

Nineteen

YOU WATCH DR. ARNOLD HOLTZER AS HE COUGHS, SCRATCHES HIS NOSE, CLEARS his throat, and waits another minute before asking, "What are you thinking?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing at all? Is that possible?"

"Okay. You're right. I'm thinking about... about the time."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, don't take this the wrong way, but I'm not sure what more we can accomplish before I leave here in" – you glance at your watch – "ten minutes."

"How do you know you can't learn something in ten minutes? Or five minutes, for that matter?"

Maybe because I haven't learned anything in six months, up until this very moment? "I don't know. I never thought of it that way."

Holtzer nods, in that slow, ponderous shrink way that (among many other things) irritates the shit out of you. "Well, let me ask you... Thinking back to our first session, would you say that you feel any differently from when you first came here?"

"About what? About this?"

"About anything."

Oh, what you'd give to tell him the truth: that you feel exactly the same as in the first minute of the first session—you're there because you were ordered to be there, it was a complete waste of time, what you did was no different from what millions of other guys had been doing for millions of years, you were singled out because you're a public figure... *There is nothing wrong with me. Go ahead, make your bullshit report to the court, tell them I haven't changed one tiny bit. See if I give a fuck. I've fulfilled all the goddamn requirements. This is my last session, and there's nothing else they or you or anybody can do to me. I know it and so do you.*

But the truth is, of course there are things they can do. Tail you, tap your phones, call the papers and TV—especially in two or three years or whenever you start the comeback. You imagine that Holtzer's final report might put you down as "less than fully cooperative" or "sometimes resistant" ...but that was better than "hostile" or worse, "shows no remorse." Which is why you don't have the luxury of anger, or of honesty.

You look to the right, toward the houseplant in front of the window, and then past Holtzer's left ear, to the bookcase with 20-odd volumes of Freud's collected writings, and then back to him. "Well... I can definitely say I've learned my lesson..."

Another nod. "Anything else?"

"Oh... I'm sorry, you know? And embarrassed. I let a lot of people down." *I let nobody down except myself. I'm embarrassed that I wasn't more careful. If I had been careful, this wouldn't have happened. No one else has cause to feel 'betrayed' or 'disappointed' or anything. I served them to the full extent of my abilities. My private life is none of their business.*

"Do you think you'd do it again?"

You shake your head. "No. No way. That, I'm sure of. Regardless of what I think about how fair – I mean, I'm not stupid. I didn't get as far as I did by being stupid. Doing it again would be the *height* of stupidity. So no, it will never happen again. Of that I can assure you."

Holtzer looks at you for a few moments, expressionless, then:

"Let's say, just for the sake of argument, that you get the urge again. What will you do?"

"Oh, you know... buy a magazine, rent a movie... Of course, what I really want is to find, ah... a serious relationship."

Again, he's giving you that silent, stone-faced look. *What the hell do you want? I've said everything that you—*

"Do you plan to get back into politics?"

"No. I don't have any... specific plan right now. Maybe I'll do some writing, or teaching... travel a bit... I'll figure it out."

"All right, then. Our time is up." You both stand, and you shake the analyst's bony hand, resisting the impulse to call him a charlatan and an asshole.

"Goodbye, Doctor."

"Good luck."

"Thank you."

Holtzer's office is just off Washington Square. *Let's go there. Just sit in the park and relax for a while.* It's a sunny day in early June, and there's no place you have to be, which is usually the case these days.

You find a bench toward the middle of the park, looking north toward the marble arch at the end of Fifth Avenue, taking in the usual scene of students, dealers, vagrants, women pushing strollers and carriages, lunch-hour types with jackets slung over their shoulders. A street

musician doing a bad Dylan. No one pays you any notice—you look thoroughly anonymous in your shades, Yankees baseball cap, dark t-shirt, jeans and sneakers. That and a coat in cold weather: your daily uniform since the day you resigned. And it's worked—you're not accosted on the street, insulted in the supermarket, or otherwise reminded of your fall, especially since you moved out of your former district and found an affordable place in the city. That also put a stop to the phone calls and letters, since they wouldn't know where to reach you.

Even the press has left you alone. Not that you'll ever forget what they did to you. Yes, Schusterman had warned you, but there really was no way to be prepared for it, for the full force of the barrage. Until you experienced it, no one could tell you what it was like to see the wax-skinned anchorman announcing the story, practically smacking his lips, with your mug shot plastered in the background. Or to find a small mob armed with notepads, microphones, cameras camped outside your apartment building at all hours. Or the headlines: CONGRESSMAN NABBED IN BROTHEL RAID, LAWMAKER CAUGHT FISHING FOR JAILBAIT, WASELL: "I THOUGHT SHE WAS EIGHTEEN." (You never said any such thing, the quote was completely fabricated, but who would believe you?)

Then there was that hatchet job, "Rise and Fall of a Boy Wonder," in *The Other Paper*. Fucking Strasler! That smug, pompous bastard, going way beyond the arrest, roasting and flaying you, casting every aspect of your career in the worst possible light. You'd heard that he had gone into journalism after college, but no specifics – not that you cared. But you weren't surprised to find him at *The Other Paper*. It made perfect sense. Their political coverage was laughable; none of them understood how things really worked. Always looking for scandals and conspiracies—if A went to a party where B was also present, and A's brother-in-law C was a friend of D, and B and D were crooks, then it must follow that A was also a crook. A bunch of

hopelessly naïve little twerps, endorsing candidates who had no chance of getting elected, then dumping on the winners as “corrupt” and “sellouts.” Didn’t they understand that you had to make deals to get anything done? No, in their minds that made you “unprincipled.” Oh, yeah, Strasler fit right in. That rich, self-righteous prick, still looking down his nose at anybody who had to work his way up...

But even Strasler is leaving you alone these days. Now you are anonymous, unexceptional, *common*. More than that; it was as if you’d *always* been that way, never been someone paid attention by anyone who mattered.

Certainly that was how your friends had treated you. Correction: those you’d thought of as friends. Yeah, they took you out for drinks on your last day in office, though the bar was in Chevy Chase, far removed from the Hill. But since then, nothing. Not from any of them—not Trayler, not Kittredge or Gund or Castelloni. After your third or fourth call went unreturned, you understood. Even Aronoff, from the Bronx, who had arrived late in ’81, winning a special election after the incumbent had dropped dead in the home of “a female companion.” You, with all of eight months’ seniority, magnanimously offered to show him the ropes. The little twit followed you around like a nervous puppy, hanging on your every word, proclaiming his undying gratitude and loyalty. And now? When he saw you a few months ago, in Penn Station, Aronoff turned and ran—no, *sprinted*—in the other direction.

But you weren’t completely surprised. They were in the middle of Abscam when you first came to D.C., and you heard all of it—the chatter, the vulture-circling from the press, the complaints that the FBI had gone too far, the whispers about who would be next. That videotape of Kelly from Florida, stuffing cash into his pockets and asking, “Does it show?” Williams of Jersey, the one senator involved—you spent a day canvassing for him back in ’70, when he was

one of the good guys, targeted by Nixon; now he was quitting before his colleagues could vote to expel him.

It was striking the way all of them had quickly lost most of their friends in the Capitol. They became pariahs, nonpersons, lonely men walking the corridors in hurried silence. No one spoke to them unless absolutely necessary. No one came to them to make deals or talk strategy—what was the point, when they'd likely be out before the end of the year? You couldn't help feeling a few pangs of sympathy for them. It just didn't seem fair the way the others treated them, as if they were carriers of some rare, insidious disease, as if even a handshake would be fatal. But of course you went along with the treatment; what choice did you have?

And now it was your turn.

A man comes over and sits on the opposite end of the bench, his blocky torso straining against the folds of his cheap blue suit. With his thinning hair and pencil mustache, he could be anywhere from his early thirties to almost fifty. But you barely notice him. You're busy thinking about the future.

Now that you no longer have to stay in New York, perhaps you *will* travel... not for pleasure, exactly, but to scout out potential locations for the comeback. Maybe somewhere in Arizona or New Mexico, where more people were moving every year—not just the old folks anymore, but people in their thirties and forties, with kids, people who were sick of the Northeast with the lousy weather and the crime and the blacks and the taxes. Or maybe Florida. Your father had mentioned it, more than once, before he died; then Helaine moved down with her kid to Delray Beach, on the Atlantic coast, after she broke up with her schmucko husband. The only problem there was that half the people were ex-New Yorkers; they would get the *Times*, maybe even *The Other Paper*...

"Look at that. *Look at that.*"

The blocky man is focused on something in the middle of the park. You look in that direction. It's nothing unusual—a dealer and a youth in an NYU T-shirt, conducting a quick transaction.

"Fucking scumbags." The man cups his hands in front of his mouth and shouts, "HEY! I SEE YOU, YOU PIECE OF SHIT! GET THE HELL OUT OF THE PARK, PUSHER, BEFORE I CALL THE COPS!"

The student looks up, in a panic, but the dealer ignores the distraction, rummaging through a gym bag before pulling out a small glassine envelope that he hands to the customer. Then both men take off, in separate directions.

"THAT'S RIGHT, GET GOING! Sonofabitch. IF I SEE YOU IN HERE AGAIN, YOU'RE GONNA WISH THE COPS GOT YOU FIRST – I'LL CRACK YOUR HEAD OPEN, YOU WORTHLESS SCUM!"

He shakes his head disgustedly. "Unbelievable. Right out in the open, in front of little kids. They don't even try to hide." Now he's looking directly at you. "Can you believe it? I mean, where the hell are the cops?"

You really don't feel like engaging with this guy. But you have to say something – no reason to get him pissed at you.

"There aren't enough. A lot of them got laid off in the mid-Seventies." This doesn't seem to register with the man. "You know, the fiscal crisis?"

"Oh yeah, right," he says. "Bankrupt. Because they spent all that money on welfare and Medicaid."

"Actually, a lot of Medicaid is paid for by the state."

"Is that so?" The man looks more intrigued than hostile. "How do you know so much?"

You shrug. You've learned to be careful in these situations. Or have you said too much already?

"I just... mm... read a lot."

"Sounds like it." The man shakes his head. "You know what it is? It's not just the cops. It's everything. People have no respect for the rules, you know what I'm saying? For the rules and for authority. And if you say anything about it, that makes you a bad guy. You can't discipline your kids—you hit your kids, and they'll take them away from you. I mean, come on, like it's gonna screw them up for life? My father would hit me if I got out of line, and I turned out all right. Your father ever hit you?"

"Once or twice."

"There you go. And are you screwed up? Come on. It's *crazy*. Even fuckin' Carter, he said his daddy would do it sometimes. Some kind of stick, or maybe a belt. Didn't screw *him* up, right? I mean, yeah, he was a jerk, but not, you know, some kind of head case."

You mumble "Hm," trying your best to be noncommittal. *Have to come up with a plausible excuse for getting up and leaving. Doctor's appointment? Need to get back to work?*

"Yeah, Carter – jeez, am I glad they got rid of him." He attempts to imitate the former leader. "'We have a muh-laze in this country.' Like that was the problem. Problem was you, you dumb cracker asshole."

"Well, he's gone."

"Damn straight. Good thing we have a real leader in there now. Am I right?"

You give him another mumble. It's not enough.

"What, you don't like him?"

"He's okay, I guess."

"I know you *voted* with him a lot of the time..."

"Excuse me?"

He laughs. "The way you voted. What's so strange? You know it's a matter of public record, Congressman."

You feel your stomach growing tight, your eyes narrowing—so much that the man puts up his hands. "Easy, easy. I'm not a cop, I'm not a reporter. It's okay."

"Then what are you?"

"Let's start with who. Frank Boscorelli. My friends call me Bosco." He puts out his hand; you shake it, with great hesitancy. "You know, like that chocolate shit you put in milk when we were kids. Or was that before your time?"

"I'm not that young."

"Sure you are. You're the Boy Wonder. Don't tell me I have the wrong Richard Waisell?"

"What do you want?"

"Cut to the chase, huh? Okay. What I do is... I'm sort of a recruiter. A talent scout. I represent some people who might be interested in somebody with your talents."

"I see. Could you possibly be any more vague?"

Bosco seems terrifically amused. "You know, all that stuff I read about you, everybody said you had no sense of humor—I just knew they were wrong. Don't ask me how, but I did. You can be funny, but your humor is whaddyacallit—subtle. Probably comes off better in writing than in person."

"You haven't answered my question."

"Sorry... My people understand that you're kind of at loose ends right now. And you might be hurting—you know, financially."

"I'm not. I got a small pension, and I have some investments. I'm okay."

"Fine. But so what? You're gonna sit around watching your investments for the next fifty years? Come on. Somebody like you has to make himself useful."

"I have some ideas."

"That's great. I mean that. But could you just indulge me for a minute and listen to another one?"

He has the manner of a salesman, and you've always disliked salesmen; their line of bullshit is too blatant for your taste. But you have to admit, this guy is good. You feel yourself relaxing to the point of at least being curious.

"Go ahead."

Bosco smiles. "Okay. What I said before, about your talents. As in, what you're good at. Listen, you achieved something at your age that a lot of guys *twice* your age, who'd been trying for fifteen, twenty years, couldn't do. Because you had the talent. And I don't mean for raising money, or putting together a good staff, or targeting the right issues. Any idiot can do that. I'm talking about the most basic talent, the one that without it, you never get anywhere. You know what that is? Communication."

"Making speeches, you mean?"

Bosco shakes his head. "It's a lot bigger—*deeper* than that. It's the thing where somehow, you get the guy listening to you to believe you understand. You know what he likes, what pisses him off, what he hopes for, what he's afraid of. Even when you don't give a crap,

which is the case a lot of the time, you get him to think you *do*. It's a gift. Not everybody can do it—I sure as hell can't. On the other hand, Reagan, he can do it in spades."

"I'm not Reagan."

"No shit. I've seen the videotapes. No offense, but you look like a guy who gives a good *impression* of giving a crap, which is not the same thing. Not everybody could tell the difference, that's why you won. But I could. It's in your eyes, or what they call your body language. The thing about Reagan is, he's convinced *himself* that he cares... and he can, like, project that feeling onto his audience. Am I making sense? You get what I'm saying?"

"I get what you're saying. But not where you're going."

Bosco nods. "It's like your humor. Like I said, we're betting that you come off better in print." He pauses. "We want you to do a column."

This is truly unexpected. "Seriously?"

"That's right. After, you know, a decent interval of time... let's say a year. You'll run in the *News* or the *Post*—they haven't decided yet. A column a week, then in a while they'll make it two a week. If you do well enough, down the line we can talk about syndication, across the country."

Part of you is flattered, even excited. But you can't help being skeptical. Is this a joke by someone, perhaps your former friends—are you on camera? Will they jump out of the bushes, laughing, as soon as you say yes? You glance around in all directions – even behind the bench – before you reply.

"This is very interesting. But are you saying... first of all, you don't think there would be some kind of, ah, reaction if my name... I mean, I could see doing it locally in a couple of places, but—"

"Tell me something. You resigned what, eight months ago?"

"Closer to nine."

"And how long has it been since you've seen your name anywhere, even the free papers in the supermarket?"

"About the same."

"Now add another year to that."

"Okay, but don't you think... like I could see *The Other Paper* doing another—"

"Fuck *The Other Paper*. Who reads that stupid rag, a bunch of queers and old hippies with their head up their ass? No mainstream publication will bother. The *Times* will bury it on page 30, if they run it at all. Trust me, to them it'll be old news. People in this country have no memory, *nada*. That's one of the great things about it, you know why? It means if you've fucked up your life, just drop out of sight for a while and then poof, start a new one. Nobody will mind—a lot of them have done the same thing, or they know somebody who did. Doesn't work that way anywhere else in the world. Out there, you might as well kill yourself because nobody forgets anything."

By now, it's clear: this is not a joke. And so you want to believe Bosco, to give yourself over completely to the salesman's worldview. But you keep thinking of nagging little details.

"And your friends can just make this happen?"

"You know how it is. They know people who know people who know people. Everybody owes somebody something."

"But what would they want me to say? I'm not going to do that Reagan-is-God routine—"

"No, no."

"—because quite frankly... I did vote with him a number of times, yeah, but I think he's not exactly the sharpest tack on the—"

"You won't be writing about his brains. You'll be writing about his smile, and his jokes, and how he doesn't take any crap from the Soviets and the unions... you know, the things that got him elected."

You can't resist the impulse to play devil's advocate. "I don't hate unions. My father was a union member. I'm not saying they're perfect, but—"

Bosco waves you off. "I know, I know. Same here. My dad was with the typesetters. Shop steward. They helped shut down the holy *Times* in '62. Got my father a decent wage, so he could put me through college."

"And this is how you thank him?"

"He passed away five years ago. But if he was alive today, this is what I'd say to him. I'd say, 'Pop, your people did a great job. Such a great job that they put themselves out of business. They've outlived their usefulness.'"

"That's not true for everyone."

Bosco shrugs. "It's true for the people who matter. Come on, am I telling you something you don't know? Their membership's been dropping every year for I don't know how long. People can't wait to get off the assembly line, or get their kids off. None of this 'class conscious' bullshit like they have in Europe, thank God. You're born into a class, you don't have to die there. Workers want to be middle class, middle class want to be rich... even rich sometimes, they want to drop out and live on a farm."

"So where does that leave the unions? They used to stand for something, sure, but now—what, the 'labor movement?' Please. There is no fucking labor movement. They stand for

themselves, that's what people think. Or they're just here to protect people who can't move up. The lazy ones, the fuckups. Driving up business costs so the rest of us have to pay more for everything. Other than that, they're not relevant. You know what I'm saying."

"We're a nation of independent contractors."

"Exactly. Like you. Like me."

You think of responding to this, but why bother? At this point, you have all the information you need.

"Okay... as I said, the offer is interesting. But I'll need some time to think about it."

"Of course." Bosco nods. "Take all the time you need."

He hands you his card, and leaves. You watch him tailing off into the distance, toward the arch and the 8th Street exit, as you imagine what comes next.

You assume that Bosco will give his "people" an update. He'll tell them—always the salesman—that everything went great, all according to plan. Maybe he'll allow that you didn't say 'yes' immediately, but not to worry, you'll come around in a few days, a week at most. And if they ask what makes him so certain, maybe Bosco will respond, "Like he has an alternative?"

Well, do you?