



“The Firm goes to Washington—only with a whole lot more action.”

—JAMES PATTERSON

THE

500

A NOVEL

MATTHEW QUIRK

PROLOGUE

MIROSLAV AND ALEKSANDAR filled the front seats of the Range Rover across the street. They wore their customary diplomatic uniforms—dark Brionis tailored close—but the two Serbs looked angrier than usual. Aleksandar lifted his right hand high enough to flash me a glint of his Sig Sauer. A master of subtlety, that Alex. I wasn't particularly worried about the two bruisers sitting up front, however. The worst thing they could do was kill me, and right now that looked like one of my better options.

The rear window rolled down and there was Rado, glaring. He preferred to make his threats with a dinner napkin. He lifted one up and dabbed gently at the corners of his mouth. They called him the King of Hearts because, well, he ate people's hearts. The way I heard it was that he'd read an article in the *Economist* about some nineteen-year-old Liberian warlord with a taste for human flesh. Rado decided that sort of flagrant evil would give his criminal brand

the edge it needed in a crowded global marketplace, so he picked up the habit.

I wasn't even all that worried about him tucking into my heart. That's usually fatal and, like I said, would greatly simplify my dilemma. The problem was that he knew about Annie. And my getting another loved one killed because of my mistakes was one of the things that made Rado's fork look like the easy out.

I nodded to Rado and started up the street. It was a beautiful May morning in the nation's capital, with a sky like blue porcelain. The blood that had soaked through my shirt was drying, stiff and scratchy. My left foot dragged on the asphalt. My knee had swollen to the size of a rugby ball. I tried to concentrate on the knee to keep my mind off the injury to my chest, because if I thought about that—not the pain so much as the sheer creepiness of it—I was sure I would pass out.

As I approached, the office looked as classy as ever: a three-story Federal mansion set back in the woods of Kalorama, among the embassies and chanceries. It was home to the Davies Group, Washington, DC's most respected strategic consulting and government affairs firm, where I guess technically I may have still been employed. I fished my keys from my pocket and waved them in front of a gray pad beside the door lock. No go.

But Davies was expecting me. I looked up at the closed-circuit camera. The lock buzzed.

Inside the foyer, I greeted the head of security and noted the baby Glock he'd pulled from its holster and was holding tight near his thigh. Then I turned to Marcus, my boss, and nodded by way of hello. He stood on the other side of the metal detector, waved me through, then frisked me neck to ankle. He was checking for weapons, and for wires. Marcus had made a nice long career with those hands, killing.

“Strip,” Marcus said. I obliged, shirt and pants. Even Marcus winced when he saw the skin of my chest, puckering around the staples. He took a quick look inside my drawers, then seemed satisfied I wasn’t bugged. I suited back up.

“Envelope,” he said, and gestured to the manila one I was carrying.

“Not until we have a deal,” I said. The envelope was the only thing keeping me alive, so I was a little reluctant to let it go. “This will go wide if I disappear.”

Marcus nodded. That kind of insurance was standard industry practice. He’d taught me so himself. He led me upstairs to Davies’s office and stood guard by the door as I stepped inside.

There, standing by the windows, looking out over downtown DC, was the one thing I was worried about, the option that seemed much worse than getting carved up by Rado: it was Davies, who turned to me with a grandfather’s smile.

“It’s good to see you, Mike. I’m glad you decided to come back to us.”

He wanted a deal. He wanted to feel like he owned me again. And that’s what I was afraid of more than anything else, that I would say yes.

“I don’t know how things got this bad,” he said. “Your father . . . I’m sorry.”

Dead, as of last night. Marcus’s handiwork.

“I want you to know we didn’t have anything to do with that.”

I said nothing.

“You might want to ask your Serbian friends about it. We can protect you, Mike; we can protect the people you love.” He told me to sit down at the far end of the conference table, and he moved a little closer. “Just say it and all this is over. Come back to us, Mike. It only takes one word: yes.”

And that was the weird thing about all his games, all the torture. At the end of the day he really thought he was doing me a favor. He

wanted me back, thought of me as a son, a younger version of himself. He had to corrupt me, to own me, or else everything he believed, his whole sordid world, was a lie.

My dad chose to die instead of playing ball with Davies. Die proud rather than live corrupted. He got out. It was so neat and clean. But I didn't have that luxury. My death would be only the beginning of the pain. I had no good options. That's why I was here, about to shake hands with the devil.

I placed the envelope on the table. Inside it was the only thing Henry was afraid of: evidence of a mostly forgotten murder. His only mistake. The one bit of carelessness in Davies's long career. It was a piece of himself he'd lost fifty years before, and he wanted it back.

"This is the only real trust, Mike. When two people know each other's secrets. When they have each other cornered. Mutually assured destruction. Anything else is bullshit sentimentality. I'm proud of you. It's the same play I made when I was starting out."

Henry always told me that every man has his price. He'd found mine. If I said yes, I'd have my life back—the house, the money, the friends, the respectable facade I'd always wanted. If I said no, it was all over, for me, for Annie.

"Name your price, Mike. You can have it. Anyone who's anyone has made a deal like this on the way up. It's how the game is played. What do you say?"

It was an old bargain. Swap your soul for all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. There would be haggling over details, of course. I wasn't going to sell myself on the cheap, but that was quickly squared away.

"I will give you this evidence," I said, tapping my finger on the envelope, "and guarantee that you will never have to worry about it again. In exchange, Rado goes away. The police leave me alone. I get my life back. And I become a full partner."

“And from now on, you’re mine,” Henry said. “A full partner in the wet work too. When we find Rado, you’ll slit his throat.”

I nodded.

“Then we’re agreed,” Henry said. The devil held his hand out.

I shook it, and handed over my soul with the envelope.

But that was bullshit, another gamble. Die in infamy, honor intact, or live in glory, corrupted. I chose neither. There was nothing in the envelope. I was trying to barter empty-handed with the devil, so I really had only one choice: to beat him at his own game.

CHAPTER ONE

I WAS LATE. I checked myself out in one of the giant gilt mirrors they had hanging everywhere. There were dark circles under my eyes from lack of sleep and a fresh patch of carpet burn on my forehead. Otherwise I looked like every other upwardly mobile grade-grubber streaming through Langdell Hall.

The seminar was called Politics and Strategy. I ducked inside. It was application only—sixteen spots—and had the reputation of being a launching pad for future leaders in finance, diplomacy, military, and government. Every year Harvard tapped a few mid- to late-career heavies from DC and New York and brought them up to lead the seminar. The class was essentially a chance for the wannabe big-deal professional students—and there was no shortage of them around campus—to show off their “big think” skills, hoping establishment dons would tap them and start them off on glittering careers. I looked around the table: hotshots from the law school,

econ, philosophy, even a couple MD/PhDs. Ego poured through the room like central air.

It was my third year at the law school—I was doing a joint law and politics degree—and I had no idea how I'd managed to finagle my way into HLS or the seminar. That'd been pretty typical of the past ten years of my life, though, so I shrugged it off. Maybe it was all just a long series of clerical errors. My usual attitude was the fewer questions asked, the better.

Jacket, button-down, khakis: I mostly managed to look the part, if a little worn and frayed. We were in the thick of the conversation. The subject was World War I. And Professor Davies stared at us expectantly, sweating the answer out of us like an inquisitor.

“So,” Davies said. “Gavrilo Princip steps forward and pistol-whips a bystander with his little Browning 1910. He shoots the archduke in the jugular and then shoots his wife through the stomach as she shields the archduke with her body. He just so happens to trigger the Great War in the process. The question is: Why?”

He glowered around the table. “Don't regurgitate what you read. Think.”

I watched the others squirm. Davies definitely qualified as a heavy. The other students in class had studied his career with jealous obsession. I knew less, but enough. He was an old Washington hand. Going back forty years, he knew everyone who mattered, the two layers of people below those who mattered, and, most important, where all the bodies were buried. He'd worked for Lyndon Johnson, jumped ship to Nixon, then put out his own shingle as a fixer. He now ran a high-end strategic consulting firm called the Davies Group, which always made me think of the Kinks (that should tell you a bit about how fit I am for cutthroat DC career climbing). Davies had influence and could trade on that for anything he wanted, including, as one of the guys in class pointed out, a mansion in McLean, a place in Tus-

cany, and a ten-thousand-acre ranch on the central California coast. He'd been guest-teaching the seminar for a few weeks now. My classmates were practically vibrating with anxiety; I'd never seen them so eager to impress. That led me to believe that in the various orbits of official Washington, Davies had pull like the sun.

Davies's usual teaching method was to sit placidly and put a good face on his boredom, like he was listening to a bunch of second-graders spout dinosaur trivia. He wasn't an especially large man, maybe five ten, five eleven, but he sort of...loomed. His pull, it was almost like you could see it spread out through a room. People stopped talking, all eyes turned to him, and soon enough he had everyone lined up around him like filings around a magnet.

But his voice: that was the odd thing. You'd expect it to boom out, but he always spoke softly. There was a scar on his neck, right between where his jawline met his ear. It was the source of some speculation, whether an old injury had something to do with his quiet tone, but no one knew what had happened. It didn't matter much, since most rooms went silent when he opened his mouth. In class, though, his students were desperate to be heard, to be noticed by the master. Everyone had his answers to Davies's questions marshaled. There's an art to seminar: when to let others blabber, when to cut in. It's like boxing or...I guess fencing or squash or one of those other Ivy League pastimes.

The guy who always went first and never had a point to make began talking about the Young Bosnia movement until Davies's stare put the fear in him. The kid trailed off, mumbling. A feeding frenzy ensued as everyone smelled weakness and started barking over one another, spouting off about Greater Serbia versus the Southern Slavs, Bosnian versus Bosniak, irredentist Serbs and the Triple Entente and the two-power standard.

I was in awe. It wasn't just the facts they'd assembled (and some of these guys seemed to know literally everything; I'd never managed to push them out of their depths). It was their manner. You could see the entitlement in every move; it was like they'd grown up toddling around the study as their fathers swirled single-malts and debated the fate of nations, like they'd spent the last twenty-five years boning up on diplomatic history just to kill time until their dads grew tired of running the world and let them take the wheel. They were just so...so goddamn *respectable*. I usually loved to watch them, loved the little toehold I'd managed to gain in this world, loved to think that I could finally pass for one of them.

But not today. I was having trouble. I couldn't keep up with the give-and-take, the points and parries, let alone outdo them. On my good days I had a chance. But every time I tried to think about century-old Balkan micropolitics, I only saw a number, big and red and flashing. It was written in my notebook: \$83,359, circled and underlined, and followed by a few other numbers: 43-23-65.

I hadn't slept the night before. After work—I tended bar at a yuppie place called Barley—I went over to Kendra's. I figured taking her up on her come-fuck-me look at the bar would do me more good than the ninety minutes of sleep I might have gotten before I had to wake up and read twelve hundred pages of densely written IR theory. She had black hair you could drown in, and a shape that invited lewd thoughts. But the principal appeal may have been that girls named Kendra who worked for tips and didn't look you in the eye in bed were the exact opposite of everything I told myself I wanted.

I headed out from Kendra's and got home around seven that morning. I knew something was up when I saw a few of my T-shirts on the stoop and my dad's ratty old Barcalounger lying on its side on the sidewalk. The front door to my apartment had been forced, and not well. It looked like a mean black bear had done it. Gone: my bed,

and most of the furniture, the lamps and small kitchen appliances. The rest of my stuff was scattered everywhere.

People were going through my shit on the sidewalk like it was the giveaway at the end of a yard sale. I shooed them off and gathered up what was left. The Barcalounger was safe: it weighed as much as a hatchback and would require some serious forethought and a couple of guys to haul it off.

As I straightened up inside the apartment, I noticed that Crenshaw Collection Services hadn't seen the value of Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War* or the five-inch-thick stack of reading material that had to be finished before seminar in two hours. They had left me a little love note on the kitchen table: *Furnishings taken as partial payment. Outstanding balance: \$83,359.* Outstanding. Spectacular, even. I knew enough law by then to recognize at a glance about seventeen fatal flaws in Crenshaw's approach to debt collection, but they were as ruthless as bedbugs and I'd been too slammed trying to pay for school to sue them to a pulp. But that day would come.

Your parents' debts are supposed to die with them, settled out of the estate. Not mine. The eighty-three grand was the balance due for my mother's stomach cancer treatment. She was gone now. And if I may share one piece of advice, it's this: if your mother is dying, don't ever pay her bills with your own checkbook.

Because some unsavory creditors, folks like Crenshaw, will take that as a pretext to come after you once she's dead. You've tacitly assumed the debts, they'll say. It's not exactly legal. But it's not the kind of thing you know to look out for when you're sixteen and the radiology bills start coming in and you're trying to keep your mom alive by working overtime at Milwaukee Frozen Custard and your dad's doing a twenty-four-year bid at the Allenwood Federal Correctional Complex.

I'd been through this sort of hassle too often to even waste time

with anger. I'd do what I always did. The more all that stuff from the past tried to drag me down, the more I'd work my ass off to rise above it. And that meant putting a wall around this little disaster, meant plowing through as much work as I could before class so I wouldn't sound like a moron in Davies's seminar. I took my reading out to the sidewalk, then righted the recliner. I kicked back and dug into some Churchill essays as traffic cruised by.

By the time I made it to seminar, however, I'd crashed. My punchy up-all-night post-lay energy was gone, as was the jolt of enthusiasm I'd had to spite Crenshaw by nailing class. To get to seminar, I had to swipe my ID at the entrance to Langdell Hall. I joined the long queue of students swiping and hitting the turnstiles and hustling to class. But my card made the LED flash red, not green. The metal bar locked and bent my knees back. My upper half continued forward in one of those agonizingly slow falls where you realize what's happening and can't do a thing about it for the ten minutes it seems to take to eat shit headfirst onto a thin layer of carpet over cement.

The cute undergrad behind the circulation desk was nice enough to explain that I might want to check with the Student Receivables Office about unpaid tuition or fees. Then she treated herself to a little pump of hand sanitizer. Crenshaw must have gone after my bank accounts and screwed up my tuition payment, and Harvard was just as serious about getting paid as Crenshaw. I had to circle around the back of Langdell and sneak in behind a guy going out for a smoke by the shipping dock.

In class, I guess my fugue state was now pretty obvious. It felt like Davies was looking right at me. Then I felt it coming. I fought it with every muscle in my body but sometimes there's nothing you can do. I had to yawn. And this one was big, lion big. There was no hiding it behind my hand.

Davies fixed me with a dagger look sharpened over God knows

how many face-offs—he used to stare down labor bosses and KGB agents.

“Are we boring you, Mr. Ford?” he asked.

“No, sir.” An awful weightless feeling grew in my stomach. “I apologize.”

“Then why don’t you share your thoughts on the assassination?”

The others tried to hide their delight: one less grade-grubber to climb over. The particular thoughts distracting me went like this: *Can’t shake Crenshaw until I have a law degree and a decent job and can’t get either until I shake Crenshaw, which leaves me with the eighty-three grand due Crenshaw and one hundred sixty due Harvard and no way to pay it back.* Everything I’d worked my ass off for ten years to earn, all the respectability filling that room, was about to slip from my hands, and be gone for good. And at the root of it all: my father, the convict, who first got tangled up with Crenshaw, who left me the man of the house at twelve, who should have done the world a favor and kicked instead of my mom. I pictured him, pictured his smirk, and as much as I tried not to, all I could think about was . . .

“Revenge,” I said.

Davies brought the earpiece of his glasses up to his lips. He was waiting for me to go on.

“I mean Princip is dirt-poor, right? He has six siblings die, and his parents have to give him away because they can’t feed him. And he thinks the whole reason he can’t get ahead in life is that the Austrians have had their foot on his family’s neck since he was born. He’s scrawny; the guerrillas laughed him out of the room when he tried to join up. He was just a nobody trying to make a splash. The other assassins lost their nerve, but he . . . he was, well, pissed off like no one else. He had something to prove. Twenty-three years of resentment. So he’d do what he had to do to make his name, even if it meant

killing. Especially if it meant killing. The more dangerous the target the better.”

My peers looked away in distaste. I didn't talk much in seminar, and when I did I tried to use polished, high-sounding Harvard English like everyone else, not the regular-Mike tone I had just slipped into. I waited for Davies to tear me up. I sounded like a street kid, not a young establishment comer.

“Not bad,” he said. He thought for a moment, then looked around the room.

“Grand strategy, world war. You are all getting caught up in abstractions. Never lose sight of the fact that at the end of the day it comes down to men. Someone has to pull the trigger. If you want to lead nations, you have to start by understanding a single man, his wants and fears, the secrets he won't admit to and may not even be aware of himself. Those are the levers that move the world. Every man has a price. And once you find it, you own him, body and soul.”

After class, I was in a rush to clean myself up and attend to the disaster back in my apartment. A hand on my shoulder stopped me. I half expected it to be Crenshaw, ready to humiliate me in front of the good people of Harvard.

That might've been preferable; it was Davies, with that dagger stare and whisper voice. “I would like to talk to you,” he said. “Ten forty-five, my office?”

“Terrific,” I said, my best attempt at calm. Maybe he'd saved the chewing-out for a private conference. Classy.

I needed food and sleep, but coffee would cover both for a while. I didn't have time to go back to my apartment, and without really thinking about it, I walked over to Barley, the bar where I worked. The only thing filling my head was that number, \$83,359, and the endless pathetic arithmetic of how I'd never be able to pay it off.

The bar was a pretentious box with too many windows. The only one in there was Oz, the manager, who bartended a few shifts a week. It wasn't until I leaned against the oak bar and took the first bitter sip of coffee that I caught myself. I hadn't come for caffeine. I cycled the numbers in my head: 46-79-35, 43-23-65, and so on. They were combinations for a Sentry safe.

Oz, who was also the owner's son-in-law, was skimming. And not just here and there, the usual retail "shrinkage." He was robbing the place. I'd been watching him up his game for a while, no sale-ing drinks and pocketing the money, comping his regulars half their tabs and never punching a thing into the register. Fishing that large a volume of stolen money from the cash drawer every night must have been a little difficult, since he had to do it while we were waiting around to be tipped out. So I was certain, dead certain, that this asshole was now keeping it in the safe. I could just tell. Probably because his act was basically a clumsy version of what I'd be doing if I were him and hadn't sworn off grifting a long time ago. The academic term is *alert opportunism*. It means that if you have the eyes of a criminal, you see the world differently, as nothing more than a collection of unwatched candy jars. I was starting to worry about myself, because now that I needed money, badly, it was all jumping out at me again: unlocked cars, open doors, loose purses, cheap locks, dark entries.

As much as I tried, I couldn't forget my apprenticeship, my ill-gotten expertise. I couldn't ignore all those invitations to stray. People seem to think thieves have to pick locks and shinny up drainpipes and charm widows. Usually, though, they just have to keep their eyes open. The money is more or less left sitting out by honest folks who can't quite believe people like me are walking around. The hidden key, the unlocked garage, the anniversary-date PIN code. It's there for the taking. And that's the funny thing: the straighter I became,

the easier it was to be crooked. It was like people were constantly upping the temptations to keep testing me after all these years clean. As a harmless-looking grad student in a button-down, I could probably have walked out of Cambridge Savings and Trust with a trash bag full of hundreds and a revolver in my belt while the guard held the door and told me to have a nice weekend.

Alert opportunism. That's how I picked up that Oz was day-locking the safe, so he only had to dial in the last number to open it. It's how I knew that that number was 65. It's how I recalled that Sentry safes came from the manufacturer preset with only a handful of codes—called tryouts—and so if Oz's code ended in 65, it was almost certain that someone along the line had been too lazy to change the original factory combo from 43-23-65. It's how I noted that Oz was barely able to calculate a tip, let alone keep his skim straight, and that his drinking had gone from bad to worse: at 10:30 a.m. he was already halfway through a five-second pour of Jameson in a mug with a splash of coffee on top. And even if he did notice something missing, who would he tell? No honor among thieves, right?

Oz had the cash drawers on the bar now. He took them into the office. I heard the safe open and shut. He came back out and said, "I'm going to grab some cigarettes. Can you keep an eye on the place?"

Opportunity knocked. I nodded.

I took my coffee, stepped into the office, and tried the handle on the safe. It was open. Jesus. He was practically begging me. Scanning the contents, I counted about forty-eight thousand dollars in bank bundles and maybe another ten grand or so in cash just piled up. Oz was way behind on the deposits.

There were two plays: I could nibble away at his skim and keep Crenshaw off my back long enough to get my degree. Or I could just rip off the Band-Aid, come in before dawn and clean it out. The bar's

back door was like Fort Knox, but the front you could pry open with a Wonderbar in a minute and a half—typical. No one would get hurt. As long as there are signs of forced entry, insurance pays out. I checked the top drawers of the desk, then the corkboard, and sure enough, there it was, tacked to the wall in Oz's third-grader handwriting: 43-23-65—the combination. Begging me.

I needed to pay Harvard at least, that week. Or else no degree. All that work, gone. The blood was pumping. A thrill coursed through me. It felt good. Really good. I'd missed it. Ten years I'd been clean, the upstanding go-getter. I hadn't strayed, hadn't lifted so much as a malted-milk ball from the grocery-store candy bins.

Standing in front of that open safe felt good. It felt way too good. It was in my blood. And I knew that shit would destroy me—like it did my dad, like it did my family—if I gave it the slightest chance. I looked over my button-down shirt, my loafers, Thucydides staring up from the cover of my book.

"Fuck me," I muttered. Who was I kidding? I was too damn respectable to be crooked. And somehow still too crooked to be respectable. I swallowed the last of my coffee, then looked down at the empty mug. I'd chosen honest a long time ago, to survive, and I was going to stick with it even if it killed me.

I clanked the safe door shut.

I had pictured Davies's office like a World War II film set: a map room with man-size globes and him shoving around armies on table maps with a croupier's rake. Instead, Harvard had put him in a spare office in Littauer Hall, all Office Depot cherry veneer and no windows.

Sitting across from him, I felt an eerie bit of déjà vu. He seemed to grow as he looked me over, and I remembered, from a long time ago, what it was like to be standing dead center in the courtroom with a judge staring down.

“I have to catch the shuttle back to DC in a few minutes,” Davies said. “But I wanted to talk to you. You were a summer associate at Damrosch and Cox?”

“Yes, sir.”

“You’re planning to work with them after you graduate?”

“No,” I said.

That’s pretty unusual. All the real work in law school is in the first year and a half, when you’re gunning for a summer associateship at a firm. Then they wine and dine and overpay you to do nothing in order to make up for the seven years of hell they’re going to make you pay as an actual associate. Once you’re in for the summer, you’re more or less guaranteed a job after you graduate unless you’re a major fuckup. Damrosch and Cox didn’t invite me back.

“Why not?” Davies asked.

“Tough economy,” I said. “And I know I’m not the typical candidate.”

Davies pulled out a few sheets of paper and looked them over. My résumé. He must have pulled it from the Office of Career Services.

“Your manager at Damrosch and Cox said you were excellent, a force of nature.”

“That’s very kind of him.”

Davies squared the papers and put them down on his desk.

“Damrosch and Cox are a couple white-shoe fucking snobs,” he said.

That was my working theory for why they didn’t hire me too, but it took me a second to process it coming from Davies. His firm had a rep that could easily out-white-shoe-fucking-snob the best of them.

“You join the navy at nineteen, when most of your chums in seminar here probably went to get drunk in Europe during their gap year. Top noncommissioned officer. A year at Pensacola Junior College, then you transfer to Florida State and graduate first in your class

in two years. Damn near perfect LSATs. Now a joint degree from the Kennedy School and Harvard Law. And” —he checked another paper— “you’re doing the four-year degree in three. How are you paying for it?”

“Loans.”

“About a hundred and fifty thousand dollars?”

“Give or take. And I tend bar.”

Davies seemed to check the circles under my eyes. “How many hours a week?”

“Forty, fifty.”

“On top of class.” He shook his head. “I’ll ask you this, because you did a decent job figuring out what moved Princip. What lit the fire under you?”

So apparently this was a job interview. I tried to think of the usual platitudes about my work ethic, summon my inner grade-grubber, but I really didn’t know how to play this one. Davies made it easy.

“I’d prefer it if you didn’t bullshit me,” he said. “I called you in here because, based on what you said in class, you actually seem to know something about the real world, what drives men. What’s driving you?”

He’d find out sooner or later, so I figured I might as well get it over with. It was expunged from the record, but I could never really erase it. People, like the partners at Damrosch and Cox, always managed to find out. It’s like they could smell it on me.

“I got into some trouble when I was young,” I said. “The judge gave me an easy choice: join up or go to prison. The navy straightened me out, and the discipline took. I liked the routine, the drive, and I put that into school.”

He lifted the files off the desk, dropped them in his attaché, then stood up. “Good,” he said. “I like to know who I’m working with.”

I looked at him, puzzled by the “working with” bit. Usually when

people caught a hint of who I really was, they showed me the door (“tough economy” or “not our kind of man”). Not Davies.

“You’ll come work for me,” he said. “We’ll start you at two hundred a year. Thirty percent bonus based on performance.”

“Yes.” I heard myself say it before I even had a chance to think.

That night, I slept on a wheezing air mattress in my empty apartment. I had to get up every couple hours to pump it back up. Dawn was a long time coming, and at some point, I remember, I realized that when Davies said I was coming to DC, he’d been telling me, not asking.

CHAPTER TWO

THE MAHOGANY BOX wasn't a coffin, but after I'd been trapped inside it for four hours, it started to feel distinctly tomblike. I found it hard to rest. That may have had something to do with the fact that most people in similar situations were lying on their backs, and dead. After a while, however, I learned that if I leaned my head forward and wedged it in a corner, I could catch a few winks.

The story of how I found myself in that box is a bit complicated. The short version is that I was stalking a guy named Ray Gould because I was in love—with a girl named Annie Clark in particular, and with my new job in general.

I'd been at the Davies Group for almost four months. The firm was a strange place, opaque by design. If you asked, they told you they did government affairs and strategic consulting. Usually that's a euphemism for lobbying.

Picture a lobbyist and you probably call to mind the bought-

and-paid-for, tasseled-loafer-wearing scum who funnel corporate and special-interest bribes to politicians, take generous skims for themselves, and ultimately make the world safe for lung cancer and poisoned rivers. There are plenty of those guys. But the go-go days of the 1970s and 1980s, when payoffs and vice flourished, are long gone. Now most lobbyists spend their days clicking through PowerPoint slides about obscure policies while bored junior congressional staff check their BlackBerrys under the table.

Those guys are the rabble. Comparing them to the folks at the Davies Group is like comparing Zales to Tiffany and Cartier. Davies is among a handful of strategic consulting firms that do very little formal lobbying. These outfits are run by Washington heavies—ex–House Speakers, ex–secretaries of state, ex–national security advisers—and they exert a far more powerful and lucrative influence through the Beltway’s back channels. They’re not registered as lobbyists. They don’t do volume. They don’t advertise. They have *relationships*. They’re discreet. And they’re very, very expensive. If you really need something done in Washington, and you have the money, and you know the people you have to know to even *get* a referral to a top firm, that’s where you go.

The Davies Group is at the peak of that cozy little world. It occupies a mansion in Kalorama, set among the trees and old European embassies, far from K Street downtown, where most lobbyists duke it out.

During those first days in DC, I started to realize that the Davies Group thought of itself less as a business and more as a secret society or shadow government. People I was used to seeing on the front page of the *Post*, or in history books, for God’s sake, would be strolling up and down the hallways or cursing at jammed laser printers.

Davies, like the other principals, spent his days doing essentially the same work he had done while in government. He marshaled

decades of bureaucratic mastery: knowing exactly which string to tug, which functionary to pressure. It was a miracle how he made this sluggish, awkward, all-powerful yet barely functioning apparatus—the federal government—come alive and turn his whims into realities.

Once he'd had to answer to voters and donors and political parties. Now he answered to only himself. He was offered far more business than he could ever take and so had the luxury of taking only those clients whose cases fit with his own agenda.

None of this was said outright, of course. You had to pick up all the routines and rituals by keeping your eyes open and asking the right questions. The Davies Group was old-school. Most consulting firms still keep a little gentlemanly patina—the suits, the library, the hardwood trim. But any gentility has long ago been squeezed out by the number crunchers. Everyone measures his life by cells on a spreadsheet: hours billed. You have to hit your numbers. From day one, you're on the hamster wheel. At Davies it was different. There were no orientations, no quotas or guidelines. There were only a half dozen or so new hires. Some years there were none.

They gave each new initiate an office, a secretary, and a paycheck for forty-six hundred dollars every other week. Beyond that it was up to you. You had to find the work. The principals and partners inhabited the third floor—to me it looked like a wing of Versailles—and the senior associates the second. We were the junior associates, new fish, and we were parked on the first floor with all the admin, HR, and research folks. Junior associate was basically probation. You had six months, maybe a year, to prove your worth to the company, or you were gone. No one taught you how to do it. You had to hustle your way past every associate's door to learn the rules of the game, but you could never seem pushy. Tact and discretion were the cardinal virtues at Davies Group.

You'd scrounge for any little project at first, and typically they'd have you do research on a mark—sorry, that's the old Mike's lingo—on a “decision-maker” the firm wanted to influence. That meant you had to find out everything there was to know in the world, public and private, about your mark, and narrow it down to only the things that mattered for the case at hand *and nothing more*. That went into a memo, one page maximum. The partners called it “boiling the sea.” And what mattered? We junior associates had no idea, but we knew we had damned sure better get it right.

That was the worst part. The partners and associates knew that if they let you squirm, you would only work harder, desperate for a pat on the head. So they never said exactly what was right or wrong. A partner would just tent his fingers in front of his lips and say, “Why don't you have another go?” then slide back across the desk the product of your endless nights and weekends at the office, always wanting more. If you were lucky, you would receive the rarest of gifts, a “not bad”—the equivalent of a panting orgasm at the Davies Group. And if you pulled the wrong grains of salt from the sea? You were gone. Sink or swim.

I was going to swim. I'd been hazed pretty hard starting out in the navy, and if staring at a computer was the worst they had for me, I was going to be fine. If I was awake (which I was for eighteen or nineteen hours a day), I was working.

The money was enough to keep Crenshaw off my back, and even with me saving 20 percent (I was still convinced that any day the rug would be pulled out) there was more left than I knew how to spend. I had to get used to going out for dinner without coupons and having an apartment decent enough to invite people over without shame.

Money wasn't the only draw. In my short time at Davies, I started getting perks I hadn't even known existed, things I wouldn't even

have known to want. They had sent movers up to Cambridge to pack up my old place. Young guys, they were nice enough not to laugh at my picked-over apartment. It took them a half hour to convince me I shouldn't help. All I had to do was pack a bag for myself and drive my fifteen-year-old Jeep Cherokee down to DC. The shocks were gone, so it lurched on the leaf springs like a seesaw anytime I went over fifty-five. Davies put me up in the firm's corporate apartment on Connecticut Ave., a nine-hundred-square-foot one-bedroom with a den, a balcony, a doorman, and a concierge.

"Take as long as you want to find a place," Davies told me the first day. "We'll set you up with a real estate agent, but if you're focused on working instead of going to open houses, that's fine with us."

Even if I hadn't been trying to save money, there was nothing I needed to buy. The firm had a car service, and most days my coworkers and I ended up eating catered breakfast, lunch, and dinner at the office.

My first week, I met my assistant, Christina, a petite Hungarian. She was so tiny, neat, and efficient that I half suspected she was a robot. She kept catching me as I tried to run my own errands. I'd ask where the post office was, or the dry cleaner's. She would extend her hand, looking a little put out that I'd try to do some task myself, then take what I was holding and do whatever chore I needed done.

"Sorry for the tough love, Mr. Ford. Don't think of it as a luxury. Think of it as Davies making sure he keeps you on task and gets his money's worth out of you."

That made it a little easier. The fifty annoying errands you have to do when you move—standing in line at the DMV, waiting for the cable guy—they just got done. And it kept up after that, all life's little hassles gone. That's when I started to understand. I'd always needed money to survive, for bare necessities month to month.

I never really stopped to think about what it really brought, those countless graces that people wrap up in the word *comfortable*.

All that made me feel a bit uncomfortable, soft even. I liked to think of myself as hungry, driven. But when you have twelve interviews and fourteen hundred pages of documents to plow through a day, two weekly reports that can make or break you, and partners ready to drop by any time for a “little check-in” that could be your last, you don’t really have time to worry about going soft. I started to realize that Christina was right: some pad thai ordered in to the conference room and a Town Car home was a small price for Davies to pay to keep each employee humming along and billing out at two or three hundred bucks an hour, seventy hours a week.

I needed the money, and I liked the perks, but that’s not what pulled me out of bed every morning at 5:45. It was the ritual of shined shoes and a crisp shirt. It was crossing off eight tasks before 9:00 a.m. It was the soles of my Johnston & Murphy’s cracking across the marble floor of the Davies Group foyer and echoing back from the oak panels. It was walking through the halls and seeing wise men do work that mattered, seeing Henry Davies and an ex-CIA director in the courtyard laughing like old roommates and realizing that if I kept busting my ass, I might one day belong in their company. It was the same thing that had been driving me ever since a judge gave me a choice: the need to find something larger than myself to be a part of, some honest work to lose myself in; anything to hold off the criminal in my blood.

I was going to do everything it took to make it at Davies, to make that respectable world stick. And that’s how I found myself sealed up in the mahogany box.

Those first few months were like pledging a fraternity. Nobody said how exactly, but you knew you were being scrutinized at every step. Every so often someone would disappear and you had the feel-

ing that in some clubby chamber at Davies Group the night before, ballots had been cast in secret, and black marks scratched beside the name of the unfit.

That was the chatter among the junior associates, at least. I thought it was a little much. But the piece of it I did buy was that your first real assignment was do-or-die. In the government affairs business, when you're needling some politician or bureaucrat to give you what your client wants, there comes a moment called the ask. No matter how byzantine the issue, it ultimately comes down to one question: Will he give you what you need? Yes or no.

A partner does the actual ask. He is the august face of the company. The real work, however, is all left to the associate. And when you get your first case, you own it. If the mark says yes, you're golden. No: you're gone.

William Marcus gave me my first real case. He had the office next to Davies on the third floor. It was the executive corridor. An oak-paneled boardroom ran along one side. On the other there were six or seven suites, each as big as my apartment, all looking down over the District from this hilltop perch in Kalorama. Walking that hall made my hair stand on end. I would flash back to drills and forward march with thirty-inch steps, head, eyes, and body at attention.

The men on that hall had literally run the free world, and they daily, without a second thought, made or crushed the careers of dozens of strivers like me. Most of the principals at the firm had bios as long as your arm; that's what the clients paid for. But Marcus's background was a mystery. As far as I knew, I was the only junior associate he was keeping an eye on. It was either a very good or a very bad thing, and given the caliber of the talent I was up against, I figured the latter.

Marcus was in his late forties, maybe a little older; it was hard to tell. I took him for a triathlete or, given his build, maybe one of those

white-collar guys who spend four nights a week trading leather at the boxing gym. He had reddish-brown hair trimmed short, a strong jaw, and drawn cheeks. He always seemed to be in a good mood, which cut down the intimidation factor a bit, but only until he had you alone in his office. Then the smiles and easy manner disappeared.

He put me on to my first ask. A giant multinational based in Germany (which I probably shouldn't name outright, so I'll just call it what we called it around the office: the Kaiser) had finagled a tax-and-tariff loophole and was using it to lowball American companies and drive them out of business. It was a typically complex international tax case, but in the end it came down to this: overseas companies that sell services to Americans pay way less in taxes and tariffs than companies that ship actual goods to the United States. The Kaiser people sure looked like they were selling goods to the United States. They claimed, however, that they were just offering a service, connecting American customers to overseas vendors and manufacturers, and so they should have to pay only the cheap tax on services. We're just a middleman, the Kaiser would argue, who never actually takes possession of the goods. But once you looked at their supply chain, it was clear they were selling goods just like everybody else and simply dodging the higher taxes.

Still awake? Bravo. The folks who were getting driven out of business had hired the Davies Group. They wanted us to close the loophole and level the playing field. That meant getting some bureaucrat in the bowels of Washington to sign a piece of paper that said the Kaiser was offering goods, not services.

One little word. And for that, the Davies Group was getting at least fifteen million dollars, which, rumor had it among the junior associates, was the minimum required to attract the firm's attention.

Marcus laid the case out for me, with a few more details but not many: my first ask. He didn't even tell me what he wanted me to

give back to him—the product, as it was known around the office. My ass was now officially on the line and I had zero clue what I was doing.

I'd been out of my depth for the last ten years, though, and it had worked out surprisingly well, so I figured I'd just keep doing what I always did: hustle. A hundred and fifty hours of work and ten days later, after talking with every expert who would answer a plea for help and reading every legal code and journal article that even vaguely touched on the issue, I distilled the case against the Kaiser into ten pages, then five, then one. I boiled the sea. Eight bullet points. Each one alone was potent enough to annihilate the Kaiser. It was the memo equivalent of uncut heroin, and I was proud and sleep-deprived enough to pass it along to Marcus thinking it would blow him away.

He skimmed it for thirty seconds, grumbled a little, and said, “This is all fucked up. You can't know the why until you know the who. These things always turn on one man. Don't waste my time until you find the fulcrum.”

I wanted marching orders. I got Confucius. So I dug back in. Among my junior-associate peers hustling for a spot at Davies Group were the secretary of defense's son, a guy who at thirty years old had already been deputy campaign manager on a successful presidential bid, and two Rhodes scholars, one of them a former CIA director's grandson. The job came down to knowing Washington, and the issues, sure, but more important, knowing the deep anthropology of the place, the personalities, the loves and hates, the hidden nodes where power massed, who had pull on who, who owed who chits. It was stuff that takes a lifetime of connections, of being immersed in the DC elite, to learn. The other guys had it. I didn't. But that wasn't going to stop me. Because I had learned a few things along the way too. What I did have was will, in spades.

So I got out of the office, away from LexisNexis and the endless

Googling, to actually talk to some human beings (to many of my youngish peers, this was an art as mysterious as levitation or snake charming). I was working on the premise that official Washington, however peculiar, could ultimately be understood as a neighborhood like any other.

About six different government offices had a say in the decision on whether the Kaiser could hang on to the loophole. But the final stop turned out to be a typical example of Washington bureaucracy: a sub-body of something called the Interim Interagency Working Group on Manufacturing at the Commerce Department.

It took about a week to crack the working group. Everything was a little harder because Marcus had told me that for now there shouldn't be any obvious signs we were working the case. I had to talk to about four or five junior staffers until I found a chatterbox, big ego, who knew nothing that mattered to me. He did, however, turn me on to a paralegal who moonlighted for fun as a bartender at Stetson's—a U Street bar that the Clinton White House staffers used to frequent, though by now it had gone to seed. She was a redhead with a nice tomboyish thing going, as amiable as you could want, though she snored like a chain saw and had a habit of “forgetting” things at my apartment.

She laid it all out. There were two figureheads who would sign off on it, but in the end, the real decision came down to three people on the working group. Two were typical agency staffers, human paperweights; they didn't matter. The third—a guy named Ray Gould—was the actual decision-maker, the one who was keeping the Kaiser's loophole open. Gould was a deputy assistant secretary (that is, under the assistant secretary under the undersecretary who was under the deputy under the actual secretary of commerce. Having fun?). I found myself saying these org-chart tongue twisters in all seriousness. If I needed something to keep me from thinking the

whole thing was a ridiculous bit of policy trivia, I would just remember that nailing it meant fifteen million minimum to my boss and, more important, would save me from spending the rest of my life wiping down a bar and hiding from Crenshaw.

Besides, I was starting to really enjoy myself. The characters were less interesting and the money was better, but otherwise this wasn't all that dissimilar from the hustles I knew growing up. That had me equal parts excited and worried.

I had my fulcrum. Marcus didn't seem pleased with me, exactly, when I brought him Gould's name, but at least he seemed a little less angry. He told me to start from scratch on making the case to close the tariff loophole. I had to tailor it all to a single goal: change Gould's mind. I read Gould's theses from college and graduate school. I found out what newspapers and journals he subscribed to, the charities he donated to, every decision he'd ever made that there was a record or memory of. I started zeroing in, fine-tuning every argument against the Kaiser's loophole so it would appeal to Gould's particular habits and beliefs. I boiled down the arguments over and over until I'd trimmed them to a single page. The previous memo had been uncut heroin. This was a designer drug. Gould would have to give us the decision we wanted.

"You'd better hope so," Marcus said.

Even with all the reading and interviews, I couldn't get a sense of the guy, of what made him tick, until I saw him in person. In profiling Gould, I may have gone a little overboard. I knew where his kids went to school, what car he drove, where he went on his anniversary dinner, his usual lunch spots. They were mostly high-end: Central Michel Richard, the Prime Rib, the Palm, but every other Thursday he would go to Five Guys, a burger place.

The week after I turned in my new report on Gould, Marcus called me upstairs, then led me into Davies's suite. Davies gestured

for Marcus to wait outside. This was the master-of-the-universe office I had imagined back at Harvard, except of course Davies had better taste than my imagination did. Books ran from floor to ceiling on three walls. They'd been read too; they weren't just leather-bound props. Everything was kitted out in mahogany. And the ego wall—mandatory for Washington: snapshots of grip-and-grins with anyone influential you've ever met—was like nothing I'd ever seen. He had shots with world leaders going back decades, and they weren't the usual two-guys-in-suits-at-a-fund-raiser variety. There he was, younger than I was, bowling with Nixon; there fishing in a little skiff with Jimmy Carter; and there skiing with...

"Is that the pope?" I blurted it out before I could stop myself.

Davies stood behind his desk. He didn't look happy. "Gould hasn't budged," he said.

They'd given my memo—the arguments tailored specifically to Gould—to the trade group fighting the Kaiser, and the group had made the case to Gould's working group. Davies had people inside Commerce who would know if Gould was starting to come around. He hadn't given an inch.

"I'll do more," I said.

He lifted up the memo I had put together. "This is perfect," he said, then let me hang for a minute. His tone didn't make it sound like a compliment.

"I already have a hundred and twenty guys downstairs who can give me perfect. I don't need another. Do you know what this contract is worth?"

"No."

"We've worked out arrangements with every single industry and trade group affected. Forty-seven million."

I felt the blood drain from my face. He looked me over for a few seconds.

“We can’t bill by the hour here, Mike. If we win, we get the forty-seven. If we lose, we get nothing. We won’t lose.”

He walked a little closer and stared me down. “I took a risk with you, Mike. I hired you for the same reason others wouldn’t, because you’re not the usual candidate. I fear I may have made a mistake bringing you here. Prove I didn’t. Show me what you have to offer that the others don’t. Give me more than perfect. Surprise me.”

It’s easier to have nothing all along than to get your hands on something and lose it. And all the time at Davies Group, I’d thought of the money and privileges as a mistake soon to be rectified. I didn’t dare think I could really have it; I didn’t dare think of it as my life. But eventually you find something you really want. Something you need. Then you’re fucked. You can never let that life go.

What I wanted wasn’t anything fancy. For me, the moment I found it came around August of that first year at Davies, three months after I’d moved to the District. I was strolling through Mount Pleasant, a ten-minute walk from the office. The neighborhood had one main drag, with an eighty-year-old bakery and a hardware store that’d been there for decades. It was where the Italians, then the Greeks, and then the Latinos found their first foothold in DC, and it felt like a little village. Off the main street of shops, the area was wooded, and to me it seemed like the suburbs. The houses were small, and I saw one for rent, a two-bedroom with a porch and a backyard where you could look down into the woods of Rock Creek Park, a band of streams and forest that cuts DC in half north to south. While walking past the house one night, I saw a whole family of deer, just standing there, calm, unafraid, looking back at me.

That’s all it took. I hadn’t had a backyard since I was a kid. My dad had had some steady money coming in—I didn’t know where from back then. We had finally moved out of the apartment com-

plex in Arlington where I'd grown up—it sort of looked like a motel, and I remember it always smelled like cooking gas—out to a place in Manassas, just a small ranch house. And I know this is a little corny, but I remember we had a swing set there, all rusty aluminum tubes that would open your palm right up if you grabbed the wrong spot. We didn't live there for long, but I remember summer nights when my parents and a couple of their friends would be sitting around a fire pit, laughing and drinking beer. I would stay on that swing all evening, pumping my legs like a locomotive, and I'd go so high up, up with the bar, looking out over the trees, that I'd be weightless, and the chains would go slack, and I would've sworn I could just take off flying into the night.

Then they sent my dad up, for burglary, and it was back to where we belonged: the gas-smell motel.

After I finished work at Davies, ten or eleven o'clock at night, sometimes even later, I would walk through that neighborhood and picture myself in that backyard with a little fire going, a couple of lawn chairs, a nice girl. It felt like starting over, like making things right again.

The thought of losing it all lit a fire beneath me. After my meeting with Davies in his suite, it was a week before I went back to Marcus's office. I laid down two more files. One profiled Gould's mentor at the Department of the Interior, where he'd worked for nine years before joining Commerce. The second focused on the best man at Gould's wedding, a roommate from law school who was now in private practice. He was still Gould's go-to for advice; they had dinner every other week or so, one of Gould's few social outlets.

"And?" Marcus said.

"These guys are easier"—I caught myself before I said *marks*—"influentials. If you look at their decision-making, you can see they're

likely to be sympathetic to our arguments. I've tailored the arguments against the loophole to appeal to each man. The first already has a relationship with Davies Group. If we can't influence Gould, we can influence those around him. If we change their minds, we can change Gould's without his ever knowing it was our words in his ear."

Marcus was silent. I knew what was coming. I had given him more than he wanted on Gould. I had done everything but case the poor bastard's house, and I was thinking about doing that the next night. Marcus shifted in his chair. I hunkered down for a reaming-out.

Instead, Marcus smiled. "Who taught you that?"

That would be my dad's old friend Cartwright. In his younger days, he'd used a similar technique to charm lonely women hitting their late thirties out of their savings.

"Just sort of came to me," I said.

"It's a variation of a technique we call grass-topping," Marcus said. "You slowly, subtly lobby everyone close to the decision-maker—wife, chief fund-raisers, grown kids even—until he comes around."

"Grass-topping?"

"That's where we make it look like we have broad bottom-up support—from the grass roots—but we're faking it. You don't need to waste time with the roots when the legislator can see only the tops."

"Do you want me to take a stab at the next step? Actually influencing the people around Gould?"

"No," Marcus said. "I'll put a few people on it."

I caught something in his voice, something I didn't like.

"We're running out of time, aren't we?" I asked.

Marcus paused. He never said much, and always thought carefully before he spoke. But I could see he didn't want to bullshit me, saw maybe even a glimmer of respect.

"Yes."

* * *

The next week one of the Rhodes scholars washed out. He was a nice enough guy, with the swept-back blond waves and entitled air of a true prep. Someone told me, and I could believe it, that the guy didn't even own a pair of jeans. I could have resented him, I guess—every privilege had just been handed to him—but he had a sense of humor about himself and I had to like him.

He was a gunner like me, the first in our group to have an ask. But the decision-maker didn't come around. And that was it. Rhodes tried to play it off like he'd decided to move on to greener pastures, but he had this hitch in his voice as he was making his good-byes, like he'd been crying. It was hard to watch. I guess the kid had never failed at anything. He'd done everything he could. The case just hadn't gone his way.

I hadn't quite believed that these multimillion-dollar contracts were riding on a bunch of junior-associate twits with no idea what they were doing. But by all appearances, they were. I guess you could say it wasn't fair. Maybe they give you an unwinnable case; there's only so much you can do and then it's out of your hands. But it's hard for me to get worked up about things being unfair. That's life, the only way I've ever known it. You could cover up your head and moan about it, but my approach was just to make sure I won, no matter what. I'd been going for a long time on fumes, on some abstract dream of the good life. Now I was close. I could smell and taste it. The more real the dream became, the more intolerable I found the idea of losing it.

Case in point: Annie Clark, senior associate at Davies Group. I'd never had much trouble talking to women, never really even given it much thought. But around this particular woman, the usual one-thing-leads-to-another ease abandoned me. From the first moment I

saw her, on the second floor, all manner of corny nonsense crowded my brain.

Every time she and I talked (and we worked together fairly often), I found myself thinking that she had everything that I'd ever been drawn to in a woman—black curls, innocent face, and sly blue eyes—and some things I hadn't even known to look for. After observing her all day as she ran circles around all the smug boys in meetings and fielded phone calls in three or four different languages, I'd be walking out of the building with her and all I'd want was to blurt out what I was thinking: that she was what I'd been looking for, that she embodied the life I wanted but had never had. It was crazy.

I began to wonder if she was maybe *too* perfect, haughty and spoiled and impossible to reach.

The first time we pulled an all-nighter at work—she and I and two other junior associates—she ran the show. We all sat at a conference table, and, deep in thought, she pushed her rolling chair back, about to set us straight on another fine point of the influence game.

Instead, she tipped over, slowly but surely, disappeared behind the edge of the table, and fell backward onto the carpet. I half expected her to wail or come back up in a rage. Instead I heard her laugh for the first time. And hearing her lie there and crack up—free, easy, unself-conscious and unconcerned about anyone or anything—instantly cut through my bullshit sour-grapes attitude. Every time I heard her laugh, I knew this was a woman who didn't have time for pretense, who just took life as it came and enjoyed the hell out of it.

That laugh put me on dangerous ground. Whenever I ran into her I wanted to throw the memo I'd spent the last month working on out the window, drop to one knee, and ask her to run away and spend the rest of her life with me.

That probably would have been a better approach than what I ultimately did do. I was in the break room after a meeting, trying to

discuss my Annie Clark strategy with the remaining Rhodes scholar without sounding like a smitten moron (and mostly failing). Unfortunately, Annie Clark herself was there, unseen, behind a pillar eight feet away, as the Rhodes scholar, a guy named Tuck I'd grown friendly with, gave me a not-unwise piece of advice about office romance:

“Don't shit where you eat, man.”

“Charming,” Annie said, coming out from behind the pillar; she raised her bottle and pointed to the watercooler. “Do you mind?”

So I was a few runs down with regard to Annie Clark. But as I said: will in spades. I just needed a rally. And when I started picturing her beside me on a gentle July night in the backyard at the house up in Mount Pleasant I dreamed of buying, I resolved to hang on to this decent life I'd won even if it took my last breath. I was going to nail Gould.

The next time I saw Marcus—he was sipping coffee and reading in the dining room—after a few preliminaries, I asked him straight out.

“When's the ask?”

“Has somebody been telling tales out of school?” he responded. The whole ordeal of surviving the first year at Davies was supposed to be a black box. Inquiring about what was inside was a little bold, but I think all the partners knew that we junior associates had started to piece together some clues about our fates.

“Three days,” he said. “Davies is going to pay Gould a visit. We've slowly been working on his confidants.”

“And if it doesn't work? If he doesn't change his mind about the loophole?”

“You've done everything you can, Mike. And I hope, for your sake, he says yes.”

I left it there. I could read it in Marcus's face. Business is business.

* * *

I wasn't about to sit around and count on hope and crossed fingers. Henry had tapped me because he thought I knew something about what made people tick. He'd said every man has a price, a lever you can use to force him to do your will. I had three days to find Gould's.

I stepped back from the politics and policy research, the reams of Commerce Department reports, all the official Washington bullshit I thought I had to know to do my job. Instead I just thought about Gould, this dumpy bureaucrat living out in Bethesda, about what he wanted and what he feared.

Watching him the last few weeks, I'd noticed a few things that had stuck out, dumb stuff that I hadn't thought was worth mentioning to the bosses because I wasn't a hundred percent sure what it meant. Gould's house was modest for Bethesda, and he had a five-year-old Saab 9-5. But the guy was a clotheshorse—went shopping at J. Press or Brooks Brothers or Thomas Pink two or three times a week. He dressed like a high-society heel in a Billy Wilder movie: tweed everywhere and whales dancing on suspenders and contrasting-color bow tie. He was a foodie too and posted on an online forum called DonRockwell.com under the name LafiteForAKing, mostly bitching about waiters who didn't know their place. Every week he dropped at least a few hundred bucks on lunch; he had a regular table at Central and favored the lobster burger.

But then, every other Thursday, like clockwork, this gourmet goes to Five Guys, which is a greasy slice-of-heaven burger joint. It started in DC, though now it's all over the East Coast. He would always order regular fries and the little cheeseburger—just one patty—and leave with a doggie bag. I'm the last person on earth to begrudge someone a heart-stopper on a bun every now and then. But something wasn't right. The leftovers suggested a superhuman restraint

that I knew Mr. Gould did not have. And with the amount of money he was dropping on food and clothes, it didn't add up. So I was suspicious. But mostly I was desperate, and maybe just swinging at shadows; anything to save myself.

By now I was one day away from Davies's meeting with Gould: the ask. There was nothing for me to do but follow Gould and hope I caught a Hail Mary. I found him on the way out of his office, heading for Five Guys. Right on schedule. I'd like to think it was my uncanny, Columbo-like powers of detection—picking up on the nervous edge to his walk, the way he stared down at the table the whole time, the fact that his take-out bag was the only one I'd ever seen from Five Guys not stained half translucent with grease. Maybe it was just desperation and luck. Or maybe the honest life was starting to feel like too much pressure, and I just wanted to say fuck it and get myself caught doing something dumb. Whatever the reason, I had to find out what was in the brown bag Gould was carrying.

He went straight from lunch to his club—the Metropolitan Club, a massive brick building a block away from the White House. It was founded during the Civil War, and, with a few exceptions, every president since Lincoln has been a member. It's the social center of the Treasury–Pentagon–Big Business set. The more liberal-arts-type folks—journalists, academics, writers—tended to cluster around the Cosmos Club in Dupont Circle. Membership in the Met was an indisputable marker that you were a somebody. Since I was a nobody, I had to improvise.

Gould walked straight through the entryway, past the reception desk, and turned left toward a sitting room. I tried to follow him. Four stewards, squat South Asians, stood at attention near reception. They stopped me like a brick wall. “May I help you, sir?” said one.

It took me a second to realize how *in place* I actually looked. My assistant had sent an Italian tailor to my office my second week of

work. She told me not to take it personally, but I'd need a couple proper suits. I'd never actually met an Italian tailor (I thought they'd somehow all been converted to Korean dry cleaners sometime in the 1970s), but there he was, measuring my ass. At the final fitting, he actually said, "This is-ah nice-ah suit." So I looked the Met Club part. That gave me a half second to improvise with the Gurkhas.

I scanned the plaques and photos on the wall beside the desk as discreetly as I could, looking for an appropriate titan of industry and government. Breckinridge Cassidy seemed old enough (the plaque said 1931–) that the odds were he wouldn't be around the club. I just hoped he was still around at all; maybe the club just hadn't had time to note his expiration date on the plaque.

I checked my watch and did my best to look entitled.

"Breckinridge Cassidy," I said. "Is he already here?"

"Admiral Cassidy hasn't arrived yet, sir."

"Very well. We're on for drinks. I'll wait in the library."

I strode inside . . . and nothing, no frog-march out, no heave-ho by the collar and waistband. I was in. Fortunately, Cassidy was alive. Unfortunately, he was a fucking admiral and it sounded like he might actually show up any second. I took a spot in the library and noticed one of the stewards glancing at me every minute or so. The club had an open atrium with a beautiful double staircase. Everything about the place—the bas-relief wall decorations, the forty-foot Corinthian columns, the quiet servants at every door—made one thing perfectly clear: this was power's home.

I thought I saw Gould on one of the mezzanines, then I glanced back at the reception desk. The steward wasn't looking at me but was pointing my way and conversing with a very confused and formidable-looking Admiral Cassidy.

Time to go.

On the second floor, I caught sight of the back of Gould's head

and followed him down a set of stairs. From the faint chlorine smell and shriek of sneakers on hardwood, I knew I was heading to some sort of gym. Then I saw the sign. Squash, of course. The official pastime of DC heavies. I trailed him into the locker room.

You can only loiter fully dressed around a bunch of half-naked world leaders for so long before you raise a few eyebrows. So I stripped down, grabbed a towel, and found a nice spot in the sauna between the chairman of the Joint Chiefs and a guy I didn't recognize but who turned out to be the CFO of ExxonMobil, very chatty.

I didn't see Gould pass by through the sauna windows, so I took my leave and headed for the changing rooms. The lockers were all mahogany with little brass plaques indicating their owners. I found Ray Gould's. It was directly opposite Henry Davies's. Using a lock at a place like the Met Club seemed a little silly—what, was someone going to swap out your Cartier for his Rolex?—and yet Gould had a Sargent and Greenleaf padlock. It's the hardware the DOD uses to lock up its secrets, and Gould apparently needed to secure his uneaten French fries.

It never seems obvious when you cross the line. Was it when I began trailing Gould? When I lied to the steward? When I slipped into one of the guest lockers in the back corner of the locker room? Or when I stayed there for hours, until I heard the last guest clear his throat, saw the lights die through my little ventilation slits, and heard the door slam shut and lock, echoing through the tiled halls?

Wherever the line was, I was certain it was now way behind me. And this was no high-school smash-and-grab. I imagined that the trilateral-commission types who frequented the place wouldn't take kindly to my trespass. But for some reason I didn't have the same visceral need to get the fuck out of there, to keep on the honest path, that I'd had back when I opened up the safe in the office at Barley. There was something about being behind Henry's shield of

respectability, about having legitimate ends for my sketchy means. I'd forced my way into this club, but if I played my cards right I could turn that trespass into a real admission to this world.

Or maybe, trapped in a mahogany box with five or six hours to think, I'd managed to talk myself into believing anything.

By 11:30 p.m., I figured I was safe. I stepped out. There was no chance of breaking the Sargent and Greenleaf, not without liquid nitrogen. Trapped in the basement, I'd had plenty of time to consider other approaches. Gould's locker shared a back panel with the locker behind it, which was empty. Whoever built the place had been more concerned about varnish and fluting than security. It was simply a matter of backing out about thirty-six wood screws, which was easier said than done because, after a careful search, I concluded that I'd have to do the whole thing with the tip of a key.

Five hours. My fingertips red and swollen from the work. My nerves shot from bolting back to the safety of the guest locker every time I heard that old building creak or saw a glimmer of light near the locker-room entrance. I knew these old run-the-world types liked to wake up early. At Davies Group, they were always suggesting six a.m. breakfasts (you know, after squash). When the gray-blue of predawn started showing through a basement window, I started to sweat. When I heard the rattle and clank of the stewards' arrival, my heart rate revved up like a hummingbird's. Blood welled around my cuticles from working the screws. I could hear voices upstairs when I yanked the last fastener out and pulled back the panel.

There was a jock and an old squash duffel in Gould's locker. In the duffel there were twelve brown bags: \$120,000 total, in neat stacks of cash. No wonder I couldn't sway him.

* * *

Never return to the scene of a crime. It's good advice. But unfortunately, by the time I extricated myself from the Met Club and arrived at work, I really had no other choice.

I asked Marcus where the Gould-Davies meeting was taking place.

"The Metropolitan Club," he said. I felt nauseated.

"Lunch?"

"Breakfast," he said, and glanced at the time on the phone on his desk. "About now, probably."

So, still reeking of nervous sweat after my long night of B and E, I found myself strolling up to Seventeenth and H Street Northwest, with the Secret Service glaring down from the tops of the high-rises around the White House. Closed-circuit cameras kept watch on every corner. And there was the police officer examining the broken window latch in the rear of the Metropolitan Club, where I had made my escape two hours before. There were a half a dozen cops in the lobby and, of course, the same steward from yesterday.

He gave me a not-so-friendly look. I told him I was there to see Henry Davies and took a seat in the library. He kept his eyes fixed on me as he went back to talk to the cops. I could see into the dining room from where I sat. It was the size of a football field, so it took me a while to catch sight of Davies, who was sitting at a table across from Gould, spreading jam on a croissant.

What could I do? Walk into the middle of the Met Club, publicly accuse Gould of taking bribes, then politely explain to the gathered dignitaries, Davies, and various thick-necked representatives of the Metro Police that I'd come across my circumstantial evidence by stalking the guy and breaking into and out of these hallowed halls? Davies had me the most worried. He'd offered me decency and I'd repaid him with crime. Just another con man. It was in my blood. Any shot I had at an honest life was a gross mistake, soon to be corrected.

I tried to follow his and Gould's conversation from their gestures and watched it segue from chitchat to substance, as Davies moved a little closer, over the table. I was watching for the ask. The yes-or-no that would decide my fate. I saw Davies lean in farther, then sit back. Then nothing. Gould looked pensive. Neither spoke. Was that it?

I was watching so intently that it took me a while to notice that two of the cops were now staring at me. When I looked back at the table I saw Gould make a pained expression and raise his hands. It was clear enough. He was saying no. Just like that, the decent life slipped away.

So what the hell did I have to lose?

Three cops were now having an earnest discussion, their eyes fixed on me. I fished out my cell phone and called the Metropolitan Club. A moment later the phone started ringing at the reception desk. I told them I was the assistant to Gould's boss, and that the call was urgent. Then I watched the steward make his way across the checker tiles to interrupt Davies and Gould's meeting.

As Gould walked out of the dining room, I walked in, fast, past the cops. One broke away and stayed between me and the exit. As I approached his table, Davies seemed oddly unsurprised to see me there.

I leaned over and whispered, "Gould is on the take," then showed him a picture I had shot with my phone: the money stacked in the duffel. Davies didn't ask any questions. His demeanor didn't change.

"Go," he whispered. A police officer saw to that. He gripped my arm in a very persuasive come-along hold and steered me back toward the library, where the other police and the steward were waiting.

"Were you on the premises here yesterday, son?" a plainclothes detective, presumably running the show, asked me.

"Yes."

“Why don’t you wait right here with us.”

The cops asked the steward for Admiral Cassidy’s number. More patrol cars pulled up outside, lights flashing. Two officers flanked me. I was fucked. My mind flashed forward through every step—handcuffs, squad car, the holding cell with the center-stage toilet and the crowd of DC’s funkiest lowlifes, the interviews, the shitty coffee, the worthless public defender, the arraignment: that judge looking down at me like the one ten years before had. But this time there were no second chances. They’d finally recognize me for what I was, a hustler in a suit I didn’t pay for. I couldn’t even see around the wall of blue polyester cop uniform to find out what happened between Davies and Gould.

“Can I help you gentlemen?” It was Davies, standing behind me. The steward withered under his stare. The cops backed off a few inches.

“You know this man?” one asked.

“Of course,” Davies said. “He is an associate at my firm. One of my best.”

“And he is an acquaintance of Admiral Cassidy?”

“I had hoped to introduce them yesterday, but I was held up at the office. I was thinking of putting this gentleman up for membership here at the Met. Anup, this is Michael Ford.”

“Pleased to meet you,” the steward said. I could see he was bristling behind his practiced smile.

“Likewise,” I said.

“Now, what is this all about?” Davies asked.

“Just a misunderstanding, sir,” the steward replied.

“Then you gentlemen will excuse us?”

“Of course,” the detective said.

Davies’s manner was obliging, but he clearly commanded the scene. I finally had a chance to look into the dining room. Gould still

sat at the table, staring down at his coffee like it would tell him the future. He looked sucker-punched.

“It’d probably be best for you to leave,” Davies whispered to me. He had this sphinxy look I couldn’t peg. I still wasn’t sure if my cat-burglar act had saved the day or detonated my career. Maybe he’d fobbed off the cops so he could mete out the punishment himself. Just before I left, he told me, “Be in my office at three.”

His suite was at the end of the seemingly endless executive corridor. I knew I was being a little dramatic, but I couldn’t shake the image I’d seen in a dozen movies of the final stroll down death row. He kept me waiting in a little hallway outside his office until 3:20. I’d been up for roughly thirty-four hours; fatigue weighed down my body like a dentist’s lead blanket. Finally, I saw Davies striding up the hallway. He walked straight into his office and beckoned me in behind him. I stood as he stopped beside his desk.

He pinned me for a while with that same inscrutable look then took something out of his pocket and held it up between his thumb and index finger. It was a wood screw, and it looked awfully familiar. I’d twisted in enough to secure the locker’s back panel, and I’d covered the empty holes with the wood trim. I guess I’d forgotten one.

“Play any squash recently, Ford?”

I’d keep my mouth shut until I could see where this was going. Davies stood twisting the screw slowly between his thumb and finger, then he tossed it up in the air. I snatched it a foot in front of my chest.

“Gould said yes,” Davies said.

“And the police?”

Davies waved it away. “And don’t worry about the admiral. He’s getting a little soft, introduces himself to his own reflection.”

“I apologize for—”

“Forget about it. Your exploits may have been a little bit more cowboy than I’d have chosen, but the important thing is we got to yes. Fifty-eight million dollars.”

“Fifty-eight?”

He nodded. “I signed on a few more parties this week.”

“And what happens to Gould? Do you go to the inspector general at Commerce, the police?”

Davies shook his head. “Ninety-nine percent of these cases get buried. If he had a bunch of body parts in there, it would be a different story, but the sad fact is a hundred-twenty-grand sweetener is nickel-and-dime stuff in this town. Though I’m glad you caught it.”

“So how did you bring him around? Just threaten to out him? Is it like...” I tried to find a nice word for it.

“Blackmail?” Davies said.

“No, sir, I didn’t mean to suggest—”

“You haven’t hurt my feelings,” Davies said, laughing a bit. “*Blackmail* is a little too crude a term to describe the work we perform. Though it would be a refreshingly direct alternative. Picture it. You show a guy a photo of himself ass-end up in a motel with some pross, and say, ‘Campaign finance reform now, or it’s curtains for you.’”

Davies considered that for a moment. “It has a certain straightforward appeal, I’ll admit. But no. Gould is a smart guy. You need only say you’ve heard he may have gotten in over his head. You say you might be able to help him avoid any unpleasantness. Usually you don’t even have to say that much. Suddenly he’s all ears, suddenly so agreeable. People don’t acquire power by being dim, at least not when it comes to their own self-interest.

“It’s win-win,” Davies went on. “Typically the guy knocks off whatever the hell he was up to faster and more certainly than any ethics investigation could ever have gotten him to. Meanwhile we

advance the policies we believe in. We make the best of their bad behavior.”

I stood by the window, considering that little wood screw between my still-raw fingertips.

“You were thrown into the hardball pretty suddenly, Mike. You never see it in the papers. But that’s how things are done. I think you’re cut out for it.”

It didn’t feel right. Maybe it was that strange reluctance you get when you’re offered something you’ve wanted so badly for so long: you’re scared to take it once it’s yours. Or maybe I just wanted things black and white. I wanted that decent life without a shred of gray. And now I’d found out that what I was running toward was tangled up with what I was running from.

“There’s something you should know, sir. Full disclosure. About that trouble—”

“I know everything I need to know about you, Mike. I hired you—well, not because of it, but because of the good you can do with it.”

He stuck his hand out. “Are you still on board?”

I could see the capital’s skyline through the window behind him. The kingdoms of the world and all their glory.

“Yes, sir,” I said. We shook.

“Good,” he said. “Now call me Henry. The way you say *sir* makes me feel like a goddamn drill instructor. And tell the real estate agent you’ll take that place on Ingleside Terrace.”

The house in Mount Pleasant. “I may hold off for now, find somewhere with a little lower rent, sock away some more savings.”

“Rent?” Davies said. “No. If you like it, buy it. Understand this, Mike. You never have to worry about money again.”

“Well, I do have some past debts, school loans. Maybe now isn’t—”

He slid a folder across the desk. “The civil case against Crenshaw Collection Services. Ready to file. The criminal complaint will be set by Wednesday. We’re going to tear their spines out.”

He led me to a pair of French doors before I could even register what was happening.

“Now, Marcus will be your mentor, but I thought I’d introduce you to the rest of the gang.”

He opened the doors into a conference room that put the Met Club to shame. The principals—a gallery of the weightiest heavies of them all—were waiting for me.

“Everyone, I’m pleased to present Michael Ford, our newest senior associate.”

They applauded, then passed me around, shaking my hand and clapping my shoulder. I’d been at Davies for four months—May through August. Someone told me it was the shortest time to promotion in the history of the Davies Group.

Davies raised his hand, and the room quieted. “Now let’s get out of here,” he said in his half whisper. “I’ll see you all at Brasserie Beck in half an hour. We have the back room.”

The principals made their last congratulations as they ambled out. Davies walked me down to the second floor to a beautiful office, as cozy as an Oxford library.

“We’ll move you up here on Monday.”

He caught me measuring the distance, not more than fifty feet, to Annie Clark’s door. He gave me the faintest smile but didn’t say a word. The guy really did know his levers.

“What do you want, Mike? Name it.”

I blanked. I had everything I’d been gunning for. A decent life, a good job, respect. And more, something I never thought possible. Going after Gould had thrilled me in a way I’d missed for years, ever since I’d given up hustling. And Davies was happy with it, the honest

work and the not-so-honest habits I could never shake. I could be the man I wanted and not have to hide where I'd come from.

"I'm happy, sir. Really. This is all too much."

"Anything," he urged me. This wasn't some inspirational exercise, I realized. He was serious. I was silent for a minute, daring to take him at his word.

"I don't know if this is the right..." I trailed off. He probably thought I was calculating a doable ask: a Benz SLK350, a private bathroom. But the only thing I could think of to ask for was trickier than that, because I'd been covering it up for so long, and because, to tell a hard truth, some part of me didn't even want it.

"My father," I said. "He..." I trailed off.

"I know about your father."

"He has a parole hearing coming up. He has sixteen years in, and eight left. Can you help get him out?"

"I'll do everything I can, Mike. Everything."

CHAPTER THREE

IN THE WEEKS after my promotion, I kept being assigned to cases that Annie Clark was also working on. I began to wonder if Henry Davies was somehow behind our being thrown together so often, though it was never exactly seven minutes in heaven.

We were both now senior associates, but she was very clearly the boss on every project. She'd already been at the firm for four years, and rumor had it she was on track to be the first female partner. She clocked a lot of one-on-one time with Henry, the ultimate sign of clout around the office.

Davies Group had a macho, competitive streak that reminded me of those Harvard Law seminar rooms. Annie could more than hold her own against the boys. She did it with poise, a dry humor, and a toughness that, coming from a woman so graceful, was especially lethal. The downside, for my purposes, was that she wasn't someone you could just flirt with. She scared the shit out of most guys.

Working the kind of hours we worked, we developed a rapport and grew to be good friends around the office. Every so often, sitting at the end of an empty conference room at eleven at night, going over the final revisions on a report for a client, I would pick up on a shared vibe: a warmth from her that made it seem like the most natural thing for me to slide closer to her, to touch her arm, her shoulder, stare into her eyes. I got the strangest feeling that she was watching, testing me, to see how bold I really was.

I could easily have been deluding myself, however. I had a serious crush going. And it seemed a uniquely bad idea, now that I'd clawed my way into the good life here at Davies, to make a pass at a woman who, while not quite my boss, was definitely a higher-up and close to Davies himself. And I certainly wasn't going to pull anything in the circumstances we usually found ourselves: sweating a tight deadline surrounded by colleagues.

My schemer's mind was always revving red, contriving ways to throw us together, but she caught me first. Davies Group had a gym in the basement. You opened an unassuming door in a back corner by the parking garage and then found yourself in a twelve-thousand-square-foot fitness utopia: rows of gleaming new equipment, flat-screen TVs, and workout clothes with the Davies Group logo carefully folded and waiting for you.

Around midnight or one a.m., after the cleaning folks had left and the whole building was empty, when you're still working and starting to get the crazies from staring too long at a computer, that gym was heaven.

I was down there one night, and with sixteen hours of bottled-up energy to burn off, I guess I was going a little overboard, doing rounds of treadmill sprints, pull-ups, push-ups, and thrusters, sweating and panting and blasting my iPod. In the course of trying not to retch or let the weights fall on my head, I perhaps forgot myself. In my entire

time at Davies, I think I'd seen one other person in there that late. I mean, what kind of maniac uses the office gym at one in the morning?

Excuses, excuses for the inexcusable. A certain song, let's say "Respect" by Aretha Franklin, came on shuffle on my iPod, and I may have been belting it out at the top of my lungs. And maybe dancing a little between sets. I'll blame the endorphins.

Regardless, just as I was hitting my crescendo during the chorus, I did a little half turn and found Annie, faking innocence, on the elliptical eight feet away. This was the second time she'd sneaked up on me. I stopped dead in the middle of the "sock it to me"s.

She performed a very polite golf clap.

"Oh boy," I said.

She walked toward me and looked at the screen of my iPod. "Aretha, huh? I didn't quite peg you for that."

I raised my eyebrows. "That?"

"Soulful."

"Ouch."

"Not like that," she protested. "I mean, it's not exactly a sound track I had imagined when I saw you down here, doing... what was that thing on the ground?"

It was called a burpee, though I wasn't about to say that to Annie. "Nothing," I said. "I happen to have a lot of soul."

"I could tell. Snazzy moves."

"Thanks." Deep breath. No time like the present. "Hey, why don't we get together outside of work. What are you up to this weekend?"

She frowned. "I'm busy."

Damage-control time. "That's cool. We should hang out sometime, though."

"I'd really like that," she said, and she draped her towel around her neck. "Actually, do you like hiking?"

If she had asked if I were into metal detecting, I'd have said yes. "Oh yeah."

"Some friends of mine and I are heading out to the country on Saturday, if you're free."

And that's how I found myself scrambling hands and feet over granite boulders in Shenandoah National Park, with Annie chugging along ahead of me in hiking boots and knee-high wool socks that gave her a distinctly Swiss vibe. Somehow, when I'd pictured her off the clock, I had conjured up scenes of her as a high-society dame in a period drama, waltzing. So imagine my surprise when Annie Clark—blue blood in her veins, Yale on her résumé—led me to a swimming hole in moonshine country.

Her friends said that the water would be too cold for swimming, but she shrugged and looked at me. I didn't care if it was the North Sea. We headed down, just the two of us.

A cascade dropped forty feet through a gorge surrounded by old-growth forest. It was early September, still hot, but the water was ice-cold. Annie took off her shoes and socks and long-sleeved shirt and dropped in first. Seeing her glide through the clear water and then lie out on the bank in her sports bra and hiking shorts, patches of sunlight moving across her smooth skin as the wind moved the branches overhead—to this day that memory stops my heart. I stripped down to my shorts and jumped in. If she were a Siren, I'd have gladly drowned trying to get to her. I didn't think she'd actually call me out on that, though.

"You want to go under the falls?" she asked.

"Sure," I said. I managed to restrain my first answer: *Yes, God, yes.*

"It can be a little scary," she said.

"I think I'll be okay." I mean, really, what could this sheltered little pixie have in store that could possibly scare me?

She walked up to a rock face formed by two massive boulders—

each thirty feet tall—wedged together. “In here,” she said, and pointed at something between them that wasn’t even a crevice; it was maybe a crack. Inside, it was pitch-black. She wedged herself in and inched into the darkness. I followed. Eight feet in, we were totally blind. There was no space. You could feel your breath bouncing back off the wall in front of you, and hear, distinctly, the sound of rushing water ahead.

“Watch your step here,” Annie said, a disembodied voice in the blackness. I brushed against her hand, and she took mine and led me around a sharp corner. We were in a pocket deep in the side of the mountain. Water dripped from overhead, ran down my face.

“And then into this pool.” The floor fell away. We dropped into ice-cold water up to my belly button. The roof of the cavern sloped down, and the pool got deeper until there was about a foot of headroom above the surface of the water. It was getting a little claustrophobic and drown-y even for me, and I’d spent my fair share of time in windowless ship holds and had gotten suffocated by the best of them at the navy’s Recruit Training Command, Great Lakes.

I was starting to wonder just how brass Annie’s balls were when that sweet voice informed me: “Okay, now we’re going to duck under and sort of swim through this little underwater tunnel. It’s about twelve feet, and then the current will take you the rest of the way and spit you out in this cave under the waterfall.”

“Uhh... okay.” Except not okay. I’m not too proud to admit that sounded pretty fucking scary.

“You trust me?”

“Less and less.”

She laughed. “Just hold your breath and don’t fight the current. Ready? Go!”

I heard her inhale, then saw her drop under the surface. I dove down and slipped underwater along the smooth rock walls. I fought

back panic. The tunnel was maybe two feet wide, too narrow to use my arms, and completely full of water. There was no way to come up for air. I could only move ahead by kicking. The current picked up, and a second later a wall of water plowed into me from the side and dragged me out into a larger stream. The sunlight hit me like a camera flash after so long in the dark. I shot out of a chute ten feet in the air and landed in a pool in a little open cavern behind the deafening curtain of the main waterfall.

We both came up panting, eyes wide. I was so wired and glad to be alive I grabbed her in a bear hug. “Holy shit!” I said.

“Right?”

I probably said *holy shit* a few more times and then realized I was in a grotto with Annie. We were both feeling punchy from our near-death dunk. Of course it was too soon to try anything; overeager, I could have ruined the good thing I had going with my dream girl. But come on. A grotto. Under a waterfall. What else could I do?

We looked each other in the eyes. Nothing from her— not a quick look away, but neither that gauzy smooch-me look. No guts, no glory. I got a little closer, a little closer, and . . . still nothing. No lean in, no lean back. A hundred percent poker face. Stand your ground, man. I closed the distance by 50 percent, 70, 90, 95 . . . When you are on a very clear descent path to a kiss, maybe not at the very beginning of it, but certainly when your faces are two inches apart and closing, you expect that any halfway decent young woman will give you at least a little sign to tell you if you’re home free or blowing your chance.

Nothing. I’ve never seen anything like it. She didn’t react.

I was between the trenches, totally exposed, stranded in no-man’s-land. I wasn’t going to park one on Miss Annie Clark without getting a welcome sign, however tiny.

So I stopped, an inch away from bliss. This was high stakes: dream

girl, see her at work every day, and so on. I pulled back. She was still staring. Still the poker face.

“It’s hard not to kiss you in a place like this.”

“I’d have kissed you back,” she said. “I guess I was just curious to see how far you’d go.”

I thought about this for a second, then ran my fingers through her hair above her ear, cupped her nape gently, and gave her the kind of leading-man, swelling-strings, knee-weakening kiss they just don’t make anymore.

When she dropped me off at my house later that night, I asked when I could see her again.

“We’ll see,” she said, and blew me a kiss. “I try not to shit where I eat.”

I was reeling, still a little shocked that I had broken through with Annie so quickly and trying to square that badass girl from the mountains with the Washington sophisticate I knew from work.

The whole romance had happened, and kept happening, so naturally.

There were a few formal dates in the beginning where I tried to impress her with highbrow delights—tasting menus, wine bars, after-hours drinks at the Phillips Collection—but I was surprised by how quickly we fell into the habits of a contented couple. If we didn’t have to work, we could hang out the entire weekend at my place: walking through the neighborhood, spending half the day sitting outside a café, or just reading on the porch. We didn’t want to be apart. I watched happily as she colonized my bathroom, one item at a time—first a toothbrush, then a shampoo bottle—slowly staking her claim. My place was bigger than hers, and closer to work. There was no reason for her to go back to her one-bedroom in Glover Park. Like the apartments of most DC workaholics, it was sparsely furnished, with packed boxes hidden in the closets.

One night about three months after that first kiss, she came over straight from work with a bundle of dry cleaning she'd had done near our office. We had a late dinner. I was sitting up on the couch, and she was lying down across it, her legs up on the arm, and her head on my thigh as I stroked her hair. She put her book down and looked over to her outfits hanging in plastic on the doorknob of my front-hall closet.

"Would you mind if I left those here? It would probably be easier than running home at midnight all the time."

I looked at them thoughtfully. My strategy in the early days of the relationship was to not scare her off by blurting out "Marry me" whenever she looked me in the eye. I hoped we'd just grow closer and closer, more and more comfortable together, until I had nabbed her without getting into any of the tricky business of relationship talks. It had paid off so far. This was one of those moments when I had to consciously hold my tongue. The truth was, even that early on, I'd have loved for her to just move in.

"I don't want to crowd you or anything like that," she said.

"Please do," I said. "You're the best thing that ever happened to me." I leaned over and kissed her. She ran her hand through my hair and gave me a long, melting look that indicated the party would be moving to the bedroom.

But then her phone rang. It was on the table, next to me.

"Turn that off," she said.

I looked at the screen. "It's Henry Davies."

She sat up. "Do you mind?" she asked, and then tried to play it off casually. "Just in case it's important. I'm doing the ask on the head of the SEC tomorrow."

"Go for it," I said, then silently cursed the phone.

She answered and, after a moment, stepped onto the porch to take the call. She was out in the cold for about five minutes.

“Sorry about that,” she said when she came back. She stood behind the couch, leaned over, pressed her cheek against mine, then kissed my neck.

“What do you and Henry talk about all the time?” I asked. We were falling in love, sure, but we both still worked at Davies Group, and that meant a certain amount of jockeying for position, of searching out leverage. We just couldn’t help it.

“That’s above your pay grade.” She gave me a troublemaker’s smile. “Now,” she said, and ran her hand across my chest. “Shall we?”

I let the matter drop, then led her by the hand upstairs.

The job, Annie: I had everything I’d ever wanted. It all seemed too easy. Because, of course, it was.

CHAPTER FOUR

WELCOME TO THE DISTRICT, where the fun never starts. I can't count the number of times during my first year in DC that some starched collar at some stick-up-its-butt schmooze-fest told me, "If you want a friend in Washington, get a dog," then wheezed laughter. Supposedly the quote came from Truman. Whenever I heard it, I was made aware of two things: First, that social niceties were so lacking in DC that their absence had perversely become a point of pride. Second, that the guy I was talking to thought it was funny to announce that he would shaft me if I gave him half a chance.

Well, at least they're honest. It's easy to make friends in the capital, but hard to make good ones, since the place is packed with barely distinguishable transient twenty-somethings who all work in the same industry—politics—where the essential skills are glad-handing and faked charm. Tuck, the Rhodes scholar who worked with me at Davies, stood out from the parade of acquaintances I acquired in DC.

He was the scion of a Georgetown public-service dynasty: grandfather a former CIA director, father a higher-up at State. He was also on a fast track at Davies Group, yet, maybe because he was born into it, he seemed less obsessed with politics and power than the rest of our peers. We worked a couple projects together and late at night would blow off steam by taking a short break and throwing a football around on the Davies Group lawn. One night, around midnight, he overshot a pass straight into the compound that housed the Syrian embassy. I have some experience in getting over fences, so it wasn't a big problem. He and I clambered over. Only in Kalorama can you enter the territory of a hostile nation to fetch your ball. We'd only just grabbed it when a flash of light shot out from behind a garage. I gave Tuck a boost and then vaulted over the wall just in time.

After that, we started hanging out more outside of work. He knew everyone—rumor had it he was sleeping with the VP's daughter—and introduced me around.

When I first got to town, I'd thought parties were, well, parties. The kind where, if you got the right people and a certain groove going, magic things happen: people start dancing, there's smooching on fire escapes, everyone's still talking around a fire when the sun comes up—you know, fun. But even the twenty-somethings in DC party like married fifty-year-olds, all networking. Tuck was house-sitting for his parents one weekend and invited me over for a barbecue. It was a big Georgetown spread, with a pool in the back, and there were a lot of people there. We began drinking early in the afternoon, and I can't remember if he or I started talking about a dip, but I stripped down to my shorts and dove in. I recall it being a fantastic idea in midair, and refreshing enough a second later. But when I came up for air, soggy and solo in the deep end under the moonlight, I saw no other bathers, only a scandalized crew that included about half the

National Security Council's Europe staff. I got the message: never enjoy yourself at a party.

I kept that insight in mind as I headed to this night's cocktail party. The host was a publisher, a well-connected fellow named Chip. That was way up there in the fierce competition for WASPiest names I'd heard at Harvard or DC. (Tuck was actually Everett Tucker Straus IV. The general method in preppy nomenclature is to start with something unbearably stuffy, like Winthrop, and then shorten it to something ridiculous, like Winnie.)

Whenever I arrived at the front door of a place like Chip's—near the U.S. Naval Observatory and the British embassy, another monster Georgetown estate—I had a twinge of that old feeling of being out of place, an interloper. When I rang the bell, I could almost believe that I was a teenage hood again, checking to see if anybody was home, listening for dogs, and clutching a handful of shattered spark-plug ceramic. (These are called ninja rocks in the trade. Even though they feel as light as peanuts, if you toss them at a window, something about the hardness of the ceramic will shatter the glass as surely as a heaved cinder block, but as quietly as drizzling rain. Magic.)

Those days were long gone, of course. When the Filipina nanny opened the door, I looked down to see not my old burgling duds—canvas painter's paints and a hoodie—but my gray Canali with a blue pinstripe and a nice straight gig line.

You might think that given a calendar full of starched-collar nights, of counting drinks and watching what I say, I'd be bored stiff. And at first I was, but eventually I learned that there was a far different kind of fun happening at these quiet salons. Beneath the surface, the passed hors d'oeuvres and polite laughter, the real game is pinpointing weaknesses, extracting promises, gathering intel, avoiding commitments, planting doubts, and sowing rivalries. The

well-behaved chatter is a full-contact sport. It comes down to who's a matador and who's a bull. It's a game I was mastering, day by day. Not quite as fun as a moonlight dip, but it had its charms.

A collection of Washington dons and socialites can be a little intimidating at first, but as I moved farther into the party, I started to see a few familiar faces, and soon enough I was chatting and cracking jokes, fully in the mix. It was now April; I'd been in DC for eleven months, and in that time the Davies Group had opened a lot of doors. This rarefied world was now my scene.

In fact, the present company offered a not-bad recap of my short and mostly happy rise at Davies Group. Here, for instance, among a clutch of youngish ladies, was Senator Michael Roebing, announcing with a modesty that was almost convincing: "When you see the look in those children's eyes, that's 'thank you' enough."

That would be the Heartland Kids Fund, which we'd helped Roebing set up. There are dozens of ways to buy politicians legally—soft money to a PAC, bundling hard money...I could go on for hours. Yet those weren't quite enough for Roebing. Most of that money had to go to campaign expenses, a term you can interpret liberally, but not liberally enough for the good senator's appetites.

When he couldn't get enough personal kitty from legal graft, we offered him some advice and guidance in organizing his little non-profit, which did, well, a little bit of feel-good everything: summer camps for the delinquents, Disneyland trips for the ailing, petting zoos for the simple-minded, you name it. Donations to a nonprofit are unlimited, exempt from all the reporting hassles that have made fund-raising such a drag over the past decade. And, since the board and staff of Heartland Kids were stocked with Roebing pals, the senator was free to spend however much of the money on the kids his conscience required and leave the rest for the feedbag: cushy jobs for the in-laws, retreat centers near his favorite fly-fishing spots,

all-expenses-paid trips, and so forth. His conscience, it turned out, didn't require much.

It's perhaps not the proudest thing I've ever done in my life, but at the very least the kids (and Davies Group, and me) got their cut of the lucre the senator was determined to get his hands on anyway. The Davies Group steered him toward making some good policy at the same time. I had learned that was the way it worked in DC. You couldn't get anything done if you were a choirboy.

Now Roebing pulled out a photo of a little kid in a wheelchair. The senator, a true humanitarian, was getting choked up. A young woman comforted him. He put his arm around her shoulders. I had to excuse myself before I threw up.

And so on it went, around the room: this one needed to get a son out of a felony marijuana possession (Winnie Jr. had been following Phish); that one just wanted a membership in Pine Valley; she had to get her dimwit kid into St. Albans; and this poor stooped-over bastard had more wife than he could handle and sold out his principles on an immigration bill in exchange for help in getting Celine Dion to sing at the missus's fiftieth birthday party.

Those were the fun ones, the good anecdotes. More often it was simply a grind of finding out who—legislators, regulators, big-time CEOs, special interest groups, foreign governments—needed what favor and who could get it done for what price. Half the time we didn't even have to search out the influentials. They came to Davies, knowing that we discreetly worked out deals between groups that could never admit they were cheek by jowl. The Davies Group was like a massive trading floor, connecting Washington's wants and needs and taking a small percentage for its services.

After a while, all the wheeling and dealing and naked self-interest can make you a little cynical about this town, make you feel like you need a long, hot bath. So I was glad when I looked across the room

and saw a handsome man in his midfifties with his coat and hat in his hand, looking less than at ease among the chattering classes.

It was Malcolm Haskins, an associate justice on the Supreme Court and a crucial swing vote on close decisions. He was a very rare sight on the DC social circuit. He looked as unassuming as a high-school science teacher. He avoided the Georgetown cocktail-party scene and was so scrupulous about his impartiality that he wouldn't so much as eat a crab cake at a sponsored reception.

Seeing him was a nice pick-me-up. The logrolling we did at Davies was an inevitable part of politics; it's all there in the Federalist Papers. But even though I was immersed in all the deal-cutting, I liked knowing that there were men and institutions that stood apart and incorruptible.

I examined a piece of modern art on the wall—a woman with four boobs, as far as I could tell—as I waited for the line at the bar to subside. A kinky brown mop of a dog materialized and started yapping and jumping all over me.

It's not that I hate dogs, it's just that we don't have the best history. I can fool all of the people some of the time, and some of the people all of the time, but somehow dogs always sniff me out as a home intruder at heart.

A tight-faced woman walked over, grabbed the beast's collar, and flashed me an apologetic look.

At the same time I felt a stealthy presence beside me. It was Marcus, very much enjoying the show as the dog continued its conceptions.

"Is that a Labradoodle?" he asked.

"Schnoodle," the woman said.

Marcus smiled. "Adorable."

She pulled the dog, still all snapping teeth, away to another room.

“Smart dog,” Marcus said.

“What can I do for you, boss?”

“On your eight o’clock,” Marcus said. I peered over and saw Congressman Eric Walker of Mississippi, who at thirty-two was the youngest member of the House of Representatives.

Bummer. Marcus had invited me to this shindig, but he hadn’t told me I’d be working. I had been wondering why he’d asked me, since these folks were a few rungs above me on the social ladder. Now it made sense.

“You thought I brought you here because of your glittering personality?”

“I thought maybe you missed me.” I glanced back at Walker. “Don’t worry. I’m on it.”

I made my way to the sunroom, where the bar was set up, and planted myself in Walker’s vicinity without being too obvious about it. With chagrin, instead of Maker’s Mark, I ordered a tonic and lime, the official drink of keeping your wits about you while others wash theirs away.

Speaking of: I felt a palm pound on my back, took my drink, and turned to find Walker and a practiced handshake. *The bull enters the arena.*

“How’s it going?” I asked.

“Can’t complain.”

“And if you could, who’d listen, right?” I said.

“Amen to that.”

We clinked glasses.

Toro!

I’d been hanging out with Walker for a few months now. He had a medium-stakes poker game and on weekends he liked to pick off the fund-raising tarts of Georgetown.

As he and I caught up, I noticed Marcus passing through an

entryway on the other side of the sunroom, taking us in through his peripheral vision. Marcus was shepherding me along in the business, and he had played Yenta to my growing friendship with the representative from Mississippi. Walker was all manners around most Washingtonians, but Marcus had watched him long enough to know he liked to loosen up around the younger guys. That's how I got tapped.

Walker was a comer, and he was on track to join the 500—a little piece of slang they used around Davies Group. I usually heard it only when somebody slipped up, because officially it didn't exist. It wasn't too hard for me to figure out: it was a list of the five hundred people inside the Beltway with real power, the select who ran Washington and, by extension, the country. The Davies Group wanted to be damn sure it was chummy with every one of them. I'd been rising at the company, getting more risks, more responsibilities, more leash. Walker was my next assignment.

And what exactly was the job? Well, when you got right down to it, the work I did for Marcus was a confidence game.

He had brought me into his office a few days after I made senior associate. "Don't let it go to your head," he said.

"I won't," I replied. "Fortune favors fools, and I got damn lucky catching Gould."

He looked relieved. "Then I can skip the part where I convince you of that. We're in the business of changing men's minds. How do you figure we do it?"

"Stumble across piles of dirty money in gym lockers?"

"When appropriate. But for the most part it's a grind."

And so began my long education in the trade. Actually, it was more of a refresher. My dad used to run cons. He went to prison when I was twelve, so what I got from him directly was very little:

overheard snippets of conversation before he closed a door, glimpses of forged papers before he chased me out of the room with his hand cocked back to hit me, though he never really unloaded.

Crime runs in families, but I've never met anyone who intended to pass it down. As my mother told me, everything shady my father did he did so that I would have legitimate opportunities, would never be tempted to follow in his footsteps. But vice sticks around, permeates a place, like years of cigarette smoke. As well-intentioned as he may have been, as much as he tried to hide the seamy side of his life from us, my older brother, Jack, and I absorbed everything. And once he was gone, there was nothing to hold us back.

Your average adolescent boy is up to enough criminal mischief that it would have been hard to tell we were bound for something other than garden-variety pyromania, shoplifting, and sneaking into construction sites and our own high school after hours. Our crew was a set of boys, mostly children of my father's friends, who were always trying to one-up each other. If Smiles, age fifteen, took his father's Lincoln out for a joyride, then Luis would take his neighbor's BMW. You can see how things might get very hairy very quickly. And by the time I was sixteen, and my brother and his friends were around twenty-one, there was really no question that the hard core of them were moving deeper into crime and would never go straight. Community college or what, managing the deli at Food Lion? No. They had the cars and girlfriends and drug habits and gambling thirsts that called for fast and easy money, no union dues or payroll tax.

At first I tried to stay out of all this, since I didn't have the maniac impulse shared by the rest of the boys (although when they dared me to do anything, jumping off roofs and so on, I wouldn't back down. I was more afraid of losing face than breaking my neck). In the back of my mind I always thought of disappointing my father. I tagged along when they would let me, mostly keeping my head down. When

singled out and pressed, I would join any mission (we called them missions, like we were the A-Team and not a bunch of hoods). For most of my teens, though, I was more geek than crook. My main criminal passion was taking apart and reassembling locks and deadbolts. It was fun, done more for curiosity than profit, and not unlike the science labs I was really getting into in school.

With my father off in prison, my brother got more and more into cons and grifts. Maybe it was a way of connecting with my dad. I loved hustles too, loved the logic of them, the neat mechanisms of a well-laid con, like a loaded spring behind the bail of a mousetrap. But Jack had the boldness I lacked, and that was a necessity for shaking people down. My father had it too. It's the willingness to make a scene, to stand in the middle of a restaurant screaming and acting indignant and cheated when the indignities and cheats are all your own doing. When my brother allowed me to come along on one of these cons, I'd hide my shaking hands and, desperate to impress him, play the part, shouting to the whole restaurant that I'd given the guy a fifty and I could prove it.

I was a typical younger brother; I would have done anything Jack asked me to. After my mother got sick, any compunction about stealing went out the window. There was no question that we would do what we had to to pay those bills. And one night, when I was nineteen, and the best lock pick by far that he or his friends knew, he asked me to pull a little job for him. I said yes. It wrecked my life so profoundly that only now, ten years later, was I finally getting it back on track.

The more Marcus taught me, the more I realized my new line of work was very much in keeping with the family business.

Here at Davies, instead of *casing*, we "assessed" our subjects. The *hook* became "development," the *roper* and the *shill* became "access

agents,” the *take* became the “ask,” and *cooling the mark* and the *blow-off* became “termination.”

I must say, the lingo sucked. Instead of the *Jamaican switch*, the *rag*, and the old *pig in a poke*, we had the “501(c)(3)s,” “PACs,” and “affiliated committees.”

But despite all the old-fashioned grifter jargon I liked to collect as a kid, the fact was I knew shit about the real core of both businesses, which was gaining men’s trust and getting them to do what you wanted. My father always tried to keep me out of it. I guess he thought if he was crooked enough, he could afford to keep me clean. That made me an eager student as Marcus taught me the straight world’s version of everything my father kept from me.

If there was one thing to learn about *human-asset recruitment*—the jargon Marcus occasionally let drop for what we were doing—it was this: MICE. That stands for *money, ideology, compromise/coercion, and ego*. For our purposes, those were the only reasons anyone did anything. It was the foundation for everything Marcus was walking me through, the finer points of all of Henry’s talk about levers and owning men.

Marcus put it up on the whiteboard in his office and asked me if it made sense. I looked it over for a minute or two, shrugged, and said I’d give it a try.

“Let’s say there’s a guy named, I don’t know, Henry, who wants to control some sap named Mike.” I walked back and forth in front of the board. “Money, that’s easy: Mike grew up without two nickels to rub together and is now drowning in debt. Ideology: poor Mike still buys that Horatio Alger American-dream bullshit that the meritocracy will always reward hard work and brains. Ego: Mike’s blue-collar faux humility is just a cover for his conviction that he’s the smartest guy around. On top of that he’s got a monster chip on his shoulder

about his incarcerated father and seedy past holding him back from the good life he deserves. In short, Mike is a sitting fucking duck.”

Marcus was laughing by this point. “You forgot one,” he said.

“Compromise and coercion. What *do* you have on me, Marcus?”

He played it coy, said nothing, and wiped the board. “Moving on to the McCain-Feingold Campaign Finance Reform Act of 2002...”

It turned out he had plenty.

MICE: those four points became my bible.

Money’s straightforward, and, though we can quibble about life philosophies, it can get most people pretty much anything they want as far as achievement and status are concerned. Ideology is getting people to believe in what you want. It’d be nice to think that it was the real trump card (and Americans always have thought that, Marcus explained), but mostly it comes into play in the negative. You can’t get somebody to do something if he can’t rationalize it to himself. The villain in every movie has to think he’s the hero.

Compromise and coercion are getting the goods on someone. Americans as a rule try to avoid these approaches because they violate some basic notions of fair play (the Yankees think they can win everybody over with money and ideology), but it was bread-and-butter to the Chinese and Russians.

Ego is playing on someone’s beliefs that he’s somehow been shafted by life, that he’s smarter than everyone else, or more hard-working, or more honest, and so he deserves a better job, more money, more respect, a better-looking spouse, whatever—beliefs that I imagine are held by about 99.99 percent of the population.

Now, you may have noticed, like I did, that a lot of this theory—about Chinese and Russians, access agents and terminations—sounded a little hard core for government affairs work. I’d thought lobbying was more about wrangling loopholes over steaks. In fact, I

was getting a distinct vibe about William Marcus, the man with no past.

I decided to confirm it one day. Marcus was out in back of the office smoking, which I should have taken as a sign not to mess with him because he only broke out the Camels when he was in the weeds. I walked up behind him as quietly as I could, toe-heel, toe-heel, like they taught us in the navy in a random drill about sentry removal (not that I spent a lot of time assassinating sentries—most of what I remember about the service was watching *8 Mile* over and over and trying to sleep despite the sound everywhere of guys jacking off).

I was actually pretty sure about what would go down and didn't expect to get too close to Marcus, but still, the speed of it surprised me. One second, I was up on tippy-toes, all sneaky behind him, and the next—so fast it felt like somebody had cut a few seconds out of a movie—I was on my face in the gravel with Marcus standing over me holding my palm between his thumb and index finger. He had twisted my arm into a precisely torturous angle that made any movement, even breathing, so painful that I briefly considered giving up on respiration. I looked up at him, and he was utterly bored, the cigarette held loosely between his lips, inflicting my agony with such one-handed ease he might have been flipping channels on a TV remote.

He let my arm unwind. "Sorry, buddy," he said. "Startled me."

"Don't mention it," I said, playing down the red raging soreness running from hand to shoulder. "I think I figured out what I wanted to know."

"Smart."

I stood up. "So what did you say you did before you joined Davies Group?"

"Trade adviser," he said, completely deadpan, and dusted me off.

"Of course."

* * *

So what do you get for the former CIA badass boss who has everything? I started getting my expenses in on time, that's for damn sure, and strictly by the book.

It was smart of Henry Davies to bring in old spooks and use their skills not to turn Soviets but to bring around pols. It sure explained a lot of the jargon Marcus used. There were plenty of intelligence guys around the navy, but I'd never met any of the operator types, the Special Warfare Group SEALs dudes, so it was pretty cool taking lessons from Marcus. I asked him one day, "Are you ever going to teach me any... you know..."

"Monkey tricks? Killing people with an envelope? Shit like that?"

I guess that's what I meant.

"Nope," he said. Instead he gave me a copy of a journal article: "Adaptive and Maladaptive Narcissism among Politicians," and a twelve-page psychology syllabus. Because all the sexy stuff was a distraction, party tricks. What the job required was a decent grasp of human nature and an iron-ass patience for both doing your homework and watching your prey.

Clearly, someone at Davies Group had done a good workup on Representative Walker. Before I met him, I knew him from the psych profile Marcus gave me: the gambling thing, the causes in Georgetown he "supported," the crowd he ran with, a couple of hobbies.

Marcus asked me my plan for getting control of Walker.

"Waiting for another tip-off from the Hamburglar isn't going to cut it?"

"Nuh-uh," Marcus said.

"Any suggestions?" I asked.

"Go make friends," he said. He gave me fifteen hundred dollars out of petty cash and sent me out to get acquainted with Walker. It

wasn't about dead drops or brush passes or whatever cool spy shit I wanted to learn. After all the psychology and jargon, it comes down to this: make him trust you, make him want to help you, make him your friend. That's the job. Hanging out with the bright young things. Tough life, huh?

The first time I really made any headway with Walker was at a preppy haunt on Wisconsin Ave. in Georgetown, a members-only bar. The crowd was mainly wealthy Southern ex-frat boys, guys named Trip and Reed with mop hair and year-round flip-flops. They were into shorts with blazers, driving around in open-top jeeps, and alpha-male-ing super-bitchy Fox News-looking blondes.

Politicians, and CEOs to a lesser extent, aren't like you and me. If you really want to understand how they think, go down to the leadership self-help section of the bookstore and you'll see a ten-foot shelf of books on how to fake a persona. Pols wear one mask for general consumption—TV and voters—and another for friends and acquaintances. There might be some real personality hidden down under all that, but I tend to believe that after all the years of polling and folksy anecdotes, they forget it themselves.

So far I'd known only Walker's professional guise: a charming Southern gentleman, Christian enough to get by but not Bible-thumping enough to alienate moderates. The file Marcus had given me on Walker was filled with psychological mumbo jumbo: early-life self-esteem issues, overcompensation, hypersexuality. It's not an uncommon profile among politicians. I'd heard similar rumors about him. Walker and I shut the bar down that night, and after a few hours drinking with the guy, I was starting to think maybe the hype about him being a skirt-chaser was a little overblown.

Then I noticed him eyeing a college girl across the room: twenty years old, tops. After last call, I asked him where he was heading. In

that easy Mississippi drawl he told me, "I'm fixing to get hip-deep in sticky," then set out after her.

I didn't know, and didn't really want to know, what that meant, but I had a decent guess.

That was the first time he loosened up around me, and it got worse from there. I could barely understand the profane shock-jock creole of sex slang he deployed, which was probably for the better. I figured it was mostly talk. I had a bit of a short fuse when it came to un-gallant behavior around women, the one good thing my dad passed down. Aside from going overboard on the locker-room chatter, he was a fun guy to hang out with and a welcome break from the bureaucrats' cocktail-party circuit.

Tonight, chez Chip, Walker was shape-shifting as per usual. After some gentle ragging on another rep about his party's chances in the midterms, he lowered his voice to a murmur, scanned the room, and asked me if I was going to get into any "strange." A fetching young woman arrived within earshot, and without missing a beat he turned the charm back on and engaged her in a perfectly chaste conversation about the relative merits of Yale versus Brown.

"I'll put in a good word for you," he said, sent her along with her tresses bouncing, and resumed the conversation on the finer points of a venereal subject I'm not even going to mention here. He thought he was being quieter than he was. I could see he was getting drunk, gulping down one glass in order to start a new one.

Marcus caught me on my way to the bathroom. "Stick with Walker tonight, no matter what," he said.

"Why?" I asked. "What's going on?"

"It'd be best if you stayed close to him. Trust me."

Typical sphinx bullshit from my higher-ups at Davies. I knew very little about what we wanted with Walker, only that he was on track

to be a heavy and would be good to know. I had picked up some hints, stuff I maybe wasn't supposed to be aware of, and the few details I got from Marcus were like pulling teeth. We had a client, some dude from Bosnia or Kosovo—I could never keep those war-torn nineties' hellholes straight—who wanted a few amendments stuck in an upcoming foreign relations bill so that he could have cheaper exports or something. It was just another boring little loophole no one would notice. The trick was to wait until the House and Senate passed their different versions of the bill and the conference committee jammed them together. That's the real sausage-making on the Hill, and the closest thing you can find to the smoke-filled rooms of legend. Walker was likely to be a junior member in any upcoming conference on foreign relations, so it made sense to bring him in.

It was a perfectly typical case, the kind we did at Davies every week. What I couldn't figure out was why they were treating the whole thing like it was a state secret. I'd never seen anything so compartmentalized around the offices.

But I was just a soldier, so I'd keep my head down and keep at it with Walker. By now he had the tight look of concentration of a high-functioning drunk on a spree. I didn't like where this was going and would have beat it out of there if not for work. He was in flagrant violation of the first rule of Washington nightlife: never have fun at a party. He muttered something, looking hard at nothing in particular.

"What?" I asked.

"Are you okay, you know, with Tina?" he said.

I couldn't remember who Tina was—Walker's dance card was pretty crowded—but I wanted to keep him mellow. I certainly didn't have a *problem* with her, so I just nodded along. "Sure," I said and steered Walker to an empty living room. He was feeling in his pocket for his keys: bad news.

It wasn't quite a scene yet, though a few people were taking an interest, watching through the entryway. And I saw Marcus checking in, subtly, while talking to two lantern-jawed guys with goatees. I left Walker for a minute and stepped over to Marcus. I was hoping to get out of tonight's assignment: I just wanted to dump Walker in a cab and send him home, skip whatever adventure Marcus had planned for me.

"Michael Ford," Marcus said. "Let me introduce you to two dear friends of the Davies Group"—that was code. *Friends* alone meant C-list clients, *close friends* B-list, and *dear friends* A-list. These guys were priorities.

"This is Miroslav Guzina and Aleksandar Šrebov. They're with the Serbian trade mission."

These trade advisers sure turned out to be an interesting bunch. Miroslav tore a piece of rare tenderloin on crostini in half with his teeth, then offered his hand.

"It's a pleasure," I said. Aleksandar's handshake felt like palming a cinder block.

"May I borrow Marcus for a moment?" I asked.

Marcus excused himself and we stepped aside.

"What's the play here, with Walker?" I asked.

He gave me his dumb and innocent look, which I could only answer with a long sigh.

"Keep him happy," he said. "And remember: the Davies Group is always looking out for you."

Damn it. These Balkans must be the guys who were bankrolling the seduction of Representative Walker, which put me in a tight spot. Walker was waving me over, antsy, ready to go. I walked back to him.

"You've got that new Cadillac CTS, right?"

"Oh yeah," he said.

"You mind letting me get my hands on it?" I asked. I knew better

than to get between a drunk with a Southern sense of honor and his keys, at least not without having a good cover.

“I don’t know.”

“Come on.”

He shrugged a little bit, held the keys in his palm, and let me take them without a fight. That surprised me at first.

“Come on, man. Fuck this Girl Scout meeting. I know a place that’ll take care of us.”

I didn’t like the sound of that at all. To my ears it sounded a little bit like *whorehouse*. I realized he gave up his keys not because he thought it was the public-safety-minded thing to do but because he really wanted to get to wherever he was taking us next.

Normally, because Marcus and the Serbs scared the shit out of me and because I was a good little corporate kiss-ass, I would have just followed Marcus’s orders and gone along with Walker.

But I was getting the distinct feeling that the Walker episode was not going to end well, and on top of that, tonight I had a very special problem on my hands. It was the enormous dude who was now watching Walker and me from the hallway, who had been keeping his eye on me all night and looked none too pleased that I was clearly about to paint the town with a reputed poonhound. And why should I care?

Because that particular dude was Lawrence Clark—forgive me, *Sir* Lawrence Clark, whom you may know as the chairman of PMG, a hedge fund that controls about thirty billion dollars in capital. More important, he was Annie Clark’s father, and a former player for England’s national rugby team. Annie was at my place right now, since that was easier for her than schlepping all the way back up to her house in Glover Park. And remember how the whole Annie thing seemed too easy, seemed like there must be a catch in it somewhere? Lawrence Clark was the first catch I

discovered. I sure as hell didn't want him seeing me heading out to some cathouse with Walker. Clark had me pinned with a furious stare, Walker was begging to go, and Marcus was just standing there watching me squirm as I tried to decide between no good options.