

Cal stared out of the windshield at the beautiful panorama in front of him. Today was drizzly and calm, and the dampness intensified the greens and golds and reds of the tree-lined cliff top. The surface of the lake was dulled by the moisture in the air, the milky gray of freshly poured cement. He rolled down the window and let the humidity pour in.

It wasn't the first time he had come to this scenic overlook. Moon Lake was smaller, more remote, less traveled than Shaky Lake. The gravel parking lot was hidden from the road by a stand of poplars. Hidden during the summer, anyway, when the trees were thick with leaves. Beth didn't know that he came here in the winter. He wondered if it was time for him to tell her. To tell her everything about the past five years. *That would take far too long*, he thought. *There's no time left.*

But still. He needed her if he was to survive. If Caitlin was to survive.

The whole thing with Orion had felt *off* somehow, right from the day he was approached at the baseball game. Too convenient.

"Oh, man, I haven't seen you in forever!" The stranger had leaned in for a back-clapping hug and then held Cal at arm's length, a huge grin on his face. The concrete hallway was deserted, and the two men stood just outside the empty, echoing restroom area. "How's the family?" asked the man.

At first Cal assumed that he *did* know this guy, that the beer he'd been drinking was just giving him memory fog. "We're good," he had said, bobbing his head and smiling. But as he smiled back at the guy, he grew more certain that they had never met before, that it wasn't the beer. "You know," said Cal, "this is probably just my terrible memory, but — " He tilted his head and squinted at the guy. "I'm not sure we've met before. I think you may have me mistaken for someone else."

"Cal Winkley, right?" said the man. "Jason Pitt." He gestured to himself in a ta-da motion. "From school?" His smile fell.

Cal had gone to Northwestern for business school, but that had been fifteen years ago. Caitlin had just been born and Beth was teaching on the South side. They had lived in a scruffy apartment near campus and didn't have much time or energy for socializing.

"We had a bunch of classes together." The man began to tick off names of business classes on his fingers. "Market Systems, Advanced Econ with that weird professor. Or was that the Finance professor who was so weird?" He looked eagerly at Cal. "Shit, man, we were in the same graduating class. Jason Pitt."

Cal decided to just run with it. His time at Northwestern was a blur of intense schoolwork, side jobs, and a newborn baby. The guy clearly knew him. "Yeah, now I'm remembering. Jason.

Right.” He could hear the trill of home run music and sound of thousands of fans shouting and whooping. He looked past the man’s shoulder at a cluster of college kids who had come tumbling into the hallway from their seats to hit the beer stand.

“Hey, let me get you a beer,” said Jason Pitt.

“I should probably —” said Cal. His cousins were drunk and rowdy back in the stands and probably hadn’t even noticed he was gone. The thought of getting puked on by a drunk relative was not appealing, and he couldn’t come up with a good excuse *not* to take this guy up on his offer. These days, things were way too tight for him, financially, to say no to free stuff.

“Sure,” he said to Jason Pitt. “I have time for a quick beer. Then I should —”

“Great,” said the man, throwing his arm around Cal’s shoulder and leading him in the opposite direction of the college kids. “There’s another beer stand just a few gates down. Microbrews. Not many people know it’s there. You like IPAs?”

While they sipped their beers, Cal told the man how he taught business at a tech college just outside the city. How Beth was still teaching middle school in the ‘hood. He told him about Caitlin, and about the family trip to Shaky Lake the following weekend.

The man had talked about his work as a pharmaceutical representative. The excitement of travel. The exhilaration of dealing with cutting edge science. The money.

Cal had been listening and nodding half-heartedly but, when the talk turned to six-figure salaries and huge bonuses, Cal sat up a bit straighter. After all, things *were* tight. He couldn’t remember the last time he hadn’t worried about money. Even on those vacations to Shaky Lake every year, paid for by Beth’s parents, he had lain awake thinking about whether the tank of gas he had put in the car on the drive from Chicago had overdrawn his bank account. As he listened to the man talk, Cal began to think of possibilities. Of the terrible unfairness of the world, that he should be agonizing over gas bills while other people raked in the money.

“You know,” said the man, wiping his mouth after a big swig of beer, “Drug companies love people with MBAs. You ever consider doing pharmaceutical sales?”

Cal had shaken his head. *Never occurred to me.*

The guy downed the rest of his beer and set the glass on the oversized trash barrel nearby, then pulled his wallet out of his back pocket and fished around inside.

“Here,” he said, holding out a business card to Cal. “Orion Pharmaceuticals. They’re really blazing the way when it comes to pain management, that sort of thing. I’ve been with them since the beginning. Absolutely amazing company to work for.” He leaned towards Cal

conspiratorially. "I'm actually going to be leaving soon. Retiring early, I guess you could say." He winked. "Got myself a thirty-foot catamaran and my girlfriend and I are planning on sailing around the world. Sounds like a cliché, I know. But I've made enough money for one lifetime. It's time to enjoy it."

"That sounds amazing," said Cal. "Congratulations on your retirement." He smiled and held his beer up in a toast.

The man pressed the business card into Cal's free hand and looked directly at him. "They're going to need to find a replacement when I leave. What do you think?" He raised his brows and waited for a reply.

At first Cal didn't know what to say. The idea of working as a drug salesman was completely foreign to him. In truth, the idea of having money was now completely foreign to him. And that pissed him off. "Okay," he told the man. "I'd be interested in learning more about it, anyway."

"Awesome," said the man. "Let me get your number and I'll have someone in Human Resources reach out to you. I'm planning on giving notice on Monday." He dug in his pocket for his phone and punched in Cal's phone number as he recited it to him.

When the man was done, he slipped the phone back into his pocket and smiled. "It was so good running into you, Cal. That's what you'd call serendipity."

Cal smiled and went along with the man's back-slapping bro hug, and then turned to make the trek back to his seat. As he rounded the corner into his gate, he glanced back down the cement hallway and saw the man leaning against the wall, arms crossed, watching him. The man smiled and gave a little wave, and then turned and walked away.

When Cal told his cousins about it later that night, he laughed, as if he had scored a free beer off some clueless stranger. And yes, the man was definitely a stranger. Cal was almost sure of it now. But he found that he didn't care. And when he got a call from Human Resources at Orion Pharmaceuticals a week later, he felt a weight lift from his shoulders and said a silent thank you to a stranger named Jason Pitt.

Now, five years later, he would gladly put that weight back on to his shoulders, that weight of financial debt and penny-pinching. Every ounce and then some.

It hadn't taken him long to realize why Orion hired him. Why a stranger had approached him at a baseball game. Three months after he started working at Orion, his cousin Jeff — the same cousin who brought him along to that baseball game — was made the commissioner of the United States Food and Drug Administration. Cal could still remember when he read the announcement, if you could call it that. His Uncle Bill always sent a long, rambling holiday letter to friends and relatives every year. Updates on everything from prostate surgeries to household

renovations to trips to Disneyland with the grandkids. It was a classic, and Cal and Beth took great pleasure in reading it every year. But that year, the holiday letter was entirely devoted to one topic: Bill's son Jeff, a Chicago physician and Rush University professor, was now in charge of the American pharmaceutical market.

Beth had been reading the letter out loud and Cal remembered the look on her face. She had wrapped her brain around it right away, that he had clearly been recruited specifically for his family connections. On the other hand, it had taken him awhile to realize what this news meant.

"Cal, how did they know?" asked Beth.

"Know what? Who?" asked Cal.

"How did they know that you were desperate for a job?" She frowned and shook her head.

"How did they know you'd be at that baseball game?"

Cal looked at her, not putting the pieces together. Then, he understood.

It had been the first snowflake in a blizzard of fear and, even today, sitting in his SUV and staring at a perfect summer landscape, he felt himself getting pulled deeper and deeper into the storm.

For a year, nobody at Orion mentioned Cal's connection to the FDA commissioner. He began to think that it was just a coincidence. That he wasn't hired as a gateway to the FDA. It was Christmas again and there was a Winkley holiday party planned. The Winkley family wasn't large, just sixteen people in all, and the party was going to be a full sit-down dinner at Uncle Bill and Aunt Jessie's house. Jeff would almost certainly be there, and Cal wondered if Jeff had heard that he was working for a pharmaceutical company.

"Everyone's going to ask about work," said Beth. "It wasn't exactly a secret that we were having trouble before you started at Orion." Her own parents had offered to let them stay at their house a couple times. Cal cringed at the thought.

"What's there to say? I work for Orion Pharmaceuticals as a drug rep. We sell chemotherapy agents and other drugs related to cancer treatment." He shrugged.

"Don't tell people that you sell narcotics, Cal." Beth smiled. "They'll have way too much fun referring to you as a 'drug dealer'." I can hear the racist jokes already."

Cal laughed. "I'll keep it nice and vague. Nobody wants to hear more details about cancer drugs, right?" He fiddled with the party invitation. "What should I say to Jeff?" he asked.

“Congratulations? Or, football is always a safe topic,” she said. “Just tell him the same thing you tell everyone else when he asks you about work.”

“He’ll ask questions. I’ve never known anyone who asks more questions than Jeff.”

“So let him,” said Beth. She held up her hands. “What else can you do?”

And so, it didn’t come as a surprise that he found himself on Christmas Eve, standing on his Uncle’s back deck, leaning against the railing talking to his cousin Jeff. Dinner was over and Jeff had suggested that the two of them get some fresh air before the kids unwrapped presents.

It was windy and threatening to snow. Not the kind of weather for relaxing outside, so when Jeff had suggested it, Cal’s heart sank. Beth was in the kitchen and didn’t see them grab their coats and go out.

Jeff began speaking before the screen door even had a chance to slam behind them.

“So, how’s John Kowalske treating you?” asked Jeff, referring to the CEO of Orion.

Cal blinked. *He’s not wasting any time.* “So far, so good,” he said. “He seems like a decent guy. Very hands-on, which I respect.”

Jeff chuckled. “Hands-on. Sounds about right.”

“I take it you know him?” asked Cal. He couldn’t predict where this conversation was going but he would give anything to end it now and go back inside.

Jeff bobbed his head and shoved his bare hands into his coat pockets. “I collaborated with Orion on a research project several years ago. John’s a very bright guy.”

“Yeah,” said Cal lamely. “So how are you liking D.C.? Better weather than here, I suppose?” He laughed nervously.

Jeff waved away his comment and just stared at him for a moment. The wind was growing more harsh by the minute and Cal could feel spits of snow begin to hit his cheeks. He began shivering and, all the while, Jeff just kept peering at him, like he was waiting for Cal to say something. But Cal’s face felt frozen, both with the cold and with an acute sense of unease. Finally, Jeff broke his gaze and smiled.

“Well, congrats on the new job, cous,” said Jeff. “Maybe we’ll run into each other on the job.”

“You too, Jeff. Congratulations.”

Without saying another word, Jeff opened the door and the two men went inside. Later that night, after he was home and Beth and Caitlin were in bed, he was rummaging around in his coat, looking for his phone, when he came across a business card.

Jeffrey Winkley, MD, PhD  
Commissioner  
United States Food and Drug Administration

Cal flipped the card over and, there, scrawled in messy doctor handwriting, was a note.

*Welcome to the business. —Jeff*

He had found the flash drive on Caitlin’s sixteenth birthday. It was a Saturday morning and he had come into the office to catch up on the overwhelming amount of work he had to do. Tonight, he was taking Beth and Caitlin to see Hamilton. They were both obsessed with the musical and he felt like Superdad when he got front-row tickets. He had more money than time, these days. Sometimes that felt like a curse, but in this case, it felt good to give his family something nice.

He pulled out his keys and unlocked his office door. Inside, it smelled like lemon-scented cleaning spray. The cleaning crew came in every night at 7 pm sharp. He knew because he was nearly always there at 7 pm. Last night had been no different. Beth had tried not to look pissed when he got home at 8:30 pm. She probably thinks I’m having an affair, he thought. It was true that his hectic work schedule had taken a toll on their relationship. She always wanted to talk about it, had even tried to arrange for them to see a marriage counselor. She gave up when he had to cancel twice due to work stuff. He couldn’t figure out a way to tell her about everything. Things at Orion were bad, and getting worse. It was little things at first, as he was on-boarding. Secrecy clauses, non-compete clauses, rules about arbitration. He had been assured that this was par for the course when you worked for a drug company. Trade secrets and whatnot. He had accepted that explanation. But as he worked his way up in the organization, he had more direct exposure to the company’s profit goals, their sales tactics, their borderline incestuous relationship with legislators. Orion had four full-time lobbyists and Cal had made the questionable decision of going out for drinks with them a few times. Turns out that it only took a few drinks before the lobbyists were telling him all about their work. The

legislators who were their 'champions', the process of turning Orion's 'Christmas wish list' into cut-and-paste verbiage for legislators to present as bills. The golf games. The tropical vacations disguised as business meetings. The wink-and-nod mutual back-scratching. The delight these people took in getting away with it. It was nauseating.

When he was promoted to regional sales manager, he got a huge pay increase and a jaw-dropping bonus. His plans to cut back his hours to something more reasonable were cut short. He remembered how Beth turned away from him when he told her.

At one point, he had considered resigning but he could never bring himself to do it. Looking back, he wondered whether he may have known, deep down, that there would be no going back.

The flash drive was lying on the floor under his desk. He didn't see it at first since it was nearly hidden behind one of the thick wooden legs of the desk. He had to crouch down onto his knees to reach it and, when he stood up, he tossed it on his desk and got to work booting up his laptop. Half an hour later, he had made it through his new emails. It was amazing how many emails he had gotten between 8 pm last night and this morning.

He picked up the flash drive and turned it over in his hands. No label. No indication of who it might belong to. He was sure it hadn't been here when he left last night. The cleaning staff was insanely detail-oriented and there was no way they would have missed it when they vacuumed last night. He knew to get out of their way when they came to clean. If the drive had been there when they cleaned, they would have given it to him with a disapproving frown, as if he was a teenaged boy who couldn't keep his room clean.

He stared at the drive for a moment longer, puzzling it over. Finally, he plugged it into the USB port on his laptop and waited for it to load. A box popped up on the screen asking for a password. He smiled and, with a shrug, typed in the word "password." Worth a shot, he thought. To his immense surprise, the drive unlocked. A list of documents popped up on the screen but there was nothing at first glance to tell him who the drive belonged to. He looked at his watch. It was already noon. He considered just closing the files and pulling out the drive. I'll just send out a "found" email and someone will surely claim it. Only, something seemed odd. He was sure it hadn't been there yesterday. Had someone been in his office? But who? And why?

He clicked on the first file. Charts, graphs, diagrams. The same crap he had to look at day in and day out. He skimmed, then clicked open more files. Still no idea of who the drive belonged to. The fourth file he opened was titled "confidential" which was, in itself, not at all unusual. It almost went without saying that any internal document was meant to be strictly that. Internal. He let his eyes wander down the page. It was data on Orion's new drug, Salvare. He practically had this information memorized by now, in the hyper-intense lead-up to the drug's release. Data about possible drug side effects, weeks of sobriety, relapse rates, rates of death

from overdose, heart attack, stroke, et cetera. But something was different. These numbers were all wrong. One number stood out, highlighted in a yellow text box. 'Death from all causes: 28%'. He shook his head in confusion, scrolled up to read the data over again. It must be a mistake. He must be interpreting the data incorrectly. The 'Death from all causes' statistic was supposed to be 2.8%, not 28%. And even the 2.8% figure was meant to be interpreted with caution. Not 'statistically significant.'

He rubbed his hand against the back of his neck and was surprised to find it damp with sweat. He scrolled farther down the document. The Salvare study had included 1,200 subjects. People diagnosed with opioid addiction but otherwise healthy. No 'sick people' allowed. No heart disease or diabetes or cancer. Average age of thirty-three years.

He punched some numbers into the calculator on his phone. 28% of 1,200 people was — 336 people. He and the other sales managers had been told there had been about thirty deaths. They were told to be sure that their presentations to clients emphasized this. That there was some correlation between using Salvare and higher rates of mortality. But not statistically significant. 'Really drive home that point,' the Clinical Director, Jane Mahoney, had said during training. Cal was absolutely positive that they were told 2.8%. Thirty-three patients. The report on the flash drive was obviously erroneous. But as he continued to scroll down, a spreadsheet appeared on the screen. Initials, ages, gender, dates, checkboxes. It was a long spreadsheet, in small font size. He zoomed in to see more detail. Each line on the spreadsheet started with someone's initials and ended with a date. He zoomed out again and scrolled. And scrolled, and scrolled. The spreadsheet went on for pages and pages. And at the end, on the far left, identifying the number of rows in the spreadsheet, the number stood out like it was written on a billboard. Three-hundred and thirty-six. 'Death from all causes.' There was no mistaking this data. Initials. Dates of birth. Dates of death.

His heart thudded in his chest and he slammed the laptop shut. He stood up and began to pace the room. He racked his brain, desperate for an explanation. For a way he may be misinterpreting this. But the more he thought, the more he knew with every ounce of his mind that he was reading the data correctly. The *real* data. He sat back down at his desk and opened the laptop again. He continued to read the document. Graphs and charts and spreadsheets gave way to memos, documentation of conversations, precise instructions from Kowalske to Mahoney on how to present the data to staff. To industry contacts. To the Food and Drug Administration.

Cal looked up suddenly as he heard noise in the hallway. He could hear the elevator ding and then open. He had only a second to decide what to do. With a few clicks, he reached a screen where he could change the flash drive password. He pulled his phone out and opened his password generator app. A ridiculously long and complex sequence of letters and numbers and symbols popped up and he quickly entered them into the password box. He pulled out a block of post-it notes from his desk drawer and scribbled down the code, then re-entered it in the

password box. He just had time to hit enter, and then save the flash drive data before someone called his name from just outside his office door.

“You’re here on a Saturday? You’re such an asshole, Winkley,” said a cheerful voice.

Cal yanked the flash drive out of the USB port and slipped it into his pocket just as his colleague poked his head into the room.

“You’re making the rest of us look bad,” complained a sandy-haired man in jeans and a polo shirt.

“Oh, Hey Kev,” said Cal. Kevin Gifford was his sales counterpart, covering sales in Missouri, Kansas, Nebraska.

“I’m just here because I forgot my goddamn phone last night,” said Kevin. “I was so fried that I didn’t even notice until this morning. Don’t tell me you’re here to do actual work.” He shook his head.

“Just needed to run some sales numbers quick,” said Cal. “I completely forgot to do it last night and I’d rather just get it done now instead of worrying about it all weekend, you know?”

Kevin nodded. “Totally, man.” His smile faded and his eyes looked tired. “I totally know.”

Cal stood up and slipped his laptop into the leather messenger bag and looped the bag over his shoulder. He ripped off the post-it note with the password on it and tucked it into his wallet. “Let’s get out of here, Kev. Let’s just get the hell out of here.”

Kevin chuckled. “I know, right?”

Later that night, after Beth and Caitlin had crashed into bed in exhausted delight from the musical, he pulled out his laptop and the flash drive. He carefully typed in the password to open the drive and then slipped the post-it back into his wallet. It was nearly 4 am when he finally shut the computer off.

Salvare wasn’t a miracle drug, it was a death sentence. The numbers had looked promising in the first few weeks of the research study, where study participants stayed in a rehab facility. No side effects. But then the participants went home. And started dying. Cal read through clinical note after clinical note, detailing the circumstances of each death. Family members talking about how their loved one’s drug use started up again right after they came home from rehab, even though they were taking the Salvare faithfully. Family members talked about how their

loved one's addictions seemed be much worse on the Salvare. How often then used drugs now, and how much they used, skyrocketed. It was too much. They overdosed. And all along, they had kept taking the Salvare, holding out hope that it would save them.

One-thousand, two-hundred research participants. Three-hundred and thirty-six deaths from overdose. And yet Salvare was due to hit the market in September. At the very end was a scanned copy of a handwritten note.

"Reviewed the data. You can expect approval in three months. Terms are as we have discussed." — JW

Jeff Winkley. His cousin. He was sure of it. But which data did he review? The real numbers or the fake?

"You're in luck, Cal," said Jeff. His voice was scratchy through the phone connection and Cal had to strain to hear him. Probably playing golf, thought Cal. "I'm going to be in Chicago on Monday."

Cal hesitated. He and Beth and Caitlin were leaving for the cottage in Wisconsin on Saturday morning. The thought of telling them he wouldn't be able to go to Shaky Lake that weekend made him cringe. But this was not a conversation he could have with Jeff over the phone and, in the end, he made plans to meet Jeff at the hotel on Monday evening.

"Jeff, we have a problem," said Cal. "It's about Salvare."

Jeff looked puzzled. "Oh? What's going on?"

Cal turned the laptop around on the table between them, so that Jeff could read the screen. "The data is wrong, Jeff. Orion didn't tell you the truth about the clinical trials." He pushed the computer closer to Jeff and gestured for him to read. He bounced his knee nervously as he waited for his cousin to finish. Finally, Jeff looked up from the screen.

"Where did you get this information, Cal?" His face was very still, his eyes hard.

"The flash drive," said Cal. "I found it in my office. I think someone may have been snooping around in there and dropped it. I figured out the password and read it." He paused, deciding how to continue. "Clearly, it's information I was not supposed to see. I only opened the file to see if I could figure out whose it was. To give it back to them, you know?"

Jeff didn't respond, just crossed his arms and stared at the computer screen.

“Jeff, don’t know see what this means? Salvare is killing people and Orion is covering it up. They’ve sent the FDA false data and now they’ve gotten the go-ahead to bring it to market. Jeff, they’ve lied to you.”

“Did you speak to anyone else about this?” asked Jeff.

“No,” said Cal. “I wanted to bring it to you first.”

“You didn’t tell anyone at all? Not even Beth?”

Cal frowned. “Why would I tell her? This has nothing to do with her, with our family.”

Jeff nodded. “Good, good.” He eyed the flash drive and a pang of uncertainty hit Cal.

On impulse, Cal reached for the computer and pulled it onto his lap. He logged out and pulled the flash drive out, then put it in the breast pocket of his jacket.

“Cal, I’m going to need that,” said Jeff, inclining his head towards the pocket of Cal’s jacket.

“What?” asked Cal. His forehead crumpled in confusion and growing distress.

“The flash drive.” Jeff held out his hand. “Now.”

“But — “ Cal stared at Jeff, and felt his throat tighten. “This is fraud, Jeff. It’s already killed hundreds of people. Orion needs to be stopped.” His eyes were pleading, hoping that the dawning realization was just a mistake.

Jeff looked at Cal is something akin to pity. “Cousin, I can see that this comes as a surprise to you, but not everything in this industry — in this world, for that matter — is all sunshine and rainbows.”

Cal gaped at him. “I’m not talking about rainbows, Jeff. I’m talking about serious fraud. I’m talking about peoples’ lives. This is entirely wrong.” He put the laptop into his bag and then leaned back in his chair. “You know it’s wrong. Are you telling me you don’t care? That you’re in on it?”

“Cal, listen to me very carefully.” Jeff’s voice was a hiss between clenched teeth. “You are going to give me that flash drive and you’re going to forget this ever happened.”

“How can you expect me to —”

Jeff held up his hand, cutting Cal off. “These are not requests. You will do as I say. I will make sure that Orion gives you an exceptionally — generous — severance package. You will go home to your family and live comfortably for the rest of your life.” He leaned forward and lowered his voice to a growl. “And you *will give me the flash drive.*” He held out his hand. “Immediately.”

Cal felt an intense urge to get up and run. He saw clearly now that Jeff was part of this terrible business, and that he was deadly serious about keeping these secrets. He thought frantically of what to do. Finally, with a shaking hand, he reached into his coat pocket and pulled out the drive. Jeff’s hands twitched, and Cal thought for a minute that he would grab the device from him. He looked at the flash drive one more time, and made his decision.

“Take it,” he said, tossing it onto the table and standing up.

Jeff smiled, clearly relieved. “Thank you, Cal. You’re making the right decision. I promise.”

Cal looked away for a moment. “My family is my top priority, Jeff. I want you to know that I’m doing this for them, and them alone.” He looked back at Jeff, meeting his eyes fiercely with his own.

Jeff stood and reached for Cal’s hand. “I know, Cal. I know. I appreciate — I appreciate how hard this is for you and I assure you that you and your family will be taken care of.” He patted Cal’s hand. “Orion will have your severance package put together within twenty-four hours. Now I want you to get in your car and go join your family. I know you’re supposed to be on vacation with them.”

Cal forced himself to shake Jeff’s hand, to wave goodbye to him as he left the room. The elevator ride seemed to take hours. He felt dizzy and off-balance when he stepped off. Outside the building, he looked around to get his bearings. Everything around him seemed surreal. And most of all, he felt absolutely terrified. He ignored the doorman’s offers of help and took off at a fast clip down the street. He just needed to walk it off. This fear and horror. As he walked, he reassured himself that things would be okay.

The high-rise buildings of downtown Chicago gave Cal the feeling of being in a labyrinth, and he soon got turned around. He was standing halfway down an alley, breathing through his mouth to avoid smelling the dumpster stench, when he saw a man walking towards him. There was something about the man’s walk, the too-quick pace, the hunched posture, that sent a thrill of alarm through Cal. He turned in the other direction and was dismayed to find that another man was walking toward him from the other end of the alley. He looked frantically for a way out of what was quickly becoming a very bad situation. He pulled the messenger bag off and gripped the strap in his hands, ready to swing the heavy leather as a makeshift weapon. Through the gloom of the alley, he saw the first man smile. A flash of yellowed teeth, a snarl. A gun. Cal dropped the messenger bag and stood, hands up.

“Please,” he said, looking frantically back and forth between the men. “I’ll give you whatever you want. He pulled his watch off and set it carefully on the slippery cement. He pulled his wallet from his pocket and set it alongside the watch. As an afterthought, he pulled his iPhone out of his pocket and laid it alongside the rest of his valuables.

The two men glanced at each other and shrugged. Cal watched helplessly as the first man aimed the gun at his head. He didn’t dare look away, but could see the second man gathering up his belongings, slinging the messenger bag over his shoulder and pocketing his wallet and watch and phone.

He ended up walking home. It was dark by the time he got there. Sixteen miles to his house in the quiet Chicago suburb of Skokie. His feet had gone numb miles ago, or perhaps he had just stopped noticing the pain. He punched in the numbers to the security system and let himself in. The house was quiet. Cold after all that walking. He collapsed on the couch and lay there, shaking, for a very long time. He fell asleep at some point, and when he woke it was dark outside. He found his personal cell phone plugged into a charger in the kitchen and dialed it while he rummaged through the refrigerator for something to eat.

Beth’s phone went straight to voicemail.

“Hey, it’s me,” he said. “I — I just wanted to say hi. I’m hoping to be there Wednesday. Sooner if I can, but —” He thought about his meeting with Jeff today. Tomorrow he would be hearing from someone at Orion about his severance and the thought of leaving lifted an indescribable weight from his chest. “I just have some things to wrap up here and then I’ll be up. I’ll call you when I leave. I love you, Beth. And Caitlin.” He paused, as if waiting for a response, then said, “goodnight.”

The next morning, his phone rang at 8 am sharp.

“Cal, it’s John.” Kowalske, Orion’s CEO, was making the call himself, noted Cal. He wondered how many people at Orion were in on the secrets. It must have been a lot. He had been such an idiot.

“Good morning, John,” he said. He didn’t know what to say — how is a conversation about hush money supposed to go? he thought.

“I spoke with Jeff and brought me up to speed on your meeting yesterday. I believe he proposed a plan to you?”

“He did,” said Cal.

“Wonderful. If you’re available, I thought you and I could go over the particulars today. Are you coming into the office today?”

“I wasn’t planning on it,” said Cal. He thought about the personal items in his office. Just photos and some knickknacks. Nothing worth going back there for.

“No need,” said John. “In fact, why don’t I come to your neck of the woods and we can get dinner. What’s the name of that Italian place in Skokie?”

“Delmonico’s,” said Cal.

“Right, right. Such a nice place.” John was quiet for a moment, then spoke again. “Very quiet.”

Cal’s skin went cold. He imagined the meeting with John Kowalske turning into something out of a mafia movie. His grip tightened on the phone.

“Five-thirty work for you, Cal?” asked John.

“Five-thirty. Yes, that —” he stuttered. “Yes, that works.”

John Kowalske was in his late sixties, though looked quite a bit younger on account of his still-dark hair and an obsession with triathlons. He was waiting in a corner booth when Cal arrived. The sun was shining so intensely through the windows that John had pulled the blinds down part way.

On his way to Delmonico’s, Cal had stopped at his bank to replace his stolen credits cards and to get some cash for the trip to Shaky lake. He would leave directly after dinner. His anxiety about this meeting was slightly tempered by the knowledge that he would be walking away from Orion forever.

Kowalske waved him over. “Cal, have a seat. I ordered us drinks already.”

Cal eased himself into the scarred leather bench. He smiled but found that he didn’t know what to say.

“I ordered for both of us,” said Kowalske. “I hope you’re not a vegetarian because I’m buying you the biggest steak on the menu.” He smiled, his eyes twinkling.

A waiter came with two glasses and a carafe of red wine. “Hope you like red, too,” laughed Kowalske.

“Steak and wine sounds great, John, although I might need a nap afterwards,” he joked.

Kowalske chuckled, and then looked down at the wine glass in his hand. “I worked you too hard, Cal. I realize that and — well, I regret it. I know what it’s like to work long hours when you have a family.” He shrugged. “That was so long ago for me that, I guess I forgot how tough I was making it on you.”

“It’s — don’t worry about it, John.”

“I’m glad you’ll have time now, Cal. To relax, spend time with your family. You deserve it.”

Cal smiled, bobbed his head in agreement. He didn’t speak as the waiter came back with their food. Huge white plates spread with sizzling steak, lobster and potato. His stomach churned and he wondered how he was going to eat a single bite.

John tucked into the steak and Cal did his best to follow suit. He desperately wanted this to be over but, clearly, Kowalske was not going to be rushed.

At one point, Cal began to give Kowalske an update on his sales plan, as one would do when handing the reins over to a successor, but Kowalske just waved his words away.

“You don’t need to worry about any of that,” said John. “We’ll make sure everything is in order. I can have Sue courier your office things to your home so you don’t have to go in.”

Cal nodded. “John, I —”

“So,” said John, interrupting him and making a show of wiping his fingers and mouth with the white napkin. “Let’s get down to it, Cal. I want to make sure you walk away from Orion a happy man.” He reached under the table and pulled out a plain black folder. Not, Cal noticed, the standard glossy blue Orion Pharmaceuticals folders that were so ubiquitous in the office.

John slid the folder to Cal and indicated that he should open it. He watched while Cal reviewed the contents. A bearer’s certificate from Bank of America for one million dollars. A document to sign to authorize electronic funds transfers of five-hundred-thousand dollars every six months for the next ten years. The deed to a 2018 Acura SUV, his company-provided car. The information was organized, simple. But Cal found himself reading and re-reading the documents, digesting it even more slowly than the steak he had just forced himself to eat.

John flagged down the waiter. “Champagne, please. Your best bottle.” He looked at Cal and smiled. “We’re celebrating.”

Cal began sweating. The numbers on the documents in the folder were mind-boggling. He thought back five years. The baseball game. The stranger. When the champagne arrived, he accepted a glass and raised his dutifully.

John drained his glass and set it aside. He reached over to the folder, where it lay on the table. He put his hand on it, protectively. Possessively. "Cal, there's just one more thing," he said. "I'm going to need the password."

Cal blinked in surprise. "But — I assume you know what was on that flash drive." He felt stupid the moment he said it. Of course he know what was on the drive. He knew better than anyone.

"I do, Cal." He drummed his fingers on the folder.

"Then why do you need to open the drive? It can't be your only copy of the files." He could feel the char of the steak creeping up into the back of his throat.

Kowalske shrugged. "Just humor me."

Cal stared at him for a moment. He had promised himself he would just do what needed to be done and then put this all behind him. He reached for his wallet to retrieve the post-it note with the password on it. Then, he froze. How could it not have occurred to him before this moment that the password had been stolen along with his wallet?

Kowalske frowned. The panic on Cal's face was clearly visible. "The password, Cal. Now."

It was all Cal could do not to start whimpering. His mind spun, trying to come up with the right thing to say. If he told John it was stolen, he suspected that would not go over well. It would sound sketchy, like an excuse. What he needed was time. Time to figure this out, to get the password back. There must be some way.

"My wallet," said Cal. He knew he was white as a ghost. He just needed to convince John Kowalske that his fear was due to forgetting his wallet, rather than from knowing he might never be able to produce what John was demanding. "I left it at home. I'm — I'm sorry, John." His heart was pounding and the food and champagne in his stomach was crawling it's way up the back of his throat. "I'll run home and get it."

John stared at him, seemingly weighing his options. Then he smiled. Friendly, jovial. "Do you always forget your wallet when you go out to expensive meals, Cal?" He laughed, then shook his head. "Of course, Cal. Go home and get it. You can drop it off at my house on your way out of town."

Cal froze. John knew about his trip to Shaky Lake. What else did he know about Cal's activities, his plans, his family? He nodded and forced himself to smile ruefully - just a silly mistake- as he said goodbye.

On the drive home, he rolled all the windows down in an attempt to drown out everything but his thoughts. What was he going to do now?

Once home, he tried every way he could think of to recover the password. He tried logging into the password creator app from his personal cell. Nothing. He paced around the house, frantically thinking. He heard his phone ping from where he had set it in the kitchen. He went to look at it.

John Kowalske: ?

John Kowalske: I hope everything's ok.

John Kowalske: I wouldn't want your family to wonder where you are