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Lies are my business. They keep me employed. If you believe scientific studies, we all lie, several times a day. Can't help ourselves. Sure, white lies are the grease that keeps the social engines running. But lies—real lies—are the source of all trouble. My job is really nothing more than figuring out who's lying and why, and to catch them at it. That's all there is to it.

Fortunately, I have a knack for detecting lies. At least on my good days.

I was sitting in the reception area of the Boston office of the international law firm Shays Abbott Burnham, which was as sleek and polished as a missile silo and just as lethal. Every surface was hard and glassy—the white stone floors polished like glass, the glazed white partitions, the glass-topped coffee tables, the frosted glass walls, the sharp-edged white leather sofa. Even the receptionist, with her brassy blond hair and poreless skin and gleaming carmine lips, perched like a Gorgon behind a curved rampart of gleaming steel you might find in a Swiss bank vault.

The décor wasn't meant to put potential clients at ease. You want soft and fluffy, it said, go to a spa. This place had the machine-tooled preci-

sion, the gun-oil gleam, of a well-made semiautomatic. It reassured like a Glock under your pillow.

Which was exactly the point. Shays Abbott Burnham was one of the biggest law firms in the world. It had more than three thousand lawyers in its offices, in twenty-six countries around the world. It was a one-stop shop. They did white-collar crime and corporate litigation. They defended giant oil companies and Big Pharma and Big Tobacco. They launched hostile takeovers and defended against them.

They didn't mess around. Their clients came there with serious battles to fight. They came seeking blood.

But not me. I was there to hear about a lie.

I'd received an urgent call the afternoon before from a Shays partner named John Malkin. He'd been given my name by another lawyer who'd hired me a few months earlier for a discreet job. John Malkin had a client who needed my help immediately—wouldn't say who or why, and couldn't discuss it over the phone. We had to meet in person, and as soon as possible. In advance he e-mailed me a nondisclosure agreement and agreed to pay my consultation fee.

Whatever he wanted to discuss, it was obviously something serious.

I never meet with potential clients without doing at least a backgrounder, to make sure I'm not stepping into trouble. So I'd read a complete dossier on the man. John Epsworth Malkin: Dartmouth, Duke Law summa cum laude, member of the Order of the Coif, which sounds like something you might find framed on the wall of a barbershop. His area of practice was regulatory compliance. If I had to do that all day I'd probably scratch my eyes out.

Malkin greeted me in the reception area with a damp handshake and an undertaker's solemnity. He had round horn-rimmed glasses and silver

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hair brushed straight back. He dressed with the raffish eccentricity that only a senior partner could get away with: pink broadcloth button-down shirt with a threadbare collar, missing one collar button; a gray pinstriped suit whose wide lapels might have been stylish in the 1970s.

In one glance I understood him in a way no dossier could ever convey. He hated his job and probably never enjoyed practicing law. He was tired of pumping up his billables and writing memos that no one ever looked at. He was an academic wannabe. He fantasized about retiring early to teach law at a small New England school with smart students and intellectually engaging and genial colleagues. He read every Churchill biography ever published. He cared about his shoes. (His were bespoke, probably from John Lobb, in London.) He collected first editions and maybe fountain pens—the ink blotches on his fingers told me that he wrote with a fountain pen. And (one sniff confirmed it) he was a pipe-smoker but only at home. Maybe he even collected South African cabernets and was inordinately proud of his EuroCave wine cellar.

Also, he wasn't the guy who was really hiring me.

He was the beard. I was sure of this. They didn't want to give me advance notice of who my client really was.

Malkin thanked me for coming. "Does anyone know why you're here?"

"I don't know why I'm here."

"Good point," he said. He led me down a corridor. We probably weren't going to his office.

"And, er, who knows you're meeting with me, or even with Shays Abbott?"

"Just my office."

"Your office . . . ?"

"My office manager and my forensic tech. But they don't get out much."

Joseph Finder

“That’s your whole office? Two employees?”

“It’s how we maintain our low, low prices.”

He didn’t smile. He probably had no idea what my rates were and wouldn’t care if he did.

“Mr. Malkin,” I said. “I’m on the clock. You’re assured absolute confidentiality. Why don’t you take me to your leader.”

He ducked his head and motioned for me to follow him around a corner and down another hall. When we reached a long conference room, I was astonished to see through the glass walls, sitting alone at the head of a long black table, the man I was really there to meet.

2

His name was Gideon Parnell, and he was a Washington legend. A national legend, actually, the subject of countless profiles in the *Times* and the *Post*. I think *60 Minutes* had twice done stories on him. He'd been on the cover of *Time* magazine.

He was a tall, handsome, regal black man of around seventy-five whose close-cropped hair had gone white. His life story was the stuff that newspaper feature writers fantasize about. Raised in poverty on the southeast side of Washington, he'd marched with Martin Luther King, Jr., in Selma. He'd become one of the great civil rights heroes and had golfed with every president who golfed since Lyndon Johnson. Every president, Republican and Democrat, had considered him a friend (to the extent a president really has friends in Washington). He was the ultimate Washington insider, a power broker with extensive connections and friends everywhere. Now he was "senior counsel" at Shays Abbott, though I doubt he actually practiced much law. The more powerful lawyers become, the less they seem to practice.

Given the circles he moved in, his being here meant that this had to be serious. Likely he'd flown in from DC to meet me. My curiosity was piqued.

He rose, all six feet seven inches of him, and crossed the room in three strides. He enfolded my hand, which isn't small, in what felt like a weathered old catcher's mitt. His other hand grasped my forearm. A classic politician's handshake, but somehow, with him, it felt sincere.

I'm pretty big myself—six four and broad-shouldered—but Parnell had more than size going for him; he had *presence*, and no point pretending that it didn't make a hell of an impression. His charcoal pin-stripe suit looked hand-tailored. He wore a silvery tie and a crisp white shirt.

There are very few people I genuinely admire, but Gideon Parnell was one of them. The man was a giant, and not just in size.

"Mr. Heller," he said, "thank you so much for meeting with us." His voice rumbled like the lowest C in the organ at Washington National Cathedral. He waved a hand around at the conference room, at his colleague lingering in the doorway like a family retainer awaiting further orders.

A few people passed by and looked curiously through the glass wall. "John, it looks like the morning rush has begun, so could you . . . ?"

John Malkin nodded and touched a button on a switch plate just inside the doorframe. The glass wall immediately turned opaque, like a glass of milk.

"Thank you, John," Parnell said preemptively. Malkin flinched and then nodded. "Mr. Heller," he said, tipping his head in my direction. He eased out, closing the door behind him.

Parnell poured coffee from a thermal carafe into a couple of white stoneware mugs. "You like coffee, and you like it black, I'm told," he said without looking up.

I smiled to myself.

He handed me a mug and gestured toward the chair next to his at one end of the long black table.

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“So let me ask you something,” I said as I settled into an expensive-looking leather chair. “What was the point of making me sign an NDA? You obviously checked me out. You did your due diligence. You even know how I drink my coffee. So if you’d really done your homework, you know about my reputation for discretion.”

“Please don’t take this the wrong way, Nick—may I call you Nick?”

I nodded.

“It’s not you I’m concerned about.”

“Then what are you concerned about?”

“Others who may be watching this office and me in particular. I have to be extraordinarily careful.”

“Well, even paranoids have enemies,” I said.

After a long pause, he said, “A dear friend of mine—I won’t say *client*, because he’s not and *can’t* be a client, for reasons you’ll soon understand—is about to be viciously defamed by a scurrilous gossip website.”

“Okay.”

“This is a gentleman I have known for decades. A man of impeccable moral character. An eminent, I would say *great*, man. If these outrageous charges are allowed to be published, his entire career will be destroyed.”

“Is the story true?”

“Absolutely not.”

“Then what’s he worried about? Truth is the absolute defense.”

“Not anymore. Not in the Internet era. I’m not sure you appreciate the gravity of the situation.”

“Well, you wouldn’t have asked to meet with me if it weren’t serious. Tell me, Mr. Parnell. How bad is this story?”

“It alleges that my friend had a regular relationship with an escort. A call girl. A prostitute.”

“Is your friend the pope? I could see that being a career ender for His Eminence, maybe.”

Parnell wasn't amused. "In his position, my friend can't afford the slightest hint of impropriety. His entire career rests on his moral authority."

I held his gaze a moment. "And you're not going to tell me who it is."

He lowered his head, clenched his jaw muscles, shook his head. "Not until you agree to take the job."

"The job is—what? To discredit this story?"

He nodded, took a sip of his coffee. Checked his watch. Finally I spoke.

"Mr. Parnell—"

"I can't tell you," he said.

"And I won't take the job until I know who it is." I started to rise. "So I'd say we've reached an impasse."

I realized then the secret to Gideon Parnell's success. It wasn't his dignity or his gravitas or his integrity. Not even his storied career. It was his face. The large liquid eyes, the disarming smile: They made him look vulnerable, eager, defenseless. Like a puppy. You wanted to protect him, take care of him. It was disconcerting. But his expression could toggle to stern in an instant.

"I want to make sure we're both on the same page before I tell you any more."

"Everything you say to me is covered by the NDA I signed."

Parnell compressed his lips like a petulant child.

"All right," I said. "You want me to discredit a false story. What am I missing here? Why give it any attention?"

"Because the story has been meticulously prepared. On the surface, it looks plausible. The website claims to have copies of e-mails, even a video interview with the escort in question. Once this story gets out there, unwinding it will take some time and the damage will be done."

"If the story's so solid, why haven't they run it already?"

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“Because I’ve made a deal with them. They’re giving us forty-eight hours before the piece goes live.”

“What’s the website?”

“Slander Sheet.”

“Hoo boy.” Slander Sheet made even the edgier gossip websites like Gawker and TMZ look like *The Economist*. It was one of those trashy, sensationalist websites that no one admitted looking at but everyone did. Or knew someone who did. Unlike old-fashioned newspaper gossip columns, which might run a cutesy blind item about, say, “a certain sixtyish real estate magnate with a much younger trophy wife,” Slander Sheet came right out and named names. It was fearless and vicious and just about everybody in the public eye was scared of it.

“Well, that sucks,” I said.

“Indeed. That’s why ignoring it won’t work. The story will have legs, as they say. It’s going to be picked up, and it’s going to get a lot of attention. Like the old saying goes, a lie gets halfway around the world before truth has the chance to put its pants on.”

Maybe not the best expression to use in this situation. I tried not to smile. “Here we are, sitting in the offices of Shays Abbott, the biggest, scariest law firm in the country. Can’t you guys just shut this thing down? Threaten an injunction or whatever? Isn’t that normally how it plays?”

He shook his head slowly. “There’s not a damned thing we can do to stop them.”

“If the piece is false and libelous, can’t you get a judge to order them not to publish?”

“That’s called ‘prior restraint,’ and it’s unconstitutional in this country. Violates freedom of speech.”

“That doesn’t stop you from threatening to file a massive libel suit against this lousy little website. Scare the crap out of them. Kill the snake. Everyone from the White House on down would cheer you on.”

“And that would just feed the flames. Give the story oxygen, which is exactly what they want.”

He had a point. “So how do you know what’s in the story?”

“The reporter e-mailed a list of questions.”

“To you? Or to this unnamed friend of yours?”

“To him.”

“Did he answer them?”

“He ignored them.”

“And they’re running the story anyway?”

He nodded.

“I don’t like this.”

“Neither do I.”

“No, that’s not what I mean. Something doesn’t smell right about this. Like maybe there’s more to the story than you’re letting on. I’d put this in the ‘where there’s smoke, there’s fire’ category. Meaning that there’s at least some truth here. So I’m thinking the real reason I’m here is that you want me to do a scrub.”

Parnell fixed me with a steely stare. No more frightened puppy dog. “If you mean, do I want you to conceal evidence and make witnesses disappear or what have you, you don’t know me. As I told you, this entire story is false.”

“Mr. Parnell, I can’t take this on until I talk to your friend.”

“I’m sorry. That’s just not possible. And I’m Gideon.”

“I understand.” I rose and extended my hand, but Parnell didn’t take it. “I’m sorry we wasted each other’s time.”

“Sit down, Mr. Heller. Please understand, this is not someone you can just go in and interview.”

“Well, until I’ve talked to the guy, I won’t do it.” I remained standing. “You know damned well you can easily find someone else. There’s no shortage of investigators who’d jump at the chance to work for

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Shays Abbott. I'm in the fortunate position of being able to pick and choose."

This was an out-and-out lie. In the past few months I had taken work I once swore I'd never do. Times were hard for everyone.

"Perhaps I can arrange for you two to talk over the phone."

"I need to look him in the eye, Gideon. Either I talk to him face-to-face or I'm just not interested."

"As I say, that's not possible."

"Why not?"

"Because he's a Supreme Court justice."

I slowly sat back down. "Now I'm interested," I said.