



Bureaucrats  
& Love



**Karl Kendall**

# Clown: Bureaucrats & Love

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## Prologue

Dear reader. You may call me Ted. I am a character in this story. Sorry for addressing you so directly, but I have been compelled by the author to do so, and I have no choice, no agency to do otherwise. In my defense, and the author's, this revives an old custom within some tales that serves ideally to prepare the reader to best approach the story.

If you continue in your reading of this fable, and without a doubt it is a fable, you may well be tempted to conclude these are only characters in fiction, that their joys and pains, their smiles and tears are fake, and there is no need to empathize, to feel happiness or sadness on their behalf.

I'm to argue differently. The author has sought to create that which, if not factually correct in objective detail, bears episodic truth, inspired by memories and projected onto situations that adhere close to reality with some sufficiency, with hope, to warrant your effort.

Thusly, you will read about human beings, hear from them about love, jealousy, grief, and hatred. That they are characters in a fictional situation does not take away from the underlying authenticity of their feelings.

To anticipate your counter-argument, when you think you've been misled by me, when you think, aha dear Ted, these characters are bureaucrats and political appointees with political connections, highly entitled people with little to nothing in their life experiences to offer us as the smallest perch for regular empathy and thus nothing to ignite interest.

But I provide a counterpoint to this wholly reasonable observation, those some constituents within these beltway denizens, their flesh and blood elements, their ability to exhibit emotions, are that which adjoin them to the rest of humanity, this despite what costume or daily corruption they chose to wear. Your capacity for empathy, dear reader, demonstrates superiority to those who would mostly be incapable of reciprocating in kind.

And so, this prologue concludes to allow the story to begin.

## Chapter 1

It is slightly after seven in the evening, the agreed meeting time. An hour before sunset, it is still light, also hot and very humid. It is mid-August in Washington. Theodore “Ted” Hart sits at a small dining table in a restaurant’s narrow outdoor dining area along a street in D.C.’s northwest corridor. He looks at the time on his phone, catches a waiter’s eye, and orders a pitcher of beer with two glasses.

He looks up the street, coincidentally in the direction of the White House, as one naturally orients themselves in this city. His colleague would come from that direction most likely, and he tended to be punctual.

Silas Wood, an analyst and titled an underwriter, though he did not do true underwriting, had a phone call in the late afternoon. As a result, he worked into the evening to complete the requested task. Antoinette was across the country, and though not technically his boss, she was two grades higher, a colleague, and more than an old friend.

Antoinette was at a manufacturer’s conference in San Diego. She’s director of program recipient development. With her was Joe Quinn from the legal department. His role was to explain any legal nuances of their government program to those attending the conference. Antoinette was there to promote this same program, and in crude terms, drum up business.

She had called Silas after being challenged by a self-described tax-paying citizen in the audience, a director of large metal fabrication facility. This was during her mid-day presentation, one of the keynote events of the conference.

Antoinette had made a broad, enthusiastic statement about the level of help her agency had provided to businesses in the region. In no uncertain terms, the tax-paying citizen demanded her to be more precise, to provide actual numbers backing her statements. He publicly questioned her veracity.

Joe Quinn whispered into her ear an apology that what he requested was not unreasonable. Such a request should have been anticipated. She promised to circle back to the request as soon as possible, as soon as practicable. She smiled and went on with her presentation after she adroitly texted on her phone.

That was at four-thirty in the afternoon in Washington, and Silas normally quit at five. He so wanted to respond to Antoinette’s request immediately, but had a meeting he had to run to. The new deputy director, Peter Caine, was not to be kept waiting.

After meeting with Peter Caine, along with two colleagues, he was able to run back to his office, find, distill and provide to Antoinette the information she requested.

By the time Silas sent it to her, a tepid response was the best Antoinette could muster. She apologized to herself for her disappointment and assumed it was Silas's best effort, but by the time it arrived, since he was no longer in the spotlight, Mister “remember-I’m-a-tax-paying-citizen” was indifferent.

Silas knew his tardy reply would lessen the information’s inherent impact. He was more annoyed at the substance of the meeting that delayed its delivery, if it even contained substance.

Peter Caine in front of his first all-hands staff meeting had declared his intention to meet-and-greet each staffer on a personal level, and this meeting was part of his fulfilling that vow. It had been Silas’ lucky turn, along with two other staffers, to present themselves to Peter and provide a show-and-tell of themselves and their duties. At the meeting, Peter Caine just smiled and nodded, and asked no questions.

Silas was finished for the day, planned to meet up with Ted, have a couple of beers, and inevitably discuss shop scuttlebutt. Ted was a good sort, sharp, pleasant, always well organized, and was in a fine position to hear things as Antoinette’s administrative assistant.

Silas realized the fates were fickle when he found himself in this position of going through Ted to find out what was happening with Antoinette. She had risen so fast while he remained in a place where he was just so competent and so well suited for his duties. He was more sad than jealous; they had shared proximate cubical space for a time and had become close.

Silas walked down the street with good timing, if not overtly in a hurry, at least at a good pace. He was no lollygagger. As usual, he held in his left hand his briarwood pipe. A residual affectation from his younger steam-punk days, he thought it made him more dashing and rakish. This despite the occasional sneer from the smoking-is-illegal crowd, regardless of whether it was lit. In his right hand, he carried his ever-present smart-phone, as, of course, one would.

The waiter had returned with the pitcher of beer and two frosty glasses. Setting them on the table, only slightly rocky, where they immediately started wetting the table, he asked Ted if he wanted to order an appetizer while he waited. Ted saw Silas approaching, thanked the waiter and suggested, “In a few minutes,” then waved at Silas up the street.

Silas smiled, had his phone to his ear listening to messages, and waved with his pipe at Ted. As he approached, he asked Ted whether it was a little too hot, a little too uncomfortable to be sitting outside. “It’ll make the beer taste better. Besides, people watching,” replied Ted, waving his hand at the street, although there weren’t many people about considering the time, probably because of the heat, he thought.

“So, what’s new?” Silas asked as he sat down, placed his pipe and phone on the table, and poured a beer, adding, “Yes, I know Antoinette is in San Diego. God, I don’t know how she does

it, every week, on and on, another place with an identical convention, and don't say she does it for the frequent flyer miles."

"It's her job Silas. Program recipient outreach is very important for the agency, and, I might add, very high profile." Ted punctuated his little nearly pat speech by taking a sip of beer.

Silas took a sip of beer. It was nice and cold, a porter, if he was not mistaken. "Ah, that's good." He laughed. "High profile. I just had my blessing-of-the-animals meeting with little Peter Caine. Ted, you have more interaction with these people than I do. Tell the truth, are all political appointees psychopaths?"

It was Ted's turn to laugh. "Our very own Prince Ludwigs, but alas, never destined to be kings. You've got to put them somewhere, Silas. They're a danger to themselves and to the public if left on the street, and besides..." he lowered his voice mockingly, "... they have very important friends."

"I know, but why dump them in our agency? Or, heaven forfend, horrible thought, can we possibly be getting the cream of the crop?" Silas had picked up a menu from the table; it was damp and pulling apart. The Pizza Calabrese looked tempting.

Ted continued in his just slightly mocking-officious tone, "Just because we're a presidential slush fund doesn't mean we're not unimportant, just small. Besides, Peter Caine is highly qualified. We're a meritocracy, don't you know, and never question otherwise. He has a law degree, and, just a coincidence, his sister is Adel Caine Ballis, a very up-and-coming state attorney general. Do I even have to mention Evelyn Caine, their father, was a big political operative in his party, a very, very big fundraiser?"

Silas sighed, "Yes, yes, and yes, we play the hand we're dealt, no matter what party is in power, not that I can tell which is which anymore. Check that, not that I ever could."

Ted took the menu from Silas. It was really falling apart, a moist jigsaw puzzle. He looked for the waiter who was inside chatting with customers. "Well, your old girlfriend certainly knew how to play her hand. Exquisite timing between administrations. And two pay grades. I'm not saying it just because she's my boss now, but I really do admire Antoinette's chutzpah. Who'd have thought it even just two years ago?"

Silas stared down at his half empty glass of beer. "God, but I'd like things back to the way they were."

Ted was looking across the street at a young-ish lady, well dressed in slacks and rather high heels was walking, nearly dragging with the leash, a very tiny dog. Surely the sidewalk was too hot for the little creature and Ted was of half of a mind to go tell her so.

Instead, he looked at Silas, and trying but failing to sound mocking and unserious, said, “The perils of dating a coworker, I’m afraid. When your professional and personal life clashes, something has to give. Here, it was her professional and personal life. Sorry old chum.”

Silas finished his beer and poured another; the liquid had already begun to lose its chill. He tried to sound chipper, “Yeah, schist happens. Want to order a pizza? But let’s take it inside.”

Just as the waiter came out, Ted picked up the pitcher while Silas grabbed the two glasses with one hand, and his phone and his pipe with the other. The tabletop was a wet, gooey mess as it rocked back and forth.

Ted said to the waiter they’d be ordering dinner inside. The waiter agreed it was too hot to eat outside, looked at the table, then looked at Silas’s pipe and told him there was no smoking inside. Silas observed, “Nor outside either, but let’s not split hairs.” They went inside.

As the men were eating their pizza, second slices, Antoinette texted Ted, “Check email. Tasks for tomorrow.” Ted looked at the text, and spoke at his phone, “Sorry Ma’am. We’re done for the day. I admire you, but you need to learn the concept of time zones. Seriously.”

Silas looked at Ted and smiled. “I thought you were one of those twenty-four-seven administrative assistants. Pick up their laundry, no trouble at all. Don’t you want your boss to succeed?”

Ted was typing out a text response. “Having dinner. Will look when home.” He showed it to Silas. “Satisfied? I really need to get a life.” Silas agreed they both needed to.

When Ted got home to his apartment that evening, he opened his laptop, logged into the government server, and began checking emails, including particularly Antoinette’s. She had sent two more since she texted him, mostly redundant and just adding to tomorrow’s “to do” list.

Many of the tasks turned out to not be immediately urgent, but more of Antoinette just delegating to Ted for remembering things as she thought of them. Then it’s his responsibility to remember them. Part of the job, he thought to himself.

One task read, “Caine hire,” and was more than a little subject to interpretation. Ted gave up and called her. It was still early on the left coast and sauce for the goose, he thought. Antoinette answered on the fourth ring, and he thought she was in a bar or lounge judging by the background noise.

“What is it?” she said into the phone. “It’s my assistant,” she said to whomever she was with.



Ted got the clarification he sought. Peter Caine was seeking an assistant, and Antoinette offered to help in the screening. Antoinette asked Ted, "Where were you earlier?" as if he needed to account to her for every minute of his day.

Ted mentioned the name of the restaurant and that he and Silas had met for pizza. For a second, just a second, Antoinette dropped her façade, "Aw, Silas. I never see him anymore. How's he doing?" and Ted seemed to think he almost could hear a hint of sadness, even remorse, in her voice.

But the façade was back up before Ted could respond in any meaningful way. Ted was thinking how her office was two entire floors above Silas' and their building took up nearly one city block, so of course it would be nearly impossible for their paths ever to cross.

As Antoinette dictated aloud, he typed off a few more things on the "to do" list; a couple were repeats from earlier. Obviously, this was most likely show for whomever she was sitting with. Just part of the job.

He said to himself, but a little more loudly than he intended, "Should I cancel your dinner with the President?" and he could almost hear Antoinette's strained smile, "What?" she said as she didn't process it, or at least pretended not to. "No worries," said Ted. "I'll take care of it," which seemed imminently pleasing to Antoinette.

Antoinette was indeed sitting in a bar, more precisely at a booth in a bar attached to a restaurant at the hotel where the conference was being held. Four stars in some guides. She was holding her second large glass of Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon. It came highly recommended by the sommelier and indeed had a minty note within its rich berry components.

It was expensive, but Antoinette wasn't buying, nor were the taxpayers picking up the tab. She was sitting across from the head of some local business development council. He was buying, and she was blanking on his name. She subtly texted Ted under the table, have him find out. She'd have to wait for his response.

In the meantime, she went into her spiel about all the good she could do, her agency could do for members of this fellow's group, whatever his name was. Obliquely, she thought, she got around to mentioning how she reported to a guy, who reported to a guy, who reported to the president. If that didn't impress, nothing would.

Gerald Medlar was his name. Ted texted her. She relaxed a second and went on the offensive; her marching orders. She mentioned to Gerald that he and his organization could help her, and by so obvious implication help the president, that the agency was getting a reputation in Congress for only helping the big companies and the big donors.

"I need small businesses, mom and pop operations. Moms better than pops, if you catch my drift." She said it, probably sounding more desperate than she should have. Her secret number

was five-hundred by the end of the year, or she was toast, a disappointment, no longer invited to the right cocktail parties. Career in a stall.

Gerald seemed a little taken aback, noting that most of the companies his organization represented were hardly backyard operations. They were mostly moderate-to-large companies, albeit maybe with the ambitious sole proprietor here or there, who may meet her definition.

“See what you can do...” Antoinette walked the line between sounding convivial and threatening “... and I’ll see what I can do,” which was effectively a bluff. She really had nothing to offer. Playing favorites with government services was strictly to be left to the political appointees.

Then again, Gerald maybe had something else in mind, something of a more personal nature. He asked if she wanted another glass of wine, “Or maybe we could go somewhere else.” He had a look in his eyes that caused Antoinette to avert hers, and she hated herself for a second, then hated herself for feeling she needed to hate herself that way.

She realized her colleague, Joe Quinn, was standing by the booth. He smiled at Gerald, but more so at Antoinette. “There you are, Annie. Nick of time. I thought we were going to be late. We’ll keep everyone waiting unless we leave right now.” He turned back to Gerald and leaned in, offering and shaking hands, “Hi, I’m Joe Quinn. I’m legal counsel for our friend here.”

Gerald introduced himself and Joe continued, “I’m normally happy to answer any and all legal questions about our programs...” he looked at his watch “... but right now we just don’t have the time. If you would excuse us, and I apologize for being so rude, but I need to steal our program director here.”

As Joe was saying this, he gestured to Antoinette for her to get up. She stood, and Joe nearly pushed her out of the bar into the large front hotel foyer. People were milling about. “What meeting? You’re mistaken.” Antoinette said.

Joe said, “You can thank me now or later. I’ve two teenage daughters. ‘Damsels in distress’ is my necessary specialty nowadays. I’m hyper-aware of a situation going sideways when I see it.”

Antoinette was quiet for a second. “Presumptuous, but thank you.”

Joe again looked at his wristwatch. “De nada. Now my problem is I can’t very well go back inside the bar, I was wandering in there to get some so-bad but so-good bar-food, to go, so I could go back to my room and veg out, take off my shoes and watch the Westman Sharpshooter marathon on cable.”

“Sounds delightful.” said Antoinette, then noting the look on Joe’s face added, “I’m serious. I’ve been standing all day too, and I think about two hours ago my smile technically became rictus, my brain became jelly slightly earlier.”

They had moved down the foyer, out of view of the bar. Joe was looking at the posted map of the hotel and conference center. He figured there was no chance of a supermarket being attached.

“Westman Sharpshooter?” Antoinette said, as if questioning Joe actually said that as something appealing.

“I’m a man in the West, and I shoot sharp,” said Joe with an affected cowboy drawl, doing his best imitation of the series’ famous tag line. Joe hummed a few bars of its iconic theme song, naturally and on-key, as would be normal for anyone who would have been a young boy when the show first aired.

Antoinette immediately recognized it and laughed that she did, shaking her head.

“Say,” said Antoinette after a moment, “if it wouldn’t be too inappropriate, strictly colleague to colleague working dinner, we could get some room service, and I can’t believe I’m saying this, watch ‘Westman Sharpshooter,’ have pizza. I think I’ve had enough wine.”

“Where?” said Joe, looking a little confused.

“My room. More precisely, and this makes it OK, my VIP suite. I kind of want to show it off to somebody. Besides, I know Janet and she trusts you. I trust you too, so not a big deal.” Antoinette added teasingly, “Do you want to call her and ask permission?”

“No, I’m OK, I guess. She’s always saying she knows I’m too lazy to cheat on her. I have to agree on that, and I’d be terrible at it. How’d you get a suite under per diem?”

“Loyalty program at this hotel chain. Like frequent flyer miles with the occasional upgrade. I travel so much nowadays, so much, I get upgraded more than just occasionally. I’m just surprised I got it during a convention.”

“Well, I need to go back to my room anyway, ditch the tie, get out of this suit. Give me the room number and I’ll see you in about twenty minutes.”

“Just don’t show up in your pajamas.”

“I’ll be decent, in street mufti, but no guarantee I won’t be wearing slippers.”

In thirty minutes, Joe showed up at Antoinette’s room. He rang the bell and she let him in. No slippers, but some well-worn dock shoes he preferred to wear on long flights.

“Now that you mention it, this feels slightly naughty. Living on the wild side.” He said in greeting as she let him into the small entry foyer.

“Maybe, just a very, very little bit, but we can be grownups.” She responded.

“Wow, I see what you mean. Fancy. Huge, separate living and dining areas. Obligatory crystal chandeliers. Bedroom down the hall? There’s a hall.”

“And a bath with steam and Jacuzzi, with a half-a-bath for guests here in the entry foyer. All very proper and very luxurious, and of course, I’ll spend no time here, other than sleeping.”

“And of course, a balcony with a nice view. Very impressive, all-in-all.”

“Room service? What toppings on your pizza?”

Joe looked a little bashful. “Anchovy?” Antoinette made a “yuk” face and lest there be any anchovy contamination, they instead ordered two small pizzas, plus two orders of tiramisu for dessert.

When their order was delivered, they served it on the dining room table, but took their plates into the living room and sat at opposite ends of the couch in front of the oversized television. Joe found the station they were looking for, and a very early episode of Westman Sharpshooter, titled “The Hacienda”, had just come on. As they watched, Joe provided lively commentary on the work of its then yet-to-be-famous director.

Such was the rudimentary plot that Joe’s commentary did not detract from following it. In fact, Antoinette thought Joe’s insight, which actor was drunk during filming, why certain camera angles were used, how many shots certain scenes took, who was dating whom on cast, made the episode tolerable to watch.

They ended up dining through two and half episodes, and indeed both were bushed from the day’s activities, which would begin again the next morning. Joe excused himself after finishing his dessert.

Back in his room, Joe called his wife Janet. Although it was late in Washington, she was a night owl anyway, something he relied upon. He mentioned eating pizza and watching Westman Sharpshooter with Antoinette. She admonished him for torturing her so, then asked which episodes. Janet admitted she preferred that at least to those so-called professional dinners, where he and the program recipient’s lawyers would go out for a “quick bite” to some high-end restaurant, the quick-bite lasting until one or two in the morning, and fortunately billable to the program recipient.

He told Janet, “Just two more days,” and he’d be home, arriving late on a Friday and taking the weekend to recuperate. As he climbed into bed, he thought about how draining these conferences were, saying and explaining the same thing over and over again, feigning interest in whatever the other person was talking about, and smiling cheerfully whatever the situation.

Right before he dozed off, his mind flickered for a moment on the idea that Antoinette chose to do this every day.

## Chapter 2

“And who are you?” Peter Caine addressed the woman sitting behind the desk in his office’s reception area. He had just rushed in. It was nine-twenty in the morning. There was a delay in the parking garage as he didn’t have his parking pass, and the guards didn’t recognize him.

“I’m Candace, from the Claims Group. Here for the week. You have some people in your office, waiting.”

Peter was hanging up his suit coat. He didn’t look at Candace. “Good to meet you, Candy. Can you check about my parking pass? I believe the previous temp, Debra was it, had put in for it last week. It should have been ready by now.”

Neutrally, Candace said, “I’ll check.” She mentioned again the two people waiting in his office. It was Antoinette who had brought along Joe. Peter had expressly requested to meet with the staff who had been at that San Diego conference as soon as they returned.

He promised the director that he personally would stay on top of the agency’s efforts to bring in more users to the programs. As the director made clear, “There are a couple of congressmen opposed to the agency who’d love to see us trip up. You need to produce a win.”

Peter had met Antoinette several times before, when he had just arrived to the agency. They were introduced at his initial meeting with senior staff. “People you need to rely upon.” noted the Chairman. He thought she seemed very interesting, good looking, still youngish compared to the rest of the senior staff, and he could sense she was very thirsty. That was good.

He had not yet met Joe Quinn. When Peter asked Candace about this, she said, “He’s one of the program lawyers. Joe Quinn. Been here a long time.”

Joe and Antoinette were standing to the side of Peter’s desk in a little sitting area. The space had a small couch, a coffee table, and a couple of chairs. Peter walked in briskly, an important man with things to do. He reached out and shook Joe Quinn’s hand.

“Peter Caine, I don’t think we’ve been formally introduced,” said Peter, continuing on, leaving no gap for Joe to respond. “I’m a lawyer too, you know. Gave up a nice practice, very nice practice to come work here. Frankly, I don’t know how you people live on these salaries. I made so much more in private practice.”

Joe smiled, “Oh, we manage. Your practice, I take it, was back in your home state?”

Peter had enough small talk with Joe and turned to his attention to Antoinette. “Antoinette, good to see you again. I presume you’re here to give me some good news following San Diego.”

Antoinette smiled a broad, very sincere smile. "San Diego was great. The conference was well attended. I met one-on-one with nearly eighty company principals..."

Peter looked distressed or confused. "Only eighty? Not, say, I don't know, at least a hundred? I thought you were there for four days."

"Actually, the conference was only three days. Travel time and all that," interjected Joe, which Peter didn't appreciate, and to which he didn't respond. He was still looking at Antoinette.

"I'm meeting with the Director this afternoon. Certainly, progress on our Adding-Businesses Initiative will come up. Are we on track or not? You know, he and I were both told we could rely on you to not disappoint us on this."

Antoinette looked downward for a second, took a breath and looked back directly into Peter's eyes. "You can tell the chairman we're approaching being on track. We do expect the next quarter..."

"Good. That's all I really need to hear about this matter. I'll tell the chairman we met, and you said exactly that." Peter then turned to Joe. "Now, Joseph, if you would excuse us, Antoinette and I need to discuss a personnel matter that doesn't concern you. I'm sure we'll speak in the future."

Joe excused himself, resisted the temptation to click his heels, and went on with the rest of his day. Peter motioned for Antoinette to sit. He called into the front office, "Candy, can you bring me some coffee? Sugar, no cream." He looked at Antoinette, asked if she wanted any and she correctly said, "No, thank you."

Peter looked around as if he expected instant delivery of his coffee. Awaiting its arrival, he spoke casually. "So, you took one of our lawyers with you on a business development trip? What's that about?"

Antoinette explained the utility of having someone during the meetings who could speak on the details of program agreements: how they're structured, legal nuances, and the like. Someone there to answer the specific questions as they arise, for people just being introduced to the program.

"I see." He said.

Candace arrived, set down on the table a paper napkin, and then placed a porcelain cup and saucer on it. As she turned to leave, Peter reached for the coffee. "Thank you."

Without further prompting from Peter, Antoinette said, "Often, it's best to have two people on your side in a meeting, twice as many ears and eyes. Joe takes excellent notes."

Peter seemed bored with the conversation and anyway changed topics. "Did you find time to look at that resume I sent you for my administrative assistant position?"

"Yes, I did. This is the Lester Connaught fellow you're referring to? Young, a little but not much experience, but good academics, from a decent school. He submitted a well-prepared resume."

"I had him come in for an interview last week." Peter said.

"I didn't know. Of course, I was in San Diego. Did you want me to speak with him by phone?"

Peter sighed and seemed a little perturbed. "No, don't bother. He was young, true, but also a tad immature, didn't seem to appreciate the seriousness of the position."

"How so?" Antoinette was interested. Anything to help her see how Peter's mind worked.

"He seemed OK at first glance, but then I noticed his fingernails were dirty. I asked him about it. Said he had been painting with a dark stain, restoring furniture or something, saying that it takes a while for it to scrub completely off." Peter paused. "Yet he knew he had this interview."

"Well, he is young." Antoinette didn't know why she was defending the fellow. She instinctively glanced down at her fingernails, which fortunately were all in proper order.

"My mistake when outlining my requirements given to human resources for the position. There are tons of people who can technically do the job; I just need someone who also makes a good appearance, is decent looking, and has good decorum. You understand, of course."

"Yes, of course."

Candace stuck her head in the room. "Excuse me, Mister Deputy Director, there's a Carlton Leakey here, with the Mindfill Consulting Group, says he has a nine-thirty meeting with you?"

Peter smiled. "Ah, Carlton. Yes, show him in." Antoinette rose, intending to leave. Instead, Peter instead pointed her back to where she was. "No, sit in on this. You'll want to be present. Carlton is an old friend from college days. He's quite successful, a partner at a very important consulting firm."

Carlton walked in, a tall and large man, very well dressed, expensive suit, ornate tie and matching pocket square, his hair graying at the temples just so. His smile exposed very white, very straight teeth, but showed no mirth. "Peter, how the heck are you? Have you straightened out the government yet?"

"Well Carlton, that's why I invited you here, isn't it?" They shook hands with a great show of bonhomme, and held on a little too long and a little too tightly for Antoinette's comfort. Then Carlton noticed her sitting there. "Well, who do we have here?"



“Someone I thought you should meet, Carlton. This is Antoinette. She’s in charge of business development here, sorry I mean recipient outreach. That’s the correct term, isn’t it, Antoinette?”

Antoinette said, “Yes, recipient outreach” as she shook Carlton’s hand, a normal, if only slightly too light, handshake for her fortunately.

“Pete and me—we are old friends. I just arrived in Washington ahead of him. I was director of Senator Wilmington’s office for many years, before I became a beltway bandit.” Carlton then pointedly asked Antoinette, “Do you know Senator Wilmington?”

Antoinette, knowing he knew her answer, but said they hadn’t met. Carlton smiled.

“You know, coincidentally, my consulting firm has several top, highly qualified marketing experts who specialize in government outreach programs. You should talk with them.”

“That’s a great idea,” Peter offered. “Antoinette, you should set something up.”

Antoinette, not wanting to be perceived as negative, said, “It is a great idea. We had discussed bringing in outside consultants. I am a little worried about our budget for such a thing, if we go forward, of course.”

Peter winked at Carlton without even trying to hide it, “Oh don’t worry about that Antoinette; money can always be found.”

With barely a moment’s hesitance, she said, “OK, then. I’d be happy to speak with your experts,”

The two men exchanged glances, looked, and smiled. Peter spoke, “So, if you would excuse us, Antoinette, I’m sure you’re busy. Carlton and I have some things to discuss.”

Antoinette shook Carlton’s hand again. As she stood to leave, Peter said, “Would you ask Candy to come in on your way out? Thanks.”

As she passed Candace seated in the outer office, Antoinette conveyed the message, and stepped into the hallway. She took the stairs down to her floor, not that she especially avoided taking elevators, but she didn’t want to be seen taking the elevator to travel just one floor.

However, she wouldn’t mind being known as one of those people, one who always takes the stairs. As she made her way down, Antoinette ran into Henry, who had just arrived. Taking the stairs up and carrying his bicycle, Henry was one of those people. He always took the stairs and always with his bicycle in tow. He commuted by bicycle unless it snowed or during ice storms.

Henry ran the IT department and kept odd hours. Now, here was a health nut, thought Antoinette. He was ready and proud to share his blood pressure and heart rate if asked. Probably he'd tell you his cholesterol numbers if you asked nicely.

They exchanged pleasantries, and Henry noted she was coming from the top floor, the domicile of the political appointees, thus implicitly she was meeting with the top brass. Antoinette enjoyed feeling important, and people noticing.

Carlton and Peter sat across from each other at the small coffee table. Candace had brought coffee for Carlton, and also a file marked "Mindfill" that was kept in an outer office cabinet. She found it with only a little difficulty.

Candace set both on the coffee table and Peter dismissed her. Carlton pick up the file and from amongst the pages a flash drive fell. "Yours to keep." said Peter, while Carlton did a cursory review of the printed pages.

"OK. Done. If that's all the opposition we have, then we shouldn't have too many difficulties."

"So, I have a habit of overestimating my opposition?" asked Peter.

Carlton laughed. "We're fine."

Both men took a celebratory sip of coffee and sat back slightly. Relaxing into more casual conversation, Carlton was the first to speak. "So, how's life, post Linda?"

Peter shrugged, "Mostly quiet, but man, divorce is expensive."

"I told you your residence is in the wrong state. Are the kids taking it OK?"

Peter shrugged again. "Only one's still in college and it's her senior year. Frankly, I don't think any of them will notice much of a difference."

Carlton asked, "So the youngest would be Mary, right? Pursuing some sort of post-graduate work?"

Peter offered a small laugh, followed by, "Planning on getting her law degree. State University, nothing fancy."

"Apple doesn't fall far from the tree, eh?" observed Carlton.

"Hardly," said Peter with just a hint of bitterness. "She thinks she emulating my sister, wants to be an attorney general someday. As you know, my sister is the shining light in our family."

"Ah, yes. Sorry I mentioned it. You seeing anyone? Or is it too early?"

Peter perked up. “Never too early, but no, I’m not. The Washington scene is a bit too, how should I say this, compartmentalized for my liking. Everyone has their own little tribe and their own level in their own neighborhood, and lines are never to be crossed.”

“Well, aren’t you the budding libertine? Maybe you should join a commune.” Carlton was enjoying taunting his old friend. He took another sip of coffee. “What about that Antoinette chick? She seemed pleasant, looked fairly athletic if you catch my drift.”

Peter looked away. “Yeah, I’ve noticed her. Has that certain hunger too.”

“Well, there you go. Problem solved. She wasn’t wearing any ring, if that means anything.”

“She is a subordinate. Civil service, obviously. Always the potential for trouble.”

“I’m just suggesting something to get you back in the game, nothing permanent. Besides, her being a subordinate can have advantages, especially if she’s as hungry as you say, or more appropriately thirsty as the kids say. You just need to manage it correctly, and of course, discretely.”

Peter thought to himself. Yes, he’d like to get to know Antoinette better. Her being a subordinate certainly adds a bit of danger, an element of naughtiness to any relationship. He tried to picture Antoinette acting naughty and smiled to himself.

He imagined walking into a high-level reception with her on his arm. He couldn’t decide if it would be a plus or a minus. It would depend who she was at that moment, whether known to be on an upward trajectory, and something he could control. Yes, he could make Antoinette into something, something Linda never was, and of course Antoinette would be grateful.

## Chapter 3

“When does anyone ever find time to do their job?” Antoinette thought as the email reminder came from Human Resources. It was informing her, since she missed the senior-staff session. She had been on travel, and she could now instead attend the regular-staff session dealing with drugs in the workplace. Presumably they meant illegal drugs, but it didn’t specify. The email closed with the pleasing phrase, “Attendance is mandatory,” not of course addressing any repercussions for nonattendance.

The presentation was in twenty minutes, and she had no meetings, no real excuse not to attend. She knew it would be an hour-long ordeal, much worse than actually doing her job, and played out in her mind the coming lost time. She had been at the agency long enough to forecast accurately how all these meetings went, both boring and intrusive.

And even worse, this wasn’t the senior-staff session. Mandatory meetings for those in that relatively small group were rife with something approaching bonhomme and a relaxed atmosphere. For them, these presentations were presented with the minimum of necessary seriousness but also almost, if not exactly, as an in-joke, as a brief vacation, a mini-escape from their more usual duties.

No, this would be a regular-staff session. It always appeared the Human Resource people had never conceived of conducting a meeting as anything beyond either a high-school pep-rally, or a class assembly in the lunch-room-auditorium. Besides, there would be no coffee and donuts.

The topic today would appear more attuned to a presentation on class assembly side, very serious and dour stuff, filled with an almost accusatory implicitness, as if everyone on staff had some by-association guilt with the topic at hand. Of course, this agency had developed its own traditions, its own kabuki theater in the presentations, presumably honed over decades.

First thing to be noticed by outsiders, if there were outsiders, would be the very large and ornate meeting room, out of proportion for the number of people in attendance. This room was a residual feature of the prior occupant of the building, an agency that had a much grander agenda. The current occupant maintained it as the meeting room hall, regardless.

Next, the outsider would notice the room was cold, winter or summer. When once asked about this, a Human Resource person replied it was a well-known fact that people pay attention more when they are cold, and apparently HR extrapolated that to the colder the better.

As the time for the meeting approached and this being a regular-staff style meeting, one would note the first two rows of chairs in front of the podium were reserved for senior staff. They would remain empty even if no senior staff were in attendance. This was an unspoken rule that no one dare break, and not dis-similar to reserved parking spaces at some companies.

The meeting itself, of course, would be conducted in a four-act format. First, a person from Human Resources, acting as host, would introduce the topic, then to bring gravitas to the topic, and almost always introduced like a celebrity, a political appointee would stop in to say a few words, often topically partisan and bordering on violation of the Hatch Act. These few words were always a wild-card, that could last thirty seconds or half of the session, depending on the particular aspirations, speaking ability, and ego of the political appointee, and rarely were they on the topic at hand.

Part three comprised the main course of the session, with either an outside consultant, or someone from the legal department in conjunction with the introducing host, taking part jointly in a tag-team verbatim read-off from the always hastily prepared presentation slides, offered with ongoing apologies about the typos.

Finally, the fourth part, and only if there was time, staff could ask questions at the end, but since the complexity and details of various topics varied, and the sessions were always one hour, the third part slide reading was always an exercise in either rushing or stalling to fill up the hour, ideally if timed right, with little time for questions at the end.

But of course, there would be questions. Staff had to show interest to show they were paying attention and really cared. First, there were always a couple of skill questions, and Antoinette always smiled when the person from Human Resources would say, "I'm glad you asked that," almost with a wink, before giving a coincidentally well-constructed response.

Then there were the inevitable suck-up questions, which were more explanations of how glad the person was to be there and how much they had learned. These were very good people to have on staff. They knew how to maintain job security.

Rarely, but occasionally, someone would be called on and the question was real. Or the question might contain what was interpreted as hostile phrasing, say about the benefits of the meeting. These would be dubbed as "interesting" but as time suddenly had run out, a "see me afterwards" response would signal the end of the meeting. At that point, staff commenced applauding, whether or not at all appropriate. It always seemed the people with the most interesting questions left the agency within the following six months.

Having already run through the meeting in her mind, the topic didn't really matter. Antoinette entered the meeting room a couple of minutes ahead of time, attuned to the blast of cold air and wearing a jacket. One always kept a jacket or sweater at the ready for just such a meeting. Hers was a nice winter white despite the season.

After the requisite signing in, Antoinette at first sat in the second row, her place, her caste, but it and the first row were otherwise empty. As more people entered and they being regular staff, she felt conspicuous. She saw Joe Quinn enter. Good old Joe. He sat in the back near the windows, smartly as inconspicuous as possible. Regular staff abided by no seating hierarchy, or reserved seating, other than avoiding the first two rows.

Joe was wearing a dark blue pin-striped suit with a red tie. Good old out of fashion Joe Quinn. Antoinette stood, walked to the back of the room, and sat down next to him. Then saying so others would hear it, "We need to talk about the new program. I think some of the contract verbiage is unclear for new recipients." Spoken mostly to explain her change of seats, it would seem innocuous enough.

Joe smiled at her and said in a quiet tone, so only Antoinette would hear, "Well, look at you, slumming with the peasants. I'm quite honored, my lady." He made a gesture as if tugging on a forelock.

She responded quietly. "Ha, ha. Just poke me in the ribs if I appear to be dozing off."

Predictably, as the meeting started, up first was the head of human resources, so an obviously important topic if it took time away from managing her secretary, making sure all the pencils on her desk were sharp and pointing to true north. Many viewed her as having idiosyncrasies, that combined with a short temper and a long memory.

Her first name was Doris, and Doris squinted a lot, as if lights were always shining in her eyes. No one ever dared ask her if she had a medical condition. As she stood to address the group, some on her staff lightly applauded, to indicate for everyone's benefit that the meeting had begun.

"Good morning," Doris started, "I hope to have you all out of here within the hour, but thank you all for attending." She gave a deep sigh, as if she wanted to be anywhere else, and continued.

"I think by now we've all heard about the horrible situation and the arrests at our sister agency, the distribution and sale of scheduled drugs as defined in the Controlled Substances Act. We'll get more into that later, but I want to remind all of you how serious this is, criminal transgressions, and additionally how it reflects on an agency of the executive branch, and all the possible repercussions for its operations in the future."

She continued in this vein of gloom for several minutes, almost as if she assumed what had happened at the other agency was surely inevitably happening at this one, this very moment, in some equivalent, if not exact, manner. As it almost seemed like she was about to break down into tears, she looked up and suddenly smiled. With incredibly fortunate timing, Peter Caine had walked in and approached the podium.

He smiled broadly with his very nice teeth, and waved at everyone, and Doris's human resources staff started applauding heartily, soon joined in by most of the rest of staff. Peter Caine had dressed well for the occasion, in a seersucker suit, yellow tie with matching pocket square. Old school Washington chic, updated in cut and looking dapper.

He began by telling everyone how happy he was to be there, how proud he was to be in Washington, representing his state and party, and noting all the hard work being done by Doris and her staff, and the excellent management at the agency. His voice then took on a dour note as he began discussing the scourge of drug abuse among staff and how it affects the workplace.

As Peter Caine was going on about this, Joe leaned over and said to Antoinette, “Drug abuse? I thought the issue was the selling of illegal drugs in a government building, and incidentally, not by anyone here. Look around at these people. Their idea of drug abuse is taking a third aspirin within two hours of bedtime.”

“Shush.” Smiling, but maintaining a straight ahead look, it seemed to Antoinette that she and Peter were making eye contact for most of his talk. Finally, Peter concluded, angrily implying that if there were drug abusers on staff, they would be rooted out and dealt with to the full extent permitted by law.

Joe raised his hand to be called upon, but Doris quickly interceded and said for the sake of efficiency, questions should wait until the end, because what they were about to present would be very much in-depth and should answer any potential questions. Joe shrugged after getting dirty looks from others on staff, and purely for the sake of efficiency, lowered his hand.

Doris introduced one of the agency’s administration lawyers, Ruth, who would go over the presentation with Doris. At this point Peter Caine leaned over into the podium’s microphone, and with a vocal fry said he had a call, a very important call with the White House, so he needed to step away, but wanted to remind everyone that he too was a lawyer.

Ruth nodded and smiled, as if indicating Peter’s parting comments had relevancy to the meeting’s purpose. He waved and left the room, to some minor applause from Human Resources staff.

“OK,” said Ruth as soon as he left and she brought up the first of many presentation slides. She read from it verbatim in case there were people in the audience unable or unwilling to read. “The list of Schedule I, II, and III drugs are defined by the United States Controlled Substances Act, title twenty-one, with modifications through the year two-thousand and fourteen in the Federal Register.”

Antoinette counted them off. There were twenty-seven slides by the end of the presentation, each of an equivalently riveting nature. Between Ruth’s quick dry reading of each slide, Doris would provide a short commentary on its meaning to staff, even if obvious.

The blatantly obvious and unnecessary take-away for Antoinette was simply to not open up a business selling illegal drugs out of a federal agency. Joe only asked once if he needed to poke her in the ribs.

Then as Doris and Ruth were wrapping up, again with perfect timing, Peter Caine reappeared, a triumvirate again on the podium. They exchanged glances and the two women nodded to Peter. It appeared well practiced. He spoke.

“All good stuff. Good to know. Words to the wise. But before we go on to your questions, we need to bring up something, because people unfortunately don’t always act wise or in their own best interests.” He took a breath and continued, “Under a recently signed executive order, we, along with several other agencies, have been authorized to begin drug testing of staff in one month.”

There was something short of a gasp from the audience, but you could tell it was disquieting to some, possibly simply insulting to others.

Now, as a short note on the demographics of this agency would seem to indicate, other than political appointees, it is more stable than most. As a result, the age and generational characteristics of regular staff could be encapsulated in the word “mature” with most, if not all, replacements coming due to retirements.

Of course, you have that phrase “You can’t tell a book by its cover” and certainly there are outliers everywhere, but if you were trying to select a group of people who did not look like they did illicit drugs, and probably didn’t, it would be the staff of this agency.

Joe again raised his hand. Antoinette shot him a look that said, “Your treading on thin ice,” Peter looked at him, and then Antoinette, and said, “I guess it is time to take questions, if any, and since he seems eager to say something, I’ll call first on one of our finest program counselors.”

With only the slightest hesitation, Joe stood up, as Antoinette tried to look small. “Joseph Quinn, program transaction attorney. I think most of you know me. Anyway, it may be a question or it may be just an observation, two parts. First, are you aware of any extant drug problem at this agency, because I look around and I’m not seeing it? Second, have you been informed how drug testing works and for whatever method you choose, the concept, statistics and impacts of false positives and negatives?”

Peter looked blankly at Doris and Ruth, then looked back at Joe. Antoinette seemed intently reading something on her smartphone. “I’m sure we’ll be using state-of-the-art testing.” Peter said unconvincingly. He looked back at Doris, who was trying to recede into the background. “Isn’t that right?” Doris and Ruth nodded. Peter turned back to face Joe. “Why, why do you ask? You seem to have read up on drug testing. I trust that doesn’t reflect anything.”

Joe looked around at his fellow audience members, who were frowning at him, did a half wave in their direction. “I don’t think we have enough drug users on staff to produce anything but false positives. Or at least something pretty close to that.”



“You can’t say that.” Peter seemed a little angry at this challenge.

The audience started chatting quietly amongst themselves, whether it was the topic of false positives, testing in general, or Joe’s audacity was indeterminate.

In for a penny, in for a pound, Joe went on. “I just think Human Resources and our fine legal team need to give this some serious thought before they start ruining people’s reputations, and opening themselves up to liability.” Joe then sat down. Antoinette shifted in her seat, slightly repelled by his display, and her uncomfortable with her unfortunate choice on where to sit.

Peter’s face was blank, and he looked cool, but not cold. “I believe there are other questions?”

One of the younger staffers, a woman from accounting roughly Antoinette’s age, raised her hand and was called upon. She did not bother to identify herself. “I just want to say thank you to Human Resources and our great administration lawyers for doing such a fine job. This is a tough topic to deal with...” She looked at Joe “... especially with so much cynicism about trying to improve things.” Joe rolled his eyes for a second and immediately regretted his lack of control.

Out of her smartphone revelry, Antoinette thought, “Here it comes.” And another staff person’s question was no question at all, but volunteering to be the first one tested since they avowed they weren’t afraid.

Two more questioners were called upon, another thanking the presenters also, and the final one asking about whom to contact on retirement benefits.

Thus, the very successful meeting, despite Joe, concluded. Staff filed out, presumably to get on with their official duties, and not engage in the selling or usage of drugs. They would get certificates by email later attesting to their successful completion of this session.

## Chapter 4

Later that morning, something was troubling Peter. His call with the White House had not gone well, although he didn't realize it at the time. He had just returned from a brief chat with the director; it was very much in-person, person-to-person, and dealing with matters such as his own future. He sure wished people would stop comparing him to his sister, or even his father.

As he passed Candace going back into his office, he asked for a coffee and to get Antoinette on the phone. She dutifully made the call, which was expectedly answered by the ever efficient and estimable Ted Hart, Antoinette's new assistant, and such as was proper and expected under the protocols of this institution, appropriate to Antoinette's recently gained place and stature.

The ever professional, yet warm and friendly, Ted Hart, always alert to the hierarchical politics of a situation, immediately broke the recent request by Antoinette not to be disturbed and patched through the call, all the while apologizing profusely.

"Good morning, Peter." She put the phone immediately on speaker, which was her habit, as it allowed both hands free to continue whatever she was doing. "If it's still morning." She glanced at the clock. "I've been very busy, and you know how time flies."

"It's still morning, Antoinette, but I didn't call to chat about the fleeting nature of time. I have a problem, which turns out to be your problem." Immediately Antoinette took her telephone off the speaker-phone setting and picked up the handset.

To a person standing just outside of Antoinette's office, such as the ever polite and cautious Ted Hart, all that was heard was a series of yeses and nos with an occasional interrupted, "I just want to point out..." and, "that's a given," with a concluding, "will do."

It was Antoinette's turn to appear at her office door. She didn't look happy. The properly inquisitive Ted Hart asked, "Bad news in Bedrock?" It was Ted's view that even the tiniest bit of levity can brighten the darkest situation.

She sighed in a very exasperated manner, "Goals have been revised. We're now way behind where we need to be. I need to draw up a new outreach plan right now."

"OK," said Ted, "but as a reminder, I have a dentist appointment scheduled for three this afternoon. I wasn't planning on returning for the day."

Antoinette seemed unperturbed, even flippant, "No, go get your teeth cleaned or whatever you're doing. Peter Caine said he'd sit down with me at five and we'd go over some ideas. We'll be in his office. I assume if we need help, he'll have Candace stay for a bit."

“That’s good.” said Ted, almost intoning it as a question, but apparently Antoinette had not heard him. She returned to her desk, where she now stared at her computer screen. Ted wondered whether it was what was on the screen or she was just deep in thought.

Ted’s telephone rang once, and he answered it without looking at the number. It was Silas. “Hey Ted, want to go grab some beers after work? I’m avoiding going home and doing laundry, so it’s very important.”

“Oh, hi Silas. Sorry, can’t, I’ll be on the other side of town. Annual dental checkup. Happy teeth make for a happy man. The secret to my million-dollar smile, that and my inner beauty.”

“Yeah, OK, you know you’re shameless with your good habits. That’s why you have no friends,” Silas teased. His voice took on a more serious tone. “Out of curiosity, is Antoinette there?”

“In her office, working, like the rest of us. Why?”

“Nothing. She emailed me a few minutes ago, asking for all sorts of information. I sent her some links to where in our database she could find it, but I’m afraid it’ll just be a big data dump or even dumps plural, without some filtering. I asked if she wanted an explanation, some assistance in pruning it down, but she never responded.”

Ted looked over toward Antoinette’s office door, but the angle of their desks prevented him from seeing her. He whispered, “She’s working with Peter Caine this evening, a little late session. It wouldn’t surprise me if she wanted to bedazzle him with the data complexity; can’t have it looking simple.”

“OK, I guess not. Do you think I should text her? See if she could use some backup?”

“Oh Silas, dear, dear, Silas, I think that is highly counter-indicated, but since you’re still smitten with her, maybe you should ask her out again, away from the office, but I would say today is not the day to do it.”

Silas responded with a deflating, “Yeah. I’ll talk to you later. Have fun at the dentist.”

Ted responded with a pert and professional, “Thank you.”

At five on the button, Antoinette showed up at Peter’s office. Candace had apparently gone for the day, and Peter was on the telephone, chatting with someone in a very informal tone. As soon as he saw her at the doorway, he covered receiver’s mouthpiece and told her, “I’ll be a minute. Wait outside, if you don’t mind.”

There was a little reception area beside what was presently Candace’s desk, a couple of chairs, and a small table covered with some trade publications, plus a weirdly boring and unreadable

magazine for bureaucrats called Officialdom that Antoinette had tried to read in the past, but simply could not get through.

Hanging on the wall facing the entrance were several framed, oversized photographs. This “Brag Wall” included Peter and a previous president with the then first lady; Peter playing golf with some high-level mucks from his political party; Peter standing with some very dignified military figure whose ornate uniform was obviously not of this country; and one, presumably his former wife and children from happier times.

There were also a couple of “certificate of appreciation” plaques: one from a fraternity of some sort and another awarded by a small town local chamber of commerce in his home state.

Peter concluded his call and summoned Antoinette. “Come on in now.”

Antoinette stood and hustled into his office, carrying her laptop, sounding upbeat and dynamic, and speaking in a slightly lower register than natural, “Good afternoon Peter, sorry to disturb you, and I really appreciate your help.”

Peter smiled as he looked up from his desk. “That’s what we’re all here for, helping each other, and for the mission of the agency, of course.”

“But, of course,” responded Antoinette as she sat exactly where she did earlier in the day. She didn’t know if that was tactically good or not when she realized she had done it.

Peter stepped from behind his desk, to take a seat in a chair nearer, but not too near Antoinette, just far enough to avoid any creepiness or scandal if anyone saw them. He looked at his watch. “I usually go to the gym about now. Got to stay in shape, but obviously this little pickle you’ve gotten yourself into takes priority.”

Antoinette became just a little defensive and immediately regretted it. “Well, I’d hardly say I got myself into it.”

“Yet, here you are,” said Peter coolly, “but no matter, what do you have for me?”

Antoinette opened her laptop and angled it so Peter could see the screen. She outlined the present outreach effort, and prior nearly similar efforts, what they did and the results they produced. She showed him various lists of companies and individuals they had contacted, who were program recipients, and in which programs. It was a very competent technical presentation. Antoinette could tell it was totally failing to impress Peter.

He feigned a yawn. “So, this all looks like the same old, same old. Maybe you should think about putting the pedal to the metal. Think outside the box.”

Antoinette had no idea what he meant, but wisely chose not to mention the fact. She responded enthusiastically, "I see what you mean. Granted, this is what had been previously approved. It went as far as we thought we could go. I now see in hindsight, it seems pretty meek."

Peter looked around nonchalantly. "Have you contacted the Mindfill Group yet?"

Antoinette looked down, almost as if in shame, "No, I haven't," then recovered. "That's on my to-do list for first thing tomorrow morning. But in the meantime, just to have all my ducks in a row, I did a quick survey about what other agencies with similar programs have done recently in outreach."

Peter interrupted, "I'm not sure being a copy-cat gets us where we want to be. Remember not only do we need results, but it has to look fresh and, incidentally, homegrown. That'd make the Director happy."

Antoinette suddenly realized how close Peter was sitting. He must have sidled his chair over while viewing the computer screen during her presentation. The slide presently in view was simply a list of all the programs developed by the agency over the last twenty years. Why so many? She thought to herself, and for the first time, she spoke candidly.

"Did you know that many of these programs were just renaming exercises of the previous program?"

"No, of course I didn't." said Peter. seemingly insulted that she should presume he didn't know that particular fact. Then a something small clicked in his head, "But I like what you're suggesting. Rebranding can cause its own excitement. Fresh because we say it's fresh. People take notice. Brilliant Antoinette."

"But is it?" She looked at him sideways, sensing a slight seismic tremor. A delivery truck rumbled down the street.

"Don't be so modest." He said, "You need to take credit for your great ideas. The Director will be pleased with what we've come up with, but."

"But?"

"Devil in the details. On that aspect you'll need professional help. Sorry, but true. Be sure first thing tomorrow to get hold of Mindfill, tell them what we've discussed, and have them develop a proposal that we can base a bid request upon. Tell them time is of the essence, and I said so."

"Our procurement office needs to jump through its hoops." Antoinette said, musing almost to herself.

Peter got a little short. “Antoinette, you need to take charge of those people. This is a Director-sanctioned situation. Tell them that. Make them aware of its importance. They should understand, quietly of course, the priority and remind them that if anyone there can’t handle the situation, they should step aside for someone who can. You, of course, understand.”

“Yes, I do, Peter.”

“Fine.” As he stood, there was a quiet moment, then he gave her shoulder a slight squeeze. When she stood, Peter remained close, a little too close. “Very fine,” he repeated. “You know, you and I could make a good team. Straighten out this broken little agency and give us both a leg up, if you know what I mean.”

Antoinette took two steps toward the door and pivoted back. “I don’t want to get ahead of anything. Let me just get this rebooted outreach campaign going first.”

“A good general always looks ahead to the next battle, Antoinette.”

Now at a more comfortable distance, she smiled. “But aren’t you the general here, Peter?”

“Since you mentioned it, I guess you could look at it that way.” He smiled back.

“So that makes me a colonel?” Antoinette said, apparently precociously.

“No, that makes you a major, wanting to be a colonel.” Peter responded with just a slight edge, emphasizing the word wanting. “Nothing wrong with that.” He concluded, softening his tone.

Strangely, he put out his hand to shake, as if they were concluding a business deal. Antoinette put out her hand and shook, twice. Then he held on just a little too long as he looked into her eyes the whole time, with a mindless smile on his face.

Antoinette left his office, hoping he didn’t notice she was hurrying. At that moment the hallway from Peter’s office to the stairwell seemed unusually far in distance, an odd trick of dimension and time.

She got back to her office, and the lights were off. It seemed very dark, even though it was still light outside. “A nice run.” She thought to herself. “I haven’t done that for a while.” Then she could have a nice shower and, while relaxing over dinner, she would study some of the information Silas had provided. Those were simpler times, her time as an analyst with Silas, but the past is the past, she thought.

Peter stayed in his office, made a few personal calls, checking up on acquaintances according to a schedule he kept in a small diary. A trick his father taught him. He’d call regularly, but not too regularly, people who could be of help to him. Even people he personally couldn’t stand he’d give a regular call, of course putting on the cheer and alluding to indistinct positive news.

He kept a bottle of high-end bourbon in a desk drawer and poured himself a couple of shots, wondering as he took the first sip if he should go to the club that evening for dinner. He had made no plans, and no one had invited him to dinner.

He then, for just a second, thought maybe he should have invited Antoinette to dinner, but that would be too soon, too awkward. She seemed nice and bright, and just a little insecure. He liked that. Maybe they could make a good team, at least for a while. She could be useful.

## Chapter 5

The ever conscientious and surprisingly virtuous Theodore Hart arrived slightly early to work. This was only remarkable because he had taken a sedative before turning in the night before, taken in anticipation of jaw soreness and a stiff neck following his regular visit to the dentist, and in premonition of the hygienist's over rigorous cleaning of his teeth. His neck was stiff and his jaw was sore, but he was not one to shirk his duties.

Anyway, he liked to arrive early, at least well before Antoinette's regular arrival. At the very least he could log into the software systems, check emails, text and voice messages, plus view the calendar reminders in anticipation of Antoinette's arrival, to prepare her for the day. He could also enjoy a cup of coffee and a pastry in solitude. Albeit the pastry was less enjoyed today owing to his sore jaw.

Antoinette arrived in a huff, well-dressed in a dark blazer, with skirt contrasting in a very subtle pattern of grey-on-grey squares. She had a program coordination meeting at another agency in a half an hour, only a few blocks away.

Ted checked and was thankful she had remembered to wear sensible, if not too dour shoes for the occasion. He had already more than once chastised her for wearing stylish too high heels, which were killers if you were trying to walk any distance, or stand for much of the day at a conference. Trade shows could be ordeals. Antoinette would get grouchy.

As Antoinette was checking her notes in preparation to leaving, she looked up at Ted and said, "I need a beard. Is that correct usage?"

"Like a goatee?" Ted realized it was a silly response, but was preoccupied with his jaw aching, and forgave himself that he couldn't be clever all the time. "Sorry, I know what a beard is. Why do you need a beard?"

"Not that I'd ever say anything bad about him, nor that he ever acted other than in the most appropriate manner, but Peter Caine. There are moments when he gives me the creeps. I'm sure it's all me, projecting something, but I think I'd feel better if I could honestly say I was seeing someone regularly, and that we are serious."

"As long as you could say it honestly. I see." Ted teased his jaw back and forth. "Let me give it some thought, but on first blush, why don't you let Silas take you to dinner sometime? You've always enjoyed his company, and he's always liked you."

Antoinette looked at but, was not reading her notes. "Silas is sweet, but we're sort of in different worlds now, divergent paths and all that."



“You two still speak the same language, and he’s one floor down, hardly in Siberia, either literally or metaphorically, but I guess I know what you mean. Can’t be seen hanging out socially with a mere data analyst.”

She looked up. “That’s exactly it. You understand how people around here are like hyenas lurking in the bushes. One small sign of weakness and the pack attacks.”

“Clarence Burlingame at the holiday party.”

“Yes. Career death by innuendo. Gee, I haven’t thought of Clarence in some time. What’s he doing now?”

“Frankly, I don’t know. You know how we don’t speak of people once they’ve left. I think we would have heard from him if he had gone into consulting or into sales or something. And you, Miss, need to leave soon. Five minutes late may be elegant and may make you seem important, but ten minutes late shows you’re just disorganized.”

Antoinette closed her laptop. “Yes mother. Just one more thing before I leave. Get me the number of Mindfill Consulting, a Carlton Leakey, if you can find it. I promised Peter I’d call and I can do that on the way over. Apparently, they’re all primed and ready for a contract.”

Ted sighed. “Ah, the beltway bandits. I love that old-time moniker, containing humor and truth at the same time. They’re so glad to sharpen your pencils for you, and for only four-hundred dollars a pop.” He gave Antoinette the number.

“Thank you. Think of them as the lubricant that indirectly keeps all of this going. We should be thankful.”

“But just simply not as taxpayers?”

Antoinette didn’t like Ted’s tone exactly. He needed to be careful, but surely, he knew she wouldn’t be able to help him if he said the wrong thing and the wrong person overheard. “I should be back in two hours, I guess,” she said in response, as she donned her jacket, picked up her laptop, and headed out the door.

Ted tackled some of what he viewed as menial clerical duties, but after nearly an hour of that nonsense, he gave Silas a call. Silas’ office telephone went to voicemail on the fourth ring and Ted identified himself, asked him to call him back, adding, “No real hurry, not technically a business matter.”

It wasn’t until mid-afternoon when Silas called him back, offering a polite apology claiming work-related matters kept him occupied. Ted understood and said there was no need to apologize. They were, after all, at work. He shared his impression that maybe, just maybe, Antoinette would be receptive to him calling her.

Maybe Silas could invite her to something not seemingly too intimate, something like an art film or museum exhibit, something away from the office, and after hours. “She’s worried that she could be seen in an inappropriate social setting.” Ted only slightly and harmlessly shifting the reality that she was more worried about being seen in a social setting with someone inappropriate.

Ted figured total obscurity, totally private settings, or an obscure little restaurant where no one would see you, defeated the entire purpose of being a beard. Anyway, Ted knew he shouldn’t let on to Silas the real reason for suggesting he ask Antoinette out. He could hear Silas’s wheels turning, even over the telephone.

After maybe twenty seconds of silence, Silas said to Ted, “There’s a street festival over in front of Saint Mary’s on Saturday. I was thinking of going, anyway. Maybe I could invite Antoinette to join me, just to look around.”

Ted chuckled. A little secular, sure, but why not? “I think that’s a great idea, Silas.” He was thinking Antoinette could easily explain that away, if by some remote chance she needed to, she had just bumped into him. He didn’t think Antoinette would be too concerned about any religious association in the geography.

Silas expanded on his idea. “Maybe I could take her to a late lunch afterwards.”

Ted knew he needed to keep a speed governor on Silas. “Don’t get too anxious there. Maybe play it by ear.”

“Yeah, you’re right. She and I are old friends, old colleagues. I should take it easy.” Silas then added, “Ted, thanks for looking out for me on this. I really appreciate it. I’ll call her.”

“Any time, my friend. Ciao.”

While Ted and Silas were talking, Antoinette was on a teleconference call with several people from Mindfill Consulting. When she called in the morning, although she didn’t end up speaking with Carlton Leakey, his staff had expected her and arranged an immediate follow up. Mindfill suggested the initial contract should be small. Antoinette noted their tossed-out amount was exactly one dollar under the amount that required a competitive bid.

As they went on, Mindfill Consulting certainly knew a lot about the agency and their programs, even though they had only occasionally contracted with the agency, or so they claimed. Antoinette attributed it to their being thorough, doing their homework, a sign of professionalism.

For Mindfill, no doubt, any entry point into agency contracting sowed the seeds of greater follow up, and was thus important.

They had three people on the call, two apparently junior marketing experts, whose background they each recited as their multiple degrees from various toney universities, and a rather proud sounding fellow with a British accent, who kept referring to Carlton with undying, yet unspecified, admiration. He was Kahlil and spoke with a certitude and lilt Antoinette found comforting.

The agency's problem, as Kahlil explained it, was the natural, if mostly unwarranted, intimidation that program participants exhibit when dealing with government bureaucracies. "As you are inevitably bureaucratic, your challenge is to appear less bureaucratic, at least less than your bench-mark equivalents."

This sounded logical to Antoinette, and she looked forward to whatever else Mindfill would reveal in the coming weeks. Kahlil suggested she forthwith weave into her lexicon the happy phrase, "Three-p means private public partnership," and to use it often, as a mantra, and encourage others to adopt it, all to somewhat hypnotic effect. "Habitation and desensitization are the keys, Antoinette, to any successful program re-roll out." And Antoinette did not doubt it for a second.

Ted heard some of this from his location outside Antoinette's office. For a moment, he wondered if he should send them his resume, if he could even get a job at Mindfill, but suspected his community college background didn't fit their image, or their billable rates. He understood the agency demanded certain minimums from the consultants they hire, which seem to be held to a much higher standard than the actual staff.

Antoinette concluded her call and after a couple of beats, Ted poked his head into her office. "Sorry to interrupt, but I just spoke with Silas and he wants to talk to you."

"What does he want?" Antoinette's voice always softened a bit when the topic of Silas came up.

"I didn't ask. It could be personal." Ted responded, raising one eyebrow slightly. In her response to Ted, Antoinette sneered, but just a little and for just a second.

"Alright, get him on the phone. No, I'll call him myself. I still remember how to do that." Antoinette dialed Ted's number on her office phone.

He answered on the second ring, just saying his last name, sounding preoccupied. Antoinette said, "OK Silas. What do you have for me?"

He sounded genuinely confused. "Oh, hi Antoinette. I have something for you?"

Antoinette sounded a little peeved, but not necessarily at Silas. "Ah, that's what I was told."

Silas tried to be helpful. “Well, I honestly thought I said I would not have the updated projections for you until early next week, and yes, I know you’re going to Little Rock on Wednesday.” Then he had an idea. “But wait, Antoinette, you in town or doing anything mid-day Saturday?”

“Maybe vacuuming, cleaning around the apartment. Maybe restocking my liquor cabinet. Ha. Why?” Antoinette always felt comfortably honest around Silas.

“Some community group is having a street fair a couple of blocks up from my condo, in front of Saint Mary’s. I was thinking of checking it out, maybe eleven, eleven-thirty-ish. You want to meet me there? Take in the vendors. Besides a band, supposedly they’re having street performers, jugglers, mimes that sort of thing, so be forewarned.”

Antoinette thought a second. “Actually, that sounds almost grand. Sure. Change of pace and all that.”

Silas tried not to sound too anxious. “OK then, I’ll forward the email I got. You can put it in your reminders. I’m sure you’re busy, so ciao until Saturday. Ah, one more thing.”

“Yes, Silas?”

“I’ll be the guy smoking a pipe and wearing a red carnation on his lapel.” He wondered if that was too much.

“You’re hilarious. I’ll see you then.” Antoinette hung up and returned to her work in a much better mood. She had a series of calls to make on their outreach program to various trade associations. Most she had spoken to before, and a couple of them noted how cheery she sounded.

A later afternoon call from Peter, telling her to share all contact information with him, only slightly soured her mood. She assumed Peter would use the information for his party fundraising efforts, something she would have disapproved of in the past. Now she was concerned the partisan approach would turn off some of her contacts. Even if it was somehow indirectly part of her job, it did not make her ostensive duties easier.

Saturday dawned hot and humid, one of those days when unquestionably Washington is a southern city. The weather forecast had promised an increasing chance of thundershowers beginning mid-day. The cheerful forecaster reminded his audience to carry umbrellas.

Silas rummaged through his hallway closet. The cheap street-vendor purchased umbrella he bought a couple of months ago had collapsed for its last time. After a confirming test, it now took up residence in the kitchen trash bin. He had another one, non-collapsing and more substantial, that his sister had left last time she was in town.

He found it behind some boxes, a bright canary yellow. His sister's taste had always tended to the primary colors, something he never shared. It did remind him of his joke about the red carnation, and he thought with that and this umbrella, all he needed was some bright blue shoes to be quite the spectacle. What would Antoinette think? Fortunately, yellow by itself wouldn't clash too much with the muted grey t-shirt and umber slacks he ended up wearing on weekends.

Antoinette started the day by finishing and sending some emails she had promised the evening before. She went downstairs and exercised in her condominium's small gym, the earlier the better, before it became crowded. Over a breakfast consisting of a protein drink and some bananas, she remembered the street festival, near Saint Mary's, if she recalled correctly.

Antoinette didn't know if she felt like going out in public. All the noise, the assorted smells of humanity, not to mention the heat and humidity. Too, street festivals are a bit trite nowadays, all having the same vendors, the same products, the same fair foods and the same small, semi-professional bands trying too hard.

But she promised Silas. Or did she promise Silas? He'd understand if she didn't show. He if anyone.

In the meantime, Antoinette checked her emails again for anything important, then checked a newsfeed to see if a meteor was heading toward the planet or something like that. Best to stay current.

Then she checked her text messages. Other than verification codes, she'd received relatively few lately. Most of her old girlfriend cadre were also at the agency, and if not avoiding her outright, have so it seems become reticent in communicating as freely as they once did. Not a pity, she thought. If they don't feel comfortable speaking to me now, they really weren't my friends.

Antoinette then vacuumed her place, cleaned the kitchen counters, threw some clothes into the washing machine, and finally settled down to make a shopping list for later in the day.

Her car had been sitting in the garage all week unused, and she could give it some needed exercise doing the loop from grocery store, to pharmacy, to liquor store, and finally a quick run across the river to a big-box store for everything else. Although since it's Saturday, all the places would be crowded. Late evening would be a better time to shop.

Time flies and Antoinette realized she needed to clean up and change if she was going to meet up with Silas. It was going to be a scorcher, so shorts, a light blouse and sandals wouldn't be inappropriate. Silas had seen her casually attired before, so that wouldn't be a problem.

For a second, she thought about the nice resorts where she had stayed when going to conventions and trade shows over the past year, all as a result of her new position at the

agency. How the resorts inevitably had enticing swimming pools, both indoors and out. How she rarely had spare time on those trips to go for a swim, and she liked to swim. How inappropriate it would be viewed, if seen in a swimsuit by program recipients or even colleagues.

Antoinette stepped outside. My goodness, it was humid. Maybe she'd just touch base with Silas, hang around for a few minutes, and return home to run her errands. Errands in the car with the air conditioner blasting. She liked the idea.

As it was, Saint Mary's was a little too far to walk, especially in this heat and humidity. She took the subway even though it was Saturday and the wait between trains was approaching excessive with the reduced service schedule.

Public transportation, the concept made Antoinette smile, with its combination of those with few other choices, the jaded government employees riding effectively for free, and the fly-over families of gawking tourists awestruck at the ride's cast of characters, the cost, and the griminess. Enough future-dystopia to keep everyone interested, but not so much to warrant mass abandonment.

At least on a Saturday Antoinette could get a seat, and she spent the six stops reading emails and staring down at her telephone. When she got to the stop nearest Saint Mary's and Silas's, she stood up and weaved past a couple of tourists standing clueless in front of the opened door. She decompressed onto the subway platform with several of her fellow passengers.

The train doors closed. It rolled away with an accelerating whine. Antoinette passed through the turnstile and found the elevator to the surface. The heat and humidity again confronted her, but she could hear music, sort of, somebody tuning an electric guitar, trying a few licks and setting the volume just below the feedback level.

It must be the street festival, and Antoinette instinctively turned onto Montalto Street heading toward the noise, only in afterthought confirming that it was indeed towards Saint Mary's. As she approached the church, she passed some Department of Public Works saw-horses partitioning off the street from automobile traffic. Pedestrian traffic increased and slowed to a stroll.

Young families, parents with one or two children, and the children with their faces painted with the current trending character or theme, couples of all gender combinations, and the occasional brooding single person, made up the crowd. Vendors were selling dream catchers, and funnel cake, and scented candles, plus the obligatory t-shirts, visors, and other forms of disposable worn items.

Antoinette was walking toward the church while searching the wares in the vendor's booths, wondering if she should buy a hat in case it started to rain, when she came face to face with a

clown in full regalia. It startled her; he stepped aside and bowed, giving her exaggerated right-of-way.

Silas stood among the crowd, looking almost lost, sort of pointing with his pipe at people he might have thought familiar. She approached him from the side so as not to startle him, and then she spoke.

“Where’s your carnation? I almost didn’t recognize you.”

Silas turned toward the friendly voice and smiled. “Sorry, no carnation. Alas, I have no lapel to pin it on.” He tugged at his T-shirt. “Quite sad really, and my pipe.”

“But that’s quite an umbrella.” Antoinette responded, pointing at the obvious.

Silas hefted it and instinctively looked at the sky. “We may need it later, if not sooner.”

“Yeah, I noticed. I was thinking of buying a floppy hat, just in case, but I got distracted by a clown, literally.”

Silas looked around. “Yeah, I saw one walking around earlier. Was it a harlequin?”

“I don’t know and don’t start lecturing me on the three types of clowns.”

“Technically, I believe there are four types.”

She looked around at the crowd. “Let’s just file that little fact under things I really don’t care to know at any level.”

The band fired up at that point, making further conversation difficult, or at least much less private if you cared to shout to be heard. People in unison looked in the direction of the church steps where the three musicians seemed really proud of themselves.

Silas raised his voice to a sufficient level. “It seems the father, the son, and the holy spirit don’t wish to be ignored.”

“The holy spirit is a little flat,” responded Antoinette.

A rumble came from the sky. A dark and menacing cloud was looming over the festivities, apparently responding in kind to the band and any other potentially handy blasphemies.

The band, apparently worried about electrocution, stopped, conferred amongst themselves and switched to a more mellow sound, acoustic and, most importantly, unplugged. They were harder to hear, but it seemed more fitting under the circumstances. This was hardly a rave. The cloud rumbled again, but seemingly now in approval.

Then the rain hit. A summer cloudburst of discriminating intensity and location. On one side of the street only a few drops fell, on the other side you were in a driving shower, and down the block it was dry. Probably it was flooding two blocks away.

Antoinette and Silas were standing in the sudden patch of torrent with a couple of dozen other citizens. All were soaked within a few seconds. Silas's raising and opening of the umbrella was a late and useless gesture in this downpour. Then the rain patch quickly passed down the street. At least the rain was cool. The sidewalk and street steamed.

Most of the people within that couple of dozen broke up laughing at their fate. So too did Antoinette and Silas. He lowered and closed the umbrella. She hugged him for some reason even she couldn't fathom, but immediately stopped and backed away when realizing how wet and clingy their clothes were. It was still funny, and both giggled, but more restrained now as they looked into each other eyes.

Across on the dryer side of the street, near a hotdog cart, stood Candace. She recognized Antoinette and Silas and was about to cross the street to say hello when the rain hit. She witnessed their soaking and the subsequent quick hug, but tried not to be judgmental, not to assume.

Silas saw her, smiled, and waved. He pointed out Candace to Antoinette. They both crossed the street to join her, still in a jovial mood, feeling quite the spectacle, and amongst some others standing there dripping water.

Silas spoke, "Did you see that? And look at you, fifty feet away with barely a drop."

Candace responded cheerfully, "Yes, I guess that comes from clean living or something."

"Hello Candace. Enjoying your Saturday?" said Antoinette, inflectionless

"Well, I see not as much as you two."

Silas interrupted, "Yes, all we needed was a couple of cans of cola. It would have made the perfect cliché soft-drink or chewing gum commercial."

It started raining in earnest, and Silas, after looking at himself and Antoinette, lent the umbrella to Candace, the dry one. The three took sanctuary in the church's narthex. There were several other festival attendees doing the same, including the clown.

His costume was soaked, and his unhappy face was even more fitting. A youngish priest came out from the back. In his slight eastern European accent, he reminded the group to be respectful of the worshippers. He didn't seem to be coping well, even though he was the driest person present.



The three colleagues somewhat huddled together. Silas spoke softly, "Candace, don't you live around here somewhere? I seem to recall someone saying something once, don't even remember why it was brought up. Something to do with the grand old apartment buildings and their architecture. Like the Grimaldi or something like that?"

It was Candace's turn. "That's the Garibaldi Apartments, over on diplomat row. It's not far. Yes, I like it there."

"I'm in one of those new trendy mid-rises over toward the conference center. Not the best build quality, I'm afraid. Once you move in, everything has to be rebuilt, repaired, or replaced, and as luck would have it just out of warranty," Silas said in a low, flat conversational tone.

Antoinette spoke up, "So, which of you is closer? I'd really appreciate the chance to towel off before I take the subway home. That's assuming it stops raining."

The miserable clown shushed Antoinette, then looked down, and held his index finger to his lips by way of apology.

Someone standing by the entrance said, "It seems to be letting up." The group aggregated towards the door, looking out at the increasing light. Some people were skipping about, hailing the few cabs that were on nearby side streets not cordoned off. The vendors had covered their kiosks and booths in blue tarps. The band had gone. All indications the street festival was a washout for the day.

As people wandered away from the church entrance, the priest followed them outside with stack of white, neatly folded towels in his arms. His pale complexion seemed to indicate he rarely spent time outside.

Where he got them or why he had them, none of the half dozen or so questioned as they thankfully accepted the loaners to dry off. Antoinette took two and began thoroughly blotting herself dry, while Silas, more demurely, accepted one, using it mostly to dry his hair.

Candace, the driest of the three, asked if they still wanted or needed to go back to her apartment. Silas looked at Antoinette, nearly finished with her blotting and said, "I guess not, but thank you for offering."

Antoinette said, "No, I'm fine now. At least good enough. But thanks Candace, it was decent of you to offer." She turned toward Silas. "We're kind of going in the same direction, aren't we?"

"Yeah, I guess," said Silas, looking at Candace. They returned their towels to the priest, who was gathering them. Antoinette said to Candace, "See you on Monday. I believe I have an eleven o'clock with Peter?"

Candace said, "Yes, I believe that's right," as Silas and Antoinette nodded to her and walked down the steps together toward the nearest subway station. Talking and jostling each other a bit, Candace couldn't quite make out if they were just occasionally touching or even holding hands.

## Chapter 6

Peter would have never admitted it to anyone but himself that he was nervous. Soon he was to have a quick one-on-one meeting with *il grande capo* himself and that had to be a good thing. If he was being dismissed, serving at the pleasure of and all that, the Director no doubt would have done that already.

He did admit to himself that there was plenty of opportunity for him to screw up. He needed to be at his best: knowledgeable, energetic, competent, and presentable. He thought of a colleague being hustled into an important meeting last year, having just come off of a red-eye flight. Private conversations held on the west coast needed to be related directly.

This colleague had the knowledgeable and competent part down, and was energetic enough that morning in a highly caffeinated sort of way, but his presentation was a hard miss; a slept-in suit and hair still dripping wet from a washroom comb-back. His unkempt look distracted from his every sentence. He did not make his points well and his reason for being there became moot. Shortly after that, they transferred him to other duties in a less critical location.

Peter smiled to himself, thinking he would make sure never to be in that position, always be presentable, always be energetic and appear competent. Knowledge, hard knowledge, was the tricky part. For that, right now, he needed Antoinette.

But where was Antoinette? It's too early in the day to be late, and he needed to leave momentarily. Before the meeting, he had to get through all the security that the big boss warranted and that could take the better part of an hour. He called out impatiently to the anteroom, "Candy, find out if Antoinette is on her way. I assume she knows what time it is."

At that moment, Antoinette appeared at the hall threshold, clutching her laptop as usual. "I think I found her," called out Candace to the inner office. She smiled at Antoinette, who made eye contact and almost smiled back.

Peter's response sounded sincere. "Thanks Candy. Good job."

Antoinette entered Peter's space. He looked up from behind his desk. "Oh good, here you are. What do you have for me?"

"First, of course, an updated spreadsheet. I emailed it to you thirty minutes ago, but I brought a hard copy if you want it."

Peter frowned. "I shouldn't have to remind you I don't have time to go over that kind of stuff. Bottom-line it for me."

Antoinette looked down for a fraction of a second, but recovered immediately and looked Peter in the eyes. “The file is for your records. You may use or dispose of it as you see fit, but here’s what you need to know. People, successful people, aren’t as stupid as we presume.”

She paused after dropping what she thought was a bombshell, then continued, “Outside we’re getting a reputation of simply not being worth the effort, and so we are becoming increasingly reliant on first timers, who most likely will never become second time program recipients. We’re basically chasing more and more companies who don’t want our programs. Bench-marked utilization is shrinking.”

Again, Peter frowned. “I can’t say any of that. Do I need to remind you we’re pitching for a bigger budget? Reframe it for me.”

Antoinette thought, “Well, we graduate a higher proportion of new users out of our program. I guess that’s not a lie. And if we define success as companies having been so aided by us, such that they no longer need us, that could be viewed as good, outstanding even.”

Peter frowned less. “Go on. By the way, we don’t tell lies here, just so you get that straight.”

“Of course not, Peter, that’s not what I meant. Anyway, if the pitch is for a bigger budget, I guess we should focus on the input requirements and not the output results.”

“You catch on, maybe a bit slow, but you do catch on. Throw some numbers at me so I can sound smart.”

Antoinette summarized what was basically a wish-list of marketing plans for the next two years and what the costs would be, then gave what she admitted were the most optimistic possible results. She concluded her spiel, “Unlikely, but still approaching credible. We’d be drawing to an inside straight, but obviously I wouldn’t say that.”

Peter smiled. “But it’s not our money. It does matter whose money you use when you gamble. Say, change of topic, you’re heading to Little Rock?”

“Yes, the Ozark Mountain Region Industrialists Society’s annual meeting. It’s apparently become quite a trade show over the years. Lots of hungry people trying to sell whatever they’ve got, but strictly non-retail engineered products and services type stuff.”

“Wow, that sounds boring. I was half thinking I might tag along and experience one of these events myself.”

“You’re always welcome.”

“But I’ve more important things to do here. You going alone?”

“No, Joe Quinn is coming along. He enjoys meeting and talking with the great unwashed masses. Frankly, a lot of business people can be quite skeptical if not outright hostile to our mission. He’s a good ambassador for us.”

“Your good old Joe. I should sit down with him some time. He can explain to me what it is he does at these events that is so great.”

Antoinette was sensing the conversation was getting a little askew and with hope, subtly changed the topic, “Peter, before you go, I know you have that big meeting shortly. How’s your search for an admin assistant going? Or is Candace putting down roots?”

Peter shook his head slightly, “Candy’s maybe a B-plus, nothing wrong with that, but I’m in an A-plus world, and I tell you, the pool of candidates out there, once you actually meet with what we’re dealing with, is pretty shallow. I’ve even had a couple of interviews where the interviewee so sensed this was out of their league, that they actually called back and removed themselves from consideration. No harm, no foul, I say, but of course I’d never hire anyone like that anyway.”

Candace appeared at the door. “Mister Deputy Director, you really need to head on over. I presume you’re walking. Remember to bring your identifications.”

“Thanks mother.” Peter said cheerfully, “I just need to wrap things up here with Antoinette, before I excuse her.” He turned his gaze back to Antoinette and, while doing so, opened a desk drawer and pulled out a letter-size manila envelope.

Their fingertips touched for a second as he handed her the envelope. She took it and instinctively stepped back. “When you’re in Little Rock, you need to give that to a Brenda Bower. She’s with Schaffer and Metcalf. They’re the law firm down there that typically works with Mindfill. She’ll be at that conference as well. Don’t worry, she’ll find you.”

Antoinette hefted the envelope, which was light, but had some small hard device inside, about a half inch thick. “What is it?”

“Something you don’t need to know about. Just tell her it’s a gift.” Peter thought some more, “It’s a flash drive with a cover letter, in case airport security is curious. You never know.” Peter made sure they had eye contact and added, “Do it as a favor for me, OK?”

Antoinette was aware the agency forbade flash drive use on their computer system, due to security concerns, but chose not to point this out. She rationalized it could be something completely different, photos of a friend’s wedding or something like that, and as such being downloaded from Peter’s home computer. It pays not to ask questions that may sound like a challenge to authority. She responded with a neutral sounding if energetic, “OK.”

“So, we’re done here. No need to hang around. I need to leave in a minute, but don’t hold the elevator for me,” Peter said by way of dismissal.

Peter picked up a small notepad he kept and had been making notations on, along with his cell phone. The phone wouldn’t be permitted at his upcoming meeting. He would surrender it at the security desk when he checked in, but he could bring in the notepad. He’d have to use even that discretely, lest he be seen checking his notes.

As he proceeded through the anteroom, Peter stopped in front of Candace’s desk. He did not make eye contact and instead looked towards the threshold to the hallway. “Candy, I understand you’ve been at the agency for a long time.” He said in a conversational tone, but looking around as if checking to see if anyone was listening.

Candace answered warily, “Why yes, I started two administrations back, my first and only employment.”

Peter looked at her and smiled. It was not a comforting smile. “Well, isn’t that just swell? So, you’ve known Antoinette the whole time she’s been here?”

“Well, yes, and no. You know, we’re all part of staff, a new-hire introduced at some point. Occasionally, I run into her out of the office. We both live in the city. You know what a small town this is.”

“Do tell? I’ve never noticed. So, off topic, just curious, is Antoinette with anyone? If you know what I mean. I’m just thinking, innocently mind you, with her travel schedule and all, it must be difficult to maintain a relationship unless it’s really serious.”

Candace let her guard down a bit, since the topic wasn’t about her, it seemed a safer discussion, “Well, I’m pretty sure she likes men, if that means anything, and of course it shouldn’t.”

“Of course.” Peter’s smile was more genuine if strained, but for just a split second.

“In fact, I happened to have bumped into her this past Saturday. She was with a fellow, just hanging out, someone on staff, as a matter of fact. They certainly seemed comfortable with each other. I’d almost assume they were dating or something.”

“Oh really? Who was this fellow?” As Peter asked this carefully, casually, Candace realized she was being indiscrete.

“I’m sorry, I really shouldn’t say. It doesn’t matter.”

Peter paused. “Should it matter? You tell me.”

“No, it doesn’t.” Candace replied, emphatically, but now somewhat embarrassed by the conversation.

Peter seemed totally at ease, almost preoccupied, as if having already started thinking about something else. “Yes, yes, I’m going now. I’ll be back in maybe ninety minutes.”

As Peter walked to his meeting, he checked text messages. There was nothing that couldn’t wait for later. The sidewalks were crowded. Traffic noise prevailed until he cut into the city-square park, but the park was jammed, too. They were mostly tourists, and some perennial protesters that, he was told, have evolved into fixtures for the tourists.

If only these people realized how amongst them, strolling through the park too, are important officials, on missions vital to their daily lives in countless unseen ways. He was one of them, of course, maybe potentially only one of the few, standing out from the crowd only by being among the better groomed and better dressed. “But we recognize each other,” he whispered to himself, as he nodded and smiled at another well-dressed man, tall with hair greying at the temples, important looking and walking in the opposite direction.

Once past the park, as he checked into the security kiosk, he gave the guard his name, his agency and title, and who he had a meeting with, saying it in a loud tone in case anyone should be listening. He was asked to hand over his identification and for confirmation his driver’s license, then his cell phone. Directed to pass through a magnetometer and turnstile, he was informed it would be a few minutes. In the austere seating area, a few other presumed important guests were waiting, each lost in their own thoughts.

While he waited, Peter pulled out his notepad and went over Antoinette’s figures again, and silently to himself practiced potential phrasing. This would have been much easier if he had brought someone like Antoinette along, but that’s not how it’s done.

His thoughts shifted from Antoinette to Joe, which, surprising himself, angered him immediately. He needed to stay focused on the meeting, and of course, the debriefing he would have with his own director immediately afterwards.

Whether this was simply a chance, and some sort of last chance, flitted through his mind. He suppressed the thought, and instead worried if he should have worn more conservative cufflinks, not these silver dice. Every little thing has some weight, he reminded himself.

He must follow the norms, and he was being given a chance on something and this was not the time to be distracted. His name was called out and a youngish fit man, neat and polished in some sort of blue uniform, arrived to escort Peter to his meeting.

The uniformed man was very polite and deferential. He opened the door for Peter. This was more like it, he thought.

He was led down a short hallway that was inclined slightly upward. Upon reaching their destination, a similarly youngish and fit woman, similarly neat and polished, was seated behind a desk. She was dressed in the female equivalent of the same blue uniform.

She cheerfully repeated Peter's name, and he concurred. She looked at him and then at her computer screen. After a momentary pause, she then directed him past an opening where he caught a glimpse of the famous garden. He entered the office. The door closed behind him. He was in the center of the universe and the big guy actually stood to shake hands. The meeting commenced, and Peter gave it his all.

"How'd it go?" Peter had appeared back at his office a little sooner than Candace expected. Peter stared at her. He did not look happy. "Can you call the Director's office? See if he's ready to see me?"

"Sure," said Candace and noticed Peter was pale while also sweating, "but maybe you should take a quick break. Catch your breath. You want some coffee? Or some water?" She paused. "I have half of my Danish left; you want that?"

Peter seemed to calm a little. "No, no, I'm fine. Just need to gather my thoughts. Please, just call the Director's office, will you?"

Candace did as requested, yet Peter couldn't help but focus on the fact that he had to ask her twice. After a brief discussion and confirmation with the Director's receptionist, Candace related back to Peter that he could meet with the Director in about twenty minutes.

He was feeling slightly better now, but his meeting did not go well, nor did it go poorly. It was the worst thing in Peter's mind; it was ambiguous. He said the right things, was smart and insightful, with the right upbeat tone, and recited quite well the figures Antoinette produced, but he could tell the big guy was not impressed. Why or what he wasn't impressed with remained elusive. They didn't even shake hands when he left, and was simply dismissed.

Peter wondered how he should relate this to the Director, if at all. Was some of it his imagination? He concluded he should focus on the objective elements of the discussion, and presume the big guy was distracted with something else. That would be likely, considering his position and everything. He could mention that, but it might sound as if Peter was making an excuse, a conjecture, no less.

The meeting itself with the Director was uneventful, relaxing even. The Director, known always to be gracious and polite, was a thoroughly old-school patrician, who nevertheless had a reputation for somewhat immoderate retribution on those he saw, but would never mention, as deserving.



He assured Peter that the big guy's moods were often unpredictable, naturally must always be catered to, but as far as he could tell, Peter performed as best as could be expected. The Director added, "We're all in uncomfortable positions nowadays. I suggest you get used to it."

And as is the way with these meetings, at the end the Director tasked Peter to produce something of his own initiative, sufficiently noteworthy, with tangible outcome and close ended, a six-week project, no more than two months, certainly. "Show us what you have." The Director added a quiet addendum almost like a random thought. "Seems internal security will become of concern for the upcoming period."

Peter returned to his office pondering what did the Director mean. "Internal security?" Were there staff about of questionable allegiance? Whose allegiance, and how narrowly defined, foreign agents, criminals, or just the opposition party, and did it matter?

Peter then remembered something the Director once said, a few months earlier, when the newspapers were reporting the indictment of a high-ranking official for lying under oath, "Each of us has to decide for ourselves what the right balance is between being effective and being honest." Peter truly admired the Director.

He asked Candace to call down to human resources for him. She immediately, if rather impertinently, asked if this was to do with filling her present role. Yes, that indeed was on his to-do list, but he responded "No, this has to do with internal security. Some serious issues have cropped up. I need someone to come up to brief me on what I can and cannot do."

Peter knew some of staff belonged to unions and were certain of their positions. It would be like touching a third-rail to think about investigating those people. Likewise, there were critical staff in very much specialized positions. Those you want them to continue doing what they do, whatever they do, uninterrupted and unperturbed.

Also, he realized that the lowest level staff would garner too much sympathy besides not offering any possible, believable security threat. He shouldn't even consider any of the senior-level staff, those he communicated with almost daily, that would be too close to home.

So, after several consultations with human resources, also one that involved a heated discussion with the chief counsel, it was decided a random security review, not unlike random drug testing, would be implemented.

They would bring in a security consultant to review employee files and clearances and identify potential problems. Fortunately, the Director knew and suggested a consulting company who could perform it quickly and quietly, and it was decided ten staff employees would be chosen, neither too high ranking nor too low, no critical positions such as Human Resources, no executive secretaries, and no new hires either, with staff nearing retirement a preference.

Human resources produced the list and, after some internal debate, presented it to Peter asking if he had any desire for additions or deletions before the go-ahead was given. It had all appearances of being random. Peter only vaguely recognized a few names. It needed no further input from him. He found himself quite pleased to see the name Joseph Earl Quinn.

## Chapter 7

It was the middle of a Wednesday morning and Joe Quinn was reviewing a contract for a recent program recipient. It was mostly standard boilerplate, as the agency loathed and discouraged any deviation, but often a company's own counsel would arbitrarily rewrite things, likely he thought to justify their own existence.

Joe's cell phone rang. It was his wife Janet. He found it unusual that she should be calling him during the day, something she rarely did unless it was important. He picked up and said, "Hi Honey, what's up?"

"Hey, maybe weird or not, I just received an email from some outfit called Four-Ess, which apparently stands for Strong Shield Security Services. I looked them up, they're a legitimate appearing consultant, does background checks for security clearances, that kind of stuff, and they're saying that you're being included in some sort of security review study, and want to interview me this week."

Joe thought for a second. "Oh, that. Yeah, somebody mentioned it at last week's staff meeting. It's called Operation Eagle-eyed Eagle; the powers that be trying to figure out how many Reds under the beds or Republicans in the rafters they're dealing with."

He went on "It's supposed to be a random sample. Luck of the draw, so it seems, and apparently, I'm a lucky one. Didn't know they'd be interviewing spouses though, although I guess that makes sense. Promise me you haven't been engaging in espionage. They hate that."

"Not funny Joe. It says here I have a right to refuse to speak with them. I would hope so."

"Well, yeah, technically true. They are just a consultant and as far as it goes, this isn't supposed to be an official review, they're doing a statistical sampling for informational purposes, but as your spousal counsel I'd advise that you cooperate with them. It'll keep things smooth here. We've got nothing to hide, anyway. Right?"

"I think it's intrusive. I'll cooperate, but I'm officially declaring an objection to my spousal counsel, for the record. Nevertheless, I'll confirm a time for the interview with them and we'll see how it goes."

"Great, you're a champ. Let me know, and I'll see you this evening. Love you." After Janet responded in-kind with her hasty, "Love you," Joe disconnected the call and settled back into his contract review. He wondered if this company's counsel was charging its client by the adjective and thought again about going into private practice and doing this sort of work from the other side of the transaction.

Joe didn't need to remind himself that he had made a lot of private sector contacts this last year, tagging along with Antoinette to the trade shows and conferences, but had to remind himself that he was doing good, important work where he was. Thinking about the possibility, he concluded, it's good to have an exit, a lifeboat or a parachute, whatever the correct metaphor is, if needed. It surprised him how long something akin to echoes of that thought lingered in his mind.

Meanwhile, Janet had responded to the email from Four-Ess and arranged a time the next day that they could call to discuss whatever this exercise was about. Their confirmation email had three attached files: one a list of the relevant statutes, the second a resume of Four-Ess itself, and the third a Topics List on areas where security risks were considered higher than normal.

This list mostly had to do with behaviors and even behavior-traits perceived to increase a person's chance of being blackmailed or to engage in illegal behavior. Janet thought it interesting how many traits on the list simply corresponded to what used to be called "sins," likening it akin to a good old-fashioned what-comes-around-goes-around call for retribution.

To that she would include from the list gambling addiction, unsustainable debt, substance abuse, yet not the also listed dangerous hobbies such as sky-diving and scuba-diving. Instead, the latter sounded more like an issue for an insurance underwriter. She thought expensive hobbies were a tantalizing topic, and concluded perhaps they would loop back quickly to unsustainable debt if pursued.

The list continued with unusual or illicit sexual practices or erotic fetishes and Janet presumed what constituted unusual was something constantly needing redefinition and rewriting nowadays. It was probably never satisfactorily settled. She thought a truly shameless person couldn't be blackmailed for any of this. Then she thought to herself simply how boring she and Joe will appear during the interview. That, at least, is a small grace.

Antoinette, having returned from her Little Rock trip, was making preparations for a Kansas City food processors' convention the following week, with Ted as usual doing most of the actual preparatory work and making the travel arrangements. Antoinette had reports to write, phone calls to make, and needed to strategize about achieving her goals.

She had a thought and wondered if Peter would like to attend the food processors' convention. At least she could extend an invitation, as a way of showing she kept him in mind. "Ted, can you get hold of Candace and find out if Peter has any availability for Kansas City? He never keeps his on-line calendar current, at least the one I can access."

Ted quickly responded, "Sorry, is that one request or two? I can get hold of Candace, but she's back in Claims, so won't have access or responsibility for the Deputy-Director's schedule."

"Oh, did he get a replacement? I hadn't heard."

“No, I don’t believe he has. Word in the hallway is that Candace did or didn’t do something that upset the Deputy-Director, and let’s just say she’s lucky to be back where she is and that she didn’t get suspended or even fired, howsoever they could do that quickly I daren’t imagine.”

“Huh, she never seemed the trouble-making type. I guess I’ll have to be careful around her in the future.”

“Nobody ever expects the traitors among us. As they say, don’t suspect your coworkers, report them.”

“What?”

“Never mind. Something I must have picked up from a Human Resources manual. I shouldn’t be trying to better myself.”

Antoinette had learned to ignore some of Ted’s more insightful and droll outbursts. “Be that as it may, Ted, I didn’t see in my email yet the tickets for Kansas City, nor a room confirmation. Can you double check?”

“Will do, madam. And I take it you now don’t want me to contact Candace, but would still like to contact the Deputy-Director? He might take umbrage at my calling him on your behalf.”

“Yes, you’re right. Of course. I’ll call Peter myself.” Antoinette thought a second. “Better yet, I’ll just drop by his office and pop-in.” She was thinking it never hurt to be seen on, coming, or going to the top floor.

She decided to take the elevator, even if it was only one floor up, and when the door opened, there was the Director and one of his assistants, a young fellow who went by Brad or Bradley depending on who you talked to. He nodded to Antoinette with a slight knowing smile, while the Director seemed unusually effusive. “Why, Antoinette isn’t it? Coming to pay us a visit?”

“No, sir.” He was old enough and powerful enough to wholly warrant being differential to. “I’m just stopping in to see Peter, the Deputy-Director, I mean. I’m off to Kansas City next week and he had said something about perhaps attending one of these conferences.”

This seemed to amuse the Director, “Peter mixing with the hoi polloi? I think that is an excellent idea, but only if he gets properly vaccinated.” He chuckled at his own humor. Both Antoinette and Brad or Bradley smiled. The elevator door opened and the Director graciously insisted, “Ladies first.”

As they parted ways, the Director taking a left with Brad or Bradley in tow, while Antoinette took a right. She made it to Peter’s suite, and indeed there was no one sitting behind the receptionist’s desk.

However, there was some angry cussing coming from Peter's office, recognizably from Peter himself, and Antoinette dared to peek in. Peter was standing in front of his desk, while a young man, with a very trendy hair style and attire, and easily surmised to be an information technology technician, was sitting at the desk staring at Peter's computer screen and rapidly typing on the keyboard.

"Well, they can't have just disappeared," said Peter to the technician.

The technician looked askance at Peter, "True. But they certainly could have been erased. I would assume by accident." He said it in a bored and certainly not differential tone, intended to remind Peter that he could easily get work elsewhere, at a dozen other places.

"Don't you have backups or whatever? I thought this system backed everything up every night into some sort of archive. Isn't that what you people do?"

The technician sighed. His tolerance limit for suffering system non-savvy fools was strained. "Not if an individual account doesn't save the files to begin with, and in fact has it set it up to delete immediately any file after being read. That's not a default setting."

"What do you think you are accusing me of?" Peter was getting a little hot again. He obviously wasn't appreciative of the subtleties presented by the technician's attitude.

Antoinette decided to interrupt. "Knock, knock. I was in the neighborhood. I was hoping to extend an invitation to Kansas City next week, food processors convention. Thursday would probably be best day, but I need to start arranging meetings if you wish to attend."

This distracted Peter from accusing the technician of treason, or worse. He cooled immediately. "Thursday? All day?"

"A few hours in KC. You could take an early flight, be back by, say, seven in the evening."

"I'll need to check my calendar." Peter sounded very distracted. Antoinette, being uncharacteristically bold in her next observation, asked, "I noticed Candace wasn't out front. Did you get an acceptable hire?"

Peter scowled, looked over at the technician, who seemed preoccupied doing some sort of diagnostic, but was probably listening. "No, but not that Candy was necessarily an acceptable metric to begin with. Sometimes nothing is better than something or someone you can't trust."

"Dare I ask what happened?" Antoinette continued on her audacious streak, but Peter stopped himself from responding and stared at her briefly.

"It's nothing you need to know. It doesn't directly concern you." The technician coughed, attempting to signal he had finished, and quietly left the two in conversation.

“So, she’s back where she was in Claims?” Antoinette played dumb.

“For the moment. But I believe if you check with her supervisor, you will find her departing for another agency shortly, maybe within the month, depending on arrangements. She had a chat with Human Resources. It will all be handled in the quietest way possible. For the good of the Agency and all that.”

“But nothing to do with these security background checks?” Maybe Antoinette had become too comfortable, too familiar in furthering the inquiry. Peter became short.

“No. Drop it. She wasn’t on the list. As for Kansas City, I’m afraid I have important matters here on Thursday that cannot be rescheduled. In the future, why don’t you try to give me at least two-week’s notice if you are planning to invite me on one of your little trips. OK?” He paused. “Is anyone else going?” He stopped short of adding Joe Quinn.

Antoinette said that in this case she was the only one from the Agency going, but representatives from their sister agencies would be in attendance, “The usual gang.”

“How cozy.” Replied Peter, again restraining himself from asking about the missing Joe.

Antoinette thought it wise to extricate herself. “I don’t know if I’d call it cozy, but anyway, I wanted to make the offer, and will keep in mind your two-week notification needs.”

“Please do.”

“I need to get back to preparing for a call with the regional offices, but might you consider Seattle at the end of next month, a network-systems show? That would be good. I’ll email you the details.”

“Yes, again, please do.” Peter’s tone softened. “And thank you for stopping by.” He paused for a second. “Curious. Do you have any plans for the weekend? There’s an evening outdoor blues concert on Saturday, on the mall. I hear it’s quite good, lots of bands or acts or whatever you call them, and I was planning to go by myself.”

Antoinette eyed him cautiously. “You’re right Peter, I’ve heard it’s pretty good. I think you’ll enjoy it. I thought of going until I got roped into a family thing by my sister. I guess I shouldn’t say it, but she’s always the one arranging these things. We’re having this big family conference call Saturday evening. Two of our grandparents are still alive, but as you can imagine are getting up there, so we’re having this call with them and our parents, and I think two cousins. It’s kind of a big deal.”

“Yes. Family. Of course. I understand completely.” He didn’t sound like he understood.

Antoinette left, dismissing what just happened and trying to not imagine it as more than it was. Peter could certainly be a person of many moods, but no doubt a man in his position is under a lot of pressure, and some leeway should be granted to such people. She felt just a little ashamed, but also relieved about making up that lie about a simple family telephone call. She didn't know she could be so inventive in a pinch.

Upon returning to her office, Ted, citing some weird pop-in visit symmetry, said Joe had stopped by. He wanted to talk to her and asked to meet in person, which Ted thought necessary to emphasize. She dialed Joe's number.

"Quinn. Oh, hey, Antoinette, let's get some coffee. Across the street. My treat. Maybe meet you over there in ten minutes?"

"I'm due on a call. Make it an hour." He agreed. Then she thought it was going to be one of those days of constant interruption and babysitting of staff, which indeed turned out to be the case.

Her call was with the four Regional Recipient-Services Offices, which would likely have been called sales offices if they had been a commercial enterprise. Including Antoinette, seven people were on the call, with each of the six more or less to differing degrees of subtlety complaining about their recently revised sale quotas, but only amongst themselves they called it that.

The consensus was that the new goals were practically unachievable and since nearly a third of their salaries were based upon achieving their goals, there was a feeling this amounted to a cut in pay, something they were promised this recently implemented bonus-driven plan would not do.

Even though it wasn't exactly true, Antoinette said she totally sympathized with their plight, that her income, too, was tied to achieving goals. She omitted instead of working on commission, she was paid a bonus for meeting her goals. Her base salary was secure, if perhaps not her actual job, she thought.

Although it turned out to be mostly a gripe session, one Recipient-Services Specialist, their official title, had a question on this security review. She and her husband had been contacted to be interviewed by some consultant. She asked if others had been. No one else on the call had been contacted.

Antoinette assured her, at least to her understanding, that a small number of staff were selected at random, and it was largely a pro-forma exercise to comply with some greater government initiative. Then she added to the woman for all to hear, "I'm sure you'll be fine." As the meeting wrapped-up, tasks had been assigned, and confirmations were made for the next scheduled teleconference, Antoinette realized she was then the only one on the line. She took a deep sigh. "Time for coffee," she said it to herself, possibly just loud enough for Ted to



hear. Then she added very much to herself, “And to find out what this cloak and dagger business is with Joe.”

She told Ted she was stepping out for a bit. “I’m having coffee with a friend.” The implication was this friend was not an inhabitant of their building, not staff at the agency. No need for Ted to know everything.

Antoinette crossed the street, conveniently jay-walking mid-block with several others, and showed her government identification to the guards at the entrance to the building across the street. This was headquarters to another agency, but they had a coffee shop in the basement, part of a franchise of many similar coffee shops around town.

She took the elevator down one level to where the coffee shop and a small commissary plied their business for government employees only. Antoinette noted the elevator buttons showed there were three additional basement levels. The building was from an era when bomb shelters were a very real factor in planning and design, but she couldn’t imagine what they’d be used for now.

She grabbed a coffee and sat down at a small café-style table. Not many people were at the coffee shop, and there wasn’t much to look at in a basement room anyway, so Antoinette positioned herself to see the elevator door. She could watch the occasional comings and goings of building occupants. Her piping hot coffee cooled in due course. She took a sip.

Antoinette was halfway through her coffee, albeit it was the smallest size they offered, when Joe came out of the elevator. He looked around to the entrance of the coffee shop, then saw Antoinette. He smiled and gave a single wave, walked over, and without ordering coffee, sat down across from her.

He smiled again, “So, you may all wonder why I called you here today,” trying to sound flippant but not quite achieving the goal.

Antoinette tried not to smile. “Well, sort of. Why come over here to purchase over-priced bad-coffee, when I can have perfectly good bad-coffee in my office? Ted excels at bad-coffee. So, I figured the key feature is the away-ness.”

“True, true. Also, if we meet in your office or at my cubicle, or reserved a meeting room, that’s a known fact. No secrets in that building.”

Antoinette took another sip; the remaining coffee was now quickly becoming rancid. “What secrets? We need to be keeping secrets?” She was honestly perplexed.

Joe looked around. He checked to see there was no one else from their agency in the coffee shop. “Let me tell you a funny story. Not ha-ha funny, but odd funny and you’re involved. I

think you need to know. What's going on doesn't feel so right. Unless you already know what it is I'm talking about?"

Her perplexity persisted, "Ah, no? At least I don't think so. Spill the beans, Joe."

"OK, you may or may not be aware that I was one of those lucky staffers selected for the security clearance study, Operation Eagle-eyed Eagle or Dither-dather, whatever it's called. Fun fact, when they told me, they said they were more interested in checking the system, rather than checking up on any individual. Less fun fact, they managed to inform Janet and arrange an interview with her before they got around to telling me. Oops, slip up. That's not supposed to happen in that order. That's what they told me."

"And you're telling me this why?"

"Well, Janet recently had the so-arranged telephone conversation with the consultant, some ex-FBI fellow, Andrew something or other, who's apparently superb at making people comfortable talking about themselves, their jobs, their spouses."

"Well, yeah, that's what they do. They're trained to be good at that."

"And they haven't contacted you?"

"Why would they contact me? Come on Joe, did you slip a secret micro-dot into my purse one day or something? What's this about?"

Joe tapped his fingers on the table. "Oh, apparently Janet and this ever-so-friendly ex-FBI agent were just chatting." He emphasized the word, chatting as if he was quoting. "Talking about this and that, our humble middle-class lifestyle, any boring hobbies, where we vacation, how often I'm away from home on business travel, where I travel to, and somehow the San Diego trip came up, and particularly some mention was made of the evening when you and I watched Westman Sharpshooter in your suite."

"So?" Antoinette felt a little uncomfortable being brought into Janet's chat like that.

"Well, Janet said upon his hearing this, the guy's attitude shifted just the slightest, he became less relaxed sounding, more focused and less casual."

"Apparently, he doesn't like old TV westerns?" She said, trying to sound both jocular and hopeful at the same time.

"I wish it were that. What he did, and Janet is certain of this, was to shift subtly the conversation back to lifestyle questions, but with just a touch of aggression, less benefit-of-a-doubt given that we were if nothing else, simply bland."

“So, not bland?”

“Yep, he starting hinting around about our views on, how does one say this, open marriage, that sort of thing?”

“He sounds kind of pervy.” Antoinette said after pondering it for a second.

“Yeah, Janet said she couldn’t decide if it was him being a little off, or if he was still pursuing a legitimate line of inquiry.” Joe paused. “He actually asked Janet if she thought you and I were having an affair.”

“That’s just gross.” Antoinette paused again. “I don’t mean it that way. I mean him.”

“Yeah, I figure that. Just for the record, Janet told him she didn’t think you and I were or are having an affair, that without a doubt what we did that evening was indeed just watch Westman Sharpshooter, she told him because that’s the kind of guy I am.”

“True. And eat pizza. We also ate pizza.” Antoinette added, helpfully.

“So anyway, I get a call from this fellow, Andrew, the next day, asking me if I have time for a chat, seems he likes that word. Among other things, he wanted to know both your and my positions, what we do, our duties, how we interact professionally, that sort of thing.”

“OK, ostensibly that doesn’t seem too out of line, but I keep reminding myself, you’re more supposed to be the subject of study here, not me.”

Joe lightly slapped the table with his palm. “I know. Then he started asking about you, what I knew about your lifestyle, whether in my opinion you habitually engaged in risky behaviors. He went so far as to ask whether I thought you were a swinger. I didn’t even know people used that phrase anymore. By the way, naturally I said you weren’t.”

“Swinger? OK, that’s really pervy. Who is this guy?” Antoinette was at the very onset of getting upset.

“After their call, Janet found him on one of those professional social media networks. He apparently is who he says he is. Works as an independent consultant. Law degree from a state university. Ten years with the FBI. Has a couple of published articles on assessing security risks.”

“Only ten years?” Her heightened awareness caused Antoinette to pick this nit? She thought to herself.

She went on “Yeah, I hear you. Maybe significant, or not, but literally it’s nothing for us to do anything about.”

Joe continued, both palms down on the tabletop. “Anyway, I finally asked him during our chat how this all relates, any of it, relates to the security clearance study. He said it might show some weakness in the system for identifying unstable personalities, especially if, using me as an example, I am of the type that could be prone to blackmail. He then said that of course it really depends if I would engage in behavior I’d want to keep quiet, but went ahead with anyway.”

Antoinette had finished her coffee and realized that she had crushed the paper cup in her hand. A few residual drops of coffee had dripped from the bottom and were drying on the tabletop.

Joe smiled “Janet has a theory on that, incidentally. Better to be a shameless psychopath, but then you have that whole other issue of being a shameless psychopath, which may not be a good thing. Frankly, I’m beginning to think the entire system is best suited for shameless psychopaths helping shameless psychopaths, but I certainly didn’t tell that to mister FBI-guy.”

“So, where did you two end-up? You’re telling me this for a reason.” Antoinette found herself just slightly angry at Joe, even Janet. He had not picked up on this.

“Well, if he should contact you, and he might, I’m just giving you background on how this all transpired, rightly or not. The Westman Sharpshooter in me is suggesting just tell him the truth and don’t make a big deal about it, because it isn’t.”

“But,” Antoinette added, now sounding just a little peeved, “what if I don’t want anyone to know any of this? Maybe what precipitated this is not a big deal, but maybe having my lifestyle discussed is. It’s also nobody’s business.”

Joe picked up on Antoinette’s simmering anger and spoke carefully, “I was reminded it’s supposed to be a study of the system, looking for weaknesses of the system, not even a review of particular individuals. I was told study subjects are supposed to have anonymity. In your case, you’re not one of the study’s subjects, I am. You’re once removed.”

“And I admit it feels just a bit off to me. That’s why we’re sitting here having this discussion.” Joe stopped when a young woman walked in wearing headphones, got a coffee, and sat at the table next to theirs. The volume on her headphone was sufficient that Antoinette and Joe could hear she was listening to a basic Spanish language course, one of the earlier lessons.

Joe continued, inadvertently, in a slight whisper, “In theory, I’m fine, and you’re surely more fine. We did nothing wrong. But just be careful. What can I say? Forewarned is forearmed.”

“Well, in this case, I’m glad you’re not going to Kansas City. Don’t want to have to explain that to your friend, Andrew.” She looked around. “I guess we should go back to the office separately. Why don’t you wait a few minutes?”

“That seems wise, but cripes, just to point out that now we are sneaking around like we did something wrong.”

Antoinette stood up, and with the back of her hand, lightly touched Joe's cheek. She said, almost wistfully, but with a hint of aggression, "That's how they'll get you, hun." She went back to the office, checking her messages on her phone as she crossed the street.

## Chapter 8

Peter Caine was having one of those days where everything seemed to be falling apart. Maybe, to Peter's mind, a more appropriate analogy would be plumbing stopped up.

Human Resources was not helping. They were a bunch of laggards and sloths, but he couldn't tell them that to their faces, and he realized he would have to continue his deference to these petty little bureaucrats in their petty little fiefdoms of protected civil service. Not that he would say that to them, either.

Once again, a week has gone by and the prospect of fulfilling his assistant position has gone unmet. He could not even get a temporary replacement after Candy returned to her bookkeeping or accounting division, Claims, or wherever she was. Human Resources even seemed to become more hardened to the idea of withholding a replacement, without admitting it of course, after she informed them she was going to another agency.

They, Human Resources, told him the reason she gave for leaving was she thought the situation unsafe in the basement parking area. She claimed a street person apparently had been sleeping at the back of the parking stalls. He startled her when she arrived one morning.

There were questions about whether he had snuck in occasionally, or if the guards had let him sleep in there out of misguided compassion. Regardless, Candace said she would not wait around for the situation to be resolved, and opted for greener pastures, or at least apparently, in her mind, safer pastures.

A shame, thought Peter. Candy, if no pride of the fleet, had performed minimally functionally, and was better than having no one. He hated the task of filing, even computer files that could be moved into or between folders with the flick of a mouse. His opinion was worse on the monotony of forms that had to be filled out, always with most of the same information as previously given, with only minor updates.

Maybe, he thought, he could suggest to the Director that he should lead a small task force with some high-level computer nerd and clerical staff, to see about some sort of mass auto-fill automation on all the agency forms. Certainly most Web-based vendors seem able to do it, so why couldn't this miserable little agency? Maybe he could fire this up as soon as the security audit was done.

And it was almost done. The initial report from Four-Ess had been completed as a draft, and presented to Peter, and of course, the Director. Peter had read the executive summary, which was a mixture of good and bad news, and depending how you wanted to interpret it, giving the answers sought.

Ostensibly, it contained mostly good news. The data from the small sampling of staff had produced a broad consistency between what their original security clearances would have indicated, and what Four-Ess produced in their review of the individuals. Conversely, this might be viewed as less than good news if the desired result was essentially a reportable bland status-quo, and thus arguably to some in Congress, a waste of time and money.

Peter thought to himself in metaphor; no one becomes a renowned physician if everyone you encounter is perfectly healthy. Or just seems perfectly healthy. In stretching his own analogy, he knew deadly diseases could sometimes be subtle, showing few symptoms, and it took the astute practitioner to identify them.

That's why he made an appointment with Human Resources to look at the Four-Ess's consultant investigators' actual detailed notes. The Human Resource bureaucrats were reluctant to give Peter access at first, citing confidentiality agreements and such.

If not secretly glad, he threw around his weight and pushed Doris to come up with a believable rationale for his presence. An independent audit by a senior official sounded like a viable reason. He graciously compromised to the physical security requirements by agreeing to come down to their offices, three levels down, to review the hard copy notes in a secure room.

While he rode the elevator down, he mused about the self-possessed strangeness of the federal bureaucracy, this being his first political appointment. Maybe it was different in the old days; his dad wouldn't have put-up with such people. He smiled, thinking his sister fits right in.

He made it to the Human Resources office, announcing himself as he entered, and only five minutes late from the appointed time. Peter had been in this suite of offices only a couple of times before. With its government austere front desk area, it reminded him of going to the principal's office in high school, at least the public school he attended for his last two years, this after his father decided it would be character building.

Some staff looked up when he announced, "I'm here," and the high school imagery was enhanced. The archaic phrase that passed through his mind was "schoolmarms" in dress, hairstyle, and attitude. All of them. Of course, he would not tell them that to their faces. Peter knew when to turn on the charm around useful-for-the-moment people.

"Doris is to have some files for me." One particularly tired sounding woman, or perhaps she was just suppressing anger, noted to the Deputy Director that the packet was already in the safe room, and pointed him toward an inner doorway with a keypad on the door locking mechanism.

After a couple of beats of them staring at each other, she ambled over, and making sure she was obscuring her keystrokes from the Deputy Director, unlocked the door and stood aside for him to enter. Maybe not angry, but now sounding bored, she recited he could take notes for

himself, but couldn't leave the room with any of the existing documents, and that he had to leave his cell phone or any cameras outside.

Peter handed her his cell phone after switching it off and asked for a legal pad and a pencil. He entered and sat at the small metal table in the center of the room. Besides the table, there were two metal chairs. The windowless room was devoid of any decoration. Just air vents, no art on the walls. A white noise generator somewhere made a hissing noise. Cozy, he thought as he looked around.

Looking at the red-brown accordion envelope, about an inch thick containing various paper and pads of several sizes, separated by colored dividers. This shouldn't take long, he mused. Peter, if anything, was a fast skim-reader. Most documents contain little of interest and these shouldn't be exceptional. The tired-angry-bored woman brought in a yellow legal pad, and two pencils well-sharpened. Peter thanked her effusively, exhibiting his charm.

Peter started going through the files, uncertain what he was looking for.

Mostly they were interview notes, plus in one case copies of receipts for some as-deemed unusually flamboyant purchases for a mere civil servant. The dividers were alphabetized by last name. It wasn't until the fifth that Peter found himself holding the file labelled Quinn, J.E. It took him a second to recognize the name in that form.

After the prior four staff files, Peter had almost hypnotized himself into a stupor. Such was the nature of the information and the apparently boring lives of the staff at this sad little agency. Joe Quinn, he recognized, and his interest piqued. He read this file much more carefully, more than just scanning.

Then he saw in the consultant notes a mentioning of Antoinette, annotated with several handwritten questions. These questions themselves were annotated by another hand, that they were outside of contract scope and thus not to be pursued. Thus left unanswered, these were rather provocative questions about the relationship between Antoinette and subject-Quinn, and the involvement of the subject's wife in the relationship. It concluded by noting that subject-Quinn posed an elevated if not undue extortion risk.

Peter whispered to himself, "Well, that's not good." Repeating the word "undue" in his mind until it lost all meaning, he started writing on the pad the key words that glared at him from the consultant notes. He had a duty to inform the Director about the presence of any questionable staff.

He then tore off his page of notes from the legal pad, folded it, and placed it in his shirt pocket. In some sort of primitive exuberance, Peter then broke the pencil in half. He left it on top of the pad alongside the unused pencil, the pad itself placed neatly next to the accordion folder with all the original contents neatly replaced. All tidy, as he scanned the room for the last time.



He emerged into Human Resource's outer office and thanked its denizens for their help.

One schoolmarm-type, she had introduced herself, but Peter forgot her name, remarked that he didn't seem to take long.

He picked up his cell phone. "That's because it was all so neat and well arranged for my benefit. I couldn't help but be efficient as a result, and I thank you all again." He fought the urge to bow gratuitously.

Peter returned to his office, on the elevator up checking his phone messages, and simply feeling grateful to be away from that Human Resources environment. Anyway, the lower floors seemed to have poorer air circulation, stifling, with leftover smells emanating from break room microwaves, that sort of thing. Too, everything is just a tad grimy. Certainly, they had less sunlight and brightness on the lower levels, yet the workers on those floors seemed to thrive in their drabness, like microbes in fertile soil.

One of Peter's messages particularly caught his eye. It was from his sister, Adel. "Just wanting to see how you're doing and say hi." She never did that. He wondered. Maybe again it's time to have the talk about putting Dad in a care facility. She kept bringing up that he rattled around the old family manse, talking on the phone all day, but obviously fading in sharpness and declining in the power of his contacts, as they too faded in sharpness, number and power.

Putting dad away would be a shame really, especially since no doubt his sister will now consider herself ascending to the position of family grand matriarch of wheeling and dealing within their party in their home state. She, in the past, was at least somewhat deferential to her father. Going forward, she was poised to be intolerable.

The return call could wait. His father was fine for now and Peter decided instead to see if he could get an audience with the Director, or at least get him on the phone.

It was one of the Director's assistants who answered the phone, of course. Peter, knowing full well the Director's schedule, thus in something approaching standard protocol asked, "Is he in? I need only a minute."

He could hear the assistant typing on a keyboard, biding time as if checking, playing to the same protocol. After a moment, the assistant asked if Peter could come immediately. The assistant noted the Director expecting guests shortly, but had a few minutes before they arrived.

Peter was a little miffed. Not knowing who these guests might be, he felt in no position to ask. "On my way. Does the Director wish for me to join him with his guests?"

There was another pause from the assistant. "That won't be necessary, but do come now."

Peter put on his suit coat and almost ran down the hall.

When he got there, the assistant was waiting just outside of the Director's office. He held his index finger to his lips and with his other hand indicated the Director was on the telephone. Then he pointed to and tapped his wrist, as if wearing a wristwatch. Then he held up three fingers to imply the minutes available.

Peter looked in. The Director was sitting behind his desk, and as expected was talking on the telephone. He heard the tail-end and naturally only one side of a conversation. "Yes, legally logical, even consistent with the law, but as you point out, not in fact with practical consistency. I'm afraid you'll have to live with it, but frankly, in this environment, I cannot imagine anyone kicking in the funds to support a challenge. Yes, goodbye."

He looked up at Peter with his usual calm, sincere smile. "Well, Peter, what's the hubbub, my little sorcerer's apprentice?"

Peter's quick jog, with a lag, had caught him just slightly out of breath. "The Four-Ess Report. I was just going through some of the base notes."

The Director didn't change tone or expression. "Yes, overall, a rather disappointing document." He looked accusatively at Peter "We must have been negligent in fully expressing to the consultant the full implicit scope of work."

"Well, at least one of their individual contractors was doing his job. I think I found a throw down." Said Peter, his breath having fully caught up.

The Director paused for only half a beat. "Don't tell me who, of course. I might know the person. I eat beef, but I certainly don't want the cow's name. Not management, I take it?"

"Oh no, regular line staff, fairly senior, so at least we can't be accused of picking on the boys in the mailroom again."

"May I ask what security violation this person committed to pose such a danger to democracy?"

"Overt blackmail risk. He's married but having an intimate affair with another person on staff."

"The blighter. Obviously, an untrustworthy person. Why wasn't this picked up?"

"Well, it was. This information was in the contractor's notes, but I would say when drawing conclusions, the consultant subjectively just sorted him into the wrong bin and it ended up being omitted in the conclusion."

"Good job of quality control there, Peter. Good catch. Trust, but verify, is so cliché, but is so the correct approach." After the praise, the Director added one question. "So, what about the other?"

“The other? After the praise, Peter was basking a bit and briefly his mind wasn’t on topic.”

The Director lost his tone of conviviality, “That another person on staff. You have two to consider here, do you not?”

“Yes, right. I am afraid she’s senior staff.”

“Damn, nothing’s simple, and I certainly don’t want to know.” The Director paused and looked up at Peter, “Handle it. Make sure it reflects well.”

Peter tried to sound confident. “Of course.” Then decided on an additional ad-lib that sounded distinctly not confident, “Consider it done.”

The Director was finished with the discussion and changed topic, distinctly not making eye contact, looking down at some notes in a small diary, “I have some people coming in. Be a good fellow, leave by the side door. Be careful. Don’t be seen or heard. I have to maintain certain confidences. I’m sure you understand.”

Peter did as requested. In the Director’s office, on the back-interior wall, an unmarked door between built-in bookshelves led into a small sub-hallway that connected to a private washroom, an old unused kitchenette, and to the main hallway.

Peter waited in the small sub-hallway until he could hear muted voices of greeting in the Director’s office, then checked to see that the main hallway was clear before returning to his own office. Besides the Director’s steady tenor, one of the other voices certainly was that of Carlton Leakey, who rarely spoke in a low volume. Peter then recalled that Carlton spoke Mandarin, as Carlton translated the Director’s greeting. It sounded as if there were only two other people in the Director’s office, both male and both with only halting command of English.

## Chapter 9

The ever-diligent and reliably intelligent Ted was sitting at his desk one morning, taking care of usual business, on official form, in this case a travel-cost reimbursement request of Antoinette's, when an only slightly flustered Joe Quinn appeared in his doorway.

"Good morning Ted, I take it Antoinette is in Kansas City still?" Joe asked as he peered instinctively into her office.

"Yep, of course, do you need to talk to her?" Ted justifiably felt this was a bit of an intrusion, next he'll have to state some obvious facts about the many ways Joe and Antoinette could directly communicate, not even counting semaphore or telex.

"No Ted, it's you I want to have a word with. I know you're loyal to Antoinette and all that, but could you let me know if something is going on?"

"I'm not sure I know what you mean." Ted absolutely did not know what he meant.

"I thought my attending these conferences was considered beneficial to the overall mission of the agency. Certainly, I've seen the responses to our feedback questionnaires. Most people seem to like the concept of having ready access to a staff lawyer when introduced to our programs."

"Again Joe, clueless here. Why do I have to always remind people I'm not psychic?" Ted said very patiently, for he was a patient man.

"Sorry, maybe you don't know. That upcoming trip to Miami."

"The chandlery and nautical supply conference?" Ted said it haltingly, as if he was selecting from a list of many possible conferences.

"Sure. Is there a reason Antoinette may have nixed my attending?"

Ted paused before responding. "I don't think so. Why would she do that? I didn't hear her say anything. Did she say something to you?"

"I hadn't heard a thing, at least not from Antoinette directly. My manager declined my travel request for Miami, first time she declined one of these requests, and when I asked her about it, she said it had always been an experimental thing, not a given, to bring an attorney along on these marketing recipient development trips. She was more evasive than normal though, which is saying something, and I got the impression it was not her decision."

“It’s not like you have better things to do?” Ted didn’t like how he was being directed in this conversation, how other areas operated within the agency was certainly none of his business.

“That’s the thing, with this ongoing slowdown in recipient cases, even applications, my regular workload was, to phrase it delicately, at a level where I could easily accommodate the time away for these trips, but when I asked my manager if there were other duties I’m now supposed to be taking on instead, she just said, ‘We’re reconsidering our approach,’ and seemed very much inclined to not want me to press further.”

Ted was trying to extricate himself from the conversation. “Well, that is an odd thing. Unlike me, of course, most people would enjoy not being overworked. Maybe in your now-copious spare time you could take some of those terribly interesting and professionally beneficial training courses Human Resources is always pushing? Anyway, don’t you have continuing education requirements as a lawyer? This might be a handy opportunity.”

“Thanks Ted, I don’t think I need help to fill up my days. I’m sure I’ll be fine. All I’m asking is if you hear anything. Now I’m not asking you to spy on anyone or anything like that, but if something is going on that I should know, I’d sure appreciate you dropping a dime.”

Ted smiled. “Slow down there with the trendy slang Bucko. Seriously, sure, if I find out anything that concerns you, I’ll let you know. Meanwhile, I again suggest you call Antoinette. I hadn’t heard of the marketing plans being altered, again, one more time, at least as of this morning, but you never know. For some unfathomable reason, they don’t tell me everything.”

“Thanks Ted, you may be one of the few people around here with integrity. Rather sad if you think about it. Or maybe it’s just me.” Unsettled, Joe almost felt like he was saying a final farewell to Ted, and fought the urge to reach across the desk to shake his hand. He shook off the odd feeling and instead gave him a friendly wave as he left.

Antoinette was in Kansas City at the food processors convention. In the exhibition hall, she was walking the floor, as was the in-house parlance, talking to various vendors. She had finished speaking with the representative of a manufacturer of conveyor belts, who naturally never heard of the agency. Some of their programs seemed to intrigue him, but Antoinette could sense in his tone, any follow-up would likely be a waste of time.

Across the aisle she eyed a company who graphically proclaimed their trade as logistics services. There were three anxious salespersons standing in front of a near-billboard-sized sign portraying trucks, airplanes, and ships with the company logo on their sides. In front of this, on a folding table, there was a bowl of wrapped hard candies. Zeroing in on the candy and thinking she should replenish the sugar in her system, Antoinette would reach for a candy and use the tactic as an opportunity to engage with the salespersons, all fidgeting, scrubbed, and uncomfortable in their coats and ties.

Her cell phone rang. It was Joe Quinn. She did not take the call. He could leave a message or text her if he so chose. Two days prior, Doris from Human Resources had called. She said she was calling all senior staff, informing them that a recent audit revealed irregularities in Joe Quinn's history and he was to be viewed as a security risk.

Doris advised senior staff to minimize contact with him to the extent practical until formal actions can be decided and taken. She advised also that since it was so sensitive, no recorded, written or voicemail records be created discussing or even mentioning this situation, certainly not to Mister Quinn, lest unknown liabilities develop as he had not yet been formally charged with anything. "Out of a surfeit of caution. We must all be cautious. Don't you agree?" said Doris in a tone which dared contradiction. Antoinette agreed, if unhappy about it.

Antoinette's cell phone then toned. She had just received a text message. It was Joe Quinn asking that she call him when free. She crossed the aisle to the logistics company's booth and introduced herself to the three salespersons. Her canned speech on the agency's services and some well-feigned interest in food logistics could keep her occupied for the better part of an hour.

Joe was back in his office, reading a contract and making notes. As Westman Sharpshooter dialogue would have phrased it, "It was quiet. Too quiet."

It was mid-afternoon when his manager, also an attorney, knocked on the door. "Got a minute?"

Joe's manager's first name was Wendy. She was an old-school-type, mostly proper bureaucrat, who has spent the entirety of her professional life at the agency—her first job out of law school.

Wendy's most memorable trait to some was the way she typically dressed in at-least-twenty-year out-of-date business outfits, mostly grey pin-striped skirts with matching jacket, white ruffled blouses with usually a red bowtie, the epitome of a generation past dress-for-success era for that young lady professional entering the workforce for the first time.

One of Joe's colleagues, also under Wendy's management, had posed the idea that when Wendy originally interviewed with the agency, she was wearing just such an outfit, and saw no need to further press her luck. At least, she kept her hairstyle slightly more updated, typically only five-to-ten years out of date.

Arguably, Wendy had one other notable affectation. Most days on her lapel she wore a campaign button for the sitting president, whoever the sitting president was. The lapel button would disappear during campaign season and return after the election, suitably updated as necessary, depending on the winner. Wendy liked to remind the unwary curious that this was in-fact not in violation of the Hatch Act, but worn as a historic accessory and perfectly legal.

Wendy seemed in an odd mood when she entered Joe's office, with a forced smile and breaking off eye contact as soon as she made it. "Sure, I've a minute. What's up?" Joe replied.

She sighed and remained standing, staring out the window behind Joe's desk. It had a view of an adjacent building across an alley, a run-down hotel with tattered drapes covering the windows. Lore in the office had it back in the day of the occasional early morning sighting of unwary hotel guests sleeping in the nude, or drinking their morning coffee with their bathrobe open, but that was many years ago, when apparently more of the staff had both early morning and voyeuristic tendencies.

"So, Joe. You appreciate our business, if we can call this business, has been slowing lately."

"Oh, but I do appreciate it. That's what my travel was all about, if I may drive home a point, supposedly trying to help drum up some new business. I'm told some of the new business targets are very aggressive. Antoinette would tell you it's very much an uphill battle."

"Drop it. That's history. I really don't want to hear about your trips again. I've read your trip reports." She seemed unnecessarily harsh on this point, but then softened and looked him in the eye, "You know you're competent in what you do, maybe a little too competent. Have you ever thought about expanding your horizons?"

He maintained eye contact. "What's this about? Seriously."

"The powers that be are coming down on us, that our group has more lawyers than needed."

"That may be the first time anyone has ever said that in this town. Do you agree with them?"

"Do I agree with them micromanaging us? No, of course not, but there is much less work than our staffing levels would indicate."

"Again, no one ever says that in this town. What are you driving at?"

"Well, laying off people is largely out of the question, as you know. Even then, it's last hired, first fired, so you're safe even if it got to that point."

The hairs on the back of Joe's neck prickled, "Should I be thinking I wouldn't otherwise be safe? I got an excellent rating in my last review."

"Oh, Joe, we all get excellent ratings. That's not the point. Congress is on our tail. We're shrinking and spending money at an increasing rate. They're not only looking at us for waste, but after what went on in the mailroom, some other things, they're seeing us as a bunch of known wastrels, possible criminals..." She paused half a beat, "... and degenerates."

"That makes no sense."

“Does it really have to? Maybe as political posturing for constituents back home, for campaign contributors, even simply as a reward for some friendly journalist looking for an angle. As agencies go, we’re among the slowest buffalo in the herd.” Wendy started staring out the window again, as if the empty building across the alley was a most interesting phenomenon.

She apparently wanted to talk, but hesitantly, as if conflicted on some matter. “Joe, you should have seen the senior staff meeting the other day, but of course, you wouldn’t have been there. Sometimes people on the top floor act like a bunch of spoiled brats.”

“I could probably name one or two.” Joe offered, but Wendy ignored him and went on. “Let’s just say there is a lot of tension between some of the political appointees. Of course, there’s always some, with their constant jockeying, but this was more than I ever recall.”

“Are you about to say when elephants fight, the grass gets trampled?” Joe queried.

Joe’s question broke into Wendy’s near-reverie mood. “No. Not at all. Why would you say that?”

Joe apologized, “Sorry. Poor out-of-context extrapolation. I interrupted you.”

Wendy regained her mental footing. “Well, none of that is important now. What I can share is after some rather bleak and almost threatening prognoses, across several departments, Deputy Director Caine, of all people, came up with a great idea, that actually has a direct impact on us, and on you, if you agree and I trust you will.”

Joe raised his eyebrows. “Which sounds more like ‘I trust you must.’ Please enlighten me.”

For a moment, Wendy glanced at him, and then went back to staring out the window.

“A special-response team. Sort of like a SWAT team, but you know, just civilian with no uniforms or guns or things.” Apparently, she felt she needed to explain that last part.

“To do what?” Joe sensed it was an awful idea, without even knowing what was being proposed.

“To handle sudden process issues, recalcitrant program recipients, non-compliance problems. That sort of thing. It’d really be a great opportunity, for the right person, of course.”

“And who would be that right person?” Joe was sensing he already knew the answer.

Wendy took a breath. “Well, the Deputy Director says he gave it a lot of thought, and I believe him. He’d like a person who knows the programs and policies well, including knowledge of the regulations and the legal nuances of the individual contracts, but also a person with some in-



the-field marketing experience, who could speak well with outsiders, and whom program recipients might perceive as empathetic, in whatever plight they're experiencing. I immediately thought of you and he was very pleased with the suggestion."

Joe pondered a second, "Gee, it really sounds like I'm tailor made for the position, if not the other way around. You know I'm reasonably fluent in Portuguese as well. Did the Deputy Director suggest that as a requirement?"

Wendy looked at Joe. "Don't be absurd. It'd be a trial situation. The goal would be to free-up regular staff for regular work, eventually develop a specialist group to handle the outlier situations, an experienced core group with resilience." She paused. "Joe, it'd solve a lot of our problems. I really think you should give it a try."

"Well, I'll grant you some leeway on what constitutes our problems. For your ears only, I'm not buying it, but what choice do I have?"

"Joe, don't be that way."

"So, if I'm to be heading up a SWAT team, doesn't this need to be formalized? A list of duties and responsibilities? Something like a charter for the group? I'm not even going to ask about any new, hackneyed position title."

"Joe, we'll take it one step at a time. This is the initial dipping of a toe in the water. OK? You'll still report to me."

"Do I even get any people assigned?"

"I think that'd be on an as-needed basis. We'll see how it develops. Let's get you set up first. There's an unused office suite adjacent to Human Resources, an old union office or something, in fact, better space than you have here. Even has a street view and not of that creepy hotel. I'll have the information management group do all the telephone and computer moving stuff ASAP."

"Why move me at all? Especially if I'm still in this group and reporting to you?"

"We feel it'll be less disruptive to the people remaining in the main legal group, doing regular line-work. They can carry on as always. Besides, they'll be busier now, taking on your existing portfolio, as most likely you won't have time. A good learning experience for them. A clean break, good for them, and good for you. It'll give you time to concentrate on what you need to be doing."

"Same with budget? Travel, consultants, office supplies. Through you?"

Wendy gave a short laugh with only a very little humor in it. She was getting impatient. "Actually, office supplies are allocated by floor. Yours will come from the Human Resources closet. Don't prey on their good nature and use too many pencils." She paused. "So we'll give it a try, OK? You can move down on Monday and, in the meantime, start combing over your portfolio and make a note for me on who you think I should assign to what."

She turned to leave. As she crossed the threshold, Wendy, being somewhat upbeat said, "It'll be fine. Do you want the door closed?"

"Please," sounding totally energy-sapped, but with his eyes darting about.

As Wendy walked back to her office, quietly to herself, she whispered, "God, we do eat our own." But she couldn't help but smile to herself at how well she handled it.

## Chapter 10

It is slightly after seven p.m. and about a half hour after sunset, on a balmy October evening. The natural light is waning and two figures sit in the artificial illumination of the signage in front of a sidewalk café. It is Silas and Ted working on a second pitcher of beer, with mostly Silas performing the labor. It's a nice evening, and the café was getting crowded and noisy. Silas is speaking just slightly louder than may be necessary, occasionally using his pipe as a pointer for emphasis. Ted speaks in his normal, articulate, educated, and restrained voice.

"So, he's just given up?" Silas sounded exasperated, sincerely so.

"I wouldn't quite call it that. It's more a withdrawal into a mountain redoubt. He's married, and I think he may have daughters in college or about to go to college, or maybe he breeds standard poodles. Those are long-term monetary requirements."

"Maybe he did the simple calculation about what date his retirement benefits would fully kick-in, once he reaches it, he could jump ship, and in the meantime, he'll look for that best ship to jump to. I predict he's gone before the end of the year, no later than spring. Summer at the latest."

"Have you spoken with him?" Silas carefully topped up his pilsner glass, spilling only a little.

Ted offered him a paper napkin to catch the runoff. "Just sort of. Initially, after his relocation, he called to arrange a meeting with Antoinette a few times. So, technically, we've spoken, but it's not as if I want to be seen talking with him casually, especially with all the Human Resources people prowling around on that floor. I'm told he doesn't ever leave his office until the end of the day."

Silas took a large sip. "Yeah, we've all heard the rumors. Something serious was apparently revealed by that security audit, and there may be others involved, but it's all hush-hush and further rumors have it that arrests may be pending. Has Antoinette said anything to you? He used to tag along on some of her trips. Maybe she heard or saw something, and this audit thing is cover for her. I asked her about him, but she got defensive."

It was Ted's turn to pour more beer into his glass. Naturally, he was more precise, much neater at it than Silas. "No, I think when she heard, she was shocked too. Apparently, all the senior staff were told at some point. And all at the same time. They were to keep it under their hat or hats, as investigations continue, or whatever, but of course it all leaked out pretty quickly throughout the agency. And to give my boss credit, I didn't hear it from her. She was perturbed when people in the regional offices asked her about it."

Silas was staring at the bottom of his glass, then looked at Ted. "Could Antoinette be involved? I mean, under investigation?"

Ted coughed, "Or me? Seriously? No, I'm pretty sure it's an issue on the legal side, not the marketing side. You know they took away his entire contract portfolio? That must mean something. He's supposed to be working on special emergency projects or something of that sort. But they never seem to materialize as being enough of an emergency such that there is work to be done. So, I guess at least he has plenty of time to polish his resume, if he doesn't get hauled off in handcuffs first."

Ted paused a moment. "Silas, maybe you should go visit him downstairs, make up some excuse pertaining to some analysis you're doing, wherever analyses and law cross, I don't know. Seek his wisdom and guidance. Officially, we've never been told to avoid him."

"I'd like to, of course." His reply wasn't convincing. "Cat, curiosity, and all that, but I'm not that close to retirement myself and I'm in no mood to look for employment at another agency. Officially warned or not."

Ted laughed, "Yeah, I maybe could get away with some excuse, the impetuosity of youth and all that, but I'm also a total coward, thank you very much." He then spoke into the night. "Sorry Joe, wherever you are. You're one-hundred percent radioactive, and our lead suits are out being dry-cleaned."

Joe, at that moment, was home cooking dinner, and in a rather good mood, which was unusual recently. Janet had poured him a glass of wine, a cheap merlot, good enough by both of their reckonings. Joe was cooking scallops and the mismatch of a red wine with seafood didn't bother them in the least.

This was a low-key, almost-celebration evening, as Joe had gotten confirmation that afternoon from his attorney, an old friend from law school, of a settlement offer by the agency. This before any lawsuit would be filed. The mere act of having a lawyer and that lawyer requesting contact points within the agency seemed to provoke an surprisingly quick positive response.

It wasn't much monetarily, very little actually, mostly symbolic, but they would also provide the needed explicit declarations to future employers, and he would retain his security clearance. All in all, it was something everyone could live with.

Janet marveled at how quietly and how quickly this came about. All sub-rosa. Apparently, there were some people in the overall hierarchy who had some understanding of what had occurred and thought it an injustice, and if brought to light, would reflect poorly on the agency, something it did not need with the agency's questionable funding future.

The primary stipulation of this settlement was that of their future peaceful cooperation and mostly of his silence. Above all, reminded Joe's lawyer-friend, your situation and eventual deposition must not be considered an additional stain to the agency's reputation.

“Get on with the play, a new act.” Joe thought to himself as he indulged in his second glass of wine. He was in no position to retire immediately. There was no windfall. It did, however, free him to enter into serious discussions with a company whose representatives he had met last year in San Diego.

In a couple of conversations, they said they could use a man just like him on staff, and one of their contacts had called occasionally to see how things were progressing. Janet and he could happily live in San Diego, and he could bear the monthly trips to the east coast as part of the job. The money would be good.

That same evening, Antoinette was in her office working late. It was quiet when everyone was gone. Not that distracted quiet like at home where you’re turning on the washing machine and doing laundry, you can anticipate the ice maker in the refrigerator dropping its occasional ice cubes, and the neighbor’s dog is barking at a delivery man.

This office building after hours didn’t even have a cleaning crew milling about since they did their work early in the morning. Being at the office was actually a refuge for Antoinette, especially after a trip. She could concentrate, if she could concentrate on the needed concerns, but this evening her mind was drifting to the situation with Joe.

Ever since Joe effectively was exiled, Antoinette had experienced bouts of guilt, or something approaching guilt. She sensed their conversation in the coffee shop may have had an element of truth, and Joe’s elements of near-paranoia justified. No one ever approached her specifically, though. There was no hint from anyone that whatever Joe did, or they thought he did, was connected to her.

She turned back to her work, planning for when targets would not be met and excuses would need to be made. Plans must appear to change. Just enough. What plans those should be? What the ‘powers that be’ want is the question. Prescience was a matter of luck in finding the right borrowing, the right steal, and presenting it appropriately on time.

The downside of working late at the office was no one being there to see you working late at the office. So, the next day, casually telling someone, but not complaining, of course, that you worked until ten o’clock in the evening just doesn’t have the same impact as someone accidentally seeing you working or even leaving late. Even the overt laziness of teleconferencing sometimes offered proof of your being on the job at odd times, and your overt devotedness to your management’s mission.

Antoinette considered taking a quick tour of the upper floor. Were any political appointees working late? She could get her ticket punched by stumbling upon someone of high ranking and seeking guidance on some matter, being careful not to ask any blatant pandering question. Luck in finding the right person, maybe even the Director, would be crucial and the right guidance being sought would require some deft thinking. The risks seemed small and manageable. It couldn’t hurt.

Peter Caine was sitting at his desk on the telephone with his sister, Adel. When she called, he had just returned to the office to pick up tickets for the performing arts center he had left sitting on his desk. The performance was the next night. Some silly Victorian operetta that Peter would have loathed to attend, although he accepted the tickets graciously from a consultant.

He had then promised the tickets to a neighbor, a man of a good family, some upward potential and well connected. Unfortunately, he also promised he would have the tickets for him that evening, thus Peter's bothersome return. Then Adel called. He poured a whiskey and listened to what she had to say, tendering as good a mood as he could muster. She had a strong tendency toward hectoring.

He immediately told her he was at the office, working late, and she seemed genuinely surprised.

She had visited their father, calling him by his first name, Evelyn. Peter was pretty sure his sister did that intentionally, not only because it seemed to imply that she and their father were professional colleagues on the same level, unlike Peter, but also because he thought she knew well how much it grated on Peter's sensibilities.

"How's he doing?" Peter, being the dutiful son, asked. He waited as he knew the conversation would devolve into one-sided recriminations about how bad of a son he was.

"He referred to you as Canino yesterday. I hadn't heard that nickname in years."

"Well, yeah, I never liked it. It was never as cute or clever as he thought. It's not like we're even Italian."

"Oh, little Canino, are you now a big wolf?" Adel enjoyed taunting her sibling, but she had called for a reason. "OK, I need you to do one thing. Do you think you can handle one thing? It's something I can't seem to do, otherwise I'd have done it myself by now."

"I'll try. What is it? I'm pretty busy, you know."

"What? In your little sinecure? Mister high-and-mighty center of the universe political appointee? Give me a break. Your present responsibilities entail not screwing up and embarrassing the family, particularly me, and maybe, with luck, putting some padding on your resume, so any future online encyclopedia entry of you is more than a single line note that you were a lawyer."

"Practicing law was OK. I was doing pretty OK at it."

"Bull hockey, Canino. You were one step away from being a Notary Public. Ambulance chasing would have entailed too much work."

“So, what I need you to do now, and by now, I mean soon, is to visit Dad, he still likes you, old-school sexist that he is, you being the only son and all that, and I want you to get his commitment to at least visit some of the assisted care facilities I’ve outlined for him. I’ll send you the list and contacts. He’ll listen to you. At least if he makes a promise to you, his sense of misdirected patrimonial honor may force him to follow through.”

Peter got a little huffy. “Is it really necessary? If he’s still doing fine at home, we could have a caregiver come in as needed. Maid service for cleaning.”

“He’s pretty well chased off all the maid services I’d trust. The house has a lot of valuable antiques. Mom did know what she was doing, at least in that regard. So, you agree. When can we expect you?”

“I’ll check my schedule, and I’ll need to book my own flight. You know they still haven’t back-filled for my administrative assistant, incredibly inefficient bureaucracy I have to deal with here, almost have to hand-hold to get anything done. Of course, the Director will need to be OK with my leaving him potentially in the lurch, even for a short period, so I’ll have to coordinate with him.”

“The Director will be fine without you for a couple of days, little Canino, I assure you. Anyway, he probably talks to Evelyn more than you do. Did you know that? In some ways, that’s part of the problem, if you understood these things.”

“I know what’s going on. Besides, the Director thinks of me as a valuable confidant and advisor.”

“Keep believing as you wish, little Canino. Not to change subjects, let’s just say a little bird asked me, how’s your love life going? And I don’t mean in any gruesome Jungian detail, but are you seeing anyone? Pole-dancers and masseuses don’t count. Remember that housekeeper when we were growing up? You had a big crush on her. What was her name?” Adel enjoyed taunting her sibling.

“Just stop, Adel. Please. Look, I’ll fly out there, maybe tomorrow, to see him the day after tomorrow. I promise, and I’ll call Dad tomorrow, in the morning, when he’s fresh. I leave voicemails, you know, not that he remembers to call me back.”

“Yep, that’s all I’m asking, for you bravely to parachute in for the day, a couple of hours, and be the big hero, even though those of us living here have to deal with him daily. Speaking of which, I have a family to get back to, my family. Nowadays I don’t have enough time, quality time, with the kids, and of course my dear husband and believe it or not, it’s important. I know, probably hard for you to imagine.”

Adel paused, remembering something “Say, wasn’t it Barbara, no Brenda? Wasn’t the housekeeper named Brenda? Some Polish-sounding last name. Come on, Canino, it should be on the tip of your tongue.”

Peter disconnected his sister without saying goodbye. He was seething, and at her amazing ability to so easily get his goat. He’ll visit their father and do as she suggested, not instructed, because it would be the right thing to do. Although he knew Adel would take full credit for getting him to go.

He imagined she thought of him as being a not-so-well-trained poodle. Taunting him with the Canino name and dragging up the memory of Brenda Ciszewski, lovely lady, was totally beyond the pale.

There was an unexpected knock on the door. Antoinette stood in the doorway. “Oh Peter, I’m so glad you’re here. I was hoping you’d be. We’re both here late tonight.”

She caught him off guard as the anger from his call with Adel was ebbing. “Yes, it appears so. Is there some way I can help you, Antoinette?”

She came in and sat in one of his side chairs. Then affecting a broad smile and saying somewhat coyly, “Nothing huge. I’d just like your advice. I’d like to know how to best approach something.”

Peter looked around his office, as if he was almost surprised to find himself there. “Do tell,” he said. He closed his laptop and pushed back his chair slightly, turning more directly to face Antoinette. He took a sip of whiskey, but didn’t offer her a drink.

Antoinette took a quick shallow breath and dove in. “It’s the goals, my metrics for the end of the fiscal year. My group is doing all that reasonably can be expected of them.”

Peter smiled, but it immediately faded. “We expect no less. So, what? I’m sensing you’re not about to seek my advice on what to do when you and your team exceed your goals. How to accept graciously the accolades? How to spend your lush bonus?”

“Well, no. Or is that a yes? Frankly, I now realize my reluctance to acknowledge openly, in the current market, mind you, that not one expert predicted our trajectory may be subpar. Simply put, the original projections within the timeframe have not aged well.” Antoinette was always comfortable speaking in the patois of business-y bureaucracy. “If it comes about, what approach should I use with the Director?”

Peter was lightly tapping a pencil, eraser side down, on a legal pad. Seemingly, he was in deep thought. In a quiet tone, he said, “So, you’re worried about what the Director will do?”



Antoinette thought it was obvious and that she couldn't have been more explicit. "Well, yes. You're his right-hand man. You know how he reacts. His close confidant. What should I do to best prepare myself, if we miss our target? And I'm not saying it's a certainty."

Peter's smile returned. He dropped the pencil on the pad. "You're not certain. Is this a setup, then? Are you trying the old under-sell and over-deliver game on me? I approach the Director with doom and gloom, and you swoop in at the last minute to save the day?"

"No, it's nothing like that." Peter surprised Antoinette with his surfacing hostility, the quick turn of mood.

He drew closer to her, "I shouldn't have to remind you it's me who has say over your program. Had you come to me sooner with this issue, if we had worked a little closer on this, this failure would not have occurred."

Antoinette drew back a little. "Peter, I'm not saying that. It's not a total failure, all full-stop and done. It just may not be one hundred percent by the precise end of the year. I had been optimistic until recently, very recently. Besides, aren't goals just that, goals and not certitude?"

"Antoinette, I think we're now talking at cross purposes here, or maybe you simply don't understand. You're dealing with a communication failure, at the very least." Peter's smile did not have any humor to it. "Of course, you have thought about who you could sacrifice?"

"Sacrifice? No, not really. Gee, it'd almost have to be everyone. The only person who sees everything besides me is Ted, but he's support, a nobody as far as that goes."

"You're a nobody I need to remind you, as far as that goes, but I admire your textbook managerial spunk, straight out of some presentation or on-line management video." Playfulness, if not humor, returned to Peter's voice, "As your manager and thus ultimately responsible, you know I should sacrifice you, lest your failure is my failure. Or...I could save you, maybe?"

Antoinette stared at him, saying not a word. She had certainly achieved her goal of being seen by a higher-up at work that evening. In some oblique way, she had also been given an answer to her question about approaching the Director.

She stood up. With mission accomplished, she made a decision. "Thanks for the offer, Peter. I don't think we're just yet at that point. It really is a hypothetical. Just because I asked where the fire exit is, doesn't mean the building is on fire, necessarily."

Peter looked up at her. He seemed surprised. "Are we done? I didn't think so."

Antoinette moved toward the door. "I'm not feeling comfortable here at the moment. I think it's time for me to go. We can chat further. Tomorrow."

Peter moved his chair back. “We can go down to your office if that’d make you more comfortable. Sometimes people unaccustomed to being here get intimidated on this floor. It’s the lush surroundings. If only the taxpayers knew what their money was buying.” He laughed and stood.

Antoinette wanted to rush from Peter’s office, but controlled herself to move nonchalantly. “No, I think I’m all done in for this evening. I’m going down to my office, get my purse, then I’m out of here. Tomorrow, when we’re both fresh, during regular business hours, we can continue. You can help me then.” With a measured step, she backed through the door and hurried down the hallway. It was not the time to wait for an elevator, or be in the confines of one. Antoinette headed for the stairs.

She had reached the mid-floor landing when Peter caught up with her. Not appearing as the fittest person, his quick and quiet movements were surprising. “I’m afraid tomorrow won’t be good for me. Family commitments; I need to fly back home.” He stepped closer. “But I have a fresh idea, simple and old-fashioned, but no one but us needs to know.”

“What are you talking about?” Antoinette was on high alert. She was almost at the flight or fight decision point, but her treacherous curiosity was telling her to hold up.

“Simple. We change the metrics to a level you’re comfortable with. Backdate a few revised memos, and presto, you’re a hero, exceeding expectations.”

“We can’t do that. People will figure it out.”

“Sure, we can. Changing the memos might even be overkill. No one reads old memos. The Director doesn’t care about old numerical details, and if he doesn’t care, his staff doesn’t care. Certainly, the people who report to you will not complain if they are given a performance bonus they don’t deserve.”

He continued “I think it’s a win-win, and only you and I will know. And before you say it, the auditors don’t even look at this sort of thing, they’re looking at expenditures and for illicit dollar usage. It’s not a lie if no one looks for it and no one sees it, and importantly, it harms no one; no one loses their job.”

Peter seemed very excited about his idea, putting on the heavy sell, and while he was telling Antoinette this, he had softly placed his hands on her shoulders, consciously or not.

As soon as he stopped talking, Antoinette noticed the contact, and brusquely brushed his hands from her shoulders. Peter seemed momentarily surprised, then hurt, but then seemed insulted. “And only you and I will know.”

He leaned forward; any third person would have said he was trying to kiss Antoinette. It would have been a joyless kiss, in a stairway landing over-lit with fluorescent lights, smelling of disinfectant with a slight undertone of cigarette smoke.

She stepped back and down one step, off the landing, almost stumbling. “No.” It echoed in the stairwell, and she rushed down the rest of the flight to her floor. The fire door shut behind her with a heavy metallic sound.

Peter thought about security cameras. He knew he had seen them trained on the area around the elevator doors. None in the stairwells. The stairwells were secure in their insecurity in this instance, although the cameras surely captured his and Antoinette’s movements going into and from the stairs. He wouldn’t follow her down to her office, but certainly needed to have a clarifying talk with her in the morning. Best not to let it go untended, in case she misinterpreted anything.

He returned to his office and used the computer system’s rather ancient meeting coordination software to request that Antoinette have a meeting with him in the morning. He thought he would prioritize it as urgent, but then allowed that the moderate importance setting would set off fewer alarm bells, if it ever came to being reviewed. That he thought that way was unsettling. Should he call her? He could leave a voice mail if she didn’t answer, but that, too, may be misinterpreted if he used a careless tone.

Nine in the morning seemed reasonable for the proposed meeting, and it would give him time to hop on a flight home and not arrive too late. His father only did well in the morning. He would arrive late in the day and visit him the following morning.

Peter sent a note to the Director, and cc’d the assistants that he had to leave to tend to a family emergency the next afternoon. He thought about it and added “concerning my father” which would provide needed explanation, at least to the Director. The Director would, of course, know how to reach him. Before sending, Peter added a bcc to Antoinette. Once sent, he debated if that was a good idea.

“Enough fun this evening. Time to go home.” Peter then thought to himself, almost saying it out loud in a near yawn. What to do about dinner? It was an issue, but then Peter remembered the delicatessen around the corner had prepared meals and he could pick up one. Not cheap, but reasonably good if not left sitting too long.

Antoinette retrieved her purse and hesitated, looking at herself reflected in the darkened window glass. The image played in her mind with some trick of perception. At one instant, she saw herself as small and frail. A moment later she appeared ruddy, chunky and near matronly. Either was disturbing by itself and she took a deep breath. Then she was back, a righteous professional, strong, almost svelte, with an element of lingering youth. That’s the girl she wanted to see.

She palmed her can of pepper spray. You can't be too cautious in this city once the sun goes down. She thought of the well-worn phrase, "If life gives you lemons, make lemonade," and its overt triteness. She reluctantly had used it in a call with the regional office staff just that morning. Her staff, barely more than door-to-door salespersons, are young. There was an outside chance they never had heard the saying before. It seemed fitting in the moment.

Antoinette left her office, locking the door for no particular reason, not the custom in this building, and walked to the elevator bank. It was quiet, no elevators in use, and the building sounded entirely empty, serene even. She rode the elevator to the ground floor and waved to the security guard as she exited the building. It turned out it was a nice evening, after all. She continued and expanded on a previous line of thought and smiled silently, thanking Peter for unintentionally giving her this unwanted and unasked for gift of lemons.

## Chapter 11

Antoinette went home that evening, on the way pondering the potential implications of recent events. Somewhere on her walk, she came upon a plan. It came in a flash, out of whole cloth, neither basting nor finishing required.

She found a prepared meal in the freezer, McDundee's Gluten Free Lasagna, unwrapped it and popped it in the microwave. Eating in silence without really tasting it, and without the usual radio or television background noise, Antoinette finished her meal, threw away the paper container, washed the cutlery, and stepped into her entry foyer.

There was a mirror, full length, in the hallway by the front door. Antoinettes stared at herself and almost child-like tried on different facial expressions. Sincerity with a certain wounded look and with a touch of indignation was the goal. It took some practice, but after a few minutes, she thought she had it down just about right. No ten-thousand hours of practice needed on some things.

Antoinette thought she might call Silas, invite him over, but it was late. Underplaying the drama would probably be the wisest route. One should not be too confident in their hand, and one shouldn't over bet the hand they're playing either. She realized this might be a slow process; the higher in the hierarchy, the more fight and resources they will likely expend protecting themselves.

She knew a little on-line research was needed, but stopped herself at the last second from using her agency-issued laptop. No, can't have that, and wondered if her personal computer or smart-phone would be safe from the prying eye of a subpoena, if it came to that.

Maybe she could casually borrow a neighbor's laptop, claiming some technical fault on her own, but that-too carried risks as simply something unusual to be noted by others, if the right questions by the wrong people were to be asked of the neighbors.

There was a consumer electronics storefront not terribly off Antoinette's usual route to work, and they catered to commuters, so it opened relatively early. She could pop in before work and could afford to be a little late. It was a practice she was already trying to cultivate in her new position.

Considering an upgrade to my personal laptop, which has become gross, would be her tale to the salesperson who first approaches, so she would appreciate some quiet time with the various models. She wanted to imagine the relative comfort of the keyboards, mice, track pads, and displays as if using it from the comfort of her own home.

Antoinette had maybe four questions to research revolving around the term sexual harassment, so she just needed four models to test really, one question for each. It was the equipment

testing and not the research topics that would be dwelled upon if asked. Nothing out of the ordinary would be noticed.

Of course, she would bring a little physical notebook to take notes from each question's response. Ostensibly to the salesperson, she'd be making a little personal treatise on the features and attributes of each of the respective models. No one would be the wiser.

Antoinette would thank the salesperson, but let them know she remained undecided. She would ask if there were any pending sales or discounts, and on which models. Hesitation and the need to think about it would be feigned, and a promise to come back over the weekend if she made a decision.

Arriving at work that morning, she acknowledged to Ted that she was a little late and added that she didn't want to be disturbed. Antoinette sat at her desk, laptop open, looking at but not reading the overnight emails, with only a few more since breakfast. After a bit, Ted noticed she made a brief telephone call. He had a receptionist telephone at his desk that could show which lines were in use, up to six, although Antoinette's line was the only other one tied in.

She then popped out of her office. "I'm going to visit Silas. I'll be right back." Ted's tendency was to be ever curious about pretty much everything anyway, and Antoinette's behavior this morning did nothing to quell that trait. He resisted calling Silas immediately and asking to be put on speakerphone. It was a silly thought and yet he regretted not acting on it.

Antoinette arrived at Silas's cubicle. On one of his monitors was a spreadsheet; on the second screen was what would appear to be a graphical representation, presumably of some data on the spreadsheet. Silas seemed deep in thought, repeatedly changing the number in one particular cell on the spreadsheet, and watching closely how the graph redrew.

She recognized the technique from when she did the same work in an adjacent cubicle. A political appointee or senior staffer would develop a theory, a pet theory on how something should be or should react, trends in the market, propositioning of this or that, and task an analyst to come up with the justification in hard numbers. This was often the approach for dealing with outsiders, such as opposition in Congress, the budget office, campaign contributors, the press, or other such interested parties.

The problem would develop when the numbers, recorded reality as it were, did not match and would not support the theory, and the senior person would simply not accept something from the analyst so unpresentable, so lacking in creativity. Unsaid by the analyst's supervisor, but constantly looming was the concept that such a lack of creativity would reflect poorly on that person's bonus and any future prospects. Sometimes post-hoc justifications were the mainstay of the analyst's life. A win-win, keeping everyone happy. The good old days she thought.

"Morning Silas," said Antoinette, startling him. "Can I seek your opinion on something?"

Silas immediately could tell this question was leading up to something serious. Antoinette was looking a little angry, but also with a touch of hurt in her voice, matching her mixed expression. This was not banter, nor was it to be a casual talk.

“Well yes, of course.” He said, “Do we want to go someplace private?” He stretched his neck, trying to peer over the tops of the cubicles.

Antoinette, since she was standing, scanned around. Someone somewhere, at least not in the next cubicle, was tapping on a keyboard.

“I don’t think that will be necessary. This should be private enough.”

He grabbed a side chair for her. From this position, next to Ted and in front of the monitors, Antoinette could see he had titled the spreadsheet “Hours by functions and tasks. All technical staff.” She had a momentary gladness for where she was now, as opposed to then.

Silas looked around as if checking to see if someone was looking, then took one of her hands and caressed it once, gently. He was worried. “What is it?”

“I had an incident in the stairwell. Not exactly a sexual assault, I guess, but maybe a little. I think more of plain harassment, but I’m not sure.” She looked into Silas’s eyes. “I feel confused and hurt.” She had that expression again.

Silas didn’t know exactly what to say. “What? Just now? Who was it? We should call security.” Silas instantly seemed more upset than Antoinette. He reached for his desk phone. She took the handset from Silas and replaced it in its cradle.

“No. Let me tell you what happened first. See what you think. It was last night. I was working late. One benefit of being senior staff, I guess. I had been on the top floor talking to...” She hesitated. “I shouldn’t tell you. It’d bias your opinion.”

“Why should it bias my opinion?”

“I had a short conversation with one of the political appointees. It went OK. He generally behaved himself, was no creepier than normal.”

“OK, I can now pretty well guess who you’re talking about.”

“I’m not saying who, but anyway, we finished talking, so I started to leave and he followed me.”

“Not that you were both done conversing, and he simply was leaving for the day? Sorry to ask.”

“No. In fact, I decided to take the stairwell back down to my office. Didn’t want to wait for or be in an elevator with him.”

“You were uncomfortable already.”

“Darn right I was. Anyway, I started down the stairs, and he followed me.”

“That’s disturbing.”

She had that look again. “Yes. You don’t know the half of it. When we got to the mid-floor landing, he stopped me.”

“What?” Silas probably said that louder than intended. He again looked over the cubicle wall to see if anyone was about. With an apology, he urged her to continue.

“He tried to kiss me, but I shouted at him, pushed him away, and ran down the rest of the way to my floor and my office. I waited there to make sure he didn’t follow me.”

Silas seemed a little dazed. “Did he touch you physically?”

Antoinette looked away. “Frankly, I don’t recall. I can’t imagine that I would let him.” She paused and sort of glanced at her left shoulder. “I have no bruise marks or anything.”

He spoke slightly louder than necessary again. “Did you call security? Either then or this morning?”

She was more modulated, “I thought about it last night while I waited in my office, but realized it would be his word against mine, and I should add again, he’s a political appointee.”

“That shouldn’t matter.” Silas didn’t even sound convincingly to himself.

Antoinette, wagging her finger, said, “Remember where you work. We’ve all heard the tale of the intern and the manager caught behind the desk. She’s immediately canned, and he goes into retirement without a blemish. It must have happened two decades ago, maybe it’s apocryphal, but I believe that rumor is kept alive intentionally as a cautionary tale.”

Silas was in thought, “I’m trying to remember last year’s workplace harassment training. What they taught us.” He paused, “Probably you should go speak with someone in Human Resources.”

“No, that’s the first thing they’d want. Human Resources works for the Agency, not for the employee; they’re not your friend. I was in the equivalent training, but for senior staff. That’s the one thing I remember.”

“OK, sure. Did they have coffee and donuts in your session?”



Antoinette looked at him quizzically. "Well, yes. Of course. Why do you ask?"

"Just curious. You know, I'm sure I have the slide presentation of my session, mere staff version, in some folder somewhere, probably in some sub-sub-folder. Want me to find it?"

"No," said Antoinette, "I've seen it. It just has slides of filing deadlines, the date of the enabling act, reference website addresses and such, mostly when put all together they imply don't be stupid or we'll be institutionally angry because of the hassle you caused us."

"Well, what are you going to do?" Silas was concerned.

Antoinette had that look back. "I guess I'll need to contact a lawyer first thing, even before I talk to Human Resources. Get those ducks in a row."

Silas smiled slightly. "Well, finding a lawyer in this town ought to be easy enough."

"Yes, but I'll need to find the right lawyer, in the right area of law, with the right experience. Do you know of anyone?"

"No, I guess asking any of the lawyers at the Agency would be fraught with risk. They sure couldn't or wouldn't help Joe."

"Yeah, I was thinking of that." Antoinette suddenly looked chipper. "Thanks Silas, I needed someone to talk to. You've been a lot of help, believe it or not."

"Let's keep it on the q.t. for the time being." Rising to leave, she flashed a brief smile and walked away.

Silas sat there for a couple of minutes, mulling things over. Then he made a call to Ted.

Ted answered quickly "Hello Silas. Weird coincidence, I was about to call you. Let's talk about Antoinette. I know she just talked to you. Right now, she's in her office with the door closed and on the phone, I believe, with some lawyer."

## Chapter 12

There would be no trial. There may or may not have been a lawsuit. There may or may not have been arbitration. The presence of a lawyer was a given, but a certainty for only a few. There would be innuendo, plenty of it.

The Director was in Peter Caine's office. This itself was an unusual thing; people went to see the Director not the other way around. He was pacing back and forth in front of Peter's desk, while Peter remained seated behind the desk, looking just a little like someone watching an unexpectedly gruesome scene in a horror movie.

As usual, the Director's voice was cool and modulated, sounding very calm despite a topic that, to almost anyone's view, would have justified more of an edge. The pacing and for the Director some unusually salty idioms betrayed his otherwise well camouflaged irritation.

He stopped pacing a moment to drive home a point. He smiled gently. "Oh Peter, please don't tell me it's steak when you're serving me turds."

"I'm not lying." Peter showed only as much indignance as he dared. When the Director started cussing, it belied he was livid even if it didn't show. "It was a momentary lapse," repeated Peter, for maybe the fourth time. "I was embarrassed; There wasn't an opportunity to apologize."

"Not the next day?"

"I was about to call her after lunch, apologize that I had misinterpreted the situation, but midday I got a call from what's her name, Doris, in Human Resources. Graciously, she wanted me to know about the rumor circulating. An ugly lie, I told her. I was advised not to have any contact with Antoinette until they figured out the origin and the intent, or even whether criminal charges could be filed."

"Yes. Small weeds do grow quickly when you don't tend to them." The Director paused "But perhaps I'm employing the wrong metaphor. This may be more of a careless ember causing a brush fire." He stopped pacing again and looked down at Peter. "Alas, it's the same old story. History repeating, echoing in the halls of this agency."

"Are you talking about that story of the manager and his intern? Is that even true? I heard it was something akin to a myth." Peter had heard, too, that it was occasionally useful to bring out as a simple cautionary tale, how the Agency responded for its own preservation and knew best whom to sacrifice. Peter thought there could be some hope there.

"Maybe not so apocryphal, Peter, and I'm also referencing a Christmas party, an incident with, go figure the era, some injudicious sybarites on staff revealing a little too much about

themselves, or the unmentionable Halloween party affair where the FBI had to be brought in. That was indeed ugly, and fortunately well buried.”

“I have never heard of those.”

“Years ago, before your time, or mine even. It’s why this agency doesn’t do official parties anymore. Although frankly, I thought it even odd that there once were Halloween parties here, with costumes and that sort of nonsense. Grownups acting like adolescents or worse, in a government building no less. Amazing. Which brings us to our current dilemma.”

“What do you mean?”

“How should this agency respond? Wait until it becomes an open sore or nip it in the bud? You, of course, would not be aware of the outcome of those various other incidents.”

“Well, the intern was fired.” Peter said with something approaching myopic optimism.

“And the manager retired. Note that please.” The Director hadn’t been amused by Peter’s comment. “The intern, well from what I understand, she was indeed powerless and yet made some idle threats that could still prove to be an embarrassment to the agency. Above all, embarrassments are to be removed.”

The Director stopped and let his anger flare for one second. “Have you lost your mind?” He then reverted to his even tone. “As for our Director of Program Recipient Development, she’s relatively new and useful, maybe elevated a little out of her league, but has potential and certainly, and I stress this, she is not in an equivalent situation to the intern.”

The Director continued “Simply Mister Caine, we do not do that to our senior staff, unless they’ve outright broken a law or refuse to cooperate with us. I’ve had occasion to speak with Antoinette. She’s bright and, above all, cooperative. It’s you, Mister Caine, who has become the embarrassment.”

Peter began to say something, but the Director raised his index finger, wagging it one time. “Tut-tut, Mister Caine. Don’t even suggest that it’s unfair, or that you’re wholly innocent, or that, please save me, it’s her word against yours. That’s not the point now, is it?”

Peter averted his eyes. “No, I see that it’s not.”

The Director’s tone became kindly if not outright fatherly. “Well, good for you. I think you’ll find we’ve come up with a very tidy solution. I spoke with your sister last night. By the way, your father knows nothing of this. Anyway, Adel offered a suggestion that I think is just grand. When you come to the office tomorrow morning, and I suggest you come early, check the top far right drawer of your desk. In it, you will find a medium caliber revolver with a single bullet loaded. You’ll know the right thing to do.”

Peter's eyes darted back and forth between the Director and the just-referenced desk drawer. He shook his head as if he didn't hear correctly. "What?"

The Director's tone went cold. "Just kidding. However, your resignation letter will be expected by COB tomorrow, effective immediately."

"Yes, of course." Deflated, he looked up. "But what am I supposed to do?"

The Director sounded rather bored with the conversation. "I'm not your guidance counselor, Mister Caine. Lie low for a couple of years, keep your nose clean. You're supposed to be a lawyer, go practice law, or tap some of your cushy Washington contacts and get a sinecure for the immediate term."

"Such that we're on this topic." The Director shifted back to sounding almost kindly. "Your sister suggested maybe in a year or two you should try a run for a local office, back home, mayor or city council, no shame in starting off-Broadway, as it were, or even for some, remaining there. I'm sure she'll be most happy to let you ride her coattails."

Peter ignored the Director's final comment, which he was sure was intentionally provocative. "What about Antoinette?"

"Not really your problem at this point. She's a practical person, and as I said, a cooperative person. I'm sure once she understands the situation, and with you no longer around, we can come to accommodation that we all happily can live with. As you know Peter, my concern has always been seeking an outcome for the good of the Agency. I believe this will also show a sign to staff that we've moved beyond the era of the capriciously fired intern."

"Now, if you will excuse me. I need to leave, get home, and change. This evening, the wife and I are going to the Warren Harding Theater for the Performing Arts. For some unfathomable reason, Carol came into a couple of tickets to this tribute of some sort, to some theater performer that I have never heard of, but is supposed to be quite famous. Musicals I've never heard of, that sort of thing. I guess I'll see or simply fall asleep trying," the Director concluded, sounding quite upbeat.

As the Director started to leave, Peter stood, and they shook hands. He sounded very sincere. "Well, I hope you have a good time at the show, Sir. I hear the Harding has wonderful acoustics."

"Goodbye Peter."

Peter sat back at his desk. He wanted to call someone who'd understand, but didn't know who to call. He couldn't say the truth to anyone, and would have to develop some sort of backstory to justify his change in circumstances, wherever he'd be going. Change is good, everyone says,

but his departure from this agency would appear a little abrupt and a little soon for the normal rotation.

He thought about his father. Maybe Adel would see the practicality and concur. He could move back home and be his father's caretaker. Dad was indeed waning, if not exactly quickly. In a couple of years... Who knows?

By doing that, others may think of him as a good son, and with the proper publicity he could leverage that whole angle, plus take a stab at reviving the legal practice, ambulance chaser or not, and maybe being His Honor Mister Mayor for a couple of years would actually put him on a better track.

He pictured how he could walk down main street, and people would pay him tribute. He could give speeches on July Fourth at the beginning of the town parade. Have confidences with the Police Chief about who's doing what and officiate at town hall meetings. He'd certainly be the most eligible bachelor in town.

Washington was a big letdown, anyway. What's the use of being a political appointee, if you just end up just being another cog in a machine of a million cogs? And half of those cogs are just fighting the other half. No wonder nothing other than spending budgets ever gets done.

But this is where the money is, lots of it, not in government, but from the government and parceled out as procurement to the friendliest of consultants and providers of services, plus the occasional weapon of war, or other material good.

Peter reminded himself that certainly he had contacts, almost plenty of them, and he needed to call them immediately. He could tell them the agency just didn't suit him, that he felt pigeon-holed or something. Above all, he had to be positive, saying nothing negative about anyone, but maybe rail against the system as a whole, something that he'd want to change someday.

First thing first, he needed to type his resignation letter. He would thank the Director for the opportunity provided and how happy he was to serve at the Agency. He'd say how much he enjoyed working with staff and how he felt actual progress had been made in fulfilling the Agency's mission. That famous movie line about not being able to handle the truth came to mind. But none of this was true.

Peter reached into a desk drawer, not where the pistol would have been, but where he kept the bourbon. The bottle was half empty. By good fortune, and math, it was also half full. Enough. He decided a couple of shots' worth would allow a certain loosening for a better drafting of the letter. It worked as far as it goes, and anyway, he could review it in the morning before sending.

An unfortunate side effect of the whiskey was an occasional drifting imagination as he composed the letter. He caught himself thinking, for just a moment, of Antoinette and would stop as his anger flared for just a moment. Indeed and obviously, she had taken him for a

chump. She had set him up. That was the only explanation. His failing, his flaw, was in not immediately seeing her for what she was, and she had gotten away with it.

After his third shot, Peter felt ready to talk, to share the truth, so he called his old friend Carlton. Fortune would have it that Carlton did not pick up, for whatever reason.

## Chapter 13

The Greater Southwest Rotating Equipment and Tubular Goods Symposium is an annual event that takes place in Houston in the autumn after the worst of summer heat has passed. Of long standing and having evolved and grown over the years, acres of pasture lands near Houston's ship channel are turned over for the weeks of erecting and afterwards disassembling huge air-conditioned tents. This includes the bringing in and afterwards removing of massive, if not outright gaudy displays of industrial equipment. Plus, of course, there is the symposium itself. It encompasses four core days of presenting that equipment for sale, while also conducting a pastiche of technical talks in the attendant engineering and scientific disciplines.

As they advertise the show in the trade publications, professional society mailing lists, and even on television locally, everyone willing to pay the admittance fee is welcome. Typically, tens of thousands are willing. Relatively few will attend the technical talks and even fewer milling about the tents may be serious buyers of the equipment. The keen salespersons attending the displays having become attuned in separating the casual onlooker from the serious prospect.

The larger group will end up being offered some clever corporate-branded tchotchke and some candy, or maybe a logo-branded tote bag. The smaller group gets invited to ornate luncheons or dinners. Having evolved with the general culture over the years, vendors using trade show models, if not completely disappeared, had diminished to a few, usually installed by representatives from overseas.

Similarly, the rumors of the hiring of hookers for potential clients have dropped dramatically from the old days. If no longer totally a boy's club, gender parity was still far from achieved. Serious professional women walking the floor remained an outlier statistic.

Antoinette stepped into yet another large tent. Again, chilly compared to outside, the air conditioners roaring on in a never-ending cycle, trying with moderate success to keep the ever-present almost oppressive humidity at bay. In keeping with the air itself, the carpeting had a certain moist feel to it. The underlying gravel gave more than it should have. Next time, Antoinette thought to herself, I'll wear more practical shoes.

This tent featured the manufacturers of rotating equipment, some of it quite large, and indeed hulking. Special temporary foundations had been erected for these loads. The costs must surely have been justified by the business this show generated. Reportedly, some years it was quite the gold mine, and others a big bust. Projections in the media had this year as being at neither extreme.

As her eyes adjusted to the glare of an over-lit tent, Antoinette checked her phone for text-messages, calls, and emails. One is never away from the office nowadays; she was learning to manage when to put away the phone and focus of the vendors, the salesmen, the prospects.

“Antoinette.” She looked around at the displays, all vying for her attention. Catching her eye in the mid-distance was a man in a dark suit waving at her. He was standing in front of some sort of enormous machine. It appeared two of his colleagues, dressed identically, were standing adjacent.

She walked closer, finally realizing it was Joe. He had left the agency the previous spring, and by most of the staff there was a general indistinct feeling of good riddance when he left. She can't say she ever felt that way, knowing what was kept quiet about what was called his security issue. She knew she could have reached out to him, but didn't. It would have just dragged her down to no good purpose.

Yet here he was. And he didn't seem mad at her at all. Maybe he was the bigger person, or a realist, or just a coward. She flashed on some corny dialogue from *Westman Sharpshooter*, which inexplicably must have buried itself into her subconscious. She honestly smiled. “Joe, it's good to see you. You look well, healthier, in fact. Nice tan. I hope you're not angry at me.”

Joe laughed, just slightly uncomfortably. He then introduced his two coworkers. Two cyphers whose name Antoinette immediately forgot. A shame that business cards went out of style.

“So, not to state the obvious. What are you doing here?” she asked him.

He laughed, more comfortably this time. “In case you didn't know, the company I work for now makes rotating equipment and some other things, but mostly rotating equipment. Since this is a rotating equipment and tubular goods show, here we are.”

He pointed to the massive piece of machinery behind him. It looked like the amalgamation of an aircraft engine and a military bunker. “And this little beauty is the Vulcan Six-Thousand. The pride of our fleet as it were.” He looked at his two companions. “Correct guys?” They both nodded and practiced their smiles. “My employer graciously has allowed me to accompany these good fellows to this show as a sort of training for all of us.”

He looked at Antoinette. “So, sticking to the same marketing blitz? I guess you made your goals after all. Kudos.” It was the same old Joe, but not. Perhaps not unexpectedly, there was missing a degree of boyish doggedness Joe had when at the agency. Maybe Antoinette was imaging it, but at the least the timing of his casual eye contact was not as it had been.

She spoke up, indifferent to his two mates watching and listening. “No Joe, this is sort of my last hurrah, almost a farewell tour. You may not have heard, but I've been promoted into a more general supervisory position. The Director declared that I've ascended. Lucky me. Believe it or not, Ted is to be my replacement. He's around in one of these tents. I'm supposed to be showing him the ropes.”



The two coworkers either became bored, or remembering why they were there, started chatting with other potential customers and whatever casual people walked by. Joe cracked a slight smile. "Ted? I guess. I mean, why not? I almost said Young Ted, but I guess he's shown himself, and isn't the same old wise-cracker of not so long ago." He stopped. "At least to your eyes?"

"He'll do fine," asserted Antoinette, "and I'm showing him the ropes. What can I say?"

"Nothing to say." Joe was feeling like he should get back to business and let Antoinette get back to hers. He meant for it to sound funny. "And you don't need to give us your agency spiel. I probably know most of these government programs better than you." He failed and felt bad.

"Say, Antoinette, just some honest advice, when you go ply your trade at this show, remember that a lot of these vendors are naturally from around here, Texas, Oklahoma, Louisiana, and such. Don't come out swinging, like you're their big savior from the big government. Not all, but a lot of these folks will think of you as a tax-sucking parasite, like the entire government. Humility in who you are and what you can do can go a long way. This is not the place to over-promise and under-deliver. People outside of the District have memories."

Antoinette nodded and lingered, apparently not quite taking the hint that she should go ply her trade. Joe finally added, "So, how's Silas doing?"

Antoinette looked away. "Oh, you know, same old Silas. We're seeing each other again, more regularly at least." She chuckled. "I'm afraid he's going to pop the question one of these days, and I'm afraid I won't know how to answer."

"Yeah, promotions, suitors, must be hell." This sounding more like the old Joe.

He glanced past Antoinette to a group of four suited figures walking together from the far end of the hall.

He kept looking past her, and his jaw literally dropped, but just for a second, almost amazed as the group came into focus. "Speaking of hell, or should I say the devil, and I was just about to ask about an ugly rumor, but apparently here it comes."

He inconspicuously pointed, and Antoinette glanced behind her. It was Peter Caine along with Carlton Leakey and two of his Mindfill near-clones. They were in their own little bubble, pointing at booths and equipment to each other with learned incomprehension, more there to be seen than to see anything.

"At least they're not on horseback." Joe surmised. He turned around to look at his company's booth and display. "Do you want to get out of here unseen? Duck around the Vulcan Six-Thousand and Antoinette..." he paused mid-sentence.

“What?” she finally said impatiently.

“Grab a couple of tchotchkes, one for you and one for Ted, tiny foam rubber Vulcan Six-Thousands. It’ll make your trip down here totally worthwhile.”

She decided to not respond, but took his advice about ducking out behind the hulking machine. She was too late.

Bursting out of his bubble, Peter Caine spied Antoinette. He stopped in his tracks and turned beet red for half a beat. Then he went pale and smiled magnificently. He got his three fellows’ attention, said something, and pointed over to where Antoinette and Joe were standing.

Carlton said a few words and the other three laughed at the quip, even Peter, if less so.

To Joe, the hall was suddenly like the main street of a western town. Peter and his associates were gunslingers menacing the town folk. He looked at Antoinette. She refused to run. He could see her fingernails digging into the palms of her hands. Joe looked around for security personnel, just in case. The two salesmen with his firm must have gone on break. It shouldn’t have been as silent as it was. He was expecting a tumbleweed to blow down the hall.

As they approached, it was Carlton who spoke first. Joe could see from their name tags that indeed, they all were with Mindfill, even Peter Caine. He recalled Mindfill as being some consultancy group the agency occasionally used, but never saw or heard about useful output. Carlton, ignoring Antoinette, offered his and shook Joe’s hand.

“Carlton Leakey. We’re with Mindfill, the world’s leading consultancy group. I understand you’re Joseph Quinn. We love your company. Magnificent products.”

Joe cautiously looked at Carlton, then at Peter, and back to Carlton. “Thank you, and of course I’m aware of the Mindfill consultancy group. Who isn’t? But are you looking for business at a trade show? I would think you’d do better in the executive offices, rather than down on the floor with a sales force.”

Carlton chuckled, “Sometimes it’s good to walk the factory floor, and even visit the showrooms and see the customers interacting with some of these most fascinating products.”

“Maybe you should go out into the field sometime, see some of these products installed and operating. They’re quite impressive from a functional perspective, too,” Joe said.

“So, this is the Vulcan Six-Thousand,” interjected Peter Caine, providing thoughtful commentary on the piece of machinery they were all standing by, nearly beneath.

Joe was thinking it certainly proved Peter Caine could read, since its name was painted on the side of the machine in large block letters, as well as on the descriptive placard. Well, of course, attorneys are supposed to know how to read, Joe concluded.

He stayed calm. Business sometimes involves dealing with people who are less than angels. There are times and places to pick fights. "Why yes Peter, you know your Vulcans. And I see you're with Mindfill now." Joe nodding politely to Carlton and his shadowing two. "I'm thinking they're very fortunate to have snagged you. I'm thinking it might be an excellent fit."

Peter ignored Joe, and then rather histrionically feigned surprise to see Antoinette standing right there. He mustered one word. "Remarkable." Then he looked back at Joe and again at Antoinette. He was trying to smile, but it was more a baring of teeth. "Are you two always together? A matched set?"

Ted suddenly popped up, but it must only have appeared sudden to those few watching intently at the increasingly dramatic encounter going on in front of the Vulcan Six-Thousand. Ted stepped between Peter and Antoinette, holding a large beverage container in each hand. "Look, Antoinette, one vendor has complimentary iced cappuccinos in insulated mugs. I brought you one. Before you ask, it's Osprey Pipe in booth twenty-seven, and with a thank you very much, they politely declined from using us, said we didn't fit their needs. Go figure."

He turned and looked through half lowered eyelids, sounding very bored he addressed Peter. "Oh, hello Mister Caine. What are you doing here?"

Peter looked at Antoinette, but spoke to Ted, "Get out of my way, you nobody." Carlton looked pained at Peter's comment and shook his head at his two associates.

Joe stepped between Ted and Peter. He was holding his hands up in a peace-making gesture. "There's no need for name calling. Peter, I think you should move on. I don't want to have to get security involved." He was looking at the other Mindfill people, for them to do something, anything.

Peter laughed. "Well, that's a hoot. You, of all people, worried about security. What I don't understand is you two are still together. I figured maybe she was just practicing with you, a comfortable subordinate, and when she got a chance reel in a bigger fish..." he looked at Antoinette, "... so she could gut him and win a trophy for her efforts."

Peter was working himself into a sweat. He stepped toward Joe and spoke through closed teeth, "Doesn't your wife object to having to share her bed with you two?"

Joe's peace gesture turned into fists. "Enough," he said, fighting himself from laying a first punch. He couldn't imagine giving Peter the satisfaction of seeing him charged with assault. In Texas, no less. "Did it, has it ever occurred to you, has it ever possibly occurred to you that

Antoinette and I are not romantically involved? That she has a steady boyfriend. You know Silas, right? Can you possibly wrap your head around that truth?"

Peter stepped back. "Silas? Silas, the analyst guy? No." Had Peter been a computer, his look would have conveyed, 'That does not compute.'

Ted, still holding the two large cappuccinos, decided it was his time to offer an opinion on the matter and stepped in. "Why? Because he's a nobody too? What I don't understand, Mister Caine, is after your harassment of Antoinette — everyone knows why you left — you'd think there would have been a restraining order against you, or does that not hold once you cross state boundaries?"

Peter Caine let out a spitting near-yelp, like a trapped animal. He was white with rage, but all these people were standing around staring at him and he didn't know what to do. Once again, he was intentionally embarrassed by Antoinette and her lies, and now she had carefully and craftily set it up so even the Mindfill people will have doubts about him. Nobody would want to work with a public disgrace.

He could see the security personnel in their matching navy blue jackets. They had gathered, then spread around the perimeter of the booth, discussing to each other over their walkie-talkie when best to intercede.

No grand *Gotterdammerung*-type gesture could be affected. Peter didn't even carry a pocket knife. So, he elected instead for the handy, mundane, and petty, and grabbed the two cappuccinos from Ted, and popping off the lids, flung one into Antoinette's face and the other was strewn between Joe and Ted. He regretted that Antoinette's boyfriend Silas wasn't there, too.

He laughed when the two security guards tackled him and pinned back his arms. With satisfaction, he could see the sticky beverage dripping off of Joe and Ted, but then turned his head to the limit that one security guard would let him and looked at Antoinette.

She had taken the brunt of the beverage, true, but beyond her face, neck, blouse and hair being coated, she seemed hurt. Not physically hurt, but with a profound sadness, she surveyed herself, then Ted, then Joe. The carpet was a mess and there was even spatter on the Vulcan Six-thousand, though that would easily wash off.

She looked at Peter Caine. The security men were holding him there, unsure and unused to dealing with aristocratic hooligans in thousand dollar suits. He looked honestly pained, and possibly for the first time she had ever seen him looking totally sane and himself, not covered with the equivalent of makeup or a mask.

It was mostly quiet where they stood, just breathing. Softly in the distance, there was a band playing cowboy music, barely discernable. Peter began to say something strictly to Antoinette, but then the air conditioners kicked in, reverting to their usual drone.

Antoinette could barely make out what he said. She was certain he said simply, “What a strange business we are in.” It was almost in the form of a question, and then the security personnel lead him away, with the Mindfill people following in their wake.

Some cleaning personnel, those ever-efficient Texans lurking in the background, immediately approached with paper towels for Antoinette, Ted, and Joe. Joe’s coworkers suggested they retreat to the washrooms and clean up the best they could. An emergency medic appeared and asked if any of them were hurt. They each said no.

## Epilogue

Reader. Your attention please. I'll defer from some obsequious "Dear" solicitation; commendably you've read through this rather short if sordid tale. I, Peter Caine, have now been induced by the author to address you directly, this literary trick having already been employed similarly to compel that near-non-entity Ted in the prologue. Fortunately for you, at least you won't be subjected to Ted's self-satisfied half-quip any further.

I would remind you, however, of Ted's original exposition on developing any empathy toward characters that otherwise, perhaps, deserve little to none. Particularly you may think of me. I come across as the bad guy in this tale, do I not? Is that truly so?

Amongst the primary characters, I am most the victim of circumstance, as you no doubt must agree. At worst, I could be accused of a certain impetuosity, but who hasn't exhibited that at least at one time or another?

It is those others who knowingly and yet flippantly do what they do which is wrong, who deserve the greater approbation, the lesser sympathy. Note how each is flawed in their own way, perhaps in many ways, yet paying a small price while gaining greatly.

The first word in the title of this story is a singular noun, and I ask you, do not assume. If you do, it is I who should express anger at the shallowness of your thoughts, even at the risk of increasing your poor opinion of me. But that will not occur, and I will not even attempt to seek redemption in your eyes. For as you can see, the story is over.