



● GREG BARDSLEY ● a novel

CASH

OUT

GREG BARDSLEY • a novel



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Dedication

For Nancy

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One



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Rod Stone scrunches his face as he thinks about it.

“So this guy’s gonna handle your testicles?”

I stare back into Rod’s gray eyes and glance down at the stubble on his square chin, refusing to crack a smile, knowing he certainly won’t. He gives me this look, like I’m chewing a grasshopper, and squints. Juts his jaw. “This man will need to soap you up, won’t he?”

I wave him off and look away. “Okay, okay.”

“He’ll shave you.”

I nod, conceding.

“His hands soft and gentle”—he shudders in mock disgust—“as they drip warm, soapy water over your balls.”

We look at each other.

“Your legs spread wide open for him.”

I have to look away, unable to keep my straight face a minute longer. Then I take my pint glass and lift it toward him.

It is noon on a Tuesday, and I’m sitting in a dark lounge. By Friday, I’ll have \$1.1 million deposited into my bank account. I’ll be like a bird uncaged, ready to fly away with my family, ready to start a new life. All I need to do is last another three days. Oh, and brave my way through a vasectomy.

“To my testes,” I say.

Rod Stone squints and juts his jaw out again, looking away. “That doc’s gonna rip out your plumbing like a—”

“Okay, that’s enough.”

Fifty minutes later, my teeth are gritted, my back is arched, and my fists are clenched.

“So what’s FlowBid stock at now? One-twenty?”

The doctor has my legs in stirrups. I’ve got a surgical clamp hanging out of my privates. I am not in my *safe place*.

“I should’ve bought when it was at ten.”

I nod and gasp. “Ten.”

“I bet you got in low, huh? What, you started there in oh-five, right?”

I grimace. “Oh-five.”

“You hang on a little longer, and you’ll be sitting pretty the rest of your life.”

My jaws clench. “Sitting pretty.”

God, my wife would love seeing this. After birthing two ten-pounders and enduring decades of OB/GYN visits, she’s been more than a little amused by the prospect of Vasectomy Day—by knowing that finally I’d be the one in stirrups, exposed and uncomfortable, the one whose crotch was absorbing wave after wave of throbbing pain. Of course, I don’t think any of her OBs were ever as rough as my jock-swaggering urologist. You see, guys aren’t gentle with each other—even when it comes to vasectomies. When Doc gave me his presurgery scrotal wash down, it felt like he was scrubbing a pot.

Then, as I lay on the table, I am suddenly struck by it all. The statement I’m making with this surgery, this *de facto* announcement that I’m done fathering babies, hits me like a ton of unexpected emotional bricks, and I’m transported back to two of the most amazing moments in my life.

Six years ago.

Three years ago.

Six Years Ago

I am a new daddy. Forty-eight hours after Harry’s birth, and I am still overcome with joy. When my wife and son sleep, I can’t stop crying. My new family is safe, my son Harry is here, and my life will never be the same. It’s instant love, and it’s the most beautiful thing on Earth. What did I ever do to deserve this?

Sometimes it blows me away to think that six years have passed since then. When I drive Harry to school, I watch as he bolts from the car to join his buddies, smiling and joking, fully independent and on his way, and think back on everything: all the times I slept beside his bassinet with my fingertips on his chest, worried he’d stop breathing; all the times I changed his diapers; all the times he needed to be rocked; all the times I had to put a favorite toy in “Daddy Jail”; all the times he cried out in the night and I’d come padding down the hallway; all the times he needed Mommy and no one else would do. I think back on all the firsts: the first step

the first words, the first day in big-boy underwear, the first haircut, the first rush to the hospital, the first time he saw something that truly ignited his imagination, the first time he insisted that his mysterious and elusive imaginary friend, “Abey Dabey Cabey,” was real and much too complex for me to understand.

Would be nice to go back to that time, for a moment.

Three Years Ago

It is less than an hour after Ben’s birth. I am a new daddy again, and I am overcome with joy. I look down at him, and he is beautiful. I’m still staring at him when a newly minted doctor slips into our room, refusing to look me in the eye. She announces that our son has a massive tumor in his abdominal cavity.

In an instant, our world darkens and tilts. This can’t be happening. But I know all too well that the worst does happen to people—every day. The doc leads me to another room and shows me an X-ray of Ben’s little tummy. On one side, all you see is solid white.

I stand there and nod. I can’t speak.

That night, I cry on the phone with Rod Stone. I hold Kate’s hand until she falls asleep. I pace the hospital floors until the wee hours. I stare at the walls. I stare at Ben—he is so beautiful.

The next morning, a platoon of doctors parades in with news: It was all an awful misdiagnosis. The white mass in that X-ray was nothing more than an air pocket. A trip to radiology confirms it. I am numb. My family is safe, Ben is actually healthy—in fact, uncommonly strong.

It takes a long time—months and months—before I really believe the doctors. After all, I know that darkness always looms, is always right around the corner—waiting for its moment, waiting to take lives upside down, waiting to make anyone wilt in its iron grip. It has hit before, and we know it will return someday, as it does for us all.

Someday.

My urologist is cutting and pulling and snipping. It doesn’t hurt anymore, not exactly, but it is screwing with my head.

“I’m conservative, Dan. A belt-and-suspenders guy.”

I grimace. “Suspenders.”

He throws something at the trash can. A wet slap against the plastic liner.

“So”—yank—“I’m thorough.”

Smoke. I smell smoke. *What the hell?* I lift my head just enough to see a stream of thin white smoke meandering out of my crotch. I close my eyes and lower my head.

“What I do is, snip, double-tie, double-tie, cauterize. That’s what you’re smelling.”

I have to change the subject. “I was gonna say—you didn’t buy any FlowBid early on?”

“No.” He sighs, irritated. “I was stupid. My adviser told me to buy eight hundred shares, and passed. I was a nonbeliever, Dan. I mean, who could’ve predicted this?” Another snip, another slap against the trash can. “But what do you think? You think there’s still some upside there?”

People always ask me that. They always want to know how much higher the FlowBid share price can skyrocket, how much more money it can make them, whether there’s still decent coin to be made if they get in now—because, hell, *someone’s* buying more and more of FlowBid, given its ever-skyward share price.

Such a dilemma.

The FlowBid story is just one of many that have played out in the last decade, across Silicon Valley and all the way up the peninsula to San Francisco. Google. Facebook. NetApp. The reborn Apple. Along with hundreds of smaller companies, they’re fueling this second Internet boom—along with skyrocketing property values and easy loans, that is. That dot-com crash eight years ago? These new economists warning about a storm brewing off-coast? The chance that it all could come crashing down? *Meh*—that’s all just noise. Moderation? Caution? That’s for losers. So more and more fortune seekers come pouring into the area every year, from across the country and around the world, sending rent and home prices into the stratosphere, clogging the freeways with an endless procession of BMWs and Audis and Porsches, flooding posh restaurants and spas, overcrowding the Whole Foods aisles and espresso shop lines. And with them they’re bringing an entirely new kind of lifestyle to the Bay Area: Out go the values of balance, tolerance, and diversity, *in* come fast and easy wealth, unquenchable greed, insane work hours, outsider arrogance, and supreme indifference to anything that’s more than five years old.

My world is tilted.

The place where I grew up is gone.

I want out.

Just a few years ago, I felt like I was making a difference. I was working as a reporter, calling out people hurting other people, people taking things that didn’t belong to them, while shining a light on people who were doing amazing things, people who wanted more from their government. I covered issues that mattered to real people, issues that dwarfed the IT babble that now dominates my life.

Now I find myself with the suits, dealing with people like Janice from Finance.

Take yesterday. Janice pops into my cube, her face worked up into a knot.

“Waddlington needs the PMO master doc for the P5s by EOB. And if you can’t get the Q1 PO results sooner, then we’ll need to put the P6s into the FOD, and that includes the L2s and L6s.”

“Um . . .” I squint at her, confused. “I write speeches. I think you’ve got the wrong guy.”

Her face tightens. “No, I don’t.”

“Huh?”

“Beth Gavin sent me. She’s Stephen Fitzroy’s—”

“Executive assistant. Yeah, I know.”

Beth Gavin loves this kind of thing: throwing shit assignments my way, assignments that have

nothing to do with my job, that throw me off my game. This is what Beth Gavin does.

Janice adds, “And don’t forget the SWAT reports for the L10s and L16s in the FOD.”

My throat is so dry, I feel like it’ll crack. *How did I get here?* Not that anyone else around here ever indulges in second thoughts. They’re too busy talking about *the new guy*.

“Fitzroy loves the new guy,” Barbara from Procurement keeps telling me.

“Oh, yeah?”

“Out-of-the-box thinker,” she says. “That’s what they’re saying. ‘Out-of-the-box thinker, out-of-the-box thinker.’ On and on and on.”

The new guy doesn’t look like us. He has this whole I-don’t-give-a-shit vibe going. Long, dark beard that comes to a point near his sternum. Big head of black wavy hair. Big, thick tribal tattoos on his long, muscular arms. Dark sunglasses, worn indoors. Heavy, charcoal-gray jeans, worn-in T-shirt, and big black boots. Yeah, he’s a pretty jarring sight around FlowBid.

I wish I could dress like the new guy. Then I realize, *In a few days, I can.*

Back on the vasectomy table, the doc asks, “So what do you think, Dan? That stock of yours has more gas in the tank?”

And, like an idiot, I say what I always say: “We still see a lot of upside.”

Because, hell, FlowBid ain’t never gonna crash.

I realize I’m still arching my back, still gritting my teeth, my fists still balled up at my sides. I pull in a deep breath and force myself to relax. Then the doc swaggers around the table, takes my hand, and squeezes it hard.

“All done,” he says. “Now, remember what I said—ice on, ice off, every twenty minutes, for the next twenty-four hours. Use a bag of frozen peas. No strenuous activity of any kind.” He squints at me. “You screw up my work, I’ll kill you.”

In a minute, my tighty-whities are stuffed with a mound of gauze and the doc is leading me out. “You’re still packing heat the next ten times, so be careful where you point that thing.”

The nurses are mute as I pad through the waiting area and head for the elevator. I know what they’re thinking, and they know what *I’m* thinking—that we’re all thinking about my nuts and scrotum, which I have to admit is kind of funny. When my cell phone breaks the silence, I know what it is without looking.

Kate.

She’s giving me her you-poor-baby voice, slightly amused. “How they hanging?”

“Not hanging. Hurting.”

“Poor little Danny had a little procedure.”

The elevator doors open, and I shuffle in. “I get the couch tonight? Doc’s orders.”

“I know, I know. You sure you can still do this appointment?”

Appointment? Mind scrambles. *Oh shit. . . . Fuck.*

That would be our weekly meeting with our sex counselor, the professional who’s supposed to help

us get our groove back, help me prove to Kate once and for all that I really do love her. Like a macho idiot, earlier this week I insisted that we keep the appointment on the books. A little snip wouldn't put this man out of order.

I grit my teeth. "Oh, I'm fine."

"You sure? I can just go solo."

Solo? Not with our counselor. "No, no. I'll be there."

"You sure?"

"Just grab me a bag of frozen peas, if you can."

"What?" Pause. "Oh, right, you're packin' peas now. Assume the boys don't care what brand?"

"Good one."

"You gonna let me take a look?" It's like she's about to laugh. "I'm kind of curious."

"You're crazy," I say.

"Oh, that reminds me. Calhoun came over again."

Calhoun. In our house? "Tell me you're kidding."

"I'm not."

"You let him in?"

"Don't worry. I just stood in the doorway, didn't budge. But he wants to talk to you."

Calhoun is our freak neighbor. We try to cope with him, but after five years we've learned it's better to avoid him. It's a shame, and we feel like dicks, but we've learned one thing: If you *do* look at him, or wave to him or engage with him in any way, you *will* lose about ninety minutes of your life—ninety minutes lost in Calhoun's strange, gelatinous world.

"He said he'll come back."

"Great."

"Says it's urgent."

"Sure it is."

"The kids are screaming. Gotta run in a sec."

"Okay."

"Oh, and someone from FlowBid called."

"Yeah?"

"Janice from Finance. I think. That sound right?"

I sigh. "Yeah."

"She wants an FOD in the P6, or something. I wrote it down."

"Okay."

"Someone's crying. Gotta go."

Pushing through the doors and into the San Mateo sunshine, I keep telling myself, *Three days*. Three days, not only will my wounds be healed, but my first round of stock options will vest, at which point I'll cash them out. Result: more than a million bucks in profit. I had never imagined the possibility of amassing so much wealth in one small moment; two years ago, *no one* would have

guessed that FlowBid stock would increase like it has. But now here I am, just three days away from whole new life.

In three days, my first block of options will vest—5,300 in all. It's the first of two installments from my original 2005 grant of 10,600 options, but I'm not going to stick around another two years to pocket the full grant. Hell, I won't even stick around another week.

As soon as the options vest, I'll call Smith Barney to place a same-day sale—purchasing my options at the grant price of \$8, and selling them immediately at the current market price of \$216. The funds will be wired to my FlowBid-issued account at Smith Barney, which will arrange to have the check printed two days later at its Menlo Park office near Sand Hill Road, the epicenter of the venture capital world. I'll show up in my Corolla, pick up the check, and proceed directly to nearby Mountain View to deposit it into our checking account.

The next day, I'll give FlowBid my two weeks' notice. I'm sure it will shock the hell out of them. Conventional wisdom around here is that only a numskull would walk away with \$1.1 million when I can stick around two more years for another million—or much more, assuming the stock keeps climbing, assuming the bottom doesn't fall out. But that's the difference between the conventional wisdom and me.

I want out.

We'll call our real estate agent to put our little peninsula cottage up for sale, for what's sure to be an insane profit. Seven years ago, we bought that little 1,200-square-foot, two-bedroom place for \$589,000; today, there's guaranteed to be a bidding war, and it's bound to go for at least a million. Paid for the course on the peninsula.

That night we'll go out for Mexican food, to a worn-in, hole-in-the-wall place we love, peopled by longtime locals and phenomenal margaritas. The next day, we'll get up, pack the car, and head over the hill and south along the shoreline, straight for the coastal communities between Santa Cruz and Monterey, where we'll start the search for the perfect “beach shack.” Kate will say, “You're really gonna go barefoot the whole day?” And I'll glance back at her, a big grin spreading across my face, and nod.

Within a month, after all the dust settles, we'll have bought a waterfront property with great view and beach access. It won't be luxurious, just functional and well made. We'll either have a tiny mortgage or none at all, and the profit from our cottage sale will be sitting in savings.

Out will go the twelve-hour workdays, the endless chatter about the need for more server capacity, the continual asides about stock options and growing fortunes, the late-night slide-deck drills with jittery VP three years out of college, the sheer exhaustion that makes you want to avoid eye contact with the world just so you can get home already. Out will go all those San Francisco dinner parties, those thinly disguised boasting contests where guests compete for top bragging rights on everything from whose house has the newest amenity, to who has the most “nanny help,” to whose kid is succeeding the most without trying. Out will go the Range Rovers and Mercedeses and BMW utility vehicles. Out will go Janice from Finance.

Out. All of it.

In will come Hondas and sandals and Fords and old VW buses with longboards tied to the roof.

will come locals riding on old beach cruisers, smiling back at us.

In will come our new life.

I want to do the things we'd stopped doing on the other side: making meals from scratch, enjoying lazy visits with friends, spending real time on the phone with loved ones, smiling at strangers, getting caught up in a good book. I want to work in the front yard and get my hands dirty, my body scraped up, my sweat mixed with dirt. Sure, it'll stink, that mixture of sweat and dirt—until I run across the beach and dive into the ocean.

We'll leave our TV in a box, in the garage.

Wi-Fi? We'll never even unpack the router.

I'll spend real time with my wife and children, the kind of time I never quite manage to spend in my current life, that life on *the other side* where I just can't stop to count my blessings.

We'll spend the whole summer on the beach. In the morning, Kate will run her three miles on the hard, wet sand as the boys and I prepare breakfast: melons, toast, and Raisin Bran, a coffee for Daddy. In the afternoon, I'll sit on our old canvas beach chair, a kid on each side of my lap, my father's forty-year-old Coleman sunk into the sand, icing apple juice, water, and a few cans of Tecate, as I read the next installment of *Robinson Crusoe*. When evening approaches, I'll take a siesta in the sand, the pulsing of the waves sedating me, the Pacific breeze washing over me, as Kate brings the boys home and sparks up the barbecue. At night, the boys and I will build castles and car garages out of blocks, the sound of crashing waves easing through the windows and mixing with the saxophone-heavy stereo echoing throughout the house.

When the house is quiet, Kate and I will sit on the couch and hold hands and talk. We'll actually hang out and talk. We need that, Kate and I. We've needed it for a long time.

This is all doable, I think as I hobble to my Corolla. *It's not a dream. It's a plan.*

My reverie is interrupted by the sound of footsteps.

Then a bizarre sight: two little geeks, coming at me like a pair of bats out of hell, running awkwardly, each of them holding one end of a rope.

“Hey!”

Before I know what's hit me, they've got the rope wrapped around me, circling me in opposite directions, pinning my wrists to my hips. In seconds I'm wrapped up, immobilized, toppling over. The asphalt comes in and out of view, gets closer and closer, until I twist just enough to land on my shoulder. Shards of pain shoot through my shoulder, my back, my privates. Especially my privates. I screw my eyes shut, tense my muscles, and fight the pain.

And then, a high-pitched voice. “Stay cool, stud machine.”

What is this? My mind is scrambling. *A prank?*

I open my eyes. From my upside-down view, I see an unmarked white van skid to a stop. The side door rolls open, and I'm pulled off the ground and made to hop toward the van. When I try to resist,

they poke me in the spine with something hard and threatening.

My head floats. “What the hell is this?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know,” one voice says, shoving the barrel of something deeper into my back.

“What do you guys want with me? I have a wife and kids at home.”

“I’m sure they’re darling.” They push me. “Sit down.”

What choice do I have? Grimacing, I hop to one of the bench seats.

“Hit it.” The van peels out of the parking lot.

I give my kidnappers a quick glance; they look dimly familiar. The tiny driver is a rail-thin, pasty-skinned nerd in his thirties; I swear he’s wearing a Star Trek shirt. The guy seated beside me is tiny, too, with jeans pulled up to his ribs—not floods, but high-riders. I can’t help but give them a very long double take.

The third guy is small but muscular, with a giant head of wavy, flaming-red hair—he may be the alpha male in this pack of tinies. He sits on the bench seat ahead of me, turns, and squeaks, “You realize what you were about to do back at that doctor’s office?”

I squirm in the rope. It’s getting looser.

Little Red squints at me. “You were about to emasculate yourself.”

And then I realize where I know them from: work. Maybe not Little Red, but the other two. Nevertheless, the realization that they’re FlowBid guys comforts me a little. *Maybe this is some kind of FlowBid prank, I think, a bizarre “abduction” for a wacky corporate offsite.* But I know I’m fooling myself.

“If this is about my vasectomy, you’re too late.” I shift my weight, trying to find relief from the hot pain shooting through my crotch. “I just had it.”

The van skids to a halt, and I’m launched off my seat. Shots of agony surge up to my rib cage and down to my knees. I lower my lids and hiss.

Star Trek says, “The Enterprise has landed.” Little Red snarls.

High Rider says, “His Treo said noon. I have it printed right here.”

He’s right. My vasectomy *was* scheduled for noon, but the doc’s office had called and asked me to come an hour earlier. I just hadn’t changed the time on my Treo.

Star Trek asks, “Should we dock?”

High Rider closes his eyes, takes a deep breath. “Proceed.”

Star Trek hollers, “Prepare for warp speed.”

We jerk forward.

High Rider stares at me a moment. “We need to discuss Fitzroy.”

Crap.

Stephen Fitzroy is my CEO. That’s my job: I write his speeches. I travel on the company jet with him; I go to his compound to work on speaker notes and slide decks; I put words in his mouth. Stephen Fitzroy is worth nearly a billion dollars; he’s one of those visionaries who’s always in the right business at the right time.

A lot of people don't like Stephen Fitzroy.

I look around the van for guns. Nothing.

High Rider squints at me. "You may recognize us. Of course, hotshot pretty boys like yourself usually looked right through us at FlowBid. We were expendable, weren't we, Dan? IT guys like us."

IT guys? Aw, man.

I try to stay calm. "No, I remember you."

"Good, because we remembered *you*. Sure, we got outsourced. And him over here"—he nods at Little Red—"his job got offshored to Bangalore. But we remember you." He glances at Star Trek, who snickers. "How could we forget the tall and charming speechwriter to the great Silicon Valley icon Stephen Fitzroy?"

I shake my head. "I'm not like that, guys."

"You may not have known our names, but we knew yours. How could we not, Dan? All that interesting IT activity of yours? All that inappropriate use of FlowBid IT resources?"

Wait, what?

"You know, the kinds of activities I don't think you want your CEO knowing about."

My heart sinks and my skin cools. *IT guys*. When it comes to the network, those guys can go anywhere and see anything. Like the calendar on my Treo, for instance.

The van makes a hard left. High Rider pulls out some kind of printout. "Here I have a high-level summary of the IT activity of one Dan Jordan at FlowBid. It's quite interesting." He glances at me. "So, in no particular order: approximately one hundred and fifty-six hours spent on personal e-mail accounts. Ninety-eight hours spent working on your personal Web pages. The photocopying of some twelve hundred pages of fliers for your son's preschool, at a cost of six hundred dollars to the company. And the laser-printing of some three thousand Yahtzee score sheets for some stupid prank at a company cost of nearly fifteen hundred dollars."

"Oh, come on. Find me one FlowBid staffer who doesn't use the goddamn Xerox machine."

"All right, then." High Rider takes a thick red folder from Little Red, and glances at me as he pulls out a page. "From one of the many personal e-mail accounts of Dan Jordan, employee number 452 at FlowBid, I read your correspondence from said employee's private Yahoo! Mail account to Dave Hatch, reporter at *BusinessWeek*."

Shit.

" 'Hi, Dave,' " he squeaks in a mocking tone. " 'This e-mail is not for attribution, but you are free to use it for your profile of Stephen Fitzroy. I am his speechwriter (you and I met after Evan's keynote at CES last month), and now that I have spent nearly two and half years with him, I think it is only fair to FlowBid shareholders (and the public) that your story be as comprehensive as possible. Again, this is not for attribution; as a former journalist myself, I am trusting you will respect my wish to remain anonymous. My livelihood relies on it. So, with that, here are a few things you may want to look into.' "

High Rider pauses, exchanges glances with Little Red. " 'Stephen Fitzroy has, shall we say, a pret

bad reputation around the office. He's often reduced lower-level female employees to tears by making fun of their weight and questioning their intelligence. . . . He has three sexual-harassment claims and one paternity suit pending against himself and FlowBid; the company's trying to settle them out of court. . . . Fitzroy had the company jet fly him and his wife to a Palm Springs vacation (on FlowBid dime) the same day FlowBid laid off sixty people in favor of less expensive employees in India. . . . Fitzroy believes in the value of 'strategically sabotaging' office rivals; he considers it one of the factors behind his early success in business. . . . Some of the brightest and most successful people FlowBid have left the company because they refuse to work with him. . . . Oh, and did I mention I has hair plugs?' "

My face is burning. How the hell did they get into that personal e-mail? Not *once* have I accessed that account from work.

High Rider is smiling. "I'd hate to see your CEO read that one."

I stare at him.

"Okay, shall I go on? All right, then. What about . . . sixty hours spent at MILFs in Heat dot-com? Forty-three hours spent at an assortment of websites specializing in the female posterior? Or . . ." He turns over to look me in the eye. ". . . seventeen minutes exchanging erotica with a married coworker?"

I'm about to pass out.

"Mr. Jordan," he squeaks. "Would you like us to share this information, including transcripts of said erotica, with the entire workforce at FlowBid?"

I can see where this is headed. I feel like I'm about to vomit.

"No."

"Good." He pauses. "Would you like us to send your correspondence with *BusinessWeek* Stephen Fitzroy? Or, for that matter, to everyone in the company?"

My head feels like it's floating. "No."

"And would you like us to send details of your improper use of FlowBid IT resources to the business conduct office? Surely, any of these offenses would suffice to have your employment summarily terminated, making you ineligible for scheduled disbursement of noncash compensation and benefits?"

In my line of work, leaking damaging rumors to the press is a capital offense. If the company found out, I'd lose everything: my job, my options, my ability to get rehired. I think of that \$1 million in options, of these final three days before they vest, and I see stars.

"I don't believe you'd want us to do that."

A jolt of pain ripples through my crotch. Twenty minutes ago, a clamp hung out of it. Suddenly, it's the least of my problems. I shake my head, hoping for clarity. "You guys are IT?"

"No, we *were* IT. Now we're just outsourced, offshored, and unemployed. We just had the foresight to back up some very interesting data before we packed our bags."

I try to steady myself. "So now you want something."

He leans forward and snaps, “We want your cooperation, pretty boy.”

Little Red releases a noise, adds, “Pretty boy.”

High Rider pauses, examines my reaction. “We want you to do as we say, when we’re ready.”

Another pause. “Otherwise . . .”

Little Red finishes, “. . . no more fat hookers for you.”

High Rider glares at Little Red. “Keep your fantasies out of this.” Then, to me: “Otherwise, we’ll release your information.”

I look away and shake my head. Of course there is the \$1.1 million, but I’m thinking about Kate and the boys. What will happen to our family if the other stuff gets out—the stuff where I tell another woman I’d like to burrow my face into her hindquarters? With my long hours, Kate’s already feeling abandoned at home—hence the couples counseling sessions. She jokes about the notion of me cheating—“You’re always getting home too late for dinner. You have some hot admin there willing to take your order?”—but lately the joke part has sounded a little halfhearted. I just roll my eyes, wave her off, because in truth I’ve never been tempted—well, almost never.

The van skids to a stop, and I realize we’re back in the parking lot, in front of my car. “Would you like some good news, Dan?” says High Rider.

I stare at him.

“The good news is, we don’t want any of your precious stock-option money.”

“Your fat-hooker money,” Little Red adds.

High Rider turns to him. “That’s your thing, and you know it.”

Little Red snaps, “Maybe he likes big girls, too.”

“Stop it.”

I keep staring at High Rider.

“But we *do* want your collusion. We’re going after that bowl of loose stool you call a CEO. When we come calling—and it will be soon—you *will* assist us. Shouldn’t be hard for a sellout like you.”

Sellout? Damn. These guys did their homework.

“Otherwise, you will lose everything: the chance to cash out your options, the comfy little life with your hard-body wife, the ability to support your sweet little family.”

I look at High Rider’s left hand. No ring.

“Get out, Dan. Get out of the van.”

Still tied up, I hop out of the van, stumble, and crash to the asphalt. I roll and groan.

“And one more thing.”

I glance up at him.

His eyes twinkle. “Have fun with the sex counselor.” He rolls the door shut, and a loud burst of laughter erupts inside the minivan.

Damn, my crotch hurts.

Sellout.

Yeah, that's me. Fucking sellout.

Twelve years ago, back when I was a reporter, it was the last thing I thought I'd become. Then life got harder and I got tired. I got tired of driving around in a '92 Dodge. I got tired of barely having enough money to buy new 501s or pay rent. I got tired of watching the suits sucking dollars out of the newsroom, forcing us all to do more with less and fail badly, destroying editorial quality, leaving us all to crank at a frenzied pace each day, eliminating the chance for any kind of enterprising investigative work. I got tired of watching my beloved newspaper industry lose more and more readers to the Internet.

When Harry was born, things got more tense, and I knew we couldn't live in an apartment forever. I was a daddy now, and I was gonna do whatever it took to make my family safe.

So I sold out.

The way I tell it to my newspaper friends, at least I sold out well. I landed a ghostwriter's job at a promising start-up. While I sometimes felt like a rare bird, being one of the few folks there with any Mexican blood, the work was good, and soon I was promoted to speechwriter to the CEO. As luck would have it, FlowBid's e-commerce software was the right solution at the right time, and when we went public on NASDAQ in '06, we raised \$1.7 billion in a day. Fitzroy made it to the cover of *BusinessWeek* that year. And just like that my options were worth something.

That was 362 days ago.

The closer I get to 365, the more I find myself spending time with my old-time California friends—the natives—people like Rod Stone.

Rod and I have been friends since we were eighth graders in the East Bay. The older we get, the more our lives head in opposite directions. But we still share a connection, this bond that won't break. Maybe it's because we've both dealt with some nasty moments and got through them together. But more than anything I think it's because we can cross over into each other's very different worlds without breaking stride.

I love my family, and he gets it.

He fights in a cage, and I get it.

Rod is shaven nearly bald, with just a rind of stubble on his scalp. His body is rock-hard, but not a giant. No fat under those loose cotton, solid-gray fatigues and flimsy, worn-in T-shirts. He's got a natural squint and a thuglike underbite that gives people pause.

Rod thinks I was wrong to sell out. A few weeks back, over a few pints, he told me, "Elgin says the best. I think it was in *The Triumph*: 'Those who chase riches lose before the chase even begins.' "

I rolled my eyes. "Elgin never had a mortgage in the Bay Area."

I'm parked in front of the Safeway in Menlo Park, surrounded by a fleet of \$60,000 imports. I gaze into space, failing to devise any kind of plan. Maybe the pain meds are making me stupid. Maybe I'm still in shock from what just happened. Was I really roped up by a band of IT geeks? Were they really setting me up for some kind of extortion? Did that guy really call his van the Enterprise?

My cell rings, gives me a jolt. I'm so out of sorts, I don't even look to see who it is.

"Yeah?"

"Dan, this is Janice from Finance."

My chest tightens. "Yeah, listen, Janice—I'm out today and—"

"Dan, you need to put the P6s into the FOD, and then next week we can worry about the L26s in the PLT."

"Janice," I snap, and catch myself, "I'm out today. I had a medical thing, and I'm on meds right now. And I don't even know what you're—"

"Dan . . ." I can hear the irritation in her voice. "I need those P6s in the FOD by EOB."

"Janice . . . Janice, listen." Long pause. "Janice, I need you to understand—"

"Can you at least give me the P6s?"

"Janice, you've got the wrong guy."

"No, I don't."

"Janice, I'm a speechwriter. I don't know the first thing about P6s, or this FOD."

Long pause. "Beth Gavin says you're supposed to take care of this."

"Janice." I close my eyes and count to seven. "Janice, we'll have to talk about this tomorrow. I'm out of action today and—"

"I sent you eight e-mails with the relevant attachments."

"Janice, I'm going to have to let you go now."

"But I—"

I end the call.

Three more days.

I reach for my cell and call home. Kate picks up, sounding harried—the boys are yelling in the background.

"You okay?" she says.

I stumble on my words.

"Dan?"

"You won't believe what just happened."

One of the boys lets out a bone-rattling scream. Kate puts the phone down and snaps, "Harry, leave him alone. C'mere, Ben." A second later, she says to me, "Okay, I'm back."

"I just had these geeks throw me into a van."

Another scream. Sounds like Ben.

"Geeks? What kind of geeks? What van?"

"I had to ask this guy in the parking lot to untie me."

There's a loud crash, then screams. I can barely hear her over the racket. "Hold on. Harry, get over here this instant." And then, "Okay. Now, *what?*"

"Let's talk later."

The boys return to screaming. "Might be better." Her voice tightens. "And if you have time to g

those peas yourself, that would be great. I still have to make their lunches.”

“No problem.”

“Okay. Bye,” she says, the line going dead right as she hollers, “Harry, leave him—”

Standing bowlegged in front of the frozen-food doors, I’m thinking about everything *but* peas. I’m thinking about covering my ass, about calling the cops, about getting a lawyer, about contacting my boss, about notifying FlowBid’s corporate security. I’m thinking about trying to stop this thing before it gets out of hand. Only problem is, if I call any one of those people, my career will be over, and my family will lose all that money—all that *future* I’ve been working toward the past two years, money for which I’ve given up my one true career passion.

Maybe all they want is some easy favor . . .

I open a door and grab a long bag of Jolly Green Giant peas.

Maybe they want some harmless scrap of information . . .

I back up and close the door, weighing the bag in my hand.

Maybe they don’t want me to do anything illegal? Maybe . . .

I turn around—and slam smack into a pit bull of a man. Or, rather, he smacks right into me.

He is white, bald, and compact, his enormous upper body nearly too big for his blue blazer. When I look into his dark eyes, I know I’m in trouble: These aren’t the eyes of someone who is surprised or worried. These eyes are like Rod’s—calm and in control. Then he grabs hold of me and sends me across the aisle and through a freezer door.

It happens so fast—it’s so effortless—that I have no time to feel surprised. Glass goes everywhere, yellow Eggo boxes tumble over my head, a woman shrieks, and I’m getting pulled out of the freezer and pushed across the aisle.

He slams me against the metal frame of a glass door and eases his jaw toward mine, completely calm, reeking of some oaky cologne. “You need to watch yourself, Gomer.”

I try to pull free, but he’s too strong. Scary strong.

“I didn’t—”

He pulls me closer, bites his lip and drives a knee into me—right between the legs.

He does it again.

“ ’Member what I said,” he whispers as he lowers me to the ground. “Watch yourself.”

The pain envelops me. It sucks my breath away, paralyzes my limbs, and overtakes my senses. Iron rods of agony slowly spread to my stomach and down my legs, worse than anything I’ve ever felt. Slowly, I slide to the ground and ball up on my side, battling the urge to vomit as I watch this guy stride toward the front, people scrambling to get out of his way, everyone parting for the pit bull in his blazer.

I hobble through the Palo Alto medical office, twenty-five minutes late for our “appointment.” I know this will be ugly, so I don’t even look at the blond receptionist; I just keep hobbling down the narrow

hallway toward that solid-oak door with the black nameplate and white lettering: DR. HEIDI M. DOUGLAS. I stop and take a few deep breaths, preparing myself. I know they're in there expanding the list of things I must do if I ever want to have sex with my wife as frequently, and as passionately as we used to.

I open the door and poke my head in.

A cold, wet bag nails me in the face.

"There's your fucking peas."

I look up, and Kate is standing in front of the couch, her cheeks flushed with anger. Heidi the counselor, is seated on the other side of the room, grabbing the arms of her leather chair, bracing for something close to a category 4 hurricane.

Kate turns to sit down, folding her arms in a huff. "Knew you'd be late."

Kate has fixed herself up, and holy shit, does she look good. Silky blond hair falling to her shoulder, a few strands dropping over her giant blue eyes. Form-fitting T-shirt highlighting her narrow torso. Tight, dark blue jeans that she knows drive me crazy. Black leather boots with square tips and thick heels, just the way I love them.

Heidi says, "Tell him how you're feeling right now."

Kate is staring at me, her nostrils flaring. "Like I wanna hit him."

Heidi soothes, "Dan?"

"You guys, I was attacked at a Safeway. Some guy threw me into the Eggos."

Kate looks confused. "What?"

I lower myself onto the couch. "He kneed me, Kate. This bald guy kneed me, right in the groin. Right after the vasectomy. The police held me for like an hour to give my statement." I look at the both, my chest rising. "I got here as fast as I could."

Kate looks skeptical. "Was this bald guy one of the geeks in the van?"

"That was earlier," I blurt. "The Eggos came later."

Kate and Heidi glance at each other. I use the moment to slide the frozen peas under my loose sweatpants, closing my eyes and hissing as I arrange the bag between my legs.

"Are you serious?" Kate asks. "Two attacks in two hours. I'm supposed to believe that?"

"I have the detective's card, honey—"

Heidi stops me with a wave. "Dan, are you acting like a man?"

This startles me. "What?"

"Are you being a man right now?"

What the . . .

"I've been attacked, Heidi. I had a vasectomy less than three hours ago, and now I've been *kicked in the nuts*. Do you understand?"

Heidi says, "A man keeps his word, Dan. He does what he says he'll do, and he'll be where he's supposed to be, *when* he's supposed to be there." She pauses. "That's what a man does."

“Dr. Douglas, don’t tell *me* about—”

Heidi waves me off. “You knew today was an important commitment, Dan, but you dropped the ball. How do you think that makes her feel? You know being there for Kate is a big issue with you two.”

I sit back and look away.

“We’ve been over this before, Dan.”

I turn and stare at her.

“Right now, who’s the one who decides if you will have sex?”

I look away again. “Kate.”

“Do you want to have sex with Kate more often?”

“Yes,” I mumble.

“But she decides.”

I roll my eyes and nod.

“So what do you think, Dan? Should you try a little harder to do things to help put Kate in the right frame of mind? The right kind of relaxed and rested physiological state? You know, reduce her stress levels around the house? Give her time to rest?” She looks at me, concerned. “Are you getting the texts?”

Part of the Heidi Douglas program is that the husband agrees to receive automated text messages from the good doctor. They’re reminders for hubbies who’d otherwise fall off the wagon. In my case I’m reminded to make a family dinner each week—and it can’t be “a giant platter of meat,” as Kate adds, meaning I need to include vegetables, a salad, stuff like that. To say the texts annoy me is an understatement, but I keep telling myself, *Obey the text, get more sex.*

“Yes, I’m getting the texts.”

“And you must follow them, because we need to prove to her that you won’t let her down. That last one’s a biggie, isn’t it, Dan? Kate might put on a good face in front of the kids, but you can see how scared she is that you’ll let her down, can’t you? These kinds of fears are common for people who were hurt at an early age, aren’t they?”

She’s right. “They are.”

“And for Kate, the most natural reaction is to shut you out, to avoid any kind of intimacy, because when she felt that wonderful closeness as a child—when it counted most—it was always taken away.”

Kate’s eyes have welled up, but somehow she also seems happy—glad that someone is finally putting her feelings into words. And it’s like a sock in the gut, seeing her there, so vulnerable, when you realize what she may soon learn about her husband.

Heidi pierces me. “What do you say to Kate right now, Dan?”

I look at Kate again, at those enormous, experienced eyes that have bewitched me for so long, her lower lip easing out in that vulnerable way, and I melt.

“Kate, honey.” I pause. “I’m never gonna leave you.”

She nods and wipes away a tear. “But you don’t love me.”

“That’s not true, honey.”

She sniffs. “Not like before.”

I wince. *How do I do this?* “Kate, I know what you’re going through. And I’m sorry I was late. But I’ve just been attacked twice in the span of two hours. A gang of nitwits kidnapped me and threw me into a van. And then some beefy little bald guy threw me through a freezer door. Look—I have the detective’s card.” I show it to her, then catch Heidi giving me the stinkeye. “But—yeah, I should’ve called.”

Kate looks off into the distance. “I had my cell the whole time, Dan.”

I take her hand. “I guess I was in shock.”

Heidi says, “Dan, do real men make excuses?”

Twenty minutes later, after doing everything I could to placate Kate—or Dr. Heidi, I’m not sure which—I convince my wife to walk with me to our usual post-therapy date spot—the small bar Cafe Fino in downtown Palo Alto. I’m sure we’re quite the sight, with Kate looking so ultrafine, and me looking like I’ve been neutered, abducted, and thrown through a freezer door.

I try to take her hand, but she eases away.

“I’m really sorry about being late, Kate. I’ve been having kind of a tough day.”

“So some kids from work really threw you into a van? What was it, some kind of prank?”

“I wish.” Call me a coward, but I don’t want to say too much.

“And this bald guy at the store—he was with the guys in the van?”

“Don’t think so.” I reach into my sweats and rearrange the peas. An older woman walking toward us gives me a stern look. “The bald guy—God knows what the hell that was.” I sigh. “You think I should see the doc again? You know, after getting kneed?”

“No idea, dude. I don’t have a scrotum.”

The gin martini at Cafe Fino feels good going down. Really good.

“Wish I’d been there,” Kate says, staring straight ahead. “Bald little fuck would have a big gash on his scalp right now.”

Kate likes to fight. Or, I should say, she used to. When I met her, Kate was a competitive kickboxer. (As you probably can tell, I have an affinity for fighters.) But that was then, and now Kate is all about being a good mom, and her kickboxing days are a distant memory.

Back then, in our single days, when we were really just kids, things were so much simpler. You didn’t have to whittle away on long self-improvement lists for the chance to screw around with your wife, the gorgeous creature who used to wake you at 3 A.M. every other night, her naked body pressed against you. Back then, you had no children for whom you’d sacrifice everything. Back then, you had no gigantic sum of stock to lose just days before it vested.

Kate crosses her legs on the stool. “All right, walk me through your bad day.”

As we sip our martinis, I give Kate the blow-by-blow: the IT ambush, the extortion scheme, the

frozen-food knockdown. When I tell her about the IT nerds' scheme, I leave out the sexual subplot—
but I admit that I did leak damaging tidbits to *BusinessWeek*.

Kate covers her eyes. “I can’t fucking believe you.”

I sink my head. “I know.”

Eyes still closed. “With everything we’ve been working for, Dan. You jeopardized it all.”

“I know. I just . . .”

She opens her eyes and looks around, raises her hands as if to say, *What the fuck?* “I mean, the
affects everything we’ve talked about for the past five years.”

I reach down and rearrange my peas. “I know.”

“Why, Dan?”

“I’ve told you why, Kate. Fitzroy’s a prick. The man destroys careers for sport. *BusinessWeek*
reached out to me, and he had it coming.”

Kate puts her martini down and turns to me, those giant eyes searching my face. “Who gives a shit
about Stephen Fitzroy?” she whispers. “All you had to do was hang on for a little longer—just a few
days longer—for the options to vest.”

I look at her.

“A month from now, you could’ve leaked stuff to *BusinessWeek* every day.”

“I’m sorry, Kate.”

“Makes me wonder what else you’ve done.”

I squint at her. “What?”

“You heard me. Makes me wonder what else they have on you. Something you don’t want me to
know about.”

Like a flash, I am reminded of “the erotica.”

Not erotica, exactly. But a handful of stupid instant messages I had with a married woman who
works down the hall, which the nerds have intercepted. The thought of Kate reading a transcript of my
dirty online chat with Anne Browne, a hot public-relations coordinator, makes me sick. My skin goes
cold, and I’m overcome by a wave of guilt that twists my gut into a knot.

I’m such a fucking idiot, such a fucking horny scumbag, such a fucking animal.

The thing with Anne was, it came out of nowhere—kind of. Sure, I liked the way she paid attention
to me—smiling at me a little longer, giggling flirtatiously at my lame jokes, letting her eyes settle on
me and stay there. But I never wanted it to go beyond that. Then one day we were exchanging some
banter on IM, pretty harmless, talking about preferences and turnoffs and crap like that, and the next
thing I knew we were trading sex secrets. We never did touch—not that Kate would care. Nor that she
would even necessarily believe me.

I hate myself.

After a long pause, Kate says, “Are you sure you can’t go to FlowBid security?”

“First thing they’d do is scour my activity on the network, and we’d be fucked.”

She sighs and looks away. “We need to find a lawyer.”

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