tossed it to Larry. “That,” Charlie said, “is the federal criminal code. One thousand, seven hundred, and fifty-five pages. That’s just the *criminal* code. It doesn’t include all the things you can get sued for. If you own an apartment building, and you don’t rent to some sleazy-looking guy who happens to be Black? Wham!” He pounded his desk with his fist. “You’re in trouble. Repeat that five thousand times with five thousand violations that shouldn’t even be in there and you could go broke from the lawsuits or be in jail for the rest of your life. Heck, you don’t even have to violate anything. You can get sued anyway and go broke defending yourself against made-up charges.”

“Sort of crazy,” I said.

“*Sort of* crazy? It is outright lunacy! You take my money by force, or you force me to do something, you’re guilty of a crime. Because you infringed my personal liberty. Everything else in that book is an infringement on all our personal liberty. There shouldn’t be more than a few pages of crimes. Murder, rape, theft, that kind of thing. You know why all these laws are on the books?”

“No,” Larry asked. “Why?”

I couldn’t tell if Larry was humoring Charlie. Sometimes Larry was unfailingly polite.

“Because it’s a big, out-of-control administrative state,” Charlie said. “It is government gone crazy. The beast

feeds itself. People like cushy government jobs, so they give themselves raises. They create more government jobs so they have something to give to their friends. It's all wheeling and dealing."

"Uh, Charlie," Larry said. "Aren't you doing the same thing? Look how much money you're making wheeling and dealing."

Charlie pointed his finger at Larry and said, "We have to beat them at their own game. I'm on the right side of this. You watch."

Two things moved quickly in 1973 and 1974—my relationship with Rochelle and Nixon's unraveling. Sometimes on weekends, Rochelle and I studied together in the library, then walked along the river and through the Capitol Mall. We visited the monuments. We strolled in and out of the Smithsonian. She had the same attitude I did about the city: It was mostly dirty and grimy and noisy, so we remained in the central downtown area.

Meanwhile, the burglary of the Democratic headquarters was moving closer to Nixon himself. In the spring, one of Nixon's top aides was indicted and charged with conspiring to burglarize the Democratic Headquarters. When Nixon tried to fire the head of the Justice Department to shut down the investigation, Congress appointed a special prosecutor.

That was where things were left when the school year ended. Rochelle and I both went home for the summer. I worked again in the hardware store. Rochelle took a full-time job babysitting for a five-year-old girl. Basically Rochelle spent the summer playing with Barbie dolls. Each day, I put my letter to her in the mail and received hers.

We returned to school in the fall and picked up where we had left off, seeing each other most days, studying together on

weekends. We both followed the impeachment investigations closely. Each day I bought a copy of *The Washingtonian*, even though I was growing to despise that newspaper with its obvious liberal bias. Each evening in the dorm lounge I listened to Walter Cronkite, although his evident bias against Nixon grated on me as well. Meanwhile, I breezed through my math and computer science classes.

One weekend, Rochelle took me home to meet her family. Her mother and father were waiting for us on the train platform when our train pulled into the station. They made such a fuss you'd think they hadn't seen Rochelle in years. I stood by awkwardly as they hugged.

Then Rochelle's mother turned to me. "And you must be Bob. We've heard such nice things about you."

I offered my hand, which she ignored. Instead, she gave my shoulders an affectionate squeeze. It wasn't quite a hug, but it was warm, welcoming, and much more intimate than a handshake. We drove back to their house, where Rochelle's siblings and a few cousins were waiting for us. Once I got over my shyness, I fell in love with her family. I came to feel more at ease with Rochelle's family than with my own.

* * *

During my third year of college, I needed an afternoon class, and there were not many offerings. One was a course in Russian history. Intrigued, I signed up. *Know your enemy*, I thought.

The course traced Russian history from feudalism and Czarist Russia, through the Revolution, to the establishment of the communist state. I ended up reading some Karl Marx, but I skimmed through the silly *Communist Manifesto* and read the far more serious *Collected Works of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels*. I

read about their insane idea that the evolution of society was basically predetermined: society would evolve from feudalism to capitalism and then finally to communism—which Marx and Engles imagined as a sort of utopia in which the government owns the nation’s resources and industries. According to the fantasy they spun, under the benevolent leadership of the communist party, all people would work according to their ability and share the nation’s wealth equally. Class systems would be eliminated through the redistribution of wealth. The way this utopia would come about was like this: the workers would realize that the evil capitalists were basically enslaving them. They would rebel and seize the factories from the factory owners and establish a communist government, and then they would all live happily ever after in a classless society.

People really believed that dangerous nonsense.

Because the idea was so unrealistic, nobody should have been surprised when the Russian Revolution, instead of leading to perfect communist bliss, led to a government in which the Communist Party established a bona fide totalitarian state in the form of a sprawling bureaucracy dictating every aspect of people’s lives, including what people could believe or say.

As far as I was concerned, *Communist Manifesto* and *The Collected Works of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engles* deserved to be on the shortlist of books that did the most damage to the world.

The problem was that America, too, was becoming a bureaucratic state—and American liberals, who held watered-down versions of Marx’s whacky ideas—were determined to enlarge that bureaucratic state, thereby moving us closer to Soviet Russia in which various bureaucracies would promulgate rules dictating every aspect of our lives.

“We’re becoming like Russia,” I told Rochelle one evening. We were sitting in Smokey Joe’s, a restaurant entirely misnamed because nobody smoked. It was a student hangout with a

jukebox, a dance floor, fried snacks for sale, and free popcorn. “All those alphabet-soup agencies deprive people of freedom and liberty in with the goal of creating a literal welfare state.”

“Is that right?” she asked politely.

“I understand now,” I went on, “why Charlie feels the way he does about the criminal code and all those rules. Who needs them? Did we have a fifteen-hundred-page volume of laws on the frontier?”

She smiled and said, “Maybe if there had been more laws, there would have been fewer gunfights.”

“Outlaws don’t obey the laws. They would have still carried guns and used them. Good people do obey the laws which means that all those laws puts good people at a disadvantage.”

She frowned, gave her head a little shake as if considering this, but didn’t respond at all. I thought it was because my argument was so persuasive.

The summer after our third year of college, both Rochelle and I made plans to stay in the city. I landed a plum summer job, a paid internship in the Senate building. I was a math major, but I had political connections: all my spare time was spent working for the Right or political campaigns. As the end of the term approached, I sublet a furnished studio in Arlington for the summer, an easy subway ride from D.C. The guy who I sublet from was a graduate student studying in Europe for the summer. It was your classic bachelor pad: lamps without shades, nothing on the walls, and chipped and unmatched plates and mugs in the cabinets.

One of the dormitories remained open, and Rochelle stayed there. I’ll admit that I rented the studio for the sole purpose of having a place to be alone with Rochelle. She was taking summer school classes because she decided to add a major in education so she could teach high school biology. She

spent her weekends studying at my place.

On August sixth, a date seared in my memory, we sat together on the couch in my apartment watching as Nixon appeared in a special broadcast. He addressed the nation from the Oval Office. “Good evening,” he began. “This is the thirty-seventh time I have spoken to you from this office, where so many decisions have been made that shaped the destiny of this Nation—”

Rochelle scooted closer to me. I put my arm over her shoulder. We both knew what was coming. “In all the decisions I have made in my public life,” Nixon said, “I have always tried to do what was best for the nation. Throughout this long and difficult period, I have felt it was my duty to persevere, to make every possible effort to complete the term of office to which you elected me. In the past few days, however, it has become evident to me that I no longer have a strong enough political base in Congress to justify continuing that effort.”

“His own party isn’t defending him anymore,” I said. “It’s a disgrace.”

“I have never been a quitter,” Nixon was saying. “To leave office before my term is completed is abhorrent to every instinct in my body. But as president, I must put the interest of America first. Therefore, I shall resign the presidency effective at noon tomorrow.”

I stood up, reached over, and turned off the television. I went back to sit next to her.

“He shouldn’t have given up,” I said.

“What could he have done?” she asked. “Once the Republican Senators stopped supporting him, he knew he’d be removed from office.”

“There is something so deeply wrong in this.” I heard the quiver in my own voice.

Just then, the telephone rang. It was Charlie.

“It’s bullshit!” Charlie was furious. “It wasn’t like that burglary would have changed the election. He would have still won.”

“They hounded him for years,” I said.

“Exactly. Nixon knew he was a victim, but he was too noble to say so. Remember in 1962 when he stepped down from his governorship? He looked at the reporters and said, ‘You won’t have Nixon to kick around anymore.’ He was wrong to resign. It was a bad decision. When you get knocked down, you don’t give up! You fight back.”

Charlie ranted for a few more minutes. Listening, I felt my own anger growing.

Charlie said, “Gotta go,” and we both hung up.

I turned back to Rochelle. She said, “But if the media had it in for him, I don’t know what else he could have done.”

I sat back and thought about Walter Cronkite and *The Washingtonian*.

“Liberals control the media,” I said, “and that’s the entire problem.”

I pulled her close to me and wound my hand into her hair. “I’ve never seen a girl with such long hair.”

“I stopped cutting it when my sister died.”

I felt a sudden chill. She had told me about two sisters, Melissa and Janet. She never told me there had been a third.

“Your sister?”

“Andrea.”

“What happened to Andrea?” I asked.

“Andrea was in fifth grade when she was hit by a car.” Tears welled in her eyes as she spoke. “She was crossing the street after getting off the school bus. The car swung around to pass the bus and didn’t see her. Andrea and I shared a bunk bed

and played games in the dark after everyone else was asleep.”

There was a beat of silence, and then another. I searched for something to say.

“The last time I talked to Andrea was the morning she died. I was brushing my hair. I had always worn it in a short bob, but it was getting longer and was then down to my shoulders. The last thing Andrea said to me was, ‘Rochelle, you have such beautiful hair. It’s the color of honey. I’m glad you’re letting it grow.’”

In the silence, I felt I could hear my own heart beating.

Then she said: “I haven’t cut my hair since.”

I sat there, struggling to wrap my mind around the fact that Rochelle literally wore her grief on her back, every single day. That was my first inkling that there was much more to Rochelle than met the eye, and that, behind her tranquil face she hid a core of strength.

Rochelle and I got married the summer after graduation. She wore her hair loose around her shoulders, with a garland of flowers in her hair, like a woodland nymph. I wore the pale blue tuxedo she picked. (Yes, in the 1970s you could rent a light blue tuxedo.) The ceremony was held in Rochelle’s family’s church and the reception was in an adjacent public garden. For our honeymoon, we spent three days in Manhattan. We wandered around Time Square, went to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and saw plays on Broadway.

I took my vows seriously. When I said, “From this day forward, for better or for worse, in sickness and in health,” I meant it. It never occurred to me that I do was not forever.

* * *

The door opened and a prison guard said, “Time’s up for today.”

Jessica gathered her things.

“Can you come back tomorrow?” I asked, I heard the pleading tone in my own voice, and recoiled from it. I am not the kind of man who begs.

“Yes,” she said. I’m embarrassed to admit how grateful I felt. “After nine-thirty is best. My wife may come first thing.”

“I’ll be here.”

I returned to my cell to find my dinner tray waiting for me on the desk. This time, the meal was lasagna, already cold, garlic bread, and salad. As I ate, I wondered if Susan was home by herself. I figured more likely, she was with Ken and Eliza. I imagined the three of them busy, each on their own laptops, searching, researching, and looking for the perfect target so they could execute my plan for escape. Or, for all I knew, something happened by now and they’d give up. Maybe the only way out of here was to sign a bogus confession and wait until the whole thing blew over.

I asked myself, *would that be so bad?* I recoiled. It was like asking a man, will you sell what’s left of your soul?

No. I would not let Phillip break me. He was nothing but a thug with half a brain. I would not allow Phillip or Pike or anyone else to use me like a piece of old junk and discard me when I was no longer useful.

How had I reached this point? Surely, I hadn’t started in life as a person without honor. Surely, I hadn’t started life as the kind of guy who would end up being a tool for thugs. I felt a growing shock that I had come to the place where I might have no choice but to sign a bogus confession or risk death.

I thought about Rochelle and wondered what she would think if she knew I was trying to reclaim what was left of my honor. Would she see that I did have some Larry in me? Or

would she resist the idea that I had any honor to reclaim?

I finished eating and then placed the tray by the door.

Before my arrest, I knew nothing about what life in prison was like—except what I'd learned from the packet of prison rules and from the novels I'd read that were set in a prison. In high school, I'd read the novels of Arthur F. Manon and the memoir, *Papillon*, written by the French writer Henri Charrière who had been wrongly sentenced to prison and who managed more than one dramatic escape.

I recalled a particularly unsettling passage from a Manon novel about how inmates, particularly those in solitary confinement, daydream about the future, think about the past, and train themselves not to think about the present. Essentially, they learn to live in another time, which makes sense. There was nothing to an inmate's present life. An inmate had nothing but the past, and if lucky, the future. And how could a person think about the future when he had no idea took shape it might take? That left only the past—and I supposed that very few inmates could look back without pain or regret.

By the time a warden came for my tray, the sun was almost down and I'd gotten ready for bed. From my window, I could see the moon, pale and cold. It was just a sliver. At the base of the moon, a bright star—or maybe a planet—shone brightly. The grating of the window formed a black pattern against the sky.

Nights in a prison cell are long. That night, my second in prison, I don't believe I slept longer than an hour at a stretch. I wasn't used to the noises, the metallic smell, or the sensation of being locked in a metal cell. Maybe a person never gets used to it. Perhaps people who are here for years still feel a momentary panic each time they are awakened by a loud rattling of the

pipes or the sound of a distant door slamming shut.

During one of the times I was awake, I stared upward at the stains in the ceiling. Then I closed my eyes and drifted back to sleep.

The next time I woke up, it was with a start, as if something had awakened me. The sky was still black. The dim, yellowed light lit the contents of my cell. The only sound was the slight knocking of water in the pipes. I was tempted to get up and look out the spy hole, but I couldn't summon the energy.

PRISON: DAY THREE

The next time I opened my eyes, it was morning. I was shivering without the blankets, which lay in a heap on the floor next to my cot. I wrapped myself in the blankets and went to the window, where I rested my forehead against the cool metal bars. Dark clouds threatened rain. I felt restless and irritated. I did a few stretches and paced my cell to help me focus. Then I picked up the blankets and folded them.

I felt sickened by the damp metallic smell in the cell, so I took the cleaning supplies from the shelf and methodically scrubbed the sink and toilet. Then I stripped my bed and wiped the mattress. I remade the bed, tucking the bedsheets tightly, military style. I stopped abruptly when I heard a clanging sound from the cell above mine. I waited for the clanging to stop, then resumed my work. I washed the rag and then used it to wipe the floor.

I'd gotten about a quarter of the way across the floor when a key rattled in the door. I stood up, still holding the rag, and waited. It was a warden bringing my breakfast. After he left, I sat at the table and ate my breakfast, listening to the sounds of the prison. I was just drinking the last of the room-temperature coffee when the key turned in the lock.

It was Potato Face. “I need your tray,” he said.

“What kind of shifts do you work?” I asked.

“I work the hours I choose.”

I stood up and handed him the tray. He didn’t like taking it from me. He clearly expected me to put it on the floor. In what was obviously a subtle power game, I stood extending it to him. He relented and took the tray.

“What’s your name?” I asked.

“Puddintane,” he said.

That was unexpectedly juvenile. I consciously dropped my voice a few decibels and as slowly and calmly as I could manage, I said, “That’s beneath of you.”

My tone stopped him. I pressed my advantage. “Why would you be afraid to tell me your name?” I asked.

I suspected he wouldn’t like me implying that he was afraid—and he didn’t. “I’m not afraid.”

“Then tell me,” I said in the same tone. “What’s your name?”

He considered this and said, “Dylan. What’s it to you?”

“Just curious. How do I know that’s really your name?”

“Why would I lie?”

“I can think of a few reasons,” I said, but he wasn’t staying for conversation. He turned, left, and slammed the door. I heard the key turn in the lock.

I had no appetite. I’m not an early-morning sort of guy. At home, I’d have a cup of coffee first thing, then breakfast later in the morning. For most of my life, that had meant a cup of black coffee. A few years earlier, Susan bought one of those fancy latte machines, and she operated it with impressive efficiency. I never learned to use it—but each morning upon waking, I had a freshly steamed latte. I didn’t eat breakfast until later.

I resumed cleaning the floor where I’d left off. When I’d

finished, I rinsed out the rag, washed my hands, and sat at the table.

That was when I saw what appeared to be a piece of white paper stuck under the plastic breakfast tray. When I pulled it out, I saw it was a sealed envelope, addressed to me, but there was no stamp or postmark. I tore open the envelope.

Inside was a slip of paper that said: “DON’T TRY IT.”

My hands were trembling when I put the paper down on the table.

Potato Face was obviously messing with me. The question was whether “don’t try it” was a lucky guess, or whether someone who was surveilling us knew I had presented Susan with a plan to escape. I didn’t believe that every chair in the visiting room was wired. I thought someone was watching Susan and Ken.

A different warden came to unlock the door so I could visit the shower room. This guy had small, beady eyes. Three inmates were already in the shower. I ignored them. I took a long, very hot shower. Nobody tried to hurry me.

I had just returned to my cell when a key rattled in the lock again and my door swung open. Wardens didn’t bother knocking. The guy who stood on my threshold was the same beady-eyed guy who had let me go to the shower room.

“You have a visitor,” he said.

I slipped my prison identification card into my pocket. He stood aside as I walked out of the cell. He closed the door, and directed me down the stairs and then toward the front of the prison. He followed behind me.

Susan was waiting for me in the usual place in the large visiting room. About a half dozen people were there, two inmates and their families. As was my habit, I carefully looked over the room before joining her, checking to see if anything was different. When I satisfied myself that nothing was different

and that the hum in the room was loud enough for us to speak, I sat down next to her.

I came right to the point. “Something weird is happening.”

She listened as I told her that the guy I thought of as Potato Face, who had arrested me, had also brought my dinner tray the night before, and my breakfast tray with a sealed letter that had been mailed the day before with the ominous warning, don’t try it.

“It seems to me that either someone is watching us,” I whispered, “or the writer of the letter took a wild guess and is trying to spook me.”

Susan looked around. “I don’t think anyone can hear us here,” she said.

“I meant watching us as in spying on us. Spying on you. Watching what you’re doing. Did you talk to Eliza or Ken on the phone yesterday about anything important?”

“I was careful not to do that. I called them when I was driving, but just to arrange to get together. We talked about our plans in their condo.”

“We have to assume we’re being watched. It’s also possible someone has a tap on your phone.”

“Oh, wait,” she said. “I remember something. I was at home one time when I talked to Eliza. The only thing I told her, though, was that Sam had no interest in trying to get out. I also told her that you often say you created a monster and the monster is out of control.”

We sat in silence, thinking. Our only neighbors were above us and below us. The condo above us was owned by a Russian businessman who was rarely there. The condo below us was vacant. At least, it was.

“Is the condo below us still vacant?” I asked.

“I’ll check.”

“I think it’s more likely that someone is tapping our phones. Oh, and Potato Face says his name is Dylan.”

“That should help me figure out who he is,” she said. She paused and looked around before continuing. “We’ve been screening prison officials for the perfect target. Ken is getting full background checks on each of them. He thought he should go into his office at Pike Enterprises today, just to see if anything unusual is going on. Oh, and I went to visit Sam. He said he didn’t call you from a company phone. He called you from his private phone.”

That eliminated the obvious answer to how Phillip knew I was planning to meet Sam at the airport. What was left was that our phones were tapped or someone was spying on us, or both.

“Is there anything else I should do?” she asked.

“Yes. In the locked box in the closet there is a file marked Pike Transactions History. Photocopy everything. Keep the originals in the box and mail the copies to Jessica Harris.”

“The journalist?”

“I’ve been talking to her.”

Susan didn’t ask any questions about it. She was like that. She just took for granted that I knew what I was doing, and that what I was doing was right.

“Anything else?”

“Yes. There’s another file in the drawer of my desk labeled D.C. I’d like you to also photocopy the contents of that folder and send the copies to Jessica Harris as well.”

D.C. stood for “disinformation campaigns.” The contents of that file were what I meant when I told Phillip that I had insurance. Nobody really cared about Pike’s shady deals and connections to Russian oligarchs. On the contrary—for a lot of his supporters, that was his appeal. They were disgusted with what American democracy had become. It was dysfunctional.

The government no longer represented them. The most hardcore of Pike's supporters might cheer his lies, but very few people like to be duped. In the file labeled 'D.C.,' I had records, for example, of the times Pike conned his supporters into giving him money for bogus causes, complete with documentation that Pike and his family knew the causes were bogus and they were duping their supporters.

"You really are ready to blow it all up," she said.

"I wouldn't be able to blow anything up at this point. But I'm ready to tell the truth."

We were sitting so close that our shoulders were almost touching. Of course, we weren't supposed to touch. The wry thought came to me that pushing up against the rules—testing authority—was exactly what I'd spent my life doing. It shouldn't be a surprise that here I was, locked in a prison—even though it wasn't bending and breaking the rules that had landed me here. It was consorting with people who had the mentality of gangsters who had also managed to grab too much power.

"I'd better get going," she said—but neither of us moved. Then she looked over at the clerk, gave me a quick kiss on the cheek, and squeezed my hand.

"I'll come back tomorrow morning," she said. She stood up and walked briskly from the room.

The clerk watched her walk out. Then he picked up his phone and made a call. I looked at the clock. It was 9:30. A few minutes later, a different warden came for me.

It struck me that the warden's uniforms didn't cause them to lose their identity as they did with the inmates. I assumed that was partly the way they held themselves, proudly, sometimes with a swagger—and perhaps because their uniforms gave them the appearance of military men.

This warden took me back to my cell.

I wondered how someone gets to be a prison guard. I thought back to the boys I knew in Baskerville and wondered which of them might have ended up as prison guards. It occurred to me—and the thought made me smile—that there were possibly people who'd known me as a child in Baskerville who would not be surprised that I was now locked in a prison. Take, for example, my third-grade teacher, Miss Pannish, who had once ordered me to stay after class and write one hundred times on the blackboard I would never again shoot rubber bands in class. I could imagine her saying, "I knew that one was no good."

I remembered a story I'd heard from a college history professor. Henry David Thoreau refused to pay his taxes because he didn't want to support the Mexican-American War, which he called an unprovoked act of American aggression. When he was arrested for refusing to pay taxes—according to what had sounded to me at the time like the stuff of legend—his friend Ralph Waldo Emerson visited him in jail and said, "Henry, what are you doing in there?" Thoreau responded by asking, "What are you doing out there?"

The professor who told the story obviously approved of violating tax laws if doing so was to protest laws that were wrong. At the time, I had challenged the professor. "So you think law-breaking is acceptable?" I asked.

"Lawbreaking can be a form of protest," he said. "But you have to be willing to do the jail time to make your point."

Most people in Pike's orbit who bent and broke rules were not doing it in protest. They believed they were acting on principle. They bent the rules they didn't think should exist.

Personally, I always assumed one day the conservatives would gain enough power to entirely dismantle the administrative

and regulatory state, thereby allowing people whatever business deals interested them. It would then be widely understood that people who grew wealthy did so because we were the ones capable of governing.

I had finished my lunch when a key rattled in the lock. The door to my cell opened. It was the same warden who brought me back from my visit with Susan. I wanted to see Potato Face again so I could try to goad him into giving me more information about who he was.

“You have a visitor,” he said. “I think it’s a lawyer lady.”

I assumed it was Jessica. This guy walked next to me until we got to the stairs, and then he directed me to walk ahead. I assumed that the reason for making the inmate walk ahead was to that the inmate couldn’t attack the guard from behind, which could be particularly treacherous in a staircase. Attacking a guard seemed to me to be about the stupidest thing an inmate could do—but I figured plenty of inmates in this place didn’t have all their marbles.

Jessica sat in a different room today, but the interior was almost identical: Cinderblock walls with paint that was yellowed, scuffed, and stained. A metal table with two chairs. Nothing on the walls except an air vent.

Satisfied that nothing was amiss, I sat down.

“You have a creepy way of looking around,” she said.

“Habit,” I told her. I didn’t add: *Habit no doubt intensified from being locked up in here.*

“I asked my wife to mail you two files,” I told her. “I’ve kept evidence over the years of Pike’s shady business practices and what I’ve called a series of disinformation campaigns. I’ve considered it my insurance. You’ll find confirmation of everything I’m telling you. But I do have an important favor.”

“You don’t want me to reveal the contents of the files until

you give me the word,” she said.

“Right. I’ll let you know when it’s safe. If I’m dead, check with my wife.”

She watched me steadily for a moment, and then said, “Understood.”

“We left off when I was about to enter law school,” I said.

“And you hated law school.”

That startled me. “How did you know?”

She smiled. “Your type is bound to hate anything to do with rule of law.”

“I resent that,” I said—although I didn’t really resent it. It was exactly the kind of comment I expected from her.

She opened her notebook, turned on her tape recorder, and positioned it to face me. “I’m ready,” she said.

* * *

My First Million

The cliché is that people who study law fall in love with the law. It was even part of the law school dean’s welcome message to my entering class in the fall of 1975. By the end of the second week of classes, I had already concluded that there was, in fact, nothing I liked about the study of law. I didn’t mind the workload. I didn’t mind having to spend most of my waking hours studying. I didn’t even mind the intense competition.

The part I hated was that we were all expected to bleat out the same talking points. The professors were basically well-dressed, well-spoken hippies. Liberal doesn’t begin to describe their politics. They were radicals, every one of them. They praised the Supreme Court decisions I had grown to hate—rulings that strengthened and enlarged the federal government.

I amused myself by intentionally riling the sheep. In class,

I argued that the Supreme Court's ruling that the Constitution required police to read suspects their rights was absurd because there was absolutely nothing in the Constitution about reading people their rights. "The Supreme Court was just making things up," I said.

"The victims of police overreach were mostly Black," one of my classmates told me sharply. She was a stout heavy-set girl who reminded me of Missy Little.

"The Supreme Court was still making things up. The skin color of the defendant doesn't change the fact that there's nothing in the Constitution about reading a person his rights."

My classmates were predictably horrified.

I joined the Conservative Society, a small but passionate group, so I could find like-minded friends. One of my Conservative Society friends was Sam Bates, a guy from Queens with an accent that made him sound a bit like a gangster. He asked me to join a study group. I politely declined. Sam was savvy. I had the feeling he had a lot of street smarts. But he didn't strike me as the sharpest knife in the drawer, if you know what I mean. I figured I'd do better studying on my own.

I kept two notebooks: In one, I recorded law school orthodoxy, the things I needed to write on exams to please the professors and earn high grades. In the other, I kept arguments debunking the very doctrines I was supposed to bleat back like a sheep.

I finished my first semester of law school with all A's. When the second semester began, students talked about their grades, but I kept mine to myself.

Sam didn't return to school for the second semester. I waited a week to see if he'd show up. When he didn't, I called him. One of his roommates answered and said he had moved back to Queens. He gave me Sam's address. I kept meaning to

write to him but never did.

In March it was time to apply for summer jobs. My grades landed me a sought-after job as a summer associate in a major New York City firm, Fletcher, Sullivan, Stern, and Palmer, known colloquially as Fletcher Sullivan. Very few first-year students received job offers from major firms. The summer salary the firm offered would be almost enough to pay for my second-year tuition.

When the rumor went around that I would be a summer associate at Fletcher Sullivan, my classmates suspected that I'd nailed the first semester grades, but I never confirmed. They still mostly avoided me, but now I sensed grudging respect.

The firm was located in New York City. Fletcher Sullivan rented a block of dorm rooms at the University of New York for the summer associates, an easy walk from Fletcher's midtown office. The firm covered the rent—a perk of the job. Rochelle and I were assigned to a unit in the married student building.

I worked on the fifth floor of a midtown Madison Avenue building. I wrote legal memos on the fine points of corporate and tax law. I read legal briefs written by opposing counsel and wrote rebuttals. The work was tedious, but the perks were great. The firm gave us Broadway tickets. Partners treated us to lavish lunches.

It was late afternoon on a Thursday in July, and I was trying to puzzle out a section of the tax code when the phone on my desk rang. It was Sam Bates.

“Hey, man!” I said. “What happened to you?”

“I'm working in New York,” he said. “I had to make about ten phone calls until I found you. I want to introduce you to my boss.”

“Who's your boss?”

“The real estate developer and investor Arnold Pike.”

Everything I knew about Arnold Pike came from reading tabloid headlines while standing in line in grocery stores.

“I told him about you,” Sam said. “Charlie Rocklin also told him about you. He wants to meet you. Are you free?”

I looked at my watch. It was four-forty. “Sure,” I said.

“Be at the corner of East 43rd and Fourth in about half-hour,” he said.

I was standing at the corner of East 43rd and Fourth when a silver Cadillac pulled up to the curb. The license plate bore three letters: AJP. A uniformed chauffeur, who appeared to be about thirty-five and had the husky look of a gangster, was driving.

Sam, in the back seat, unlocked the door for me. I slid inside next to him. The moment my door was closed, the car lurched forward into traffic. The interior was plush and gray had a new-car smell, layered with something light and floral. It was my first time in contact with obscene wealth. I looked at Sam, impressed. He was suntanned and relaxed and wore an expensive gray pin-striped linen suit.

“Is this *your* car?” I asked.

“It belongs to Pike.”

The driver was listening to the traffic updates on the radio.

“So tell me,” I said. “What have you been up to?”

“Pike offered me a job if I passed the real estate exam. The test was a snap after a semester of property law and contract law. Last month I made three thousand dollars in commissions plus my salary.”

“Three *thousand*?” That was an astonishing monthly salary in 1976.

“Yup,” he said. “Think of that. One semester of law school. I’m twenty-three years old. And I made three thousand dollars last month in commissions plus my salary.”

“What are you selling?”

“Office space. Renting apartments. I help Pike with his deals. Putting together real estate deals means cutting through lots of red tape and pulling a lot of strings.”

My bullshit sensor flashed red. There was obviously something un-kosher about this setup.

The Cadillac stopped in front of a building on Lexington Avenue with art deco ornaments. We slid out of the car. The car zoomed away. We entered the building through tall glass doors. A doorman behind a desk greeted us. The lobby was done in traditional colors: deeply stained wood furniture, burgundy carpet, and gold-tinted mirrored elevator doors. The air had the scent of freshly cut flowers.

We rode the elevator in silence to the top floor. The doors opened to a Penthouse office lined with windows offering a panoramic view of Manhattan. A large, good-looking man was sitting behind a large desk, speaking animatedly on the phone. He had reddish hair, and boyish movie-star looks. He looked a little like Robert Redford, but his face had a softness to it. He seemed to be rambling a bit, but that could have been because our entry distracted him.

Facing his desk was a plush white couch and two chairs. Sam and I sat on the couch. From what I could gather from Pike’s side of the conversation, he was trying to find out who in the organization had talked to a reporter without permission.

He hung up, and then reached across the desk and we shook hands.

It’s hard to describe the feeling of sitting across from Arnold Pike. Some people just exude star quality. Pike was magnetic.

“Sam says you’re one of the smartest people he ever met,” Pike told me. “He also said you’ve made some waves at the

Benjamin Franklin Law School.”

“I think I annoy a few people,” I said.

“If you’re not making a few waves or annoying a few people,” Pike said, “you’re accomplishing nothing. I believe in accomplishing things. Sam might have told you that I own and manage 22,000 apartment units. I have three major real estate projects in the works. One is a convention center over the Penn Central Transportation Company’s 34th Street yards. I acquired the development when the railroad went bankrupt. My architects have drawn up plans for a \$90 million center. We want to replace that run-down piece of junk convention center on the Hudson.”

Pike talked rapidly. I felt dazed and a bit lost. He spoke with an air of self-consciousness as if he were performing.

“Last week,” Pike said, “I purchased an old department store near Central Park. Next, I’m planning the construction of an apartment complex on Penn Central’s 60th Street yards.”

I had a hunch about how to deal with Pike. I looked him in the eye and said, “What’s your plan after you own Manhattan?”

He looked at me with new respect. Sam also shot me an admiring look.

“Maybe one day I’ll run for president,” Pike said. “I’ll fix what’s broken in this country. I’ll get rid of all the stupid and corrupt laws hampering cities. Make no mistake. They’re all corrupt. I can pick up that phone,” he pointed to the phone on his desk, “and get around any of those rules. The rules are there so politicians can make a buck helping their friends around them.”

It was a cynical—and I believed realistic—assessment of the regulations churned out of regulatory agencies.

“Charlie Rocklin also tells me you’re brilliant,” Pike said. “Charlie is a mover and a shaker. I’m always looking for good

people. I only hire the best. If you want a job here, you have a job.”

“Thank you, sir,” I said.

“You had a year of law school,” Pike went on. “You can read contracts, right? That’s helpful. I need people who can drive hard bargains. School helps, but it isn’t everything. I graduated at the top of my class at the Harvard Business School, but,” he shrugged modestly, “nothing I learned there helps me in the least.”

Once again, my bullshit detector flashed red. I knew he hadn’t graduated at the top of his business class at Harvard. I resisted the impulse to glance at Sam. If anything, Pike probably graduated at the top of his class from the Los Angeles School of Acting.

“We’re going to do great things in this town,” Pike said. “We’ve already done great things. Sam can tell you about what we’re doing. I’m a tough boss, but I overlook mistakes. The only thing I ask for, other than competence and hard dealing, is loyalty. I don’t care about the law degree as long as you can read a contract and pull off a good negotiation. A real estate license is essential of course.”

I searched for a response that was non-committal without rejecting the offer.

“I think I should finish law school first,” I told him.

“Not a bad idea,” he said. “Not at all. I can always use good lawyers as well. A friend of Charlie’s is a friend of mine. When you graduate, give me a call and we can talk.”

Pike handed me his card—a gold embossed card with PIKE ENTERPRISES written across the top, and his name and telephone number underneath. I thanked him and slipped the card into my breast pocket.

Pike stood up, signaling the end of the meeting. Sam and

I stood up as well. We all shook hands, and then we stepped into the elevator. We didn't speak again until we were out of the building.

"What did you think?" Sam asked.

"It's tempting. It's not like I'm in love with law school."

"That was how I felt," Sam said.

"Pike didn't finish anywhere near the top of his class at the Harvard Business School," I said.

Sam shot me a look. "He says he did."

"He didn't. How did you meet him?"

"My dad went to school with his dad. My older brother knew Pike when he was in school. He was a bit of a troublemaker. Okay, he was a hell-raiser. He feels the way you do about rules and regulations."

"Your dad went to school with rich kids?" I asked.

"They weren't so rich then. I mean, they were well off but nothing like now."

"Is the enterprise legit?"

"Totally, except for the part about bending rules now and then."

"Well," I said. "Behind every fortune, there is a crime,"

Sam turned to look at me, startled.

"Balzac," I told him.

"Ha!" he said. "I thought it was the Godfather. Bob, you knew just how to talk to him."

"Guys like him are easy to read," I said.

We were going separate ways, so we each hailed our own cab. That evening, I moved Pike's business card from my wallet to the locked safe where I kept important documents.

The following afternoon I took a break from work and went to the main branch of the New York public library system. I sat at

a table in the reference room, scrolling through the microfilm, reading up on the Pike family.

Evidently, Pike's grandfather had left Germany in the late nineteenth century. He went West and operated saloons. Given the location of the saloons and the income they generated, it was likely that they were in fact brothels. After he earned a small fortune, he moved to Queens. He had a premonition that Queens—which was then rural and sparsely populated—would see a building boom. He bought several pieces of choice real estate, but he died before he could build his real estate empire.

Sylvester Pike, Arnold's father, made a large fortune building houses in the 1950s. Returning World War Two soldiers were eligible for home loans under the GI bill, so there was thus a sudden demand for single-family homes. Sylvester earned his wealth—not because of the quality of homes, which were adequate and standard—but because he exploited loopholes in the vast tangle of red tape and legislation that had been set up during the Franklin Delano Roosevelt era.

The Federal Housing Authority—the FHA—a Roosevelt-era agency, offered building loans, so Sylvester took out government loans to build the houses, which he then sold to returning soldiers. FHA regulations allowed builders to recoup part of their expenses, so Sylvester set up shell equipment companies. He rented himself equipment at inflated prices and billed the government for the expense—an expense that he never, in fact, incurred. When Sylvester submitted the costs, he added a 5% architecture fee, even though there had been no architect. Thus he submitted inflated cost estimates, did the work for millions less than he reported, and pocketed the difference.

He was hauled before the Senate oversight committee and accused of public corruption. He said he had provided full

value to his customers, and he did everything he was contracted to do. He insisted he had done nothing illegal. Just because he'd done the architectural drawings himself didn't mean that he'd cheated anyone. Wasn't he entitled to just compensation? He was completely indignant and accused the Senators of trying to besmirch his reputation. He threatened to sue for defamation.

He was found not guilty of public corruption because at the time, there were no laws against what he had done. Then at some point in the late 1950s, he formed a sort of cooperative agreement with New York's most infamous gangsters, who in turn partnered with the Genovese and Gambino crime families. Through his crime family connections, Sylvester Pike was able to purchase masonry and other building supplies at low prices. As far as I could see, that was the extent of the partnership—which is pretty tame, as far as crime family connections go. Sylvester's son, Arnold, was his favorite child and was groomed early to take over the family business.

Next, I searched through New York's criminal history and the history of the crime families. The Pike family name didn't appear in any indictments or supporting documents. I also checked city records of marriages, deaths, legal notices, and criminal records about the Pike family. I found nothing unusual.

I was in my second year of law school when Larry decided to run for public office. The year before, in anticipation, he had moved to Richmond, Virginia, and worked in the state offices. He announced himself as a candidate for City Council. He called on Charlie to help him on the promise that Charlie would not play any dirty tricks unless he cleared them with Larry first. Charlie told me about that one evening on the phone. "I told Larry fine," Charlie said. "I know how to play it clean, too." I donated to Larry's campaign and signed up for Larry's campaign

newsletter.

During the summer after my second year of law school, I once again worked at Fletcher Sullivan. In August, Fletcher Sullivan handed out permanent job offers. My offer was in an envelope with my name handwritten on the front. It was the standard first-year associate offer. The salary was \$40,000 per year. Rochelle and I would be able to live in luxury.

I hated my third year of law school as much as I had hated the first two years. To say I was not enthusiastic about starting work at Sullivan would be an understatement. One evening over dinner, I said to Rochelle, "It just doesn't make much sense for me to take an associate position that I'll hate."

"Maybe there's another legal job that you would like," she said.

"Maybe," I said.

But I couldn't think of one. I wanted both money and power. I didn't want to draft dull legal memos. I wanted to be where the action was.

Larry won his election. I saw the results in the morning edition of *The Washingtonian*. I called him immediately. "Congratulations, man," I said. "Way to go."

"Arnold Pike basically bankrolled my campaign," he said. "I was surprised. It was only for Richmond City Council. But he said any friend of Charlie's is a friend of his. He said he always has an interest in talented young politicians."

"What do you think of Pike?" I asked Larry.

"Definitely rough around the edges. Crude. Arrogant. He could use a good public relations director. But he can't be all bad. Why?"

"I'm thinking about working for him," I said. "In real estate."

“Lots of money in that,” Larry said. “Charlie thinks Pike’s the greatest. Charlie thinks one day he’ll run for president. He’ll turn Washington, D.C. on its head.”

“You could do that,” Rochelle said that evening over dinner after I told her Larry was now a city councilman. “You could run for office.”

“I’m not the type,” I said. “I’d rather be the power behind the throne.”

“You’re going to do it, aren’t you,” she asked quietly.

“I think so. You don’t think I should?”

“I don’t. I think it would be a mistake. Bob, you can do anything at all. Why work for a horrible person like Arnold Pike?”

“He’s wealthy. He builds housing projects. He donates large amounts of money to good candidates for office.”

“I guess,” she said, but she didn’t sound persuaded.

The next day, during a break between classes, I went to a pay phone and called Pike’s office. A secretary answered. I explained who I was. She asked me to hold.

A few minutes later, a man came to the line. He said, “My name is Ray Miller. I’m Pike’s chief assistant.” He had a New York accent and used that brusque tone used by so many New Yorkers.

“Pike gave me his card more than a year ago,” I said. “He told me a job was waiting for me in his organization. I think the idea was that I’d work in real estate with Sam Bates.”

“You’re the Franklin law student who is friends with Sam and Charlie Rocklin?”

“That’s me.”

“Give me your number and I’ll get back to you,” he said.

I gave him my home phone number and we both hung up.

He called me at home that evening. “Pike authorized me to offer you a starting annual salary of \$60,000 plus commission if you pass both the New York real estate exam and the New York bar exam. He needs help negotiating real estate deals. You’ll basically be doing the kind of work Sam is doing.”

\$60,000 plus commission?

When I recovered, I said, “I accept.”

I had not planned to accept on the spot. I also hadn’t expected to be offered a salary like that.

“You’ll be working in the Pike Enterprises building in Brooklyn with Sam,” he said. “We hope to move the entire enterprise into the city within a few years. We can start you before you get your bar results, but not before you have your real estate license.”

Rochelle showed no reaction at all when I told her—but then, she wasn’t really the type to get excited or emotional. “I’ll start looking for a teaching job in Brooklyn,” was all she said.

She found a teaching position and an apartment for us. The apartment was a two-story Brooklyn brownstone townhouse, built in the 1920s, with crown moldings and hardwood floors polished to a sheen. We moved into the townhouse in June.

I spent the summer after graduation studying first for the bar exam, and then the real estate exam. I used the second bedroom for an office. Sam was right—after studying law, the real estate exam was a cakewalk. It was basically watered-down property law, contracts law, and agency law.

While I studied, Rochelle decorated our place. She had a curious way of making decisions. She’d spend days or even weeks considering a particular color or a particular piece of furniture. Then, when she made up her mind, she was done. It

was as if the process had taken so long, and finally reaching a decision was so difficult that once her mind was made up, she was finished. Rochelle making a decision was like a stubborn bolt finally sliding into place.

I admired her taste. She went for the elegant and understated. She liked soft, restful colors—greens and blues. “Ocean colors,” she called them. The furniture was comfortable with a touch of the feminine. The chairs and couches she selected had curved backs, the wood stained a soft gold.

Shortly after we moved to Brooklyn, I asked Rochelle what kind of car she wanted. She said, “A blue one.” I bought her a blue Ford 200.

I started working in September. I spent time negotiating deals, taking on project management responsibilities, and occasionally selling condominium units. Pike was a showman rather than a businessman. Other people did the work, and he threw the parties and managed his public relations.

The first time I was invited to one of Pike’s parties—before I understood what kinds of parties Pike threw—I brought Rochelle along. We arrived to find the party in full swing. Pike had rented a full floor of a hotel including the ballroom and indoor pool. There were hundreds of people in the ballroom including dozens of very young women. They were scantily clothed. I’m no expert, but many of them appeared underaged. The strobe lights were flashing. The band was playing a song with a heavy beat. The display of food was mouthwatering.

Rochelle was clearly uncomfortable. “Should we go?” I asked her.

“Yes,” she said.

Once outside, we hailed a cab. She settled in. The cab driver hit the gas and we lurched forward and then back. She adjusted herself in the seat and looked out the window. It was a warm summer night and night had fallen, but the city was as

vibrant as if it was high noon. Cars, taxis, and buses careened around corners. When the lights changed, the crosswalks were thronged with people. The stores and buildings were lit. Stores and restaurants were open. Rochelle pretended to be captivated by the lights of the city.

She didn't say anything until we got home. She put her purse on the table just inside the door and turned to me. "Is it worth the money to work for someone like that?"

"I like the work," I told her.

* * *

"Why?" Jessica asked. "What did you like about it?"

"The work was thrilling. Pike offered a lifestyle of wealth and luxury."

It occurred to me that maybe there was nothing special in any of this. Maybe I was just another person who had fallen into Pike's spell and therefore met my ruin.

"In person," I told her, "he's captivating."

"I find that hard to believe. On television, he comes across as a moron. I find everything about him completely repulsive."

"Pike arouses strong emotions in everyone. People either love him or hate him. They either worship him or believe he's the devil incarnate. I can tell you this: If you fall under his spell, something happens to you. When you are around him, you feel like you're part of something big, like you can change the world. You are above the rules that constrain ordinary mortals. He makes people feel excited and alive. You really start to think that he possesses the urgent and only truth. He offers the chance for success. In exchange, all he wants is loyalty. He doesn't return the loyalty, but he demands it."

"Go on," she said.

* * *

Rochelle and I celebrated our third wedding anniversary at an Italian restaurant called the Culina. The Culina was the perfect restaurant for an intimate talk—and there was something I wanted to know. Our table was on the second floor with a view of the city skyline. The interior was modern—large windows cased in steel, walls painted a deep greenish gray—none of the stereotyped Italian restaurant decor. The tables, though, were perfect for intimate conversation. Each was set off by itself.

I put my hand on hers. Some guys have a gift for conversation. I could think of no subtle way to ask my question, so I just asked: “What about children?”

She shrugged and looked toward the kitchen and pretended she was eagerly waiting for our food. I might not be the world’s best conversationalist, but I knew when something was off.

“I thought you wanted children,” I said.

I could see from the firm set of her lips that she didn’t want to talk, and nothing would persuade her to budge. Rochelle appeared all soft and watery, but underneath, she had a core of stubbornness. I didn’t know what else to do, so I dropped the subject. It wasn’t like I was dying to have children myself. I was really just curious.

After Pike built his third luxury condo building in New York, he wanted to know why I hadn’t purchased a unit. We were in his office after a meeting when he demanded, “What are you doing commuting in from Brooklyn?”

“Rochelle teaches in Brooklyn. I’d rather be close to where she works.”

“What does she teach?”

“High school biology.”

He pointed his finger at my face and said, “That wife of

yours shouldn't be teaching high school science. She should be a fashion model. She has the look. She has the longest, most fantastic hair I've ever seen. I've got the contacts to get her started if she wants."

Pike's second wife was a fashion model. His first wife had been an actress—the kind who was drop-dead gorgeous, but you never heard of her or remembered seeing her in any movies.

"Thank you, but I don't think Rochelle wants to be a model," I said. Actually, I knew for a fact that she didn't want to be a model. I was tempted to say she likes dolphins just to watch Pike's bemusement.

In the next presidential election, Ronald Reagan ran against the incumbent Democratic president. Rochelle liked Reagan because his message was upbeat, and he promised to stand up for old-fashioned values. I liked him because I understood that his intent was to dismantle the regulatory state.

Rochelle and I followed the campaign the way sports fans follow sports. It was good to have common ground again. I felt optimistic that Reagan would win. He brought warmth and optimism after Nixon's cool cynicism. Indeed, he coasted easily to victory, painting his opponent as a geeky, unlikeable, and out of touch with average Americans.

Pike got us tickets to a victory bash at the Century Plaza hotel in New York. Everyone was ecstatic. A new decade was dawning. In his landslide victory, Reagan showed that he could put together a new winning coalition. Even Rochelle had a second glass of wine.

Rochelle and I were sitting in a small couch facing a window with a panoramic view of New York. I took her hand. A few years had passed since the last time I'd asked her, so I tried again. "What about children?"

A look of deep pain passed over her face.

“What?” I asked.

“I can’t. I just can’t.”

I struggled to understand what she meant. For a moment, I thought she meant she couldn’t talk about it. Then it occurred to me that she couldn’t have children. I was aching with curiosity. When did she find out? Why didn’t she tell me?

She turned away. “I don’t think this is a good time to talk about it.”

I let the subject drop. I wanted to say something comforting, so I said, “It’s okay, Rochelle. I can do fine without children.”

“I’m glad,” she said softly.

About that time, Pike completed another luxury apartment building in midtown Manhattan. Phillip put the real estate team to work selling units. One day Sam came into my office and said, “We’ve had inquiries from Russians wanting to buy Manhattan real estate.”

Russians? Manhattan real estate?

“Nobody in the Soviet Union has any money,” I said.

“Apparently some people do. There are closet capitalists over there making a bundle. A guy named Leonid Muratov is sending an emissary. I have enough on my plate. I just sold six units at full price to one of his associates—”

“Six units?” I asked. “Nobody buys six units at full price. That’s six million dollars.

“They pay cash,” Sam said. “Do you want to take it, or not?”

“Sure,” I said.

The emissary consisted of three Russian businessmen. Two had a smattering of English, the third was fluent in English. We sat in a conference room with a long polished wood table and a tall window with white leather chairs. The guy fluent in English

told me that they had the cash because Muratov's company did business in New York.

It was a lie. What was more, it was a transparent lie. Moreover, the guy didn't care if I knew he was lying. I looked over the paperwork. The cash—large amounts of it—were coming from the Soviet Union through a German bank. I didn't trust anything coming out of the Soviet government. The Soviet government was a bastion of corruption. But cash was cash, and Muratov had it.

The transaction took five weeks. I read each document in the two-inch stack of paperwork and made changes where I thought they were necessary. I followed the book exactly—with a single exception. I didn't demand to see the origins of the money. At the time the laws about verifying the origins of money were murky and easily gotten around. I figured it was none of my business. What happened in Russia was no concern of mine. If Muratov wanted to smuggle that money out of the Soviet Union, it wasn't my problem. My earnings from the sale would put my net worth over one million.

I didn't tell Rochelle about the transaction, but I didn't hide what I was doing, either. I often made business phone calls from home. She must have heard me mention Muratov's name because one evening after I got ready for bed, I found an FBI notice on my bedside table. According to the notice, an intelligence agency reported that Muratov was swindling his fellow Russian citizens who wanted to emigrate. Apparently he told people who needed to emigrate that he would sell their possessions for them and send them the money. Instead, he pocketed their money.

“They're all a bunch of thieves over there,” I said.

“Why do business with him?”

“If I don't, someone else will,” I said. “And I'll put the

money to good use.”

Disapproval, like a shadow, passed across her face. That was when I remembered that she was an idealist, like Larry. I, on the other hand, was a realist. Money was power, and the way to be safe was to have more of it. I made a mental note to protect her by keeping talk of business out of our home.

“I know,” I said. “You’re right. I should be more careful.”

The deal closed on a Thursday in March. The day was windy and cold. I bundled up and walked the six blocks to Tiffany and Co. The clerk was a young, clean-cut, baby-faced man, polite and eager. I told him I wanted to select a gift.

“What is she like?” he asked.

“Understated,” I said. “Classy.”

“Does she wear earrings? Bracelets?”

“Just her wedding band. Occasionally small pearl or diamond earrings.

“I have just the thing,” he said. He showed me a pendant about the size of a dime. It was made of four gleaming diamonds set in a cloverleaf hanging on a delicate platinum chain.

It was exquisite. I asked the price. It was also expensive.

I bought it. I slipped the box into my pocket, walked outside, and hailed a cab home.

I found Rochelle sitting on the couch with a suitcase at her feet. My stomach lurched.

“Rochelle?” I said.

“I’m leaving.”

I felt off-balance. I sank into a nearby chair. “I closed the deal today,” I said.

“I know,” she said. “I saw the deposit in the account.”

Not knowing what else to do, I pulled the box from my pocket and opened it. She didn’t move.

“It’s blood money,” she said.

“I would have quit if you had told me you felt this strongly.”

“You can’t quit,” she said.

“What do you mean I can’t quit? Of course, I can quit.”

Her expression changed, softening a bit. “You think you can,” she said. “But you can’t. You’re trapped by your own fears. You can’t live a normal life. You feel you have to protect yourself, with money, with power. You need to build a wall around yourself to keep out some imaginary boogeyman.”

None of what she was saying made sense to me. “Is there someone else?” I asked.

She seemed startled by my question. “No,” she said softly. “But one day there will be.”

“Where are you going?”

“I’m staying with a friend until I can get my own place.”

She stood up. I stood up as well. I wanted to stop her but I knew I couldn’t. I wanted to help her, but I knew she wouldn’t let me. “If you need anything—”

“I don’t. I’ll be fine.”

She picked up her suitcase, and without a backward glance, she was gone. The last thing I saw was her long honey-colored hair billowing like a cape.

I tried to get her back, of course. I felt it was something I needed to do. If I didn’t at least try, how could I live with myself later? I didn’t know where she was living, so one day I went to the school where she taught. When the final bell rang dismissing the students, I slipped into the school and went to her homeroom classroom. I found her standing by her desk, organizing papers.

“Bob, please,” she said. “It won’t work.”

“If I give it all up and go to work for Fletcher, Sullivan, will you reconsider?”

“You’d be miserable at Fletcher, Sullivan,” she said.

“No, I wouldn’t. I ought to know.”

She shook her head. I stayed a moment or two longer until the silence became unbearable, and then I turned and left.

She took almost nothing with her—just her clothing and personal items—almost as if she had long known she was a temporary visitor in someone else’s home. The divorce was easy. I tried to give her a generous settlement, but she wanted nothing, so we hired a lawyer to draw up the papers for us. There was a waiting period, a sort of marriage limbo, or a kind of purgatory when you’re not really married, but you’re not yet divorced.

I started dating right away, but my heart wasn’t in it. Sam set me up with some women. He took me to parties. I went along. I drank too much. I did what most men probably do when their wives leave them: I threw myself into work and spent long hours at the office. I worked into the evenings, and then accepted invitations to Pike’s parties, or went out with friends.

Not long after Rochelle left, the real estate development team finished construction on Pike Towers. I hadn’t paid much attention to the construction, so I was unprepared for the sensation of standing on Fifth Avenue and gazing up at the finished building. If you crossed the Palace of Versailles with a piece of modern architecture, you’d get Pike Towers. It was gold. It glittered. It reeked of opulent wealth. And yet, with its elegantly curved lines and towering height, it blended into the New York skyline. The building was like Pike—showy and gaudy and commanding.

I gave up the townhouse in Brooklyn and bought a condo in Pike’s building. The unit I bought was sixteen hundred square

feet, with two bedrooms, an office, a living room, and a dining room. The windows faced east, offering a view of the East River. My unit had a private elevator to the lobby and a private garage.

Charlie was frequently in New York on business, so he, too, purchased a unit in Pike Tower. His consulting business had expanded now that he'd taken on two partners—both political operators as savvy as he was. I frequently met Charlie for a late-night meal, reminiscent of our late-night dormitory meetings. Larry was then running for Congress. Pike donated generously. I did as well.

One balmy evening in June, about six months after Rochelle left, Charlie, Sam, and I were sitting at the bar attached to the lobby of Pike Towers.

“If Rochelle had just told me that she was thinking about leaving,” I said, “I would have mended my ways. I would have left the job.”

“Rochelle couldn't take the truth,” Charlie said. “She wants to live in an ideal world where everyone makes nice. The world isn't like that. The tough and competent people make money. We need the money to fight the encroaching evil of communism.”

Sometimes it helps to have a friend who is a realist. “I guess,” I said.

“That's my man,” Charlie said and patted my shoulder.

Charlie and Sam turned the conversation to sports. I had the feeling Sam and Charlie stayed out later that evening than usual because they knew that I didn't want to be alone.

The eighties were good years, politically and professionally. We were all riding high. I had never felt as optimistic about

the future of the country. It was the decade of conservatism. President Reagan rolled back taxes. My wealth increased with Republican power.

Other Russians wanted to buy property in New York. Like Muratov, they had a lot of money to spend and weren't worried about cost. I sold them Pike luxury apartments at inflated prices. I got richer and started moving my money offshore. I used my wealth to help a sensational radio talk show host, P.J. Wiley, rise to fame—

* * *

“Yeah, I know about that,” Jessica said. “You're the guy who bankrolled P.J. Wiley.”

“You've been doing your homework,” I said. “Actually, he got started on his own. I helped catapult him to national fame.”

“I wouldn't brag about that if I were you. You do really have an affinity for disgusting human beings. How did you meet him?”

“Through Charlie.”

“I should have guessed.”

* * *

Charlie called me one evening while I was going over the final paperwork for a real estate transaction. He was then in Virginia working on a Senator's campaign. I assumed he wanted to hit me up for a campaign donation. Instead, he said, I have something for you to listen to. There's this guy out in Topeka, Kansas with a local radio show. P.J. Wiley.”

“Never heard of him,” I said.

“Mark my words. One day every person in this country will have heard of him. P.J. Wiley is the answer to Walter Cronkite and boring news. I'll mail you a tape.”

The tape arrived a few days later. I inserted it into my portable cassette player, sat on the couch, put on earphones, and listened.

“Want to solve the nation’s problems?” bellowed a man with a deep, melodious voice. “That’s easy. Liberals shouldn’t be allowed to use keyboards, typewriters, word processors, or email. They shouldn’t be allowed to speak in public at all. They shouldn’t be allowed to own or buy guns. If you accomplish those things, we will have a sane, calm, orderly country. Take their keyboards away. Take all their guns away. Take their guns and keyboards and I guarantee you’ll reduce crime by more than 90 percent.”

He then launched into a monologue deriding the Clean Air Act, the latest piece of liberal legislation to make it to the Senate floor. “The stupidest thing I ever heard,” he bellowed, “is thinking that if you call something the Clean Air Act you’ll fool people into thinking that it’s going to get the air clean. Have you seen all the exemptions in that Act? I’ll tell you about those exemptions. Those exemptions mean that the air stays dirty, but the companies that can bribe the officials or figure out how to maneuver their way around Washington will make a profit. The companies that spend their time actually working instead of lobbying will get shafted. The liberal elites in Washington will make sure their friends get the exemptions. Like all two-thousand-page pieces of legislation, this Clean Air Act is a Godawful mess.”

I stopped the tape and called Charlie. “The guy is outrageous,” I said.

“Exactly right,” Charlie said. “He’s shocking, fun, funny, and entertaining. P.J. understands that people are frustrated and dislike what they don’t understand—and who can understand a two-thousand-page piece of legislation?”

It took eighteen months and cost four million dollars to get P.J. his own show based in New York City. Three of those four million were mine. I knew the investment would pay off—and it did. The guy who arranged the deal with a major radio network was Phillip McHugh. He explained in his heavy Bronx accent that in arranging the deal, he was not working in his capacity as a Pike Enterprise employee. He said he was freelancing—a transparent lie.

You can see how effectively different parts of our coalition scratched each other's backs: Pike's organization got P.J. a national audience, and then P.J. later helped Pike take national politics by storm by throwing his support behind him.

One morning I sat in Phillip McHugh's office with billionaire Robert Fuoco signing the papers to get P.J.'s radio show on the air. More specifically, the papers we signed set up a corporation to launch P.J.'s show.

"You'll both see a good return on your investments," Phillip assured us.

He was right—as I knew he would be. Over the next fifteen years, my initial investment of four million dollars would grow to eleven million. My offshore accounts were growing rapidly.

I didn't spend much time actually listening to P.J.'s show after it launched. I read transcripts, kept track of what he was saying, and measured the results. We learned from P.J. Wiley that the more outrageous the lie, the faster it spread. Go Big became our motto.

About this time, there arose a husband-and-wife team, the governor of a small Southern state, Eddie Heller and his radical wife, Jocelyn. Eddie Heller ran for president. He would never have secured the 1992 Democratic nomination if not for a fluke. The incumbent Republican president was so popular

nobody believed a Democrat had a chance, so the Democratic frontrunner, a former mayor of New York, dropped out of the race. It was pretty clear that he intended to wait and run when there would not be an incumbent to compete with.

The Hellers terrified me. Eddie was the embodiment of the 1960s counterculture. He'd literally spent the 1960s smoking pot, wearing hippy clothing, and avoiding the draft. People said he was likable, but he struck me as the type who might sell snake oil at carnivals. He did a good job faking the *I'm A Nice Guy Routine*—

* * *

“I met him once,” Jessica said. “He *is* a nice guy.”

“He’s a phony,” I said.

She shook her head. “You are so cynical. Go on.”

* * *

Heller’s wife pretended to be a moderate, but she was a militant feminist. They were basically communists who wanted to regulate the rich and seize their money to give to the loafers. The Hellers were precisely what I’d spent my life afraid of. They threw me back to the feeling I’d had as a child that unseen satanic forces lurked just out of sight.

P.J. Wiley went after Jocelyn Heller. “Eddie Heller married Jocelyn because she’s a controlling bitch who was able to mastermind his political career. But who wants to sleep with a bitch like her? It’s no wonder Eddie plays around on the side. The Hellers make a big deal about their pet cat, but it’s obvious to anyone who looks at Jocelyn that Eddie also has a dog.”

Eddie Heller got lucky again when a cocky third-party candidate siphoned off millions of conservative votes, thereby splitting the conservative vote between the third-party candidate

and the incumbent. As a result, Heller won the presidency.

A few weeks after Heller was sworn into office, Charlie called me. “We’re swinging into high gear,” he said. “We have to nip this presidency in the bud.”

Charlie and a small band of dedicated conservatives raised a fortune and spent every penny sniffing out scandals. They looked at every check the Hellers had written and scrutinized every tax form. They accused the Hellers of driving a staffer to suicide. When it came to light that the Hellers had been part of a large real estate deal in Eddie Heller’s hometown, they accused them of self-dealing. In making these accusations, they tapped into the widespread assumption that anyone involved in a major real estate deal was engaging in some form of self-dealing.

The election of Eddie Heller coincided with the break-up of the former Soviet Union. When the Soviet Union dissolved, Russia declared itself a new democracy and adopted a Constitution similar to ours. Trying to privatize the nation’s resources and industries resulted in a wild scramble for power. Chaos set in. What happened next was that a small group of men took control of the nation’s industries and resources. They became known as the new Russian capitalists.

These new Russian capitalists talked a lot like various parts of the American conservative coalition. Like the small-government conservatives, they were rebelling against an all-controlling bureaucratic government. Like the religious right, they talked about restoring religion, family, and traditional values. Karl Marx had called organized religion the opium of the people and the communist government had adopted atheism as its official religion. A segment of the Russian population was tired of being told they shouldn’t be religious.

Putin talked about returning Russia to a time when the nation was pure and innocent before it was transformed into

a totalitarian state by those who sought to trample personal liberty in the interests of power. As I knew from my college Russian history class, there was no such golden era in Russian history. Feudalism and Imperial Russia under the Czar hadn't been exactly a cakewalk for the common people.

America, in contrast, did have a golden era in which governments were local, the power of the federal government was minimal, and personal liberty was at a premium—

* * *

“When would that American golden era be?” Jessica said, “Presumably before the 1960s, when, in your opinion, the unraveling of America began. So, would our golden era include slavery or racial segregation, or the fact that women were not allowed to vote, and minority communities had their rights trampled?”

She crossed her arms over her chest and gave me a stern look as if daring me to respond and defend myself.

I knew better than to take the bait. I met her gaze and waited.

“But please go on,” she said. “We’re up to the part where Russia’s wealth and resources were controlled by a small group of white men, your friends, the new Russian capitalists.”

* * *

People started calling the Russian capitalists oligarchs because they became fabulously wealthy. Their critics argued that they became wealthy because they took control of the nation’s industries and resources, which they then plundered for their own enrichment. Charlie’s theory was that the competent rise to the top and take control.

By the late 1990s, P.J. was airing in every rural area in

America. Meanwhile, Robert Fuoco was buying up rural television and radio stations. Each radio station featured P.J. There were places where Fuoco's station was one of the few stations people could get. Listeners had a choice: P.J.'s radio show or country music.

Charlie fed information and ideas to P.J., who then passed the ideas to his audience. P.J. told his audience that the federal government was so corrupt there was only one thing to do: tear it all down and rebuild. It all had to go. The agencies. The piles of regulations. The corruption. The deeply inbred socialism. It was too corrupt to be fixed so it had to all be burned to the ground. He told his audience that liberalism was like poison. He encouraged his listeners to cheer the right-wing movements all over Europe springing up to stop the spread of global socialism. He reduced the intricate complexity of international relations and politics to one word: globalism. He told his audience that it was all corrupt.

As Charlie predicted, the liberals quoted P.J. as often as the conservatives. They quoted him in outrage, thereby giving him even more airtime, expanding his reach, and bringing him even more fans who were secretly sick of the liberals' virtue signaling and peddling of hope porn. Here was the kicker. Despite P.J.'s popularity and Fuoco's purchase of television stations, Heller's popularity remained high. There was some trick we hadn't discovered yet.

* * *

That was when we heard footsteps approaching. I assumed a guard was coming to tell us visiting hours were over. "You'll be back?" I asked. Again, I heard the pleading in my voice. I added, "We should be able to finish tomorrow."

"I'll be back." What I felt was a relief. One more day was all

I needed to get to the important parts of the story.

The guard opened the door. She adjusted her back on her shoulder and walked away toward the front of the building. How deeply frustrating that I couldn't just walk out the door as well.

"You can go to your cell or the courtyard," the guard said to me.

"The courtyard," I said.

Once there, I sat by myself on the same bench as the day before. A few inmates were walking the perimeter. Another handful was standing in a group, talking.

It occurred to me why Phillip wanted me to sign and videotape a confession. Forcing me to sign a bogus confession would trap me forever. I'd have little choice but to remain forever loyal to the regime. Adopting a lie often had that effect on people. I sensed it was already happening with Sam. Once a person adopted a damaging lie, he became complicit in a way that made him want to defend the regime as a way of justifying their own complicity.

A warden came into the courtyard and said, "Number 319 has a phone call."

I stood up, deeply startled. "*Me?* I have a call"

"Yup. That way," he pointed to the entrance. I walked in the direction he pointed. He came behind me. When we reached the front office, the clerk handed me the receiver of his desk phone.

"Hello?" I said.

"It's me," Susan said briskly. "I just got home." I could hear her breathing. Then she said, "Someone broke into our condo and searched."

"*What?*" I steadied myself against the counter.

"I don't think the burglar took anything. Just searched."

“Where were you when it happened?”

“I was at Ken and Eliza’s place.”

“Thank you for telling me,” I said. I spoke tersely to signal that I couldn’t say anymore. A clerk was watching me.

“I’ll come back in the morning,” she said.

“Come early,” I said.

“Of course.”

We said our goodbyes and disconnected. When I put the receiver back down, my hand was shaking. I took a deep breath to control my trembling.

The warden who brought me said, “I can take you to the TV room or the courtyard.”

“Thanks, but I’ll just go back to my cell.” I needed to think this over.

We hadn’t gone far when the warden walking behind me abruptly stopped. “Wait,” he said. I stopped and turned around. He took a phone from his pocket and answered it. “Okay, I’ll bring him back.” He put the phone back into his pocket and said, “Another call. Same person.”

We pivoted and turned back to the office. “You know,” he said, “each call beyond one per day costs you ten bucks.”

“I understand,” I said.

We reached the office. The receiver was again on the counter. I walked over and picked it up.

“Susan?” I said.

“Yeah,” she said. “They took the locked box from the closet.”

That was the box that contained my insurance—the file with the records of the wrongdoings of the Pike Administration.

“What about the files in my desk? The one labeled D.C.?”

“They didn’t get that. I’ll explain tomorrow.”

“Okay,” I said.

We said our goodbyes and hung up.

The walk back to my cell seemed interminable. My knees felt so weak that I had trouble with the stairs. I held the railing and stopped a few times to rest. I glanced back once at the warden who was escorting me. He was waiting patiently. He had a baby face and looked about fourteen. I figured he was in his mid-twenties. He probably assumed my shakiness was due to my age. My hair was gray, after all, and my shoulders were slender.

I resumed walking. At last, we reached my cell. I leaned against the wall while he unlocked the door. Then I stepped inside. I felt grateful when the door closed behind me. I needed to be alone. Someone had already brought my dinner tray. I sat in the chair at my desk. My legs felt too shaky to pace the cell, and the last thing I wanted to do was lie down. I pushed the tray aside. I put my elbows on the table and rested my forehead on my hands.

When I'd had that long talk with Phillip on my first day here, I'd mentioned to him that I had insurance of my own. Sending a thug in search of it was something Phillip would do. If he was after records that were damning, he'd gotten the wrong file. Not that it mattered too much. Jessica had copies of all the contents.

The question was—how did the burglar know that Susan wasn't there just then? Most people are home on a Saturday. Someone must be watching her.

I understood then that Susan, Eliza, and Ken were in danger. Of course, plotting to get me out always carried risks—but the fact that someone was watching Susan closely enough to know when she was and wasn't home and no doubt still had access to the apartment raised the danger level.

I had to call the plan off. I really had no choice. I'd have

to tell Susan in the morning when she came. I would send a message to Phillip telling him I planned to sign the confession. That should at least relieve the pressure on Susan long enough for the three of them to get out of the country. It was time for me to be noble. I'd sign the confession to allow Susan, Eliza, and Ken to get safely out of the country—but the moment I knew they were safe, I'd renounce the confession. Jessica had the entire story. Let Pike sic his goons on me. I no longer cared.

There was enough money in my offshore accounts to keep Susan, Ken, and Eliza in luxury for the remainder of their lives.

Once I made the decision, I felt almost weightless. I had much less to worry about. The future became simpler. In the morning I would tell Susan that she, Eliza, and Ken needed to leave the country. If I could join them later, I would. Meanwhile, I would stay here, sign the confession, and take my chances.

Sometimes I thought Pike and Phillip were more bark than bite. If so, it was possible that after the whole thing died down, I'd be able to join Susan abroad. It was easy to overestimate Pike because he presented himself as a strongman and used, shall we say, unorthodox methods—was all-powerful, but the reality was that Pike and his minions were mostly inept. They bungled the simplest tasks. The only thing Pike was really good at was creating a narrative. He was terrible at actually solving problems, but he was good at branding. He was, in essence, a gifted con artist.

I understood, of course, that Pike commanded what was essentially a paramilitary. If he turned his goons against me, anything could happen. But he forgave people who got back in line and paid proper homage.

I was trapped. Rochelle's long-ago words came back to me: *You're trapped by your own fears.* Then I heard Jessica's voice saying: *You hated Baskerville. You were stifled there. Your parents were stifled*

there.

Perhaps I always had been trapped. The thought occurred to me that my imprisonment was some kind of cosmic joke, and I was locked up in steel walls now as a metaphor for how I'd lived my life.

I paced until a warden came for my dinner tray. Exhaustion from the lack of sleep since arriving and the stress of it all caught up to me. I felt so tired that the muscles in my back ached. I picked up the blankets and, one by one, shook each one out, and then wrapped them tightly around my shoulders. I lay back on the cot, which squeaked under my weight, and stared upward at the ceiling. The wind rattled the windowpanes. At what felt like regular intervals, a twig or leaf hit the window. Each time, my heart thumped.

The light was dimmed for the night. The night sky was so black that the metal grating disappeared. In the stains on the ceiling, I saw shapes, the way you can see shapes in the clouds. First, I saw what looked like a bird with wings spread. As I stared, the stain seemed to take on the shape of a dragon complete with bat-like wings and the tongue of a snake. When I closed my eyes, I still saw the dragon, now with beady yellow eyes.

I shook my head to get rid of the image. The next time I looked at the stains, I saw a butterfly—a Papillon, the butterfly that had inspired the title of Henri Charrière's memoir. I wondered if seeing a butterfly was a good omen.

I was jolted from that pleasant thought by a clanging sound from the cell above mine. I closed my eyes and pinched the bridge of my nose. I didn't think there were many more days of this I could tolerate before going completely mad.

I must have fallen back to sleep because the next thing I knew, I heard a loud knocking. I sat up and listened, but there

was only silence. Had I dreamed of the knocking? I wasn't sure. Maybe it was the inmate in the cell above me again. I stood up and went to the door and looked out the spy hole. The corridor was empty. I watched for several minutes to make sure. Still nothing. Potato Face is playing with me. I pushed the thought aside. It was absurd. More likely, the person in the cell above me had dropped something.

I had no idea what time it was. I laid back on the cot, closed my eyes, and listened to the sounds in the prison.

My thoughts whirled the way they do when you're half asleep, with random images coming to me. I thought of my childhood home and Rochelle's beautiful hair and I felt an odd stirring. I wasn't the type to dwell in the past. Retelling my David Copperfield crap was taking a toll on me. Thinking of Rochelle, I felt the stirring of long-suppressed regret and a longing for the things I'd lost.

The knocking of water pipes and the swishing of air in the vents remained low and steady enough that I felt lulled and drifted back to sleep. The next time I woke up, the early light of dawn was streaming in through the window.

I closed my eyes. The image that came to me was Rochelle as she looked when I'd first met her, in a blue dress and a silver ornament in her hair, looking like an angel. I was in such tumults, it made no sense that I should think about her now. Perhaps I wanted to show her that I was willing to sacrifice myself for the greater good. See, I wanted to say. Maybe I wasn't as bad as you thought I was. Maybe I had some good in me.

PRISON: DAY FOUR

The next time I opened my eyes, the early morning light was streaming in through the window. I went to the window, rested my forehead against the cool metal bars, and looked out. Dark clouds threatened rain. I felt restless and irritated. I did a few stretches and paced my cell to help me focus.

I had probably been awake for about an hour when a key rattled in the lock. In came Potato Face with a tray. “Back on the job today?” I asked.

“I’m on the job every day.”

I decided to take him by surprise. “You burglarized my home,” I said.

He stopped and stared at me.

I watched him carefully, but I could not read him. He gave his head a little shake, turned, and strode from the cell, slamming the door behind him. Had he stayed another few moments, I might have been able to get him to talk to get a better read on him.

I went to the spy hole and looked out. I watched as he took a tray from a cart and keyed his way into the cell across from mine. He delivered two more trays before the cart moved beyond the range of my vision.

Alone again, I sat at the table and lifted the plastic lid. Breakfast consisted of a pastry, two hard-boiled eggs, a cup of milk, a cup of coffee, and a cup of orange juice. It wasn’t bad—except that the coffee was room temperature and the cream was

powdered.

I'd eaten my breakfast and showered and was sitting on the cot, waiting. Before long, the same warden who brought my tray came to retrieve it. Soon after, another warden, this one with jet-black hair, came to let me go to the shower room. Even in prison—or perhaps particularly in such a place of uncertainty and vulnerability—ritual was comforting, even if the ritual meant the humiliation of a public shower while a warden stood nearby. I'd read a study once about rats in a maze. They tolerated being shocked with electric currents as long as the shocks came at predictable times. It was when the shocks came randomly that the rats went mad. Being in prison was like learning to tolerate predictable bouts of shock.

Back in my cell, I tucked my prison identification card into my pocket and continued pacing. I knew from the brightening of the sky that it was no longer early morning. Visiting hours would start soon.

My hair was still damp from my shower and my skin smelled faintly of soap when the same black-haired warden came back to tell me I had a visitor. I walked down the corridor to the stairs, listening to the sound of our footsteps. His shoes were heavy and made a thumping sound. The rubber soles of my prison-issue shoes were quieter. Once we reached the ground floor, I waited for his instructions. I knew from the direction he pointed that we were going to the family visiting room, which of course meant my visitor was Susan.

We arrived to find that Susan was the only visitor in the room. The same clerk sat at his desk with an iPad propped up in front of him. He looked up as I walked past him. Susan sat in a chair in the far corner. I pulled up a chair and pushed it as close to her as I dared.

The problem was that the room was too quiet for us to say anything that we didn't want the clerk at the desk to hear. We sat with our knees almost touching. The couple not far away, was talking quietly. Even with the murmur of their conversation and the sound of air rushing through the vents, I was afraid the clerk would hear a whisper.

We exchanged greetings, but without any of the usual hubbub, neither of us dared to talk about anything important. The only sound was the air rushing through the vents and punctuated by the faint rattling of plumbing pipes.

Susan made small talk about the traffic she had encountered the evening before when she'd left Manhattan. At last, the first family entered. An inmate wearing a navy jogging suit entered with a blonde woman who appeared to be his wife. With them were two small boys, who immediately began making noise.

"Something is wrong," she whispered. "I can tell."

I glanced at the clerk. He was looking at his screen. I didn't want to speak, so in response, I gave Susan a small, quick nod.

Footsteps and voices came down the corridor and then another family entered: A woman, about thirty-five, with three children. The children rushed for one of the toy boxes and squealed.

I leaned close to Susan and said, "We have to call off the plan. I think you're in danger. You, Ken, and Eliza can't risk this. Get someplace safe. I'll wait it out. Maybe I'll sign, and then when you're safe, I'll renounce it. Or I won't, and I'll just lay low until this blows over. I don't believe Phillip will have me killed."

"No," she said firmly. "We are all in this together."

In my peripheral vision, I saw the clerk put down his phone. At the same time, another family entered. Susan folded her arms across her chest and set her mouth in a determined

line. I couldn't argue with her in the visitor's room without attracting attention.

"What about that burglar?" I said. "Can you see you're in danger?"

"He didn't take anything else. He didn't even touch the files in your desk drawer. I'd already moved the important stuff that I planned to take to Eliza and Ken's place because we planned to go in Ken's car.

"Were there signs that you were packing to leave?"

"No. I was careful. I wanted to leave the condo so that it would look as if I'd be back anytime. Last night we moved everything we're taking with us to a hotel not far from here. I see no reason to go back into the city. Everything is ready."

I considered all of this.

"See," she said, "we're in a hotel room now. We're all safe."

I shook my head. If she was being watched, whoever was spying knew where she was. They might also know what she and Ken were planning to do.

"I don't like it, Susan. It's too risky."

"We're not backing out now. Besides," what was almost a twinkle came into her face, "Ken is having a great time putting your plan into action. He keeps saying how brilliant you are. He's also embellishing your ideas."

She'd made up her mind, and obviously trying to argue with her was out of the question.

The room went quiet again. The children were on the floor, busy with crayons and coloring books. The clerk was looking around. Susan went back to small talk. I could see she was nervous and had more to tell me.

The clerk's phone buzzed. He picked it up and began talking.

Susan seized the opportunity to whisper, "Tomorrow

evening. We think we'll be ready."

Behind us, the boys were squabbling over a toy.

"I wonder if our apartment is bugged," I said. "Did you check to see if the unit below ours is empty?"

"I did, and it is. I asked the doorman and I checked with the sales office. The doorman also told me that our upstairs neighbor hasn't been around for months."

"Is Sam still in prison?"

"He's probably out by now. He asked me not to come back. He was afraid of getting into more trouble with Phillip."

Another family entered, again raising the noise level.

Susan leaned in close to me and whispered, "We found our guy. He's a prison bureau executive, the assistant to the regional director. His name is Carson Miller. He's a hard-core Pike supporter. He even travels to Pike rallies. Ken called him and asked for an appointment. They had a remote video conference this morning. Ken was in his office at Pike Towers. He felt safe because nobody was around. He checked Phillip's schedule to make sure nothing would bring him in."

I nodded. The place was usually deserted on weekends. The support staff was off. Executives who worked, generally worked from home.

"Later this afternoon," Susan went on in a whisper, "they're meeting in person in Ken's offices at Pike Enterprises. Pike is in Washington D.C. and will be there until this evening when he's scheduled to meet supporters in one of the private ballrooms in Pike Towers."

She paused, leaned back, and looked around the room. I watched her.

Then she whispered, "We're shooting for tonight because the regional director, Carson Miller's boss, left today for a long weekend in Florida. He's not due back until Tuesday morning.

That gives us an extra day in case something goes wrong. Sunday is the best day anyway because more prison employees are off duty on a Sunday evening. Our tentative departure time is just after sundown.”

I considered the fact that Ken would have to do some persuasive lying in his meeting with Carson Miller. I figured he could handle it.

She looked around, leaned even closer to me, and whispered, “You’ll like this story. Last night Ken went to a private event where Pike was meeting donors. Ken used Eliza’s phone so that Carson Miller wouldn’t recognize the number. He called Miller. He reached a recording, which he knew would happen after hours. Just as the recording was playing, he told Pike, “It’s one of your big donors. Can you just say, ‘This is Arnold Pike. Thanks for the favor.’” Pike took the phone just as the beep sounded and said, “This is Arnold Pike. Thanks for the favor.” Pike’s voice is distinctive. The clink of glasses in the background and soft music muted by carpet and lush furniture was the perfect touch.”

“Very smart,” I said. “I’d think Carson Miller, when he got the message, would try to return that call.”

“He did,” Susan said. “First thing this morning. We expected that. When Eliza saw the number come up on his phone, she answered, pretending to be a personal assistant to Pike. The guy was so bowled over he was practically stuttering. Carson said what an honor it was to do a personal favor for Arnold Pike. Eliza played it up. She promised that very soon, she’d arrange a time for Miller to meet Pike in person.”

Good thing our planned escape was less than twelve hours away. At any time our story could blow up. “We still have to worry about Potato Face,” I whispered.

She was about to say something, then stopped again and

looked around. I controlled the urge to follow her gaze. Both of us looking around could look suspicious. She settled back in her chair as if momentarily relaxing. I knew she was waiting until she felt safe saying whatever she planned to say.

Then she took a small piece of paper from her pocket and unfolded it. It was a thumbnail black and white photograph printed from the Internet. I didn't want to reach for it, afraid I'd be breaking some kind of rule. For that matter, she probably wasn't supposed to bring it in. I leaned forward close enough to get a good look at the picture.

"That's him," I said.

With small quick motions, she shredded the picture. I almost smiled. Who would have guessed that Susan, Ken, and Eliza had hidden talents for stealth and jailbreaks?

"Who is he?" I whispered.

"His name is Dylan Biggs. He's a New York cop and a hardcore Pike supporter. We think your guess was right. Phillip tapped him to arrest you, probably with another person on Phillip's on-call law enforcement list. Then after your arrest, most likely at Phillip's direction, he answered an ad for a temporary warden position. We think he's getting double pay, from the prisons and from Phillip."

"How are we going to get rid of him tomorrow night?"

"Ken sent him a personal invitation to meet with Pike in a private room at Pike Towers at 9:00 this evening. We put a tracker on his car. If he heads to Pike Towers, we're out of here. If he's at the prison, or anywhere nearby, we'll have to postpone."

The whole thing still made me nervous. There were still so many things that could go wrong. For example, what if Potato Face was smart enough to locate the tracker and make them think he was far away?

“How did you get the tracker on his car?”

“We found it in the staff parking lot at the prison. We’ve been tracking him ever since.”

She paused and we listened to the murmur of voices in the room. Then she whispered, “There is a complicating bit of information. Pike seems to have no idea that any of this is going on. When Ken went to that event, he was able to ask a few subtle questions. The way Pike answered persuaded him that Pike knew nothing.”

Just then, one of the children shrieked, “Give me that back!” My nerves were jangled enough without having to endure the sound of children screaming. I turned to look. When I saw it was nothing more than a squabble between siblings, I let the air rush from my lungs in a sigh of relief and turned back to Susan.

“If Pike isn’t the driving force behind this,” I whispered. “Who is? How did Phillip manage to persuade Department of Justice lawyers to bring charges without Pike behind it?”

“I have no idea,” she said.

I sat back and thought this over. Then it occurred to me, “Pike could have been behind it without knowing he was behind it. People use his name all the time. He likes to think of himself as a big-picture guy who leaves the details to others.”

“That sounds right,” she said. Then, “I should go. Unless there is something else.”

“I can’t think of anything.”

She dropped her voice to a whisper so soft that I barely hear, leaned forward, and added, “We’re planning to leave the country.”

“Of course,” I said.

After she left, a guard came for me. This one was slender. His

uniform hung limply on his bony shoulders. I asked if I could go to the courtyard. I wasn't ready to stomach the damp metallic smell of my cell.

He said fine and typed something into his phone, I assumed to log in my whereabouts. We arrived at the courtyard arrived to find a handful of inmates already there, a few sitting on benches, others walking the perimeter. Two wardens stood in a corner, watching. Both had their arms folded over their chests and their feet spread widely enough to give the impression that they were ready to spring at any moment. The sky was overcast, and the air was brisk.

I walked the perimeter of the courtyard, careful to keep a distance between myself and the other inmates. I forced myself to think about the future. For now, I'd had enough of the past. I tried to imagine how the sequence of getting me out of the prison would play out. If all went well, it would be calm and orderly. The door would be unlocked for me by someone who believed he was doing Pike's bidding. He would perhaps, be accompanied by Ken. The three of us would walk through the maze of corridors to one of the outside doors. I stopped and revised. I'd have to change to street clothes. I couldn't be seen walking in the parking lot in prison garb. Then Ken and I would be out under the night sky and I'd be free.

I hoped all would go well for Susan, Ken, and Eliza, but I had no way of knowing. I felt overcome by a feeling of helplessness. I had come up with the plan, but now I could only drift along and hope that those who were free could pull it off. It was like being in a boat unable to paddle. I had no choice but to leave the rowing to others.

Perhaps I'd always been swept along. Perhaps riding in a boat while others did the rowing was another metaphor for how I had lived my life.

I'd done two laps when the warden who had brought me to the courtyard came back. I saw him enter the courtyard and look around. I assumed he was looking for me, so I walked over to him. Sure enough, he was there to take me back to my cell.

When we reached my cell, I stood back while he unlocked the door.

I stepped inside and listened as the key turned in the lock. I looked around. Something was different. I looked over the walls, the bed, the floors, and the desk. I couldn't place what had changed. Perhaps there was something different in the smell. Or maybe I was imagining it.

My lunch tray was on the table. Inside was a meatloaf, a salad, overcooked vegetables, a slice of bread with a pat of butter, and a cookie. The salty smell of the meatloaf was surprisingly appetizing. I was hungry and ate quickly.

I had eaten and placed the tray by the door when another warden came to tell me I had a visitor.

He directed me to the front of the building, into the room with the individual room. The clerk at the table, seeing me, pointed to the last room the one where Jessica and I had met the day before. Jessica was sitting with her back toward the door. I stood for a moment, looking in. Then I opened the door.

She turned around and said, "Hi."

I looked at each of the walls. She might think my habit of looking around was creepy, but I wanted to know if anything was out of the ordinary. When I saw that everything was as it should be, I sat down across from her.

"I got the file your wife sent me," she said. "The Muratov stuff was in there. Plus more."

"Any questions?"

"Not so far. It confirms what most people suspected.

Shady business deals. Taking dirty money. Playing fast and loose with the rules.”

I supposed there wasn't too much in that file that people didn't already know.

I need you to take care of one of the folders my wife sent you, the one with information about the financial records.”

“Why?”

“Someone broke into our place yesterday and took the originals. You have my only copy.”

“Will you need it back?”

“I don't think so. I'll let you know.”

She steeped her fingers together and seemed to be thinking this over. Then she said, “Is your wife okay?”

“She's fine. She was spooked, but otherwise, fine. I'm ready to start.”

I was more than ready. I was eager. If all went well, I'd be out of the prison that evening. This was my last chance to tell her the entire story. Fortunately, we were just getting to what I considered the important part.

She turned on her tape recorder and waited for me to begin.

* * *

ALL THE WORLD'S A STAGE

Twelve years after Rochelle left me, Charlie said he had someone he wanted me to meet. “You're going to like her,” he told me.

The person was Susan, and he was right. She was fun, funny, and upbeat. She liked to flirt and dance. It was almost as if Charlie thought what I needed was someone as different from Rochelle as possible. If Rochelle was understated and classy, Susan was showy. You might even say gaudy. Susan

dressed for impact. Her black hair was always freshly dyed, her lipstick in place.

I found it easy to be with Susan. She kept her eyes fixed on me and seemed to enjoy listening to me. For the first time in my life, I turned into something of a talker. She was impressed by everything about my life—my job, the people I knew, my luxury apartment. When I talked, I didn't hold back. I let her know exactly who I was and what kind of work I did. No matter what I told her, she remained wide-eyed and accepting. She wasn't an idealist like Larry, but she wasn't a cynic like Charlie, either. She defied classification. After a while, I understood that while Rochelle had pushed back against me in subtle ways, Susan reflected back whatever I said without judgment.

Once Susan started spending more time in my condo, the change was immediately apparent. The place was always immaculate. I had a cleaning service, but between cleanings, things tended to get untidy. Not with Susan around. She was a good cook and prepared elaborate meals. At first, I assumed she was attracted to what I had to offer: A life of ease and luxury. After we had been dating two years, I came to believe that her devotion was real.

"She's a keeper," Larry told me after he came to visit for a weekend.

One day I was in my favorite easy chair in the living room reading *The Washingtonian* when I was startled by the name *Leonid Muratov*. His name appeared under a headline toward the end of the first section: *Russian Gangster On FBI Most Wanted List*. According to the article, the FBI wanted Muratov for crimes committed in the United States. The list of crimes he was wanted for was long: wire fraud, racketeering, mail fraud, money laundering, aiding and abetting, securities fraud, filing a false registration

with the Securities and Exchange Commission, and falsification of books and records. Evidently Muratov had participated in a multimillion-dollar scheme to defraud thousands of investors in the stock of a public company headquartered in Pittsburgh but incorporated off-shore.

Most of those were crimes Charlie didn't think should even be illegal—and in fact, before the rise of the administrative state—hadn't been illegal.

Rochelle had a different opinion. *They're all thieves*, she'd said.

"What's the matter?" Susan asked. She had been sitting at the dining room table reading a magazine. Now, she came over and sat in the chair next to mine.

"This guy," I said, pointing to his name. "I sold him six condos a while back. He's wanted by the FBI."

"You couldn't have known," she said soothingly.

Not long after that, Susan and I got married in a small civil ceremony. We had under twenty guests: My immediate family, her immediate family, her best friend, and Larry.

Susan and I were still newlyweds when I received a call from my study partner from law school, Ken Dalio. "I'm done with this firm," he said. "I've worked my last seventy-five-hour week."

"Give me a copy of your resume and I'll see what I can do."

Ken stopped by our condo that evening to drop off his resume. Over the years, Ken and I had often gotten together when he was in New York for work, but he'd never been to my place. He looked around and whistled. "Even on a partner salary of a half million a year, I doubt I could afford this." He raised his eyebrows and gave me a look that I assumed to be respect.

I introduced him to Susan and we invited him to sit down. He and I sat on a couch facing one of the floor-to-ceiling windows. Susan went into the kitchen. We heard her opening and closing cabinets. It was early evening. The city lights were already bright against the fading sky.

“I could retire,” he said. “I’ve got enough money. All I know is that I’m done with civil litigation. It’s nonstop. I think I’m ready for a life of glamour. Look at this place.” He looked around again and whistled.

I never really thought of my life as glamorous. Money, for me, was security. “Pike sort of expects people who work for him to buy his condos,” I said.

Susan came in with a tray containing a bottle of chardonnay and glasses, which she put on the glass table in front of the couch.

After that, we made small talk. We talked about life in New York. He said D.C. was changing but he couldn’t put his finger on exactly how. He said, “My wife is eager for me to change jobs. We’ve taken only one real vacation in fifteen years. Most of our vacations mean I travel for business and she goes along. She spends her day sightseeing alone, and she doesn’t like it.”

The next day, I took Ken’s resume to Pike’s new right-hand man, a lawyer named Phillip McHugh. He was in his office with the door open. His secretary, at a desk in front, saw me and nodded, indicating that I could walk in.

I gave him Ken’s resume and said, “He was my study partner during my last year at Franklin. I can vouch for his brilliance.”

Phillip looked over his resume, and then asked, “What kind of work does he want?”

“Paperwork. No more litigation. Nothing confrontational.”

“Negotiating contracts?” Phillip asked.

“That would work.”

“I can put him in the licensing department,” Phillip said. “The pay isn’t what he’s used to, but the hours aren’t what he used to put in.”

“I think licensing would be perfect,” I said.

“I’ll give him a call,” Phillip said.

About a week after Ken started working for Pike Enterprises, I paid him a visit in the licensing department. I sat down in the chair in front of his desk and asked, “What do you think?”

He went to close his office door and then sat back at his desk. “This is insane,” he said in a whisper. “Pike earns millions doing absolutely nothing except slapping his name on things. As part of the contracts, he demands credit for whatever operations are involved. In other words, he does no work, puts his name on projects, and takes credit.”

That sounded exactly like Pike.

“The Russian capitalists are perfectly willing to let him take the credit he wants,” Ken said. I’m not sure what they get out of some of these deals. They do the work. They put Pike’s name on the project. They give Pike credit. And they pay Pike millions.”

“Why do you think they do it?” I said. “Are they trying to buy him?”

“I’ve wondered the same thing. At first I thought he was a slick businessman. Then I wondered if he was a top-notch con artist. The Russians are not the only ones. I don’t know what it is about that guy, but people literally throw money at him just to use his name. This isn’t like the kind of contract negotiations I’m used to.”

I shrugged. “Maybe he’s lucky.”

“Maybe.”

I looked at my watch and stood up. I had a meeting soon.

“We should go out, the four of us,” Ken said.
“Let’s do it.”

We went out the following Saturday. We went to dinner and then caught a play. We learned we had much in common. Ken and Eliza never had children. Susan and Eliza hit it off right away. Eliza had worked in the Senate office when we were in law school, but now she was content to spend her days lunching with friends, shopping, and talking over tea. She and Susan arranged to get together one afternoon during the coming week.

Soon the four of us were going out regularly. Eliza and Susan planned elaborate vacations we never took because Ken and I were too busy working. Working at Pike Enterprises didn’t require around-the-clock hours of litigation, but neither Ken nor I ever really found the time to take off two full weeks at the same time. We kept saying we would—and I think we honestly intended to—but it just never happened. Eventually, Eliza and Susan announced that they’d had enough. They wanted a vacation. They had passports. So they bought tickets and jetted off for a tropical vacation in Tahiti. Susan sent me postcards of sunny beaches and shimmering blue-green waters.

I guess I just wasn’t the vacation type. I wasn’t really an adventurer or explorer of new places.

Meanwhile, over the years, the Pike real estate division sold more than 1,000 condos in cash to anonymous shell companies, some of which—if not all—were secretly owned by Russian capitalists. The Russians returned the favor. In 2002, when Pike was about to go bankrupt, a real estate development company with ties to Muratov moved into Pike Towers and partnered with Pike Enterprises to get him out of financial trouble. This happened more than once. Pike got into financial trouble and

the very Russians who he had helped, who had now grown ten times richer as ruling oligarchs under Putin, returned the favor by bailing him out.

The ties between Putin's Russia and parts of America's right-wing tightened when Putin enacted anti-gay legislation. His law criminalized disseminating what he called "propaganda" about homosexual relationships to children. Under the law, anyone who presented any information about homosexuality to a minor was in violation of the law. In reality, simply making such information public, or talking about homosexuality, could violate the law because minors would be able to view it.

The liberals in the United States—those paying attention, and most were not—exploded with rage at what they called Putin's fascist regime. At the same time, America's far-right leaders, including Matt Buchon, applauded Putin. Buchon wrote his famous piece in which he said, "Putin is entering the claim that Russia is the Godly nation of today." Other leaders of America's Christian Right hailed Putin as leading the counter-revolution against the widespread Western paganism that included easy divorce and readily available abortions.

By that time, the idea of diversity as a strength had taken root in the United States. P.J. Wiley sent shock waves when he said, "You know, Putin has the right idea. Russia is untouched by the myth of diversity and deranged multiculturalism. The idea that diversity is a strength is one of the left's most unhinged ideas. Do marriages work when two people are entirely different? Of course not. Does a marriage work if two people have different beliefs and values? Of course not. Diversity is never a strength. It's an excuse to open our borders and invite in every kind of criminal and bring this great nation to its knees."

Another portion of America's right wing, the Second Amendment gun rights people, found themselves on the

receiving end of millions of dollars in donations from Russian capitalists. The Second Amendment people are the guys who believe that the federal government, under the control of liberals, is becoming tyrannical—”

* * *

“I know who the second amendment people are,” Jessica said. “Please explain the ‘tyrannical’ part. It makes no sense to a rational human being. Even my aunt, a die-hard Pike supporter, thinks that those militia guys are a bunch of weirdos.”

“They’re well organized and driven by a powerful ideology. They’re more dangerous than your aunt may realize. Those militias organized in the early 1990s in response to President Heller’s gun control laws and the shootouts at Ruby Ridge, Idaho, and Waco, Texas. They embrace Jefferson’s ideas—”

“*Thomas Jefferson?*”

“I guess you don’t know that Thomas Jefferson said, ‘A little rebellion now and then is a good thing.’ He also said that when governments become too tyrannical, people should rebel. That shouldn’t be a surprise. That’s sort of what the Revolutionary War was about.”

“So the logic is, we rebelled against England and set up our own government so now we should be able to overthrow our own government if we don’t like it? Isn’t that sort of insane?”

“They don’t think the government represents them any longer. They don’t think it’s their government. They don’t recognize what America is turning into.”

“Because America is no longer ruled entirely by white people and isn’t governed by what they think are Christian laws,” she said.

“That’s part of it. The other part is that they think the federal government is a large, bloated, bureaucracy located far

from their homes. They don't understand it. They want the government to be small and local so they feel they have some control over their lives. They feel oppressed and they think that when a government turns oppressive, private citizens have a duty to take up arms against the government. I can tell you that the citizens of Baskerville were enraged when the Supreme Court in the 1950s and 1960 started handing down rules that changed how they were allowed to live."

She sighed. "I think that would have been the *white* citizens complaining, but all right. Go on."

* * *

Phillip McHugh called me one evening in late 2013. "There's someone you need to meet," he said. "His name is Elliot Seton. He's looking for people with computer science backgrounds. He has investment ideas."

"I majored in computer science a long time ago. Things have changed."

"Doesn't matter," he said. "You have a head for that stuff."

He sent me a packet of biographical information about Elliot Seton. From the packet, I learned that Seton started out as an American intelligence officer. As part of his intelligence training, he learned Russian. Most of the American intelligence community viewed Putin's Russia as a danger: The regime was aggressive, attacked its neighbors, and was abandoning rule of law. Seton, though, like the Evangelical leader Matt Buchon—viewed Russia as an ally instead of an adversary. His superiors, therefore, pushed him out of his job. After leaving his job, he spent time in Moscow and developed close relationships with the Russian capitalists.

Phillip set up my meeting with Seton for a Thursday in late December. We met in a conference room in Pike Towers.

Seton was a serious, thin-lipped man. I had the feeling he rarely smiled. He had almost no chin, giving his face a square shape.

“I can tell you how the capitalists in Russia hold on to their power,” he told me calmly. “It’s astonishingly easy. You want to win the next election? You want to keep people like the Hellers out of power? I can tell you how. Russian intelligence officers in the Soviet-era KGB understood psychology better than anyone else. The United States may have won the war with technology and machines, but the United States is no match for the Russians in the information department. If we want to survive, we need to understand what they do.”

“What do they do?”

He opened his briefcase. “I brought you some reading material.” He took out a stack of papers held together with a clip. “This was an old KGB manual. I translated it from Russian myself.”

I put the packet into my own briefcase.

“What do you have in mind?” I asked him.

“Starting a company to monitor social media.”

A long-ago memory came back to me: Rochelle and I were watching Nixon’s resignation speech on television. “Liberals control the media,” I had said, “and that’s the entire problem.”

Nixon’s resignation taught me that we needed our own media if for no other reason than to drown out liberal nonsense.

“I’m interested,” I told him.

I spent the evening reading the KGB manual Seton had given me. The manual opened with a brag: The Russians were the masters of propaganda. Nobody in the world did it better.

One heading was “Governing by Crisis and Spectacle.” The idea came from a Russian philosopher named Ivan Ilyin, whose ideas inspired and guided Putin. Ilyin understood that

the purpose of government is to create stability and order. The people, though, expect the government to give them things. So what the leader has to do is keep the people so occupied that they don't have time to make demands. The leader does this in two ways. First, he orchestrates an endless cycle of crisis and spectacle to keep people riveted. Second, he does "battle" with their enemies. Fake enemies work just as well as real ones and are obviously less risky to engage with. So the leader identifies an enemy (or invents the enemy, depending on your perspective) and promises to vanquish the enemy. The people are thrilled—and occupied—by the fight.

After that introduction, the manual explained the basics of confidence building and the methods for deploying payload content. The manual then went on to describe various propaganda methods, including the firehose of falsehoods method, a technique that builds on Soviet methods but is made far more effective by the Internet. The leader releases a rapid and continuous stream of lies. The key is that the leader must have a shameless willingness to tell outrageous lies without regard for consistency. The more shameless the lie the better because the listeners feel overwhelmed. Fact-checkers can't keep up. The liar of course has an advantage: A lie can be told in a sentence. Refuting the lie can take hours of research, and hours of presenting the truth, and even then, the fact-checker loses because the liar has the advantage of first impression.

The manual also explained why go big worked so well for P.J: When a lie is big enough and outrageous enough, the lie itself becomes the story. People talk about the lie and actual news is pushed out of the spotlight. Some lies are so big that once people accept it, they entirely let go of reality and will then believe anything the leader tells them.

Next, the manual described the method known as

whataboutism, which was frequently used in Soviet Russia. If your opponent accuses you of something, you respond by saying, “But what about—,” and then name something the opponent had done. A famous example was:

Western diplomat: Soviet labor camps are an abomination and human rights disaster.

Stalin: What about lynchings in the American South?

In fact, a joke that circulated in Russia went like this: An American calls a Soviet radio station and asks, “Can an ordinary citizen afford to buy a car?” The radio station host says, “What about lynchings in the American South?”

Whataboutism short-circuits a discussion, deflects blame, and throws listeners off balance.

Another method could be called *you’re a bigger one*. This is the method whereby you accuse your opponent of doing precisely what you are doing. This one is steeped in cynicism. The goal is to persuade the listener that both sides lie and cheat. If both sides cheat, the winner is the best cheater. If people believe both sides lie and cheat, they don’t mind if their own leaders are lying and cheating. Instead of feeling appalled, they think, “He’s a liar and a cheat, but he’s our liar and cheater.”

All these various methods dovetailed to create what the manual called noise. The propagandist doesn’t try to silence the truth-teller. In Putin’s Russia the truth was offered on Russia’s state-sponsored news station—but as one possible theory. Other “theories” were also offered. People who insist on only the truth are ridiculed for not being open to other viewpoints. So the truth is put forward, but refuted, and then drowned out by noise.

The goal is the disruption of the opponent's messaging.

The manual included a lengthy section on psychology, explaining that fear was the emotion most likely to engage and hook a person and that once a person formed a worldview, they tended to believe any new information that confirmed their worldview.

The manual concluded with a history of disinformation tactics demonstrating that they have been used and understood since ancient times. According to the manual, the first known use of disinformation to consolidate power dates back more than twenty-five hundred years ago, when Darius I of Persia established his reign. Darius ordered his life story chiseled onto the side of a cliff by artists. The sight was so awe-inspiring that people traveled to see it. The story began like this:

I am the greatest ruler ever! I am descended from
a long line of great kings! My kingdom was given
to me by the supreme god Auramazda! Whoever is
hostile to me, I utterly destroy! Whoever is a friend,
I surely protect! When kings rebel against me, I
vanquish them, one by one!

If you believe the story that followed, Darius never suffered a single loss in battle. Single-handedly, he vanquished all of his enemies. And—this was the important part—he came to power with help from the gods.

Today, that's called a founding myth: A story that gives a new regime authority and legitimacy.

You might say that Darius not only pioneered disinformation and the idea of a founding myth, he also developed a new technology for reaching a wider audience and putting his message forward in a way that had a ring of truth.

Words chiseled on a mountain must have suggested to ancient people that a superhuman force was responsible.

The first known disinformation manual was written for Chandragupta Maurya, the founder of the Maurya Empire in ancient India, by his prime minister, Kautilya. Kautilya understood there are two kinds of wars, open wars and concealed wars. Open wars are fought on the battlefield. They're expensive, risky, and always result in casualties on both sides. Concealed wars, or wars of disinformation, were less expensive, carried almost no risks, and were almost guaranteed to succeed.

He gave an example: If you want to assassinate the king of a neighboring country, or at least diminish his power, killing him is almost impossible and obviously carries huge risks. The easier way is to get his own people to do it by stirring their rage against him with lies. The way to do this—in ancient India—was with skilled secret agents and spies who could first build trust, and then start whisper campaigns.

With the rise of social media, spies and agents are not needed. All you have to do is infiltrate social media by pretending to be citizens of that country and establish trust. If one political party wants to divide the other, the method is simple: Open online accounts, pretend to be members of the opposite political party, build trust by pretending to be one of them, and then drop damaging lies about their party's leadership.

I read the manual in a single evening. Afterward, I felt both dazed and impressed. It was obvious that we could use these methods to destroy the threat of left-wing communism in America. At the same time, I understood that disinformation was a powerful—and dangerous—tool. The manual got me thinking about the similarity between the invention of the printing press and the invention of the Internet. Johannes Gutenberg thought his printing press would spread the word of God. Maybe it

did—but it also spread disinformation at a rate never before seen. The disruption and influx of new information that people were not equipped to handle caused the religious wars in Europe that left a quarter of the population dead. Disinformation was a powerful tool that must be used carefully.

Elliot Seton and I formed Outreach Analytics with Robert Fuoco. Pike was also an investor, but he wanted his name kept out of it, so he channeled his investment through a shell company. Pike thought it would be wiser if our offices were not housed in Pike Towers. That was the first—and only—time I knew Pike to suggest someone rent elsewhere. We rented office space in a nearby building.

In June of 2015, Pike announced his candidacy for president. He'd long talked about running for president, but I never took him seriously—until the day he made the dramatic entry into the grand ballroom at Pike Towers and gave the speech that took the nation by storm.

Yes, it was a dark speech. He talked about the impending destruction of America. He talked about how the liberals were corrupting and ruining the American way of life. He talked about how the purity and sanctity of the small towns were being ruined. He said the things I'd always felt.

He named the feeling I'd always had of danger lurking just beyond the horizon. When he talked about enemies coming to our borders, I felt a visceral fear harkening back to my childhood and the sense I had of unseen forces seeking to destroy what was good and pure about America.

Both of those happened at the same time: He manipulated me, and I understood how he was manipulating me.

Pike created a founding myth that went like this, "I am a successful businessman. The evidence of that is that I am a

billionaire.” He promised to use his business acumen to fix the problems in the country. When his opponents pointed out his string of bankruptcies, he laughed them off as a clever business tactic. He made a killing selling merchandise to his supporters. Tens of thousands of people wanted a baseball cap with his favorite slogan. The money he earned selling merchandise to his supporters allowed him to flaunt the trappings of wealth, which persuaded his supporters that he was a billionaire who didn’t need their money.

Everyone knew that the Democratic nominee would be Jocelyn Heller. She was then serving as a United States Senator. For reasons I could not fathom, she was the darling of the Democratic Party. She was like Missy Little times ten. We welcomed her as the candidate. We had been pummeling her for years with any hint of a scandal we could find. Now we picked up the pace.

Jocelyn did what socialist candidates do: She promised free stuff, which is really a way of bribing voters. The part socialists don’t explain is that someone has to pay for all that free stuff. Their idea, like Soviet communists, was that the wealthy (and competent) would pay. To counter what were effectively bribes, we worked to help people understand how the kind of socialistic big government Jocelyn wanted to build would ruin America.

Most people expected Pike to lose. Heck, even Pike expected to lose. A majority of Americans clearly preferred Jocelyn Heller. The goal of his candidacy was to undermine and delegitimize a Jocelyn Heller administration. I saw Pike as a way to strengthen the conservative movement to withstand four years of Jocelyn Heller. I’d torpedoed Missy’s campaign, and I intended to torpedo Jocelyn’s. I didn’t expect to beat her. I hoped to leave her so bruised and battered that she’d be ineffective as a president.

Pike had his own reasons for running for president. He entered the race because he wanted publicity. He said he wanted a true conservative message out there and to swing the political center to the right, but he wanted to elevate his brand. He wanted visibility.

His campaign strategy was to say shocking things to enrage his critics and delight his fans. Like P.J. Wiley, he said what many of his supporters were thinking. His policies were straightforward. He wanted closed borders. He was opposed to globalism. He was a fan of the Russian president, who he admired as a tough leader who promoted capitalism, privatized business, and kept order. Except for a few outspoken show people like Buchon and P.J., most conservatives who admired Putin kept it to themselves. Putin was too unlikeable—and brutal. But Pike was open about his admiration.

By the time Pike announced his candidacy for president, the Outreach Analytics staff included five directors, a half dozen programmers, a business development manager, and about a dozen media specialists who operated literally thousands of fake social media accounts. We kept the operation lean to prevent trade secrets from leaking out.

To allow me to focus on my work with Outreach Analytics, Phillip suggested that I move out of the real estate department and into the media and public relations department. He also suggested that Pike Enterprises change my job title to “Media Consultant.” After that, I did very little work for Pike Enterprises. Outreach Analytics took all my time. I still drew a small salary from Pike Enterprises, but most of my income was from advertising revenue generated by our social media accounts.

Outreach Analytics helped Pike by crowding online sites with so many competing stories that people had trouble

concentrating on any one. We overwhelmed the senses. We told so many rapid-fire lies that it became impossible for the media and the Democrats to debunk them.

If someone tried to pin a scandal on Pike—which, to be honest, was easy given the life of debauchery he had led—we flooded the waves with outrageous comments that grabbed everyone’s attention. We measured outrage by tracking the postings the user engaged with and the nature of those engagements. Much of this could be done automatically with algorithms.

Our media department doctored videos. We took footage out of context, doctored, and edited it. With the flip of a switch, we could spread a doctored video across the Internet to millions of people. The videos were perfectly calibrated to increase that person’s fears and put the person into a fighting spirit. Once we had someone in our clutches, we provided constant entertainment tailored to their particular fears.

The operation developed by Outreach Analytics was based on several sound principles of psychology. It’s all about identifying a person’s fears. Everyone has fears. Sometimes you have to probe deeply to learn what those fears are, but they’re there. Some people are more fearful than others. The more fearful a person is, the easier it is to control that person. Some people, for example, are terrified of an intruder coming into their homes. Others are afraid their children will abandon their upbringing or culture. Others are afraid of losing their money. Some people are terrified of an authoritarian takeover.

* * *

“Isn’t everyone?”

“Not at all. That’s your fear, but not everyone’s. To most people ‘authoritarian takeover’ is a meaningless phrase. When

confronted with an actual authoritarian who promises to blow through the rules, dispense with laws, and get things done, they cheer for him.”

“Okay, go on.”

“Once you know a person’s fears, and once you have that person isolated, you can easily manipulate and shape that person’s view of the world.”

“How can you isolate a person in the age of the Internet?”

“It’s easier in the age of the Internet. I can isolate a million people with minimal effort. All I have to do is persuade them to distrust and ignore any information that doesn’t conform to what I tell them. When people receive information that reinforces their worldview, they experience a pleasurable feeling. This means once you have shaped a person’s worldview and taught him to distrust alternate sources of information, the work is easy. The person will naturally reject any information that runs contrary to the worldview you have created. Such a person is also easily led to accept new information—as long as the information confirms that person’s worldview.”

“Confirmation bias,” she said, naming the psychological term.

“Correct. We followed a simple formula that began with confidence building. We created social media pages and accounts with strong views on a wide range of topics. These accounts, posing as real people, generated content consistent with the theme of the account. Naturally, these accounts attracted like-minded people. We had gun rights accounts, anti-abortion pro-Christianity accounts, Republican-hating accounts—”

“Republican hating?”

“Did you think we only brainwashed people on the right side of the political spectrum?”

“What was your goal?”

“Our goal was to dismantle the out-of-control administrative state. We had to make the public understand that the entire federal government was corrupt and that Democrats were peddling myths and hope porn. We wanted to expose their lies that they could achieve a perfect government by giving people handouts. We started by keeping detailed digital files on each user. We tested a person’s likes and dislikes and compared their inclinations to their demographic data to create a detailed psychological and political profile for each user.”

“I know about that,” she said. “Outreach Analytics illegally harvested private and personal information from fifty million users across several social media sites.”

“One hundred million,” I said. “Moreover, the illegality has never been proven, and never will be proven.”

“Ha!” she said. “Given the fact that you are currently in prison, your confidence seems, shall we say, unwarranted? But go on. Tell me about these detailed user profiles.”

“Once we thoroughly understood a person’s fears and their general likes and dislikes, confidence-building was easy. We built confidence by consistently, over a period of months, posting material that confirmed the person’s worldview and played to his or her fears, and by tricking people into thinking our accounts were experts. Social media is so new that people tended to measure the expertise of an account by its number of followers. After building enough confidence—which we measured by the nature of the comments and the amount of engagement an account received—we deployed payload content.”

“Payload content?” she repeated.

“That’s the disinformation bombshell, the story you want the target to believe is true. When deploying payload content, we started gradually, testing the waters. If, for example, a particular account attracted people who had a visceral fear of dark-

skinned people, we would slip in a video of a group of dark-skinned men committing a crime, perhaps destroying property, or engaging in violent behavior. Similarly, if a different account began attracting the Black Lives Matters people, we'd throw in videos showing Republicans saying something shockingly racist. Then we'd measure the level of outrage the person exhibited. The more outrage, the better."

"That's right," she said, "that whistleblower who called out that social media site said that anger was the emotion most likely to engage a social media user."

"People love to be angry. When you understand that, you can increase your social media engagement. The most helpful accounts were real people, Pike haters who didn't understand the first thing about how government worked. These were accounts that grew large when Pike came to power. They were good at attacking, and they so effectively attacked Pike that they grew rapidly in popularity—"

"When you say 'account,' do you mean real people?"

"Yes. I can give you a few examples. One was a retired social worker. He read an article about how easy it is to flip votes in voting machines. He was a bit paranoid and didn't know the first thing about computers and cybersecurity, but he tweeted out his paranoia. He confused "Something like this can happen with computer systems" with "this can easily happen to voting systems!" He enraged people. He scared people. They thought he knew what he was talking about because he had a few graduate degrees, even though his expertise had nothing whatsoever to do with cybersecurity, but he claimed to be an expert, and sometimes on social media, sometimes that's all it takes.

His account grew until he had hundreds of thousands of followers, which persuaded others that he must in fact be

an expert. It's a pattern I've seen on social media. An account makes a correct prediction, or claims to have made a correct prediction, based on that, claims to be an expert in all matters—and hundreds of thousands of people believe it.

This particular retired social worker was so gullible that we easily fooled him into attacking Democratic leaders.

The steady way she stared at me made me think she knew exactly who I was talking about.

* * *

As we improved our algorithms, we got better at hooking people and pulling them in. All a person had to do was click one of our advertisements, and we had that person in our clutches. After a person 'liked' one of our pages, our algorithms performed a full assessment of the user and sent a stream of posts specifically targeted to that person. Each time the person clicked, they were drawn further into our web. We pummeled both sides, Pike supporters and Pike critics, with messages carefully tailored to each user.

The power was exhilarating. We were the creators of truth. We shaped reality through our fingertips. We sat back and watched the liberals tear themselves to pieces. We cheered as they did our work for us.

That was when Republicans started jumping ship.

Larry called me late one night, a few weeks after Pike won the Republican nomination.

"I'm out," he said. After Larry's last term in Congress ended, he had taken a job with the conservative television network as a political analyst. I was so accustomed to seeing him on television offering political commentary that it was a shock to realize I hadn't actually spoken to him for about a year.

"What do you mean, you're out?" I asked.

“I’m not endorsing Pike for president.”

There were a growing number of prominent conservatives who were absolutely refusing to support Pike’s candidacy. Larry was the first of my personal acquaintances to join them. I was surprised—but knowing Larry—not too surprised. Still, I felt the need to push back. “After all the money Pike gave to your campaigns all those years?”

“There are principles involved,” Larry said. “It’s one thing to accept a donation from a guy. It’s another to support him for president.”

“Would you rather have Jocelyn Heller?”

A beat of time passed. Then another. “Yes,” he said.

That surprised me. “You’re going to vote for Jocelyn Heller?”

“I’ll vote for a third-party candidate for president. I’ll vote Republican down-ballot. Come on, Bob, you know he’s a bad guy. He shouldn’t be president. He doesn’t know anything about running the government.”

“He’ll run the government the way he runs Pike Enterprises. He’ll let others do the real work.”

“I just can’t support him,” Larry said.

I didn’t like it, but I understood that Larry was an idealist.

From the viewpoint of controlling the flow of information and media narrative, Pike proved to be the perfect candidate. He was a natural at creating noise. Manufacturing crisis and spectacle was second nature to him. He completely dominated the airwaves. Everything he said or did became headlines, which meant there was no space for any serious discussion. Mainstream newspapers, unaccustomed to this kind of politics, were easily tricked into picking up stories about fake scandals, thereby giving them legitimacy.

Pike leaped from one manufactured crisis to another. If the news cycle slowed down, he'd grab the nation's attention by doing or saying something outrageous. Once, for example, he said that a female liberal reporter was uglier than a donkey. It was all anyone talked about for a full day. He kept his supporters thrilled by landing blows on the liberals. He kept the liberals spinning with rage, which in turn thrilled his supporters. He understood, with P.J. Wiley, that when the news turns into a show, the winner is the person who puts on the best show.

Pike directed the narrative. He signaled to us the rumors he wanted to spread—and we spread them widely. He'd give an interview or send out a Tweet that contained something along the lines of “Many people are saying. . .” followed by the story he wanted to be told. Other times, he just Tweeted out the lie, and we picked it up and ran with it. He constantly undercut mainstream news outlets and trained his supporters to ignore anything that came from what he called the “lame-stream” or “fake” media. He told his supporters they could believe only him. Pike's critics made fun of how much cable television he watched, but how else was he supposed to plan his game?

I knew we had succeeded the day I walked into a bar and local news was on television. People nodded as they listened, taking in whatever we told them. When news becomes entertainment, all that matters is who puts on the best show.

We watched Jocelyn Heller's approval ratings slip. It was a beautiful thing to behold.

I hired more computer experts and promoted the best ones we already had into leadership positions. To work for me, engineers not only had to be qualified, they also had to be loyal to the cause.

My core team consisted of twelve software engineers who I trained in the arts of propaganda using the Soviet manual

Seton had translated from Russian. Each of them understood the need to control the narrative. The offices of Outreach Analytics were still housed in a building near Pike Towers, but we expanded to an entire floor. Occasionally Seton came as well. Sometimes he brought his son, a kid about seventeen and a true believer. I worried about a kid being let in on our secrets, but Seton assured me there was nothing to worry about. His son, Guyton, struck me as a particularly intense teenager. He always wore the red cap signifying that he was a devout Pike supporter.

I created a structure, putting the three best engineers into leadership positions. That way I had only three direct reports instead of twelve.

Two of the three, Dominik Randall and Joshua Carroll, were both graduates of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. They'd been fraternity brothers and members The Right, the same conservative club I'd joined in college. They had both been working as highly-paid engineers when I hired them.

The third, Nathan Graham, was a quiet man who kept to himself. I suspected he was the smartest of the bunch. Unlike Domink and Nathan, he didn't come up through the academic route. He had grown up in Texas. Right out of high school, for reasons he kept to himself, he enlisted in the Air Force. His talents, though, were evidently clear to his superiors. He was moved into a cybersecurity unit and quickly moved up the ranks until—without a college degree—he was working in an elite cybersecurity unit in the Pentagon. After re-enlisting twice, he moved into the private sector where he became a cybersecurity expert. Companies hired him to assess their security. He tested their security by trying to break in, first, by hacking into their computer systems and then by getting into buildings by accessing their electronic security codes. He was one of those

natural math geniuses.

It wasn't enough for these three to be top-notch engineers. I did thorough background checks on each of them. All three came from die-hard conservative families. All three had impeccable backgrounds.

All three were ambitious, regularly asking if I needed anything else.

One day in late summer a few months before the election, my phone buzzed in my pocket. I was walking down Fifth Avenue after a lunch date, heading back to Pike Towers. I looked at my phone. The caller identification came up as "unknown." I answered anyway and was startled to hear Pike's unmistakable voice.

"Bob," he said. "I have something stunning to tell you." After that, he rambled. Tucked into his ramblings, he said, "Many people are saying that Jocelyn Heller is running a child pornography ring out of the basement of a pizzeria in Queens." He then named the pizzeria. Then he asked, "You know about Jessica Heller's server that was found?"

There was no server. Supposedly a server from Jocelyn's campaign had been seized by law enforcement, but it was made up.

Because I didn't answer, Pike repeated, "You know that server, right?"

"Right," I said.

"It's all there, on that server. Evidence about a pedo-ring."

"Interesting," I said. "Sir. I'm about to go into a meeting. I'll have to talk to you later."

Minutes after I hung up, Fuoco called and told me that we needed a conference call to decide what to do about the pizzeria story. By the time I arrived back at the office, Fuoco had arranged the call. All five executive officers were on the call.

Fuoco included Phillip McHugh as well.

Once we were all on the line, Fuoco said, “We have to do it. It’s what Pike wants.”

“No,” I said. “It’s too preposterous. Nobody will believe it. We’ll end up looking silly.”

It was Phillip McHugh who said, “Let’s do it. What’s the worst thing that happens? If it bombs, Pike will say something outrageous and everyone will forget all about it.”

I still had my doubts, but I went along. It was Charlie who created the story. He created a fake social media account under the name Isabella Abrams, a fictitious person whose hometown was given as Fort Smith, Arkansas. This fictitious person posted this:

My NYPD contact said that emails about a vile and disgusting pedo-ring that was found on Heller’s server. They use a plane called the Lolita Express. It’s clear from the evidence on that server that both Jocelyn and Eddie have a taste for underage girls. We’re talking about enslavement and an international child trafficking ring.

Charlie included a link to a story about stolen yard signs. Evidently nobody bothered to click on the link because the story went viral. Soon my team had the story humming through our thousands of online accounts. P.J. Wiley picked it up and spread the story to his millions of listeners.

I believed the story was so preposterous that most people knew it was a lie, and all in good fun. Then one day I saw Nathan Graham in the lobby of the building that housed our offices.

He took me aside and whispered, “I am so sick and disgusted by the Heller’s pedo ring. We have to bring that woman down.”

I looked closely and saw that he believed it.

“Absolutely,” I said.

A few days later, some idiot wearing a Pike for President tee shirt walked into the pizza parlor with a gun. He threatened to shoot up everyone in the place if the children were not freed.

The owner of the pizza parlor was enraged. He gave tours showing that there was no basement, which obviously proved the story was a complete fabrication. To my amazement, lots of people, including Nathan, continued to believe the story was true.

The next political operative I knew personally to defect from Team Pike was a buddy from college named Kyle Morgan. I hadn't kept in touch with Kyle, but I'd followed his career. When we were in college, Kyle had worked on Nixon's campaign as a volunteer and had been a member of the Right. After getting his undergraduate degree in political science, he went to the University of California at Los Angeles film school for a graduate degree in filmmaking. He didn't finish because, within the year, he was hired by a campaign to film ads. He was so good that he had a steady stream of work.

After what came to be known as Pizzagate, he had enough. He gave an interview on a major cable network and declared himself a Conservative Against Pike. Susan and I sat together in the living room and watched his interview.

Kyle said, “It was all lies. Those ads I created for conservative candidates in which I said we stood for family and traditional values. They were all lies. Look at Arnold Pike, who the party is now embracing. He was married three times. His affairs and wild parties have been the stuff of tabloids for decades.”

The journalist interviewing him held the microphone for him and let him ramble on.

“All those ads I created about how character matters,” Kyle said. “Those were lies too. The Republicans have nominated a vulgarian. I created ads about how America needs to stand up to authoritarian regimes. Arnold Pike has spent decades doing business with Russian oligarchs. I made ads saying that we stand for personal responsibility and look at Pike. He inherited millions from his father, much of which he squandered. Without dirty Russian money, he’d be bankrupt. I made ads saying that we were the party of law and order, but that, too, was a lie. Pike and his circle freely break laws.”

I picked up the remote and turned off the television.

“I know a lot of people like that,” Susan said. “People who refuse to vote for Pike.”

“Me, too,” I said. “Pike’s gonna lose.”

The Washingtonian ran a story about Outreach Analytics and linked us to Pike’s online media campaign. The article stated—falsely—that the operation was run out of Pike Towers. To my even greater dismay, they ran my picture. My name appeared in the caption, but not in the article itself. Nathan Graham called *The Washingtonian* to tell them that was not true that the operation was run in Pike Towers. He got them to print a correction.

After that, I hired a firm that specialized in removing any mention of my name from the Internet. They had some success. I also took more care to stay under the radar, avoiding any situation in which I might find myself mentioned in the media.

Seton called a meeting with me and Fuoco. He said he had something important to tell us. It was an overcast Wednesday morning in September. We sat at a polished oak table in one of the meeting rooms in Pike Towers. The plate-glass window

offered a stunning view of Manhattan. Modern paintings were on the wall. We drank coffee from large mugs.

Seton said, “My contacts in Russia tell me that the Russians set up a troll farm in St. Petersburg. It’s called the Internet Research Agency. Their goal is to elevate Pike to give him a chance at the presidency. Putin hates Jocelyn Heller with a passion. The farm has ninety dedicated staff working full-time. Last year, two highly ranked female IRA employees, came here on an intelligence-gathering mission. They made stops in ten states. Their mission was to understand the divisions and fractures in American culture. They concluded the most divisive issues were racial equality and gun rights. Those are the issues they are seeking to exploit.”

“Are they impersonating Americans?” I asked.

“Very effectively. They are operating Black Lives Matter accounts that are building trust and then deploying content about how the Hellers have undermined issues of importance to Black Americans. They have All Lives Matter accounts deploying payload content about the dangers of Black Lives Matter. They have an account with 300,000 followers called the Heart of Texas and another with almost 200,000 followers called Save Islam. The followers are real Texans who believe these organizations are real. Both organizations told their followers they will hold a demonstration in the same park on the same day this weekend.”

“What a way to make trouble,” Fuoco said.

“They think chaos will help Pike, who promises to restore order. Nobody thinks someone like Jocelyn can restore order.”

“They’re right,” Fuoco said.

I’ll confess that I had a moment in which I wondered whether this was taking dirty campaign tricks too far.

Seton concluded the meeting by giving us both some

information about the Internet Research Agency. After I returned home, I added to the file I had labeled, “D.C.: Disinformation Campaigns.”

The following day, Nathan stopped me in the lobby of the building that housed our offices.

“I follow a group called Heart of Texas,” he told me. “They’re holding a rally this weekend. My parents have been bugging me to come home for a visit, so I think I’ll go this weekend. That way I can go to the rally. So I’ll be traveling on Friday and Monday, but I’ll be plugged in and working.”

I thought of all the reasons Nathan shouldn’t attend that rally, including the reason he didn’t know: It had been arranged by Russians in an attempt to cause a fight.

“It’s all staged,” I told him. “There will be an Islam meeting the same day in the same place.”

“I heard about that,” he said.

“You did?”

“Sure. That’s why I need to be there.”

“If you know it is a setup—” I began. I stopped when I saw Nathan’s face harden. He was a smart guy, but he tended not to think things all the way through.

“Let me know how the rally goes,” I said.

On Sunday evening, he emailed and said, “It was wild. Those Islamic dudes are crazy.”

About this time, Pike shocked the nation by accepting the endorsement of a well-known white supremacist. There was the predictable outcry from mainstream media and the left—the kind of outrage that Pike enjoyed. Now I was completely persuaded that Pike would lose the election. It was one thing for someone like P.J. Wily to use confrontational politics to rile

the liberals and stoke hatred of liberals. I didn't believe such extreme confrontational politics would work for a person campaigning to be president of the United States of America.

In late September, Kyle Morgan published an Op-Ed in *The Washingtonian*. He wrote about the Republican Party in general, and Pike in particular. He said he had his epiphany. "I understand it now," he wrote. "Arnold Pike is not an aberration. He is the natural product of sixty years of conservatism in America. The entire conservative movement has long been permeated with extremism, racism, ignorance, and a desire to return to a bygone era in America—an era of I shrugged it off. Every coalition has undesirable elements. Besides, Morgan left out the need for small government and the importance of having a party that stood for that.

Two weeks after Kyle's Op-Ed, Charlie, who was in charge of the campaign's outreach to the nation's Evangelical leaders arranged a revival meeting in Tennessee. The meeting included Pike and about twenty well-known Evangelical leaders. On the surface, the idea of Pike, of all people, courting Christian voters made no sense. Pike never went to church. He had been married three times. He started his relationships with each of his last two wives while still married to the previous wife. For decades his wild parties with underage models were the staple of the tabloids.

The revival was so successful that Charlie arranged another, larger one in New York with more than fifty Evangelical leaders from across the country. Charlie called me and said, "You've gotta come. You won't believe what you see. It'll be tomorrow at three in the Pike Towers conference room on the twenty-fifth floor."

I entered the conference room just as the meeting was about to begin. The table could seat forty people. All the chairs

were filled, and a few dozen more chairs had been brought in from another room, forming a larger ring just behind. When I arrived, there was standing room only. I stood near the door.

Pike sat at one end of the table where most of the attendees could see him. Pike seemed to have changed into a different person. The swaggering and bellowing Pike had transformed himself into a meditative, pious man. His expression was solemn and contrite. His hands were folded meekly in front of him. He stared at a spot high on the opposite wall, giving him the appearance of one in a trance or deep meditation. He breathed deeply. Occasionally he closed his eyes.

I recognized two people in the group, John Palmer and Louisa Mitchell. Both were connected loosely to the Evangelical churches and were also members of the Pike campaign.

One of the attendees was discussing Pike's three marriages. He was saying, "Arnold Pike has supported abortion. He's even paid for abortions." He turned to Pike and said, "You never denied paying for abortions."

"May I speak?" Pike asked quietly. All eyes turned toward him.

"I have had dark moments, but my faith has seen me through," Pike said softly, as if in a trance. "My faith has shown me the light. When I am president, I will never stop fighting for people of faith. I will appoint judges who understand Christian values. I will restore the faith as the true foundation of American life."

He closed his eyes again and breathed deeply.

"Hallelujah," Louise Mitchell said quietly but with passion.

"Hallelujah," others said, joining in.

John Palmer said, "Can you all just imagine the heathen judges Jocelyn Heller would appoint if she were to become president? God send us Arnold Pike!"

That was when I understood that Palmer and Mitchell had been planted there to help orchestrate the show.

Pike, his eyes still closed, continued breathing deeply. Then, speaking in a voice so faint it sounded unnatural, he said, “We need a revival in this country. We have to get back to common sense and moral values. This country has gone way off the deep end.”

“Amen,” someone in front of me said under his breath.

I was amazed by Pike’s act. He was good. My first impression of him had been correct. If he’d graduated first anywhere, it was in a school of acting. He was a showman.

One woman turned to the man next to her, and speaking quietly—but with just enough force to be heard around the room—she said, “He may be a little rough around the edges, but his heart is in the right place, and he tells it like it is.”

Pike began speaking again, but I don’t remember what he said. I was too fascinated by the reactions of everyone in the room. After he spoke, one of the preachers asked Pike if he could lay his hands on him. Pike didn’t answer. He just closed his eyes and breathed deeply, faking piety so effectively that anyone would think he was feeling God’s presence in the room.

Dozens of the leaders then stood up. Those closest to Pike laid their hands on him and closed their eyes as if in prayer. Others then touched them, creating a kind of chain around the room.

At that moment it seemed that everyone in the room had their eyes closed except me. I waited until there was a shuffling as they moved back to their seats. I then seized the opportunity to slip as quietly as I could from the room.

Later that afternoon, Charlie sent me a text message. “What did you think?”

“Impressive,” I texted back.

Then, two weeks before the election, the porn star scandal hit. The porn star herself went on national television and told the newscaster that Pike had paid her hush money and that she and Pike had an affair while Pike's third wife was recovering from the birth of Pike's youngest child. As proof, she showed a copy of the payment she had received of one hundred and twenty thousand dollars that had been channeled to her through one of Pike's personal lawyers. It was all over the news. When asked for a statement, Pike said his lawyer had paid her off with his own money without telling anyone, so Pike knew nothing about it. "She is lying and demanding money to stay quiet," Pike said. "I've never even met her."

Photographs then circulated showing Pike and the porn star together, both holding drinks at what was obviously a swanky party. Pike changed his story. "I never had an affair with her," he said.

I thought the story was so preposterous that nobody would believe a word Pike said. Then, later that day, Pike's personal lawyer gave an interview and confirmed that he had made the payment himself without telling his boss. "She was lying," he told a reporter, "and I wanted to shut her up, and I didn't want to bother the boss with it."

My bullshit detector went off. To say the least, it strained credulity to believe that Pike knew nothing about hush money paid to a porn star claiming to have had an affair with him while his wife recovered from childbirth. The outrageousness of the story was all anyone was talking about. It was all over the papers and cable shows.

What I should have wondered about at the time, but I didn't, was why this lawyer had been willing to go on national television and tell a humiliating lie. For a lawyer to make a huge payment to a porn star without telling his client was beyond

the pale. To say the least, it strained credulity to think a lawyer would spend that money from his own pocket to protect a client from a false accusation without telling the client or asking his client for reimbursement.

Then, the next day, Pike's campaign was saved by an information dump. Hackers had gotten into a server used by one of Jocelyn's top aides and leaked the personal emails. It was easy to take passages out of context and create a scandal. I suspected—but never knew for sure—that the hackers also edited the emails to make it appear that Jocelyn had made scathing comments about other liberals. American intelligence officers immediately concluded that the hacking had been done by Russians.

Charlie called me and said, "Get on it."

I knew what he meant. I gave the orders and Outreach Analytics swung into action. We blitzed social media and every website we operated with the Jocelyn email "scandal."

The ploy worked. The noise drowned out the porn star scandal.

It turned out that the email leak was more than noise. Whoever doctored the emails understood that a certain segment of America's liberals disliked Jocelyn and had wanted a different candidate. The doctored emails had Jocelyn's staff making scathing comments about her former opponent and saying things that completely enraged his supporters. You'd think it would have occurred to them to doubt the authenticity of emails leaked by Russian hackers, but it didn't. Anger and confirmation bias persuaded them that the hacked and leaked emails were authentic.

A day or so later, reporters were back on the scent of the porn scandal story. Pike deflected them by calling a particularly annoying reporter, Lisa Carlisle, "Lyn' Lisa." Reporters were so

shocked by the juvenile name-calling that they reported it as a story and again forgot about the porn star.

Here's the part that's hard to explain: Watching the way Pike ran the liberals in circles was fun. Watching his antics was like watching a fight. It's hard to look away. It's also hard not to silently cheer at the way he played the liberals for fools. I knew Pike had his flaws, of course, but I was willing to overlook a few sins for the sake of unity on the right, and for the sake of destroying the rot that was eating at America.

One night during the weeks leading up to the election, after Susan was asleep, I lay in bed and listened to the sound of her breathing. I reached for my phone and searched for Rochelle's name. It had been more than thirty years since I'd seen her. The first thing that came up was her book: She'd published a middle-school-level book called *All About Dolphins*. Next, I saw a social media post in which she called herself a Conservative Against Pike. I scrolled through her social media postings and learned that she was living in Philadelphia. She was married to an architect and she had two grown daughters.

It wasn't that she *couldn't* have children. She hadn't wanted them with me.

I searched through "images" and found her picture. Her hair was cut short. Her face was framed by short wispy hair. She was still heart-stopping beautiful.

* * *

I stopped talking when I realized that Jessica had her hand on her throat.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"I'm fine." That's when I saw her eyes were glassy with tears. What she said next startled me deeply. "You poor man,"

she said. “You never understood her.”

“I never deserved her. I probably don’t deserve Susan, either.”

She sat still for a long time and then, even more quietly, said, “Go on.”

* * *

Pike won the presidency by the slimmest of margins—not the slimmest in history, but he barely squeaked in, helped by two fortunate circumstances. First, people came out to vote for Pike who had never before voted in a presidential election. These were people who previously had no interest in politics, but they hated the liberals and therefore loved Pike. Second, our antics dissuaded enough liberals not to vote for Jocelyn. They didn’t vote for Pike. They voted for a third-party candidate who, like us, hated the Democrats.

Not long into Pike’s presidency, members of Congress got wind of the fact that there had been some coordination between Pike’s campaign and the Russian government. They started to investigate. Pike responded by pressuring the FBI director to drop the investigation. When he refused, Pike fired him, which set off a maelstrom. “Consciousness of guilt,” the liberals cried. “Why would Pike fire the FBI for investigating him if he had nothing to hide?”

I was starting to suspect the reason: Pike could not tolerate any disloyalty. The very act of investigating him was the greatest possible insult, and he couldn’t tolerate it.

The attorney general then appointed a special investigator. Pike responded by targeting and firing any law enforcement personnel who didn’t help him undermine the investigation. Most of the people he targeted were liberals who he believed

hated him. No doubt, he was a bit paranoid. If he as much as thought someone didn't vote for him, he assumed the person was an enemy. There were some people who he wanted to fire, but couldn't reach, so he targeted them on social media and made their lives miserable.

That was when Pike began moving people loyal to him into positions of authority and leadership in law enforcement agencies and the Department of Justice. At the same time, Phillip began moving the men Pike referred to as Second Amendment people into rank and file law enforcement positions. Like Pike, these guys had no respect for traditional law enforcement agencies and departments because they believed that agencies had been subverted by liberals who were forcing a new order on the nation.

Not all of the Second Amendment people infiltrated law enforcement departments. Many formed militias. Pike knew and approved. More specifically, they formed paramilitary units that Pike knew he could call on at any time. Before long, from what I could gather from whispers, Pike could put an actual fighting army into the field.

* * *

"I know who those militia guys are," Jessica said. "My aunt, who incidentally is a strong Pike supporter, calls them weirdos. She thinks they're harmless and she's cool with them as long as they vote Republican."

"They're not harmless. Most people underestimate them. They were not, in fact, a bunch of weirdos. Many are well-educated. They are well trained and organized. A lot of them were trained in the military. If Pike called on them, there are no limits to what they would be willing to do."

"Okay," she said. "Go on."

* * *

Another thing that happened after Pike won the election: For the first time, I had enemies. Until then, nobody much cared about me or my work. But Pike put us all in the spotlight, and I hated it. One of the first angry phone calls I got was from my oldest brother.

“Maybe you should rethink your support of Arnold Pike,” he said.

Both of my brothers were lifelong Republicans. Both, though, rejected Pike.

I said something soothing and conciliatory—I dislike direct confrontations—and got off the phone as quickly as I could.

One evening while I was waiting for Susan in the private restaurant in Pike Towers, I was approached by a resident of the building who I had never met. She was a slender, well-groomed woman about fifty years old. “You’re one of those Outreach Analytics people, aren’t you?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I said.

“I read about you in *The Washingtonian*.”

I knew exactly which article she meant. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I repeated.

She stared at me but didn’t respond. Slowly, deliberately, she walked away.

Then, things took an unexpected turn. Pike began directing his ire against the conservatives who had failed to support him in the election. It was one thing when he targeted liberals and proponents of big government. But when he started going after conservatives, I felt shocked and sick.

It wasn’t long before he got around to Larry. He attacked Larry on social media, posting Tweets about how Larry was a

terrible commentator and couldn't be trusted. He said Larry was a conservative in name only and secretly sympathized with the liberals. He said Larry was trying to undermine conservatism. As a result, Larry received a constant stream of death threats from Pike's zealous supporters.

Larry called me and said, "Can you call him off? I'm getting death threats."

"I wish I could. Did you ask Charlie?"

"Charlie is trying, but he said Pike won't budge."

"I have no influence over Pike at all," I said. It was true. If Charlie couldn't budge him, I certainly couldn't.

"I have more calls to make," Larry said. "I need to find someone who can get this to stop."

It was hard to watch what happened next: Pike refused to let up on Larry until the network where Larry was employed fired him.

As soon as I saw the news, I called Larry and offered him money.

"I've got some savings," Larry said. "I'll be fine."

"If you need anything, let me know."

"Thanks, buddy," he said.

The Washingtonian kept a running total of the number of lies Pike told in office. He was up to four thousand lies by the end of his first year, and ten thousand by July of his second year. He lied so effortlessly it wasn't clear at times whether he was using lies as a weapon, or whether he believed the things he was saying.

Toward the end of Pike's second year, when Democratic candidates were already declaring themselves in the running for the 2020 election, Larry called me. "I'm going to run for president," he told me. "I'm going to try to take Pike down in

the primaries.”

“Do you think you can?”

“I’ll give it my best. Can I count on your support?”

“Tell me where, and I’ll send money. I’ll be your biggest donor. But I still work for Pike Enterprises, so I have to lay low.”

“I understand,” he said.

I signed up for his campaign newsletter. One day, Larry sent me an email with a link to a video. He wrote only three letters in the subject line: OMG. I clicked on the link. The video was from a campaign speech he gave to a crowd of about five thousand in Virginia.

Larry stood on a stage, raised his fist, and shouted, “We need a president who doesn’t lie to us constantly!”

“Booo!” the crowd replied.

Undaunted, Larry shouted, “We need a president who doesn’t destroy anyone who gets in his way!”

“Booo!” the crowd responded.

“We need a president who doesn’t invite help from foreign autocrats!”

“Boo!” shouted the audience.

That was when I had my—what do you call it?—epiphany. I knew we’d created a monster and the monster was out of control. Until then, the idea of Heller-style communism scared me more than anything Pike was doing. Now I saw that the cure can be worse than the disease. But I was too frightened to do anything but watch as Pike tightened his grip on power.

When the four of us went out—me, Susan, Ken, and Eliza, we avoided talking about work or politics. It was the least Ken and I could do for our wives, who wanted vacations but settled for evenings out in Manhattan. I knew, though, that Ken

was growing uncomfortable with Pike and his antics because, on those occasions when politics or Pike intruded on our conversation, he visibly recoiled. Once, for example, we went into a bar. There was a news program on the television. Pike's picture showed up. Ken shifted so that he wasn't looking at the screen.

I was therefore not surprised when Ken called me on a Saturday morning. "Can we get together?" he asked. "I need to talk."

"Certainly," I said.

He suggested coffee at a swanky cafe a block from Pike Towers. Ken had long since purchased a condo of his own in Pike Towers. When I arrived he was already there. He'd gotten his coffee and a pastry and was sitting at a private table in the corner. I bought myself a coffee and pastry and joined him.

He skipped the small talk. "I think I need to resign."

I didn't have to ask why. I knew why.

Ken took a sip of his coffee and then said, "I was okay with bending the rules. I was okay with making a buck here and there. I didn't mind the crass parts of Pike's personality. The job was good. The pay was great. But this has gone too far. I honestly believe he's a danger to the country. I'm sure you can see the problem."

"I see the problem," I said, "but I don't think you should resign."

"Why not?" he asked.

I steepled my fingers and tapped them together as I thought about how to answer. My gut told me that resigning was a bad idea. Staying was safest. I trust my gut in these matters, but my instincts are always hard to explain.

"Why do you think I should stay?" he asked. "I mean, other than the salary. I'm not interested in looking for a different

job. I'm not ready to retire, but I don't know if I can stomach working for Pike any longer."

"I think you should stay there, and lay low. Slow down. Take fewer projects. Reduce your hours. But stay."

He sighed. "Maybe you're right. Pike is sensitive to anything that feels like disloyalty."

"I just don't think you should make any enemies right now. I don't think you should draw attention to yourself. Charlie told me that Pike has been seething about Larry ever since Larry refused to endorse him for president. Pike carries grudges."

He sighed again. "I read Kyle Morgan's Op-Ed piece. Did you see it?"

"I did."

"I agree with him," he said. "I think we need to build a true conservative party based on true conservative values like the importance of tradition. Having Pike in the White House is an embarrassment. It's hard to justify being a conservative."

We drank our coffee in silence. Then he asked, "What's going to happen after Pike has completely destroyed mainstream media? What's left but an authoritarian regime?"

"The alternative is a liberal regime," I said. "Which is just a different kind of authoritarianism. They don't allow dissent. They want complete control. They seize property that doesn't belong to them in the interests of what they call spreading the wealth."

"I think a liberal regime would be better than Pike," he said.

"I still think a liberal regime is worse."

"But using Pike to fight the liberals means we have to give complete power to Pike. We're at his mercy."

I nodded in agreement. We were at his mercy.

"You know. I'd like to take my own advice and step back

from Pike, his administration, and his business empire. I'm afraid it will look suspicious if we both reduce our hours at the same time."

"Nah," Ken said. "You report to Phillip and you're never in the office anyway. Phillip has almost nothing to do with my division. Besides, I don't have to say anything to anyone. Nobody knows how much I work."

On Monday, I made an appointment to speak to Phillip McHugh in his office. Phillip was now one of the top three people in the organization whose last name was not "Pike."

I sat across in a chair facing his desk. "I think I need to slow down," I told him. "My health isn't great. I'd like to reduce my hours."

"No, problem," he said.

I kept a close eye on his reaction. He seemed to take me at my word. We made small talk, and then his secretary announced his next appointment. We shook hands, and I left. I felt satisfied with the outcome.

As I was walking home, I called Ken and told him what I had done.

"Eventually we'll be able to quit altogether," Ken said, "but your hunch was right. This isn't the time to make enemies. For now, we need to stay out of Pike's crosshairs. I saw the way he went after your friend Larry."

"Let's talk soon," I said, then we both hung up.

I was still listed as one of the founding members of Outreach Analytics, and my name was in the corporate papers for Pike Enterprises, but I no longer did any work. I managed my portfolio. Susan and I went out often. We talked about a vacation, but it just never happened.

One evening when Charlie and I met for drinks in Manhattan he told me, in a confidential whisper, “We’ve been busy moving loyalists into all of these agencies. Our people are getting jobs as agents and officers. It’s not enough that he can appoint the people in charge of the agencies. We need our people at all levels.”

My internal alarm flashed red. “Pike is supposed to be dismantling these agencies,” I said, “not weaponizing them.”

“He wants control,” Charlie said. “Complete control.”

I felt a chill. How was this not worse?

Charlie said, “Soon we will have thousands of loyalists who take orders directly from Pike at all levels of the federal bureaucracy.”

“Why?” I asked. “What do we get from that?”

“We get protection,” Charlie said.

A beat of time passed. Then another. “Protection from what?” I asked. “Who protected Larry?”

Charlie gave me an astonished look as if the answer was obvious. “Larry will be fine. There are bigger issues than any one person’s job. Pike is making sure law enforcement agencies are packed with loyalists, which protects us from the liberals weaponizing the agencies for their purposes.”

Wait, I wanted to say. *We’re talking about Larry Raskins, my friend since kindergarten and your college roommate.* Did Charlie really feel nothing at seeing Larry’s career ruined?

“Are you going soft on me, buddy?” Charlie asked.

“Of course not,” I said, but I felt sick.

“Here’s the thing about Pike,” Charlie said. “Unlike Nixon, he’ll never back down. That’s why he’s our guy. He’s a fighter.”

Charlie continued talking, but I had trouble focusing. I forced myself to nod as if I agreed—but Charlie’s logic wasn’t making sense to me anymore. A few times I caught him giving

me a curious look. I was happy when we finally parted company.

During the week before my arrest, I didn't go out much. Most of the time, I sat in my living room and read books. I went back to the classics of government I had read in high school. I read Locke, Rousseau, and Hobbs. I read the classic sociologist like Max Weber and was stunned by his wisdom. What I couldn't see while I was in high school was crystal clear to me now.

"Why are you reading all those books?" Susan asked once.
"I'm trying to figure out where I went wrong."

* * *

I then told Jessica about my arrest, the discussion I'd had with Phillip early during my first morning in the prison, and how I had made the decision to call her.

"Now you know the whole story," I told her. "I was framed. But I'm not innocent."

She sat for a moment without moving. Then she pulled a stamped postcard from her prison-issue bag and handed it to me. It was addressed to a post office box. "Drop this in the mail when I can print the story."

We stood up and shook hands. Her grip was strong and warm. She squeezed my hand a moment longer than she needed to.

"Good luck," she said warmly.

She left the room and closed the door softly behind her. I looked around one last time at the scuffed cinderblock walls in this room smaller than the span of my arms. If all went well, this would be my last time in this room.

If walls had ears, the cinderblock walls in this room had

heard my entire story—or most of it, anyway. What remained to be seen was how the story would end.

I heard footsteps approaching, and stood up. The warden opened the door and said, “Come on.”

When we reached my cell, I stepped inside. There was an envelope on the table. I waited until the door locked behind me. First, I turned and looked out the spy hole. I couldn’t see the warden who had escorted me back, but I heard his footsteps receding.

Then, I went to the table, picked up the envelope, and turned it over. It was sealed and addressed to me. I tore open the envelope and pulled a slip of paper on which was printed:

This is a friendly warning to let you know that we are watching you. Buck up and keep your courage. Sign the damned confession.

I felt a chill. *Are you going soft on us?* Charlie had asked. I recoiled from the thought. No, it couldn’t be. Not Charlie.

But my mind was spinning. I wondered how common it was to use a word like ‘soft’ in this context. Then I wondered if I should try to reach Susan—but I knew what she would say. If they were ready, we had to go for it. She’d flat-out refuse to leave without me. Even if someone like Charlie was behind this, we had to take our chances.

My stomach was jittery and my chest felt tight. Because I had nothing else to do, I found myself repeatedly going to the spy hole and looking out. Each time, the corridor was empty. Wild thoughts came to me. Any time I heard a noise, I thought someone was coming to kill me and plant a suicide note next to my body.

I remembered the woman who had approached me in the

lobby, and the call from my angry brother. Maybe I had been thinking about this all wrong. Maybe whoever had it in for me right now and was playing these games was partly motivated by hatred of Pike and all I had done. I pushed the thought aside. How could Phillip and Potato Face possibly team up with an idealist? Idealists don't do things like imprison their enemies on false charges.

I paced but there was a limit to how many hours I could spend pacing the cell. I went to the window and leaned my forehead against the metal grille of the window. In the courtyard was an organized exercise regime: At least twenty-five men were jogging the perimeter while another group did pushups in the center.

Storm clouds were gathering in the sky. Rain would not be the worst thing this evening. It would help cloak us in the darkness.

When a warden came to ask if I wanted exercise time in the courtyard, I said yes. Anything was better than pacing this cell or lying on the cot looking at the ceiling. By the time we reached the courtyard, the exercise regime had ended. About a dozen inmates idled around. I alternated between sitting on a bench and walking the perimeter. When it started drizzling, a warden returned me to my cell.

I had nothing now to do but wait.

Sometime later, a key turned in the lock I knew a warden was coming to bring my dinner tray. To my complete astonishment, Potato Face entered, carrying the tray. I watched in terror as he set the tray on the table. Wasn't he supposed to be on his way to Manhattan to meet with Pike by now?

I took a few deep breaths to make sure my voice would be steady, then said, "Don't you ever get a day off, Dylan?"

“I’m always on the job.”

He paused to give me a chilling smile.

Quietly I said, “I’ll tell Phillip you’re doing a good job.”

He looked perplexed—as if confused that I’d figured out something so obvious.

I said, “Phillip must have forgotten to tell you that I graduated at the top of my law school class.”

“I hate smart asses,” he said.

He reddened a bit and his facial muscles tightened. I could see he meant it. He hated smart guys. I felt his anger—I literally felt it—and knew I’d gone too far.

“I don’t know why you would hate smart guys,” I said smoothly. The cajoling flattery helped. He softened a bit.

“I’m not such a bad guy, Dylan. Did you know I work for Pike?”

“I don’t believe it. Phillip says I gotta watch you because you’re dangerous.”

“Do I look dangerous?”

The question threw him. He looked me over. From his viewpoint, a man like me was anything but dangerous. To him I probably looked eighty. He was fit and young.

“Did you try looking me up?” I asked.

“No.”

“You weren’t the slightest bit curious? You know my name. Robert James Martin. Why don’t you look? When you get off work, look me up.”

He took a phone from his pocket and started pressing keys with his thumbs. I assumed he was doing Internet searches.

“There is nothing here about you. Nothing comes up.”

“Now search for my name, ‘Pike Towers’ and these numbers.” I gave him the transaction number of the deal in which I’d sold units in Pike Towers.

I could see from his expression that he found it.

“I was the broker. See. I work for Pike. Phillip is jealous because Pike favors me. Pike has been moving me up into positions of more authority. You are not keeping an eye on me at Pike’s direction. You stepped into a power struggle between me and Phillip. He’s using you for a stooge.”

He looked at me as if trying to decide if I was lying. I was, of course, lying through my teeth.

“When are you seeing Phillip next?”

“Maybe tonight. I have an appointment to see Pike himself.”

“Perfect. The moment you talk to Pike, ask him, ‘What’s going on with Robert James Martin, the communications guy? The friend of Charlie Rocklin. Is he a good guy?’ I can assure you Pike will tell you that I am.”

More precisely, as soon as Potato Face showed up at Pike Towers and tried to get through the lobby to the private restaurant he’d know someone had been playing him for a fool.

“I’ll do that,” he said.

“Let me know tomorrow what you find out.”

“Yeah,” he said. “I will.” With that, he swung around, marched from the cell, and slammed and locked the door.

I looked at the meal tray on the table. I had no appetite. My stomach was too jittery. I had even less of an appetite when I saw that the meal was a hot dog and fries and potato salad, but I forced myself to eat. I would need the energy. If there was a book entitled Jail Breaks for Idiots, I was pretty sure it would include the advice not to try a jailbreak on an empty stomach.

I ate slowly and carefully. When I finished, I put the tray by the door.

The warden who came to get my tray was, fortunately, not Potato Face. By now, Potato Face should be on his way to Manhattan. The warden who entered was one I’d seen before.

He had eyes that reminded me of a fish. Once he was gone, I got ready to leave. I changed into a fresh jogging suit and brushed my teeth. I put on my shoes and hid my prison I'd under the stack of towels.

I went to the window and looked out. The sky was almost completely dark, streaked with a deep purple. The moon, covered mostly by clouds, was just above the buildings.

Time ticked by. I went to the cot and lay down. Each time I heard a noise, my chest tightened. I breathed deeply and rhythmically to calm my racing heart.

Sometime later, I heard the sound of footsteps in the corridor. I sat up so quickly that the bed springs groaned. I held still and listened as the key turned in the lock.

The door swung open, and there was Ken and a man about fifty years old. The man wore small rectangular glasses, had gray hair and a thin graying mustache, and a friendly, open face. Instantly I was on my feet.

“Mr. Miller?” I said quietly and respectfully.

“Yes,” he said. He held the door open for me. This was happening just as I had imagined it.

We went down the stairs, but instead of heading toward the front of the prison, as I expected, we took a different turn and went into a corridor in which I'd never before been. At the end was a metal door. Miller entered a code on a keypad, inserted a metal key from his ring, and opened the door. We walked through and he closed the door behind us. The corridor was lined with what appeared to be executive offices. At the end was a door with a frosted glass window and the name “Carson Miller” stenciled in black lettering. Miller opened the door and gestured me inside. Ken handed me a bag.

Miller said, “You can change in there,” and pointed to a

private restroom.

I ducked into the restroom and opened the package. Susan had packed a change of clothes for me: khakis, an undershirt, a pullover sweater, street shoes, and socks. I changed quickly.

When I emerged wearing street clothes, Carson led me back into the corridor. At the end was a metal door. He pressed a security code and keyed open a door. The door led to yet another corridor, this one lined with security cameras. The glowing red lights told me we were being watched.

At the end was a door with a small frosted window. I knew from the dark window that the door led to the outside.

We reached the door and Miller went through three steps: He keyed in a code, he pressed a badge to an electronic lock, and he used a regular key in the deadbolt. He swung open the door to what I assumed was a staff parking lot.

“Thank you, sir,” Ken said. “You’ll receive a bonus directly from Pike Enterprises.”

“It’s already been deposited,” he said.

I said nothing. My knees were weak with relief. I felt such gratitude I was afraid if I tried to speak my trembling voice would give us away. Ken and Carson shook hands. I extended my hand to Carson as well. His handshake was firm, brisk, and friendly.

Ken and I stepped into the cool night air and Carson closed the door behind us.

“This way,” Ken said.

A sidewalk hugged the building. The parking lot to our right was flooded with light, but parts of the sidewalk up ahead were in shadows. Ken and I walked briskly.

We turned a corner and came face to face with a man pointing a semi-automatic pistol at us. “Oh no you don’t,” he said.

The man was Nathan Graham, my engineer. I was stunned.
“What the hell are you doing, man?” Nathan asked. “Didn’t you get my notes?”

His notes?

A strange thing can happen in an emergency: You can find a strength you didn’t know you had, and—despite a rapidly beating heart and suddenly trembling hands—you find you can keep your voice steady.

“Nathan,” I managed to say in a strangely calm voice. “You don’t understand what you are stepping into.”

“I know more than you think I know,” he said.

“Do you know that the charges against me were invented out of thin air?”

“Of course, I know that. I was the one who hacked the court website and put the notices there. Now. You’re listening to me. Got it? I need both of you to walk over to that car.” He pointed his gun vaguely toward the parking lot.

Ken started to move in the direction Nathan pointed. I remained where I was.

“Ken,” I said. I saw the terror on Ken’s face. Ken looked at me. I shook my head to indicate that Ken should stay where he was.

“I don’t think you heard me,” Nathan said to me. “I need you both to walk over to that car.”

Speaking very slowly to give myself time to think, I said to Nathan, “You haven’t thought this all the way through. Do you realize what will happen to you if you murder me in cold blood in the parking lot of a prison? This place is swarming with armed officers. The minute that gun fires, they’ll be all over you. Kill me and not Ken, and there’s a witness. Kill Ken, and you kill an entirely innocent man. I’m as innocent as he is—no charges have ever been filed against me—as you well know.”

Nathan was a smart guy, but he tended not to think things all the way through.

I went on, “If you think Pike will offer you a presidential pardon to save you from criminal charges, you don’t know Pike. This is too close to him. I work for him. I’m connected to his inner circle. If he pardons my murderer it will raise all kinds of alarm bells and make him look bad. Pike is not about to do something that makes him look bad.”

“Phillip said—“ Nathan began, then stopped.

“Do you think Phillip will be able to help you? Phillip is a thug. He needed you to hack into a website to stage this charade.”

“Yes. Phillip is an idiot,” Nathan said.

“What did Phillip tell you?” I asked.

“Phillip didn’t tell me anything. I told him. I told him everything.”

“What did you tell him?”

“I told him you secretly funded Larry Haskin’s campaign, even after Larry turned against Pike. I told him that you were turning against the organization. I could see it. I told him Sam had called you from Riyadh and you were planning to meet him at the airport.”

“You were the one spying on me,” I said.

Of course, it was him. Nathan was a professional hacker. He knew how to break into places. Keeping track of Susan and getting into our apartment had been child’s play to him.

“Phillip didn’t understand how much of a danger you are, even when I told him that you’re talking to that journalist. But I knew. You know too much. You can blow the lid off the whole operation. You might say I did a little freelancing.”

“You turned against me,” I said, to keep the conversation going to buy some time while I tried to think up with a plan for

getting past him.

“No. You turned against the organization. I knew you weren’t loyal anymore to Pike. You’d become a traitor.”

“Okay,” I said. “So you were spying on me. You heard me tell Susan that I was on my way to the airport. You called Phillip and you hatched a plan to arrest me with Sam. Phillip got that thug, Dylan Biggs, to help you out. Phillip pulled some strings, probably called in a few favors, and got me booked into the prison.”

At that point—with access to the apartment under ours—it wouldn’t have been hard for him to keep an eye on Susan and figure out what we were up to.

Meanwhile, we were at a stalemate. He was pointing a gun at me, which he didn’t want to use. He wanted us to get into the car willingly, which I was not going to do.

“When you broke into our apartment,” I asked, “what were you looking for?”

“Your insurance.”

I was slow with that one. I couldn’t think of how he would have known about that. It took me a moment to remember that I’d told Phillip that I had insurance of my own.

“The insurance you wanted was in a file marked D.C.,” I said. “It’s still there. You missed it because you were looking for evidence of financial crimes. Nobody cares about financial crimes, Nathan. Do you know what D.C. stands for?”

I waited. He narrowed his eyes to small slits.

“It stands for disinformation campaigns,” I said. Then, in as gentle and soothing a voice as I could manage, I said, “I think you deserve the truth. Do you agree? Do you want me to tell you the truth?”

He didn’t move, so I went on. “I’m telling you the truth because I care about you. I hired you. You’re like a son to me.

Remember that Heart of Texas rally you attended just before the election?”

He looked at me blankly. To trigger his memory, I said, “You told me you follow a group called Heart of Texas. Your parents had been bugging you to go home for a visit. You went that weekend so you could go to the rally. You wanted to be there because an Islamic event was being held nearby—”

“Yeah? So?”

The organization, Heart of Texas, was invented by a troll farm in St. Petersburg. Those Muslims didn’t crash the rally. The clever troll farm in Russia invented two competing organizations and scheduled them for rallies in the same place. That Muslim group in Texas thinks *you* crashed *their* rally. The Russians set one American against each other.”

“You fell into the trap. You took the bait.”

He stood still, watching me.

To drive home the point, I spoke quietly. “You were manipulated, Nathan. By Russians. They played you like a fool. There’s more. Remember the Heller pedo ring you were riled about during the election? It was all a lie. I can prove it. The evidence is in the file. Charlie invented the story out of whole cloth. He posted it on social media under a fake name, Isabella Abrams. He gave her hometown as Fort Smith, Arkansas. First, he made sure there wasn’t actually an Isabella Abrams in Fort Smith. He included a link to a story about stolen yard signs. The account has now been removed.”

“There was no pedo ring?” he said.

“No. You can read all about it in the file marked D.C.”

“How do I know you’re not lying now?”

In a quiet, soothing voice, I said, “You can check it out. I’m sure you can figure out how to get into our apartment. I can give you the key if you want.”

“I don’t want your key,” he said.

“Do you want more examples of how you fell for lies? Remember when the Republican running for city council in Arizona lost that special election? Pike claimed the loss was due to fraud. There was no fraud. He made it up. He might have believed it himself. I gave up trying to figure out whether Pike was a true believer who believed his own lies, or whether he was a master manipulator. At any rate, he sent out a fundraising email. You donated half your salary. That was noble of you. But there was no election fraud. Pike invented it all for a fundraising ploy. The money went to fund a private security detail for Pike. Now, maybe if Pike has told you what he wanted the money for, you would have given it anyway. I didn’t know until after you donated the money or I would have tried to warn you.”

A cold wind rustled the leaves overhead. I tightened my chest muscles to keep from shivering. He seemed to shrink a few inches in height.

“I wanted to tell you sooner,” I said. “I wish I had. You were what is known as a useful idiot.”

In fact, it had never occurred to me to tell him the truth. But it should have.

We all three stood still. Nathan and I were looking at each other. Nobody wanted to be the first to move.

“Now,” I said softly. “This is federal property. If you shoot me and Ken in cold blood on federal property you will be guilty of two murders under federal law. That’s a capital offense.”

I could tell from the sudden hardness in his eyes that he knew just what I meant. To make sure, I said, “That means the electric chair.”

Both he and Ken were watching me.

“It won’t be worth it, Nathan. Nobody will hail you as a hero. Phillip will pretend that he doesn’t know you. You will

be a criminal and you'll die an ugly, ignoble death. It's a quick death, but it isn't painless."

He shrank another few inches.

I turned my back to Nathan. "I turned my back so that if you shoot me, it will be clear it was a cold-blooded murder." Then, quietly, to Ken, I said, "I'm going. Are you coming?"

I walked away from Nathan deliberately, without haste. A moment later, Ken was at my side. Neither of us looked back. I thought about the physics of a semi-automatic pistol, and I wondered if we would even hear the sound, or whether, if Nathan shot us, we would die instantly.

But he didn't shoot. We got to the next corner and ducked out of his sight. We then ran the rest of the way to Ken's white Mercedes, which was idling with the headlights on. Eliza was in the driver's seat. Susan was in the back. I slipped in next to Susan. After Ken was in the passenger seat and both doors were closed, Eliza put her foot on the gas.

We were out of the prison parking lot on a dark road when my heart stopped racing enough for me to speak. "Where are we going?" I asked.

"North," Susan said, "To the John C. Munro Hamilton International Airport in Ontario. If we drive straight through, we can be there in eight hours."

"So what took you so long to get out of there?" Eliza asked.

Ken told them how I had talked our way past Nathan Graham.

"I never liked that guy," Susan said. "He seems shifty."

"Now it all makes sense," I said. "Phillip didn't stage my hearing—something that had always seemed beyond his abilities. He fooled me into thinking a case was pending against me by having Nathan hack the website and post the notice.

Sam's was probably fake, too."

Susan said, "More information about the Middle East scandal came out today. We think you were right. Someone in Pike's immediate circle was trading American secrets for a lucrative licensing deal and Phillip needed someone to take the blame."

"So he set up Sam to take the fall. And I stumbled into the scene by going to meet him."

"It looks like that."

I pressed the button to lower the window a few inches. I wanted to feel the wind. There is nothing like the rush of wind in a car on a highway to make a person feel free. I breathed in the night air, then rolled the window back up. I watched the trees as we whizzed by them. The sky overhead was still cloudy, but in the distance, I saw stars.

"Where are we going from Ontario?" I asked.

"I thought you'd never ask," Susan said. "From Ontario, we're flying to Sidney, Australia, and then to the tropical island of Efate, which houses Port Vila the capital of the nation of Vanuatu."

I had literally never heard of the place.

Ken turned around and explained. "Vanuatu is one of the few nations that doesn't have an extradition treaty with the United States. We don't think anyone will come after us, but we're not taking any chances."

"Eliza and I picked Vanuatu of the available choices," Susan said. "We always wanted a tropical vacation."

Epilogue

The swimming pool sparkled in the sunlight. The sky was the clear translucent blue you only see in the tropics. I sat in a chaise lounge and sipped a glass of chilled wine. Just beyond the pool was a stretch of white sand, and beyond that was the ocean—a brilliant green blue. The whisper of the sea was a comforting lull, like a faint heartbeat. The air was salty and pungent.

The door to the pool house opened and Susan came out, wearing a bathing suit, large sunglasses, and a floppy straw sunhat. She carried a small stack of magazines and newspapers. She sat down on the chaise lounge and opened one of the newspapers. We had no Internet access. We got our news the old-fashioned way—through newspapers and magazines that came through the mail. They were generally at least a week old.

We'd been here now about two months. Within days of our arrival on the island, we purchased two neighboring beach-front bungalows. We all four felt the same way: If we never returned to the United States, we were fine with that, too. Why not spend the rest of our days on a beautiful island paradise?

Within two weeks of our arrival, the scandal of someone attempting to trade nuclear secrets for personal gain was no longer in the news at all. There was some lingering coverage about how Sam had misunderstood his orders, but the matter was pretty much dropped. That means that it grabbed headlines

for about the same amount of time as Pike's porn-star-payoff-scandal, and a bit less than Pike's threat of nuclear war against North Korea.

The disruption of our lives was just one more casualty in Pike's wake of destruction. Meanwhile, Sam was trapped by his lie. It would always be attached to him, like a permanent, ugly stain.

One morning after we'd been on the island for about three months, I walked to the post office to pick up our newspapers. Lest you think that living on a remote island changed the nature of my mental focus, I can assure you that I remained vigilant. I scanned the streets and the horizon for anything out of the ordinary. It wasn't exactly fear that I felt. It was more like a watchfulness, the feeling I'd had since childhood that lurking just beyond my vision were evil forces.

Here, on the island, the unseen dangers no longer frightened me quite as much. They were there, like drawings of dragons on the far reaches of medieval maps—more like cartoons than actual threats.

I suspected the day would come when I'd let people like Larry and my immediate family know where I was, but for the foreseeable future, I liked being entirely anonymous and far away.

The post office was the kind of flat-roofed, glass-and-aluminum structure built in the United States in the 1950s. The metal trim on the exterior was painted pumpkin orange. There were two signs in the windows, and both were in English. The first said "Vanuatu Post," and the second said, "Western Union: Money Transfer." Just inside the window was an ATM machine.

Susan and I had our own post office boxes. Ken and Eliza had theirs. Once each week, I walked to the post office for

our mail. I opened our mailbox. Inside was the usual stack of newspapers and magazines. Newspapers and magazines were our only contract with our previous life and the world beyond the island. I tucked the stack of newspapers and magazines into my satchel.

I didn't take any of them out again until I was back in my lounge chair facing the swimming pool. Susan was at a table near the swimming pool with Eliza. I could hear the hum of their voices, but mostly I heard the whisper of the ocean.

Rochelle had once said that she could live her life on a sunny beach with a book. At the time, I had been unable to imagine such a life. And here I was.

I started with *The Washingtonian*. After I'd gone through each newspaper, I pulled a copy of *City Life* magazine from the satchel. The lead story splashed across the front of the magazine was, "The Memoirs and True Confessions of a Disinformation Warrior." The author was Jessica Harris. My heart pounded. I flipped through the story, skimming quickly. Then I turned back to the beginning and read more closely. There it was—the story I had told her but boiled down to the essence and written in beautiful, searing prose.

The article concluded by promising an upcoming three-part series on disinformation tactics and how they work.

Would it make a difference? It remained to be seen whether enough people would pay attention. The problem, of course, was how people got their information. Social media meant people were bombarded with a constant stream of headlines, snippets, opinions, and declarations by experts, many of whom were not actually experts, but most people didn't know how to tell the difference. The result was that droplets of truth were lost in the cascade of irrelevant information and outright lies.

Maybe there had been advantages to the old-fashioned,

boring, Walter Cronkite way of getting the news.

In her story, Jessica referred to me as Anonymous, and for that, I'm grateful. I hate publicity. Eventually, someone may figure out who I am, if anyone cares enough to bother, but for now, I'm still anonymous. You see, my name isn't really Robert James Martin.

You didn't expect me to tell the whole truth, did you?

