

THE DIRECTIVE

A Novel

MATTHEW QUIRK



Little, Brown and Company

New York Boston London

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For Ellen

THE POLICE CLOSED in. I could feel his blood dry, tighten like scales on my skin. It marked me as the gunman. I knew I should raise my hands and surrender, trust my life to the laws I had sworn to uphold, the laws that had torn my family apart.

Or I could give myself to the killers. They waited in the black car beside me, my only escape. The rear door swung open. I was innocent, but I'd seen enough to know the truth no longer mattered.

A hand reached out for me.

The only way out was to go in deeper.

I stepped into the car.

CHAPTER 1

Four days earlier

NEVER BET IN another man's game. It's a simple rule I picked up from my father. So what was I doing walking down a Manhattan alley, fingering twelve hundred dollars in my pocket, heading toward a three-card-monte gang who looked like they'd decided to take a break from knifing people today to fling cards instead?

I had no idea. But if I had been thinking straight, I probably would have guessed it had something to do with the eight hours I'd spent that day looking over china patterns, bookended by my fiancée Annie and my future grandmother-in-law.

Bergdorf Goodman has a little playpen they call the Engagement Suite, where a salesman in a three-piece suit and a string of well-maintained women parade luxury goods past you until finally a \$1,500 pitcher starts to seem reasonable.

The grandmother, Vanessa, had stepped in for wedding duty, since Annie's mother had passed away many years before. Our sales-

man had an accent that sounded Argentinean and walked us through every conceivable permutation of chargers, knives, forks, saucers, teacups, and bowls.

Annie didn't care much about material things—she'd never had to—but I could see the grandmother working on her with the weight of the Clark name, the family expectations.

Hour four became hour five. This was our second stop of the day.

“Mike?” Annie asked. She and her grandmother stared at me. The salesman and his harem frowned behind them like a jury. I'd zoned out.

“Did you hear me?” Vanessa asked. “Flat cup and saucer, or footed?”

“Oh. I'd just go with something simple,” I said.

Vanessa offered me a smile that didn't touch her eyes, and said, “Of course you would. Don't you think this one is a little more refined, or is this a bit more . . . elegant?”

Annie looked at me. I'd do anything to make her happy, but after four days in New York in dude-on-wheels mode, getting dragged from store to overpriced store, I was running out of steam.

“Exactly,” I said.

Annie looked troubled, Vanessa angry.

“Well, which is it?” her grandmother asked. “It was a question.”

A couple of years ago Annie's father had sent debarked German shepherds to kill me, but he was starting to look pretty good compared to Vanessa.

Annie looked from her grandmother to me. “Mike?”

The Argentine twisted his watch chain. Vanessa pulled a 600-thread-count napkin tight as a garrote. My eyes were so dry from the endless staring and overbright glare of the department store lights I could almost feel the lids scrape as I shut them.

Flipping out—maybe clearing the table with a sweep of the arm—was growing in appeal, but probably not my best move.

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I stood and clicked my tongue. “Sorry,” I said. “Will you excuse me? I just remembered that I have to get a call in to my accountant by the close of business.”

It was a lie, but an effective one. If there was one thing Annie’s family held sacred, it was money. This would spring me.

I fast-walked for the exits. The Argentine waved me back—maybe they had some emergency recovery area with rib-eye and ESPN for overwhelmed fiancés—but I needed air and the streets.

CHAPTER 2

I HAD CAUGHT the monte game out of the corner of my eye on our way to Bergdorf's. It was down a side street piled high with garbage, about halfway between the marble showrooms of Fifth Avenue and the Middle American mall that Times Square had become.

Making my way through the crowded sidewalks, I saw the swindlers at work among the tourists. A pickpocket plied the crowd that had gathered around a Chinese portrait-sketcher. Across the street a few aspiring rappers roped in passersby, writing their names on a ten-dollar CD and then using unsubtle threats to complete the sale. Being around all that noise and mischief did me good after hours of forced manners and conditioned air.

With no real thought about where I was going, I soon found myself turning toward the monte game I had seen earlier. I was surprised to see it was still going on, though they'd moved it to the other end of the street.

The operator throwing the cards was a lanky white guy with a wiry, desperate strength to him. He wore an oversized Yankees cap pulled down over his eyes, and jeans hanging around the middle of his ass.

For a table, he had three milk crates stacked vertically with a newspaper on top. The cards and the patter flew: “Twos lose and the ace gets paid. Find the honey, find the honey, find the honey.”

He glanced at me, but pretended not to notice as I approached. With the slightest rise of an eyebrow, he indicated to the rest of the crew that the game was on. There were four players.

As I moved in, he signaled them subtly, and they made just enough room for me to get close to the action. They played four rounds as I stood there: cards dancing, money falling and flying in the operator’s hands between winners and losers. Not that it mattered. They were all working on the same team, all pooling the same money, all on the operator’s side. That’s how the monte con worked.

And that’s why it was so stupid to risk a dime in it. Even if I knew their tricks, I’d have to beat them at their own rigged game.

I should have stopped and thought for a second about what the hell I was doing, then walked away, back to Bergdorf’s and the sterling-silver sorbet spoons.

But instead I stepped into the game. The operator started working me: “Money or walk. *The Lion King*’s down the street if you wanna gawk at something. This is players only.”

I ignored him, acted a little scared, a little tough, like your typical mark putting up a front of sophistication. Jesus, I looked the part. I’d been so busy working that week that I told Annie to throw some clothes into a bag for me for the trip. I had on a V-neck sweater under a blue blazer, some kind of moleskin pants, and boat shoes—I guess she was trying to yacht-club me up for the meeting with grandma. I looked like stupid money. I would have mugged myself.

The crew closed in behind me, pushed me closer to the game. “Shutting the gates,” it was called, part of hooking the mark, the first stage of the short con. There was only one woman playing, and she’d just won twice. The stakes were up to forty-dollar bets. After the operator threw the cards around, you placed your bet in front of the card you thought was the ace of spades. Someone could outbid you by doubling your bet on another card. The highest bet played, leaving only one player and one bet per round. That was key to the hustle.

“He’s not taking my bets anymore,” she whispered to me. “I’m too good. I got this figured out.”

She was about five feet four, pale and blond, a city creature with a fierce look in her eyes and a body that was hard to ignore. “Help me out,” she said with a knowing look. She slipped me eighty dollars in worn twenties as she pressed against me. “Lay that down, on the left.”

Some pasty, mouth-breathing kid put forty in the center. I took her money and laid it down on the left. “Eighty,” I said. The operator looked down at the bet, seemed pissed, then flipped the ace of spades next to my bet and handed me \$160.

The monte con has its classic roles. The love interest to my left was “the booster,” and her job was to give me a risk-free taste of the action, to make me believe that the operator was beatable, to convince me to get my own money in the mix. I pushed the cash I’d just won across the newspaper to her. As she went to scoop it up, the operator grabbed her wrist. “What the fuck?” he said. “My man here won. Beginner’s luck.”

“It’s her money,” I said. “I put a bet down for her.”

He wheeled on me. “Don’t pull that Wall Street bullshit up here, Thurston Howell. You want to play? Money up. Or you spend it all on your little sailor suit?”

Berate the mark. That usually wrapped up the hooking portion of the show. I was insulted, angry, and eager for revenge—ripe for a rip-off.

“The corner’s bent on the ace,” the woman whispered in my ear. She was hanging on to me like a Bond girl now, pumping up my confidence. The corner was bent back, but a skilled operator can crimp and uncrimp at will. It was another way to draw me in, convince me I couldn’t lose. I took out my wallet and pulled out a twenty.

I watched him throw the cards, picking up two at a time and tossing one. Everyone assumes you drop the bottom card, but you actually throw the top with a sleight-of-hand move called a hype. This guy wasn’t very good at it, but it’s a convincing technique even when poorly done.

The cards fell. The ace was obvious with the crimp. I put my twenty down. Then the mouth-breather did his part. He was a “capper.” If you ever hit the right card, his role was to immediately double the bet so you couldn’t win. When you bet wrong, the capper just stands back and lets the dealer take your money. The game is hopeless.

And so it went. The capper’s bet played. He lost, and then the dealer flipped over the ace where I had bet.

“You would have won, see,” the girl whispered in my ear.

I took out a few more twenties from my wallet. The operator’s eyes lit up. By now we had a decent crowd going. To my right stood a few well-dressed, well-built guys who I gathered were in town for some kind of black fraternity event. To my left was an older Chinese woman carrying a big woven plastic shopping bag.

She ventured a ten-dollar bet, correctly, on the center. Maybe the capper, who seemed a little slow, missed what was happening, because he forgot to double the bet, and the lady’s ten bucks stood.

It didn’t matter. The operator slid the right-hand card—which I

had followed and knew was a two—under her winning ace in the middle to flip it over. Somehow, as it landed, the winning ace became a losing deuce. The operator had swapped them during the turnover. That’s why, even with all the money in the world to outbid the capper, you can never win.

I knew everything I needed to know to beat these guys. I pulled all of my money out of my pocket, about \$900 minus what I had spent today, and palmed it. I tend to keep a lot of cash on hand: old habits.

“Ace pays and deuces lose. Follow the honey, honey’s in the hive, money with the honey.”

The operator threw the cards and kept up the patter. The crimp disappeared from the card as the operator shuffled. He didn’t need it now that my money was out and my trust in Pussy Galore was absolute. I followed the ace. The cards fell.

“Left,” the woman clinging to me whispered, leading me wrong. I laid ten on the center where the ace had landed. They wouldn’t let me win, so the capper laid twenty on the right. All according to plan. I double him to forty on my ace. We went back and forth, 80, 160, 320...

“Six hundred forty,” I said and laid it on the newspaper next to the ace. The beauty of a bet that big is that when you lay it down, the bundle of cash is wide enough to cover the cards for a split second.

The capper looked at me, dumbfounded, then at his roll—there were maybe six twenties left over. He couldn’t double my bet. He licked his lips, then turned to the dealer for help.

I’d been watching them as they went for their money. I knew they didn’t have me covered. The dealer didn’t seem fazed.

“Gekko’s greedy. Greed is good! Six hundred and forty’s the bet.” All he needed to do was swap the center ace I had correctly picked with one of the deuces on the side, and the whole stack was his. He should have pretended he was a little concerned, but the guy

was beaming. I was having second thoughts myself. I wasn't looking forward to explaining to Vanessa and Annie that we'd be eating at Wendy's because I got rooked at three-card monte.

I watched as he lifted the right-hand deuce and used it to flip over the ace I'd bet my money on. He switched them in the process, of course, and laid down what he was sure was the losing card.

"Twos lose," he began, triumphantly. But then he bothered to actually look down at the cards, and saw the ace of spades staring up at him next to my \$640 in cash. His eyes bugged out.

The spectators who weren't in on the con whooped with joy. One guy grabbed me around the shoulders.

I hadn't messed around with cards for years. Still, it wasn't too much trouble, especially with a sloppy operator like this one, to switch the cards myself with my pinky and ring finger as I laid my money down. I knew what his next move would be, so when he switched them later, he actually ended up giving me the winning card.

I'd won fair and square. And crooked.

"Cops!" the capper shouted.

I should have expected it. If the game goes south, or he takes a mark for enough money, the lookout shouts "Police!" and everyone scrambles. It's the last resort of the short con. Even if the mark wins, he loses. The gang bolted. In one swipe of his hand the operator pocketed the money and the cards, and tried to dart away. My new friends from Alpha Phi Alpha looked like they might lend some muscle to the principle of fair play, and blocked him on two sides. As a result, he had to come through me, with a right hook to my kidneys as he knocked me out of the way and his milk crates tumbled to the ground.

The other guys shouted some very inventive threats after him. I just watched him go.

“You going to let that punk rob you like that?” one of the spectators shouted. “You won straight up, man. I’d find that dude, and I would get my money back.”

“Never bet in another man’s game,” I said, shrugged, and walked away. As I turned out of the alley, I realized I was smiling. I hadn’t had that much fun in a long time. After surviving my run-in with the grifters of New York, I could certainly face down my 120-pound fiancée, her grandmother, and a footed teacup.

The whole incident took twenty minutes. Soon I was back in Bergdorf’s, between Annie and Vanessa. The pain under my ribs had mellowed to a dull throb. Arturo was demonstrating the merits of different fish forks.

“Mike,” Annie said, and looked at me sweetly. “You doing okay? Are you wedded out for the day?”

In my lap, out of sight of the rest of the party, I examined what I had lifted from the dealer as he crashed past me. When your target is wearing pants that baggy, picking someone’s pocket is easy.

He’d run off with nothing. I walked away with my \$640, plus another \$800 or so for my troubles and a knife unlike any I’d ever seen. It was slim, with a beautifully grained rosewood handle and brass bolsters. It must have been eighty years old, Spanish or Italian. It wasn’t a switchblade, but it flicked open with such speed and ease it might as well have been. I had a feeling the kid had ripped it off from someone. That knife was one of the more lethal-looking items I’d ever held. I closed it carefully, then put it and the money away.

As I rested my hand on the cash in my pocket, I smiled. “I’m having the time of my life,” I said, then turned to Annie’s grandmother. “You’re right about the gravy boat, Vanessa. Limoges all the way. And Arturo,” I said, rubbing my hands together, “do you still have those Haviland catalogs?”

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That was the moment, flanked by my fiancée and her grandma in the Engagement Suite, fingering the six-inch blade in my pocket and the grimy roll of twenties I'd lifted off a street hustler, when I realized maybe something wasn't quite right with me, and with this dream I'd been chasing for years of a quiet, respectable life.

CHAPTER 3

WE MET ANNIE'S father a half hour later for dinner at a French place with three Michelin stars. He was drinking champagne and talking on his cell phone at the center of an empty banquette. He ended the call, then greeted Annie and Vanessa. Finally, he looked at me, then Annie, and said, "You still wasting your time with this guy?"

No one responded.

Then he barked a laugh and crushed my hand with his. "Joking! Sit!"

Larry Clark, actually Sir Lawrence Clark, is an English ex-rugby star who now works in high finance, running a hedge fund. He radiates aggression and good health, and favors the sort of humor that involves putting you on the spot or lying and then laughing at you when you believe him.

He'd maintained his dense rugger's build into middle age and shaved his bald head daily into that gleaming pink power orb a lot

of chief execs are going for these days. It went well with the scowl he always wore when looking my way.

I was still so wound up from my close call with the cardsharps that I didn't mind breaking bread and trading a few jabs with Clark. After the second course, I excused myself and tracked our waiter down in the labyrinth of wine racks. I intercepted the bill before Clark had a chance. It took a bit of coaxing, but I managed to get our server to let me pay.

The pleasure of outplaying the hustlers that afternoon was nothing compared to seeing Larry's face at the end of the meal, when the waiter explained, with a look in my direction, that "the gentleman has taken care of it."

As we walked back toward the park after dinner, Vanessa said that she was tired and asked Annie to walk her back to the hotel. Clark asked if he could "borrow me for a moment."

I smelled a setup. Annie lifted her shoulders.

"I'll get him back in one piece," Clark said, but after my move at dinner and his barely concealed rage, I wasn't so sure. I went along with it. This wedding was a done deal. Maybe he finally wanted to make peace.

We strode toward a section of Fifth Avenue that was lined with McKim, Mead and White behemoths, Gilded Age hotels and robber barons' clubs.

Clark turned the knob and led us through the heavy wooden door of a town house. I didn't see a sign. Maybe it was his club, and we would hammer out a peace treaty over brandy and cigars. I didn't particularly look forward to club talk, though I'd learned to have fun playacting it over the past couple of years—laughing along with guys as they complain about being "horse poor" and what a hassle their sixty-foot steel-hulled yachts are. But if it meant ending my troubles with Lawrence, I was all for it.

He led me into a library, and we sat down on a pair of leather chesterfields. There was no small talk. He leaned forward on the couch and started in.

“I know your family, Mike. I know the kind of people you are. It’s out of my hands. Annie has made her decision, and there’s nothing I can do about it.”

This is what I get after those years of hard work: the navy, then putting myself through college and Harvard Law, nights so broke and hungry I just went to bed at eight. It could have been that I was having trouble adjusting to this world, but as I sat and endured Clark’s glare, I realized that some part of it was due to the fact that this decent life was having trouble with me. He thought I was some delinquent, my whole life one long con.

“Larry,” I said. I knew he hated the familiar tone. “Your daughter and I love each other. We look out for each other. We take care of each other. It’s a sweet thing, and rare. I really wish you and I could start over and find a way to get along. It’d make everything easier and make Annie happy. What do you say?”

He didn’t respond, just knocked his heavy ring against the marble table beside him twice. The door opened. Two men joined us. “These are my attorneys,” Clark said as he introduced them.

So much for brandy and cigars. What bothered Clark most was that he and I were so similar. He came from nothing, and started his fortune with some very shady real estate deals in London. When he first tried to scare me away from Annie, I had hinted that I knew about the dirt in his past. That bought me some breathing room, but it also earned me an enemy. He’s always resented me for outmaneuvering him.

If you hustle long enough, you can buy all the stage dressing you need to look legit, even the manners. But Clark, I feared, had finally convinced himself. That sort of hypocrisy is dangerous, and I—by

who I was and what I knew and who loved me—threatened him deeply. No matter how much he talked me down to Annie, I tried to stay above it. I didn't tell her about his past. It would just look petty.

"There's some business to settle, Mike," he said. "I'm heading to Dubai tomorrow, so unfortunately I have to fit it in this evening."

One lawyer handed Clark a sheaf of papers. Another held a thick leather-bound binder that looked like a corporate checkbook.

"Are there any incentives that might make you rethink this relationship? To see that it's in your and my daughter's best interest to take separate paths?"

"You're kidding," I said.

He stared back at me. He was totally serious.

I rubbed my chin for a second, took in the mahogany bookshelves and my three inquisitors.

In my jacket pocket, I had a white card that the check had come in back at the restaurant. It was nice linen paper, blank and folded once down the middle. I took it out, along with a pen, then leaned forward and jotted something down inside. I slid it across the table, sat back, and crossed my arms.

For a moment, Clark seemed pleased that I was on board, that he could play his favorite game: haggling over money. Then he read the note.

He breathed hard through his nose in anger, and dropped it on the table.

I could see what I had written: *There's a seed in your teeth.*

I saw his tongue working behind his lips to extract it as he glowered at me. After I left my last job, a lot of firms had sought me out to come work for them. So I had a fair amount of practice shooting people down when they tried to buy me. Clark placed the sheaf of papers on the table in front of me.

I was angry, of course. I could feel the heft of the knife in my

pocket, and for a moment I had a surreal image in my mind: if I poked one of these beautifully upholstered counselors, only wool stuffing would come out. But the truly infuriating issue was that I couldn't show how furious I was. That would play into his hand, his belief that I was some hood. No, I had to be Bruce Banner. *Calm. Stay calm.*

"You may be aware that we have considerable family business interests," Clark said. "Annie is involved with several trusts and holding companies, and there's some housekeeping—legal, financial, tax—that needs to be squared away before..." he trailed off in a pained breath.

I started leafing through the stack. It was a half inch thick and as complicated as a merger agreement, but it was, in essence, a prenup, in case I was trying to gold-dig the lovely Annie Clark for however many tens of millions she was due as Sir Larry's sole heir.

"This is a legal document," attorney two began.

Thanks. Clark tended to forget that I had a JD/MPP from Harvard. I let his attorney ramble on while I finished reading through and marked the contract in a few places.

"This is just a draft," he said. "A starting point. I'm confident we can work something out. You're free to seek independent counsel, of course. Do you see any problem with that?"

I tossed the papers on the table. "I do, actually."

They exchanged glances. Attorney one's nostrils flared slightly. I could see their excitement grow. Legal battles were better than sex to these people. The whole contract was a slap in my face, of course, and I'm sure what Clark wanted was a fight. But I wasn't going to indulge him.

"There's a mistake on page nineteen. You were probably thinking of New York. Virginia goes with the Uniform Legal Code on family law," I said. "But that's no big deal."

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“It’s a draft,” Clark’s lawyer stammered.

“It’s fine. Who wants to witness?”

“Sorry?” Clark said.

“I couldn’t care less about money, Larry. If this will get you out of the way, I’ll sign on the spot. It’s fine.”

“We could work up another draft.”

“That’s okay,” I said. “I already corrected it.” I signed three times on the last pages, stood, and handed it back.

“If you need to do it with a notary, just let me know,” I said. “Have a good night.”

If getting rid of that prick only cost me a few million and my signature, I’d gotten off easy. I walked out.

When I made it back to our hotel room, I found Annie sitting up in bed, working on her laptop.

“How did it go with Dad?” she asked. “Looks like you survived. Olive branch?”

“Prenup.”

“What? He never even talked about it with me. He just ambushed you with it?”

“And two lawyers.”

“Oh God. What did you do?”

“What did *I* do? Nothing. I signed it. It’s up to you, of course, but I’d be fine if you did, too. Just get him out of the way.”

I don’t know what she expected. That I would throttle the guy?

She put her laptop down, shaking her head and fuming. “I’m going to go down there and—” she threw the covers back.

“Don’t even worry about him,” I said. “Though this means that if things go south for us, you won’t be able to get your hands on my Jeep.” The car in question was a twenty-year-old Cherokee, with fading paint and no shocks, that I couldn’t bring myself to get rid of.

Even Clark's rude awakening couldn't completely burn off the pleasant haze surrounding my brain after four courses and a bottle and a half of Chave Hermitage Burgundy that made me finally understand how people could be so obsessed with wine.

I lay down next to her on the bed.

"You'd still love me if it meant having nothing?" I asked.

"What kind of question is that?" She asked it with sympathy, mainly, and a little offense thrown in. After a moment, she softened. "Come on, Mike. Of course," she said. "Of course," she whispered in my ear, then moved down to kiss my neck.

CHAPTER 4

I DON'T HAVE very sophisticated opinions about pairings: which wine goes with this or that. But I do have one matchup I feel strongly about. If tonight's menu involves breaking and entering, life-and-death sprints from the police, or any sort of manic violence, you really can't go wrong with Steel Reserve in a twenty-four-ounce can and a shot of Old Crow.

Both of those potables were sloshing along on the Metro seat beside me on my way to my brother's house. They certainly looked out of place in Annie's cloth tote bag, which read Tranquil Heart Yoga on the side, over some sort of mandala earth-mother logo. I hadn't tasted them in years, though they were once the go-to for me and my brother, Jack. You'd drink the top two ounces out of the can of Steel Reserve, pour in the equivalent volume of bourbon, seal the can's mouth with your thumb, invert once, then sip. Typically this was done while driving (holding and turning the wheel with your

knee), very often to the scene of a crime about to be committed. The beer is 8 percent alcohol, but there's more to it than that, some special alchemy from the combo of cheap bourbon and the medicinal tang of the high-gravity lager. Together they went down like a swallow of burning regret. Within minutes they trashed every restraining impulse in your body and left you an amped-up object of imminent destruction, a teenage hand grenade.

Tonight was a special night. I needed a best man. I was letting the past back in, no matter how awful it tasted. For a long time my father had been urging me to get back in touch with Jack. He said he had gone straight. Years before, I'd cut my big brother, my only sibling, my old hero, out of my life. However much Jack deserved it, it still broke my heart. I'd been dead wrong about my father's sins, so maybe Jack deserved another chance, too.

I missed him. No one knew me like he did. And, for all his faults, Jack had looked out for me when I was young and my father was inside. Annie and I had a great crew of friends, but there was a part of my past I couldn't really talk about with them. I needed someone I could drop my guard around and joke about the old days with. I needed a way to vent without doing something stupid like I had at that monte game in New York; I still had the bruise on my ribs. If people like Lawrence Clark were going to hold my past against me, why bother hiding it? Jack was back in town now. Maybe I could use this wedding to pull us all together. After New York, I called him to meet up, and after a few awkward messages and calls back, we'd decided on dinner tonight.

When I had looked up his address on the fringes of Takoma Park, just outside the District boundary, all that showed up on Google was a vacant lot with a lady pushing a cart full of junk along the sidewalk. As I neared his house, I passed auto body and pawn shops and storefront churches. This was everything I had pictured for our reunion.

It was a mistake. He must have still been running cons. Though I guessed I'd made the right call on what to bring to this dinner party.

I turned the corner. After a few blocks, the neighborhood changed. The liquor stores became wine shops, the cars rose in price, and then I found myself in front of a row of brand-new town houses, "Starting in the 600s!" a banner exclaimed.

The shot of the vacant lot must have been out of date, from before they started construction. And the bag lady was long gone, replaced by a very attractive young mother in yoga pants pushing a double stroller the size of a Zamboni.

Jack's place was number 108, a three-story house on the corner, the prime spot in the development. As I climbed the stoop, I wondered how Jack had got his hands on that slice of real estate. This cute spread with the marigolds out front actually made me a lot more nervous about what Jack was up to than if I had found him living in a dive next to a vacant lot.

I rang the buzzer.

Thirty seconds later a man I barely recognized opened the door. He had brown hair trimmed short, with salt-and-pepper gray just beginning to show around the sideburns. He smiled, showing the lean cheeks and jawline of a dedicated runner. He was wearing a Patagonia vest, chinos, and a newish-looking pair of \$130 New Balance running shoes in dull gray. This was not the brother I knew. Jack's style was disposable flash all the way. This guy reeked of quiet, dignified affluence.

"You didn't have to bring anything," he said, and took the bag of booze as he led me back toward the dining area. "But thank you."

A delicious smell drifted over from the kitchen, which was kitted out with high-end culinary toys: Shun knives, a stand mixer, a half-dozen different Le Creuset pots. I was lucky I'd had my crash course in conspicuous consumption at Bergdorf's.

“I’m glad you could make it,” he said. “I’ve been wanting to try this Thai recipe, but I haven’t had a good reason to go for it until now.”

A clipping from the *Times* lay on the counter. I looked out the rear window at the driveway: Audi A6, in gray. A corporate lawyer’s car. Jack always preferred American muscle. When we were younger, he had a ’69 GTO he’d taken two years to restore himself. I felt like we built the damn thing one piece at a time from parts snatched from junkyards, leaping fences and outpacing Rottweilers.

I turned back to the kitchen to find Jack frowning at the six-pack and the plastic bottle of whiskey I’d brought.

“Would you like me to pour you one of these?” he asked. He had pulled a crystal pilsner glass from the cupboard and was not doing a great job of hiding his distaste.

“Are you drinking?”

“I don’t really drink much anymore,” he said. “But feel free.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “If it’s a recovery thing, I can get rid of those. It was sort of a joke.”

“No. No cold turkey or anything like that. Just not during the week. I’m so busy with work is all. Don’t bounce back like I used to.”

“That’s great,” I said, then looked around the first floor—marble counters, stainless-steel appliances, new flat-screen—silently tabulating his overhead.

“You have a full-time thing going?” I asked. “Machine shop?”

“No,” he said with a chuckle, as if I must have been joking. “Nine to five. Actually more like eight to eight, you know how it goes. Just another wingtipper now.”

“Good for you. What sort of work?”

“Security consulting,” he said. “Stuff like that.”

It was a curious posting for Jack. In the old days, if you wanted to

manage risk, step one was to not let a guy like him through the front door.

“Really?” I said, letting more surprise than I had intended creep into my voice.

He smiled. “I know what you're getting at, Mike. Wolves and the henhouse. But I'm all clean these days, and some of my past...” he searched for the right word “...experiences actually prove pretty useful. I do some courier work, contracts for law enforcement, investigations, running things to informants. I'm comfortable in that world. Though for the most part I spend my days sitting on my can in front of a computer, running background checks.”

“Who do you work for?” I knew a few names in that industry.

“My own company,” he said. “Just a one-man S corporation, sort of a tax dodge.” He reached inside the refrigerator and pulled out a green glass bottle of sparkling water.

“And who does your company work for?”

“No can do, Mike. You wouldn't believe the NDAs I have to sign,” he said. “You probably know what it's like, right?”

“Sure.” I wanted to call bullshit, but he seemed so at ease in this habitat. If I had gone white picket fence, why couldn't he? God. It was almost a letdown. Jack Ford, one of the all-time great con men, had finally been taken by the squares.

“So Dad told me you're between things now, or working for yourself,” Jack said.

“Yeah. My own firm.”

“If you ever need any work or help, just let me know. I haven't forgotten all the times you bailed me out. I owe you big, Mike. It's the least I can do.”

That almost sounded like charity, which galled me. But I kept my temper in check. All Jack knew was that I was drinking malt

liquor and rotgut whiskey and taking public transportation. To someone who didn't know the world I'd come from—learning at the knee of DC's most powerful fixer—the idea of a thirty-year-old having a nice little political shop where his only job was to pull strings sounded pretty far-fetched. Jack hadn't seen me since I was a navy recruit with a fresh arrest who'd only barely avoided prison. God. He might have thought I had come here to shake *him* down.

“Thanks. I'm all set.”

“And this girl. Annie? She sounds amazing from what Dad told me. Where'd you get engaged?”

“Tuscany.”

He whistled.

“It was the least I could do,” I said. “She's great. Hilarious. Crazy smart. Calls me on my bullshit. Makes me a much better guy. I'm nuts about her, man. So I don't mess around when it comes to the romance stuff.”

“I'm so happy for you, Mike.” He looked at me for a moment as if he really meant it, then turned and checked his recipe. He had laid out a dozen ingredients in small glass bowls.

The dining room table was set for two at the opposite ends. There was a charger under each dinner plate. It looked like a spread from *Gourmet*, except for the can of Steel Reserve beside my wineglass. Waste not, want not: I cracked the beer and topped it off with a splash of Old Crow.

“To brothers,” I said, and lifted my drink. Jack looked at his sparkling water in distaste.

“Actually,” he said, “pour me one of those.”

“You sure?” I asked.

“Oh yeah. It can't be as bad as I remember.”

I walked over to the counter, fixed him a drink, then handed it to

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him. We raised our cans and sipped. He came up with eyes shut tight and mouth in a grimace.

“Jesus. It’s worse,” he gasped, knocking his fist against his chest. We both started laughing. I was glad we were feeling so chummy. It would give me a chance to go behind his back before he could go behind mine. Trust, but verify: it was due diligence time.

CHAPTER 5

I'D CHECKED OUT his recipe, and the last fifteen minutes looked slightly less complicated than a mitral valve replacement. That was my chance. As Jack started toasting peanuts, I pressed the volume control on my phone down until the ringer switched to vibrate and it buzzed in my pocket. I pulled it out and apologized to Jack. Bent over the pan, he barely noticed. I answered it with a "Hi, sweetheart" and headed upstairs to take the call.

I had one advantage when it came to scoping out Jack. I'd spent the better part of my youth tagging along with, eavesdropping, and spying on the guy, so I had a good sense of his hiding habits. How else would I have kept myself stocked through adolescence with high-powered fireworks and old *Playboys*? I checked under the mattress in his bedroom, mostly for old times' sake, and found nothing.

I tapped on the closet walls: no false panels. That left the dresser. It was solid oak, very heavy, but I managed to pivot it eighteen inches

away from the wall without making much noise. In high school Jack had used a hole punched in the sheetrock behind his dresser to hide his contraband. He would put the goods into a bundle, tie a string to it, lower it into the space between the walls, then tape the string just inside the hole. There were probably still a half-dozen M-80s sealed up in the walls of the apartment building where we'd grown up.

His setup these days was a fancier variation on the theme. There was a section of sheetrock behind the dresser that pulled away to reveal two high-end biometric safes. The top one had a powder-gray steel door about four feet wide and two feet tall. That usually meant guns. It was big, too; he could have fit a squad automatic in there. But there was no way I had time to get into either right now.

As I searched, I kept up my end of the imaginary wedding conversation I was using as a cover. "Sure. Whatever color chairs you want..."

It made for a nice juxtaposition as I took stock of the dangers Jack was concealing in this cozy house. The safe on the bottom was smaller, with an eighteen-inch-square door, a Group 2 combination lock and relocker. It probably cost about \$1,200. In my experience you didn't buy equipment like that to keep your birth certificate dry. It usually meant a lot of jewelry, money, or drugs. Or maybe the guy was just a security freak. We'd grown up around enough thieves that the habits were ingrained.

I managed to get the dresser back in place, then went to the closet and started checking his belts. In his teens, Jack carried a piece-of-shit Raven Arms .25, one of the classic Saturday night specials. He mostly used it for plinking cans but wasn't above sticking it under someone's jaw if things got hairy. He always carried inside-the-waistband on his strong side, so I knew what to look for.

The closet kept up the same story as the rest of the house. A half-dozen suits hung there, nice stuff: Zegna, Brooks Brothers, and so

on. The wider belts, the ones you'd wear with jeans, were about two inches shorter than the thin ones you'd wear with a suit. And on most of those thin belts, I found what I was looking for about six inches to the right of the buckle: a contour worn into the leather from a holster, a decent size, maybe a .40. Jack had moved up to a bigger caliber, and whatever work he was involved in, it meant wearing a good suit over a concealed weapon. He sure as hell wasn't just punching investors' names into Accurant to see if they'd been kiting checks.

I heard a phone ringing downstairs. I rifled the desk drawers, going through the usual office detritus, until I found a black card, the shape of a regular credit card but three times thicker, with copper contacts on the bottom and four glassy rectangles on the front.

It was electronic, but I couldn't fathom what it did. As I turned it over in my hands, I accidentally pressed one of the rectangles with my thumb. An LED in the card began flashing, tinting the dark room red in a complex pattern.

After a moment it stopped, and as I tried to figure out what I had just done, Jack's laptop screen blinked on with a similar pattern of white flashes. A command line appeared, code scrolled down the screen, and then, across the middle of the display, a message appeared: "Fingerprint not recognized."

I stepped in front of the computer and started to sweat. I didn't want there to be a record of me poking around up here. A second later a light turned on beside the webcam built into the top of the display. My face appeared on the screen.

The computer let out three loud beeps.

Scanning... authentication failed, the display read.

Please wait while we contact a representative.

My heart pounded. I dropped the card back in the drawer and slid it shut.

Jack probably heard it. And now *I* would look like the thief. I

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waited for the knock on the door, the totally justified accusations. None came.

It was odd. The food should have been done. He should be looking for me by now. I heard the sounds of blinds dropping downstairs, of furniture moving.

I walked to the top of the stairs.

“You should just stay up there,” Jack said.

I took a step down, looked across the living room, and discovered where that Glock .40 had gone. Jack held it raised in his right hand.

“Don’t come any closer!”

Now *that* was the brother I remembered.

CHAPTER 6

ANNIE HAD DONE a good job hiding her concern when I told her I was going to meet up with Jack tonight. I knew she had a few worries about my old life, but I think she understood that it would be good for me to reconnect with him, have someone I could talk to, square things from the past.

“Go, see your brother,” she’d said.

She and I had moved in together four months before, though we’d barely spent a night apart over the past year. We lived in a quaint neighborhood in Alexandria called Del Ray, all 1940s bungalows and throwback main street shops. It was just across the river from the capital, and I was glad, after the scandal, to have put a little distance between me and Washington. We’d thought about trying a new town, but it was nice to be near my father now that he was out. My family had fallen apart when I was a kid, and I finally had a few pieces of it back. That was part of what drew me to Jack.

Annie gardened. I mowed the lawn. There were always some folks stopping by to chat with us as we sat on our porch. I would have the neighbors over for barbecues—an orthodontist on our left and a tax attorney on the right—nice enough people, if a little dry. They liked to talk about QuickBooks and bond funds.

Some nights Annie and I would open a bottle of wine, climb through a dormer window, and watch the stars and lunar eclipses from our roof. We'd hide notes in each other's bags. I'd get to court, face down a federal judge, and open my case to find "Thanks for last night, counselor" scrawled on a Post-it.

But something wasn't right. Ever since the madness at my last job, ever since that one awful moment at the end, there had been a distance between me and Annie. It's one thing when your fiancée hears you, after fifteen minutes on hold with Comcast, groan "Jesus, I could kill somebody." But things take on a much different cast when you say that in front of a woman who has actually seen you standing over the body of a man after you took his life. She told me she understood that I had no other choice, but she never quite forgot. I'd catch her watching me sometimes with something like suspicion, and I knew it was still on her mind, maybe feeding those doubts about me that her dad had planted.

She wasn't the only one who didn't like to think about the day I was forced to face down our former boss, Henry Davies. I felt fine enough, for the most part, but every so often—when I was trying to sleep, or riding home on the Metro—I would remember his face, like it was right in front of me, or picture the photos of his grandkids on his desk, or feel his fingers clawing at my wrists.

From the work I had done at our old firm, even after all the bloodshed and the hard work of cleaning up the scandal, I had a reputation around DC as a competent political fixer. I was glad to leave behind the hard-core black bag stuff I'd learned at my last job. I could afford

to pick and choose clients, for now at least, to take only the cases that let me sleep well at night and still cover my overhead. It was nothing like the money I was used to, but it was enough. You don't find much better bargains than the ones you make with the devil. And if I really believed in the cause, occasionally I might use a trick I'd picked up from my old mentor: only a light touch, a little leverage, or perhaps absentmindedly failing to correct the impression that I knew someone's secrets.

With her mother gone, Annie's grandmother—with her posh accent and coin-purse lips—had stepped in and was driving Annie crazy in the run-up to the wedding. It was the Clarks' chance to show off their class and wealth to the wider world. The perfect day. The perfect daughter. The perfect life. And if the wedding and the need to make me a proper, respectable man with no sharp edges was starting to get to me, it wasn't Annie's fault.

At the house, some nights I would watch the red glow of the numbers on the alarm clock, listen to the sleepless dark. Eventually I'd step out of bed, careful not to wake Annie, and leave the warmth of that body I loved so well. I'd walk down to the porch or just stand in the backyard, watching the sky, ignoring the bite of the cold spring air. I was afraid there was something out there, as basic as gravity, pulling me out of this peaceful home into the night.

I hoped Jack would understand, that we could help each other out. That's what had brought me out to his house tonight.

But this was not what I had bargained for.

I laughed and shook my head as I came down the stairs at Jack's house. I'd been dragging my feet on choosing a best man, and Annie must have known it was because a little part of me hoped to have my brother up there beside me, the past forgotten, everything in its place. Jack would just have to stand there and hand me a little box. How badly could he screw that up?

Here was my answer: Jack had pushed an armchair up against the front door. He stood to the side of the front window, peeking out the blinds, a bead of sweat running down his temple. I could see into the open kitchen, where the noodles were congealing in the pan. It was a nice interior scene, carefully arranged and suggesting a title like: “Waiting for someone to come kill me.”

I ignored Jack, walked over to the range, and tried some of the pad thai.

“This is great,” I said.

“Thanks,” he replied, without looking away from the street.

I sat on the couch and placed two bowls of noodles on his coffee table. I offered Jack one. He looked at me blankly, didn’t say anything. I twisted some onto my fork.

“I’m in trouble, Mike.”

“Really?” I said with mock surprise.

He nodded, then glanced at the pistol.

“Oh yeah,” I said, looking at the gun. “I was going to ask about that. I hope it’s not for me.”

“No.” He went on in a monotone. “I was working a job as a courier, and I started to wonder if maybe this wasn’t just about security, if someone was playing both sides. I was worried I’d end up taking the fall for something big, someone getting hurt, you know? So I started looking into the people who’d hired me.”

“Were you maybe thinking of fleecing them?”

“Just covering my ass. And it *was* big. These guys are serious. I got scared, tried to beg off a job. The people behind it, maybe they found out I was digging. Whatever it is, they’re after me now.”

“So the gun,” I said, nodding. “Any chance these bad guys are due to stop by tonight?”

“Maybe. They just called. They could come for me any second. They’re saying I owe them. They’re setting me up—”

“How much?”

Jack looked up at me, startled. “What?”

“How much did they say you took?”

“I didn’t take it, Mike. They’re setting me up.”

“I know. But how much?”

“It’s not about the money, Mike, they said I messed up some plan. They said I had to make it right or they’d hurt me.”

“Get to the point. How much do you need?”

He took a drink from a bottle of water he’d placed on the shelves.

“The payment was sixty-five thousand,” he said. “But I gave it back to them. That didn’t settle it. They said it was too late, that I botched everything and I’d have to do the job myself now. But I’m trying to stay straight. I swear I didn’t take anything, Mike. I didn’t want to tell you about it, get you involved. They jumped me yesterday on my way from the Metro. Worked me over in the stomach. It was bad. They said if I didn’t give them what they wanted, they were going to really mess me up, send me to the hospital.”

“Huh,” I said. “So they beat you in the one spot that doesn’t bruise much.” It’s a handy technique for enforcers who don’t want to leave marks, and for liars who don’t have any. “Go to the cops.”

“I wanted to. I tried asking around. They must have found out somehow. They said they’d kill me if I did.”

“Of course,” I said, and had another bite of pad thai.

“I think they’re just trying to scare me off for what I know, make me disappear.”

“So why don’t you?”

“Mike,” he looked hurt. “I don’t want to run anymore. I just want to live my life. I haven’t done anything wrong.”

“So what, you need to buy your way out? Pay them for the job you messed up?”

“I’m not asking you for anything, Mike. I just need somebody to

talk to. I need a way out of this, and I'm so goddamned scared I can't think straight. Maybe you could help me expose what they're up to. Outthink them somehow. I mean *maybe* I could make up what they lost on the job. I'm not sure if they'd go for that, or how much it'd cost."

The soft sell. Jack still had his touch.

"Who would I make the check out to? Or I guess cash is better with shadowy types like this." I patted my pockets, looking for a checkbook or wallet.

"Seriously?" Jack asked.

"Of course not," I said, and put my bowl down. "You're not getting any money out of me, man."

I couldn't believe I'd given him a second chance and he was pulling something like this.

"You know, Jack—"

Bright lights shone through the blinds. Then came the chirp of tires. The slamming of doors. Loud voices. All the stage dressing for an old-fashioned shakedown. It sounded like three men. Jack had really gone all out.

"Right on time," I said.

"Mike, you should get out of here. Do you have a gun?"

"I don't need a gun, Jack."

I stepped toward him so I could get a good look at his eyes, the size of his pupils, to see if he was using.

"So what's this massive plot you stumbled across?" I asked.

A fist pounded on the door.

"Get away from the window," Jack said. He retreated to the kitchen and took cover behind the counter that separated it from the living room.

I watched the doorknob shake, then heard the rattle of metal scraping inside the deadbolt: someone raking the lock. Any self-

respecting arm-breaker would have just knocked the door in, but these fellows happened to be interested in preserving property. Interesting.

I went to open the door.

“What are you doing, Mike? These guys don’t joke around.”

“You’ve done this before, Jack,” I said, shaking my head. “You’ve literally done this same setup before, where the bad guys come to beat you up for doing the right thing, and I have to pay them off. Tampa, I think. Do you even remember? I gave them eight hundred bucks.”

“Mike. You’ve got to believe me.”

I was about to lay out a whole heartbreaking speech about how I’d given him another chance, come here to ask him to be my best man, and now this. But I was too disappointed and angry to even get into it.

“Forget it,” I said, then muttered a few curses under my breath as I shoved the armchair to the side and pulled open the front door.