PUBLIC OPINION

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Cordurouy

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This book is for Winston McCrary,
who was a great friend.

"With enough cleverness,
anyone can be manipulated."

MARK TWAIN

PART 1

CHAPTER 1

They say it's Christmas.

It's early morning, and it's still dark in Los Angeles. I'm driving through the Hollywood Hills all but lost, and the streets are nearly empty. With the front two windows of my car rolled down, the air is crisp, and the temperature is somewhere in the mid-sixties. Cold for around here.

My body is achy and weary from these long hours. And heavy drinking. I don't sleep much, but I'm wide awake and driving north, drinking a coffee and plotting. Plotting like a kid who secretly stays up late on Christmas Eve to catch Santa Claus.

You can sleep later. You only get one chance a year to catch old Saint Nick. That's how I feel right now: I'm on a futile mission to which I'm somehow obligated. I'm a barking dog chasing a car, not knowing what I'd do if I caught it.

Driving through these dark hills playing Sinatra Christmas tunes through my car's crackling stock speakers and humming along, I'm trying to convince myself I'm cool like Sinatra and sneaky like Santa. The perfect combo. Though I feel more like I'm in the middle

of a five-year-long panic attack, and I'm amazed I was sober enough to drive this late. The coffee is working.

There's a spotlight up ahead illuminating a hollow tube of foggy air shooting toward the stars. Everything else up here is dark, so I just keep driving toward the light, moving toward the lighthouse on a hill in this pretentious, mountainous desert. Curving uphill and downhill and uphill again, careening through narrow, moonlit roads.

Every few minutes, another car comes roaring past me headed in the other direction, and I must move to the side of the road so they can squeeze past on the narrow street, but the other drivers never feign any attempt at slowing down. These people up here have the confidence of knowing I'll move over and let them pass. And they're right. Each time, I slow and move to the side.

With clear skies and daylight, you could witness the entirety of Los Angeles from up here, but right now, it is merely humid darkness, a haze of mist and smog, and the lines of the road up to about a school bus's length ahead of me. I slow my car to a crawl and squint to read the house numbers on my right. 2638. 2640. I'm tired, and this starts to feel like a bad dream. I want to say I'm sick and go back home, but I can't. Maybe I should puke in the ditch.

The party is at 2648, so this is close enough. I pull my car over to the curb, roll the windows up, and park. Taking a sequence of deep breaths like I'm about to go free diving, I try to give myself a pep talk. "Just breathe..." "—don't stay too long..." "—in and out."

I step out of my car and look around. There isn't a house on the block worth less than $15 million. I should call Elmer, but my almighty phone has no reception up here, and that makes me feel even more embarrassingly helpless.

Each house has a few lights around its driveway and front gate, but they're otherwise walled off, and it's difficult to tell what's what, as there aren't any streetlamps on this hill. Parked cars line the road, and I can tell where the party is by the spotlight in the backyard and

the wafting noises of partygoers hooting and hawing. I follow the sounds.

The cars parked along the street include Porsches, Maseratis, Rolls-Royces, Bugattis, and Aston Martins. I haven't even gone inside yet, but I can smell the phoniness and self-importance of the crowd already. These kinds of guys need to own a Porsche 911 to feel like they belong, and they're compensating in every way you would imagine. It reeks of new money and celebrity privilege, and I'm anticipating the frivolous small talk of their first-world problems. My dark maroon 1994 Jaguar XJR stands apart in this gaudy row of cars, with its bluebook value of around $10K—by far the cheapest car on the street.

I'm still far enough from the house that no one else is around, so I approach the driver's-side door of a brand-new yellow Aston Martin and take a deep breath. I need something to calm my nerves, but I shouldn't have a drink before going in. A random act of vandalism feels like the appropriate move here, so I clench my right hand into a fist and swing it downward like a flesh-and-bone sledgehammer onto the top of the side mirror.

The first swing causes a cracking sound. I immediately tighten my fist and swing down again. The second impact hurts my hand and makes the car alarm howl, but the inertia this time cracks the mirror so it separates from the car and hangs barely attached. I swing one more time and dislodge the mirror entirely. It dangles just above the ground, connected only by a few colorful wires. The alarm is still blaring. I quickly shuffle down the road and toward the address I'd been given, feeling a bit calmer and more distracted than when I parked.

Elmer texted me this address and said I needed to meet someone here with him tonight, on Christmas Eve no less. His text didn't convey anything else. Honestly, the last-minute summons doesn't bother me so much, as I don't have any holiday plans and suspect I might know why Elmer called me out here. Which is why I'm nervous to witness how the night unfolds. I'd say there's a fifty-fifty

chance I'll be beaten to a pulp and leave this party on a stretcher. Part of me feels like I've set up an intricate Rube Goldberg chain of events to play with someone's life, but I am not certain what any of the levers or pulleys of my machine actually do. It all just needs to happen to find out what it all does.

Elmer texted, and that set off the evening, and so, of course, I came. I had no choice. Elmer runs a PR firm in Los Angeles. He has an excellent reputation as a decent and trustworthy guy, which isn't easy to maintain over three decades in Hollywood as a publicist. Elmer is old school, and he's met as many slimeballs and scam artists as anyone, so his bullshit radar is on point. He legitimately cares about his clients, and from what I can tell, he only represents people he at least somewhat respects. That's why I like him. Plus, he occasionally sends me business. I'd say he's both a friend and a mentor. Whenever he needs assistance in cleaning up some gross online PR debacle, he calls me in to help with damage control, reputation management, and crisis management.

There must be a guest list for this party. It isn't my crowd as much as it's Elmer's. Celebrity elites have never been my cup of tea, not that they'd have any reason to invite me. Part of my opinion about them is rooted in disgust, and the rest is probably rooted in envy. Who doesn't want to be a rich and famous movie or rock star and party in an incestuous in-circle of the well-to-do while being admired by the befuddled masses? No child dreams of becoming a glorified IT person: the silent helper of celebrities' reputations.

The cyber bodyguard of our betters.

Stepping from the street to the paved path going to the front door, I watch a well-dressed young couple enter the party ahead of me. She's wearing a Santa hat along with a silky dress. The man holding her hand is in a sharply tailored suit, and the top of his head is adorned with a fuzzy headband of faux reindeer antlers.

The outside of the house is dressed with lights and Christmas decorations. It seems quasi-normal and expected from out front, but

there's undoubtedly turmoil and unrest pacing around the upstairs of this house. That's why I'm here, after all. Not for the back-patting and elbow-rubbing and hobnobbing.

There are two men in tuxedos near the entrance, and one of them is holding a clipboard with the guest list. They look more like security guards than door attendants. One of them tells the other, "I know it's a Christmas party, but just say happy holidays to the guests." He notices me, points at the clipboard, and makes a motion with his finger that implies he needs me to announce my name or some secret password but doesn't have enough time to explain the process to me out loud or even say as much as, "Good evening."

Their expressions tell me they aren't yet convinced I belong here. Like I'm just wasting their valuable time. I'm not wearing a fancy suit, shoes, or watch. I do look like I might be lost, I must admit. Or like I'm a paparazzo trying to sneak into an exclusive event for a tabloid photo. Both men have menacing builds, and I'm confident either of them could take me down with one arm tied behind his back.

"Merry Christmas. I'm Melvin Ritkin," I tell them. "Elmer and Titus are expecting me. Also, Fred's a good friend of mine." I sigh and nervously look at my phone while I wait for a response from them. Still no reception or internet. It's just a nervous habit of mine to look at the screen for some sense of order.

One of the men takes a few steps away to whisper into his walkie-talkie. He returns and tells me to follow him inside while the other tuxedo stays at the entrance with the clipboard.

We go in, and the party is loaded with enough people to form an army battalion. The men look like young Hollywood and tech big shots, all dressed in fancy tailored suits with manicured haircuts and almost-beards. About half of them are fit and chiseled, while the others look like they grew up on computers. Most of the women look like early-twenties models paid to show up and make the party feel memorable. In LA, it is common practice to have attractive

women paid to go to parties and events like this to flirt and socialize so the powerful men in attendance feel validated. The ratio of women to men is around three to one by my count. It may be four to one; I'm not great at math.

It's a safe bet that nobody here has kids since most rational and responsible parents are back at their homes getting ready to open presents in the morning. Only single degenerates that need attention would be here so late.

A MODERN DAY GATSBY

The house is that of a thirty-two-year-old narcissist worth over $400 million. Titus himself. A man born into money and privilege who became a movie star in his own time and made several lucky investments.

Power begets power. Titus's attitude and personality remind me of Charlie Sheen before he got HIV but more handsome and stoic. I haven't met Titus in person before, so I'm basing this on what I've seen in interviews.

The house is ostentatious in the usual ways homes are in the hills: thoroughly modern with plenty of glass, marble, and cement. Tall ceilings. Abstract art. Recessed lighting. High-tech smart-home appliances everywhere. There's enough square footage to warrant having an elevator from the master bedroom to the garage so you aren't summiting three flights of stairs several times a day.

The spotlight is lit up deep in the backyard, and several parties are going on simultaneously. Holly, garland, wreaths, and a giant, decorated Christmas tree fill the living room and downstairs area. The house is meticulously decorated, as if it were a Christmas scene from a Hallmark movie. The backyard has a pool and a giant treehouse, tennis court, and basketball court, and they're all decorated with lights for the holidays. That's at least what I can see from the foyer.

This party will surely be going until the wee hours. There are little platters with piles of cocaine conveniently placed around each room along with utensils for inhaling the powder through one's nostril. When one mound of nose whiskey is depleted, the staff promptly replaces it with another entire pile. Enough for everybody who wants some.

I tread into the backyard, and it's even more bizarre and raucous than the sounds I had noticed when parking my car had seemed. There's a band playing and people laughing and singing along to "Grandma Got Run Over by a Reindeer," and it seems slightly unbelievable to me that so many people know all the words to the song.

To confuse things even more, Miley Cyrus is standing on a chair leading the chorus, and the surrounding crowd is singing along with her, smiling, and dancing to the music being played by a live band behind the pool and in front of the tennis court.

It is an evening of excess and self-absorption for the luckiest of the luckiest generation. They are spoiled, coddled, and selfish, and they're confident they deserve it all and more. This is a party to celebrate themselves as much as it is to celebrate Christmas, Hanukkah, Jesus, or whatever. Miley is excellent, though, so I exclude her from my generalization.

Next to me are two thin nerdy guys talking to each other. One says to the other, "Sure, if you eke by in obscurity and never make a dime off your art, only then are you an artist, according to the miserable and tired at least."

"Yeah," the other guy responds, "well, M. Night Shyamalan wrote *Stuart Little*. Sometimes you just have to pay the bills."

"Hey, that's his best movie," his friend responds, and they both chuckle. "Movies used to be more subtle because people used to be more subtle."

"A talking mouse," the other responds. "Can't get much more subtle than that."

Right as I think I recognize Cuba Gooding Jr. dancing and singing

along madly to Miley's rendition, the security guard in the tuxedo who escorted me into the house reintroduces himself by grabbing my right arm and forcing me back inside and toward the stairs. He issues a stern summons to follow him up there.

The partiers downstairs are oblivious to us as we climb the staircase.

We go to a door in a hallway. The tuxedo opens it, shoves me in, and presumably hurries back to his post out front.

This room smells like the expensive colognes of five different men about town mixing in the air and fighting with each other. My first instinct is to ask if we can open a window or turn on a fan, but strangely, this is a room without windows or fans, so I settle for not saying anything yet.

Looking around, I recognize a few faces, but Elmer's is the only one I know personally. He has grown out a beard, which matches his graying hair, and he has on a brown suit that doesn't feel festive or chic. He is standing between me and the door. He nods. "Good to see you, Melvin. Thanks for coming."

Titus is sitting in a large leather swiveling chair behind his desk, scratching his famous chin. I recognize him right away, seeing as this is his house and he's a successful movie star. Movie stars are rarely as impressive in person as you'd imagine, but Titus does have a certain air of sophistication and confidence I can't help but admire. And I'm at his party, in his office, surrounded by his confidants.

Many movie stars can pretend to be a badass on camera, but few are in real life. Daniel Day-Lewis and Samuel L. Jackson come to mind as two who I'd believe are badasses in both environments, but they're the rare ones who were born with charming intimidation and skill. Titus, however, strikes me as the type of person who has learned to act this way through years of practice. He has been groomed to fit the part, which he now does as convincingly as anyone.

Put on an act long enough, and it can become a reality.

A STUFFY OFFICE

I'm guessing this room is an office by the look of it. A room with no windows and three doors feels ominous to me, but I'm no expert on home design. The decorating of this room is not like the modern, stale, Apple Store aesthetic I saw downstairs but more like a study from an old British detective novel. Big mahogany desk; dark wood walls; two ornate globes; an oversized hourglass; a chess table with the pieces handmade from gold and bronze. No computer or electronics other than an antique phonograph and some dim lighting fixtures. It's unexpected, but also it's appropriate somehow, like he's practicing to play Sherlock Holmes in a movie.

Titus is sizing me up as he lights a cigar. On his left are two of his management people, but I can't remember their names. On his right, standing and bouncing the heel of his foot up and down nervously, I recognize an up-and-coming actor named Oscar. He's in his early thirties and has a boyish face that I know is hiding dark secrets, though he hides them well. Seeing Oscar here makes me feel like shitting my pants. I was worried he may have been why Elmer called me here. Oscar and his fucking computer.

Put on an act, and it can become a reality, so I display my most convincing expression of confidence and clench my cheeks.

Oscar is gripping his laptop like it's an ancient relic. He walks over and hands it to me. "You the computer guy? Here, take this."

Nodding, I accept the laptop with both hands out, palms up like a samurai being given a new katana. I look to Elmer just in case he feels like making a proper introduction.

Elmer sees the look on my face and chimes in. "Yes, of course, sorry. This is Melvin, who I told you about. He helped us out in the Puerto Rico situation. I think you should be open. You can trust him."

"I'm Oscar. Look, some rat shithead hacked my computer and has all my files and says I have to pay a ransom or he'll leak all of it.

Some of that stuff can't be seen by anyone. Emails. Photos. Personal shit. It'll ruin me. And it'll ruin Titus, too." I exhale my despair as Oscar admits his debacle, and now I am confident. "So what, are you an engineer or a developer or a hacker or something?"

"No, but I stayed at a Holiday Inn Express last night." I look around, and nobody thinks I'm clever except for Elmer, who barely breaks a smirk at my reference to an old commercial.

I set the laptop down on the desk, and Titus looks up at me for the first time since lighting his cigar. His eyes connect with mine so intensely I can't look away. He stands and walks toward me, making eye contact the whole way. Titus comes right up close to my face like he's trying to look into my soul. His face is as close to mine as it can be without my having to bring up the awkwardness. He sticks out his hand, and I instinctively shake it. "Melvin, Merry Christmas, and thanks for coming so late. This sounds pretty straightforward. Elmer tells us to trust you. He says that you're some sort of digital alchemist. If you can help us out here, we won't forget it. So can we?" Titus speaks as though we're the only two people in the room, and it's both comforting and terrifying at once.

"Can you what?" I'm not sure what he wants, but maybe I wasn't listening closely enough.

"Can we trust you?" Titus is speaking in his deepest voice. It sounds like he's performing lines from a movie and needs to come off as intimidating. If so, it's working.

Everyone in the room is staring at me, waiting for my response. My hands begin to sweat, so I put them behind my back. "Well, I've never known a truly honest man," I say, desperately wanting to cut some of the tension in the room after my Holiday Inn line bombed.

"That's not a very satisfying answer. Look, this isn't The Comedy Store. We're concerned about this. That's why the party is downstairs, and we're up here."

"You can trust me as much as you can trust anyone, is my point." I try to smile to let him know I'm on their team, and somehow, they

seem content enough with this answer. "So how did they get access? And how long ago?" I ask.

Titus returns to his big desk and motions for Oscar to go on with the details with a simple wave of his hand as he plops into his leather chair.

Oscar speaks with some degree of composed confidence now, as if he'd been reciting this part before I showed up so as not to give up too much information. "It was stupid. A catfish or something. This girl I matched with on a dating app, it's called Raya—have you heard of it?"

I nod. Raya is an exclusive dating app for celebrities and verified social profiles of which I am aware. I would venture to guess I know more about it than anyone in this room.

"Well, we were texting for a few days, and she sent me this link. I get my texts on my laptop too, so for some reason, I opened the link there, and that's what caused it. I thought it was a video of her, but instead, my screen locked up and was covered in symbols, and then it restarted to a page that just says their demands. I don't know. It was around noon today, I guess, and I've been freaking out ever since. It says we can just pay them, but we wanted to make sure we involved an expert just in case there's anything we should do, or if there's a way to catch these rat bastards. Like, how do we know once we pay them that they won't release the files anyway?"

I open Oscar's laptop, and the screen refreshes to a black background and an all-caps, red-font list of demands, with the familiarly whimsical hacker speak of, "OOPS, YOUR FILES ARE ENCRYPTED," at the top in a bigger font and a list of instructions below it for sending $100,000 in Monero to a specific account number within twenty-four hours, or else.

Oscar looks at me expectantly, appearing as innocent and vulnerable as he can manage. He's the real victim here, according to him. "So can you help?"

Five faces in the room, and they're pointed at me again, waiting

for my answer. They want a solution to poor Oscar's stupidity. Digital neophytes, hoping to be told that everything will be okay and I'll handle it so they can go back to their partying and their privilege. No problem, your reliable nerdy tech geek will fix your mistakes, sweet child. Don't worry. "They're asking for a hundred grand?" I start with the rhetorical. "If you're worried about what's on this device, then you should just pay them. I'm not sure why you'd need me for the transfer unless it's to help with the Monero part? It's basically like most other cryptocurrencies but is impossible to trace."

Titus gulps the rest of his glass of whiskey and stands again to address me eye to eye, puffing hard on his cigar now. "I'll pay the money. That's not a problem. But we're worried that after we pay, he can still post this stuff. Stuff that will hurt me inextricably. Oscar can show you the names on the accounts for the catfish that tricked him. We're hoping you can help make the transfer for us and see if you can find out who was behind this. We know it's a long shot, but we can say we tried. According to Elmer and Fred, you're the guy for this kind of thing."

This is what Christmas must feel like for the unimaginably spoiled children of billionaires. I'm getting everything I hoped for and more, but I try to portray a demure expression like I'm still on the fence about whether to help them. I make this uncomfortable silence last a few extra moments, savoring my Christmas present. I answer coolly, "Sure. If you tack on 20 percent and send me $120,000 by wire tonight, I'll handle the payoff and investigate the usernames and stuff to see if I can find the culprit. You should know, ransomware like this is nearly impossible to trace if they're half competent. It's doubtful that I'll come up with anything. Maybe an IP address on the Raya account if we're lucky, or a billing address on the cell phone account Oscar was texting. Hard to say. Also, if they have control of this device, they can probably hear everything we're saying right now."

Everyone else looks at Oscar's laptop in surprised disdain.

"Fair enough," Titus responds. "Like I said, as long as we can say we tried to investigate this. Well, there it is. Justin, handle the wire for Mister Melvin and get him whatever else he needs." And with that, Titus leaves the room like he has a few more equally important meetings to tend to, and now I know one of these guys is named Justin.

Oscar starts to leave but first puts his hand on top of his laptop. He gives me his business card with his other hand. "Take the laptop with you, and let me know whenever I should meet you to pick it back up. Here's my number. Text me, and I'll send you the screenshots for the catfish bastard if you want them. And thank you in advance for your discretion. We won't forget this."

"Should just be a couple of hours to get the laptop unlocked if everything goes well," I say. "I'll text you."

"I'll be up, waiting." Oscar nods at me gratefully and follows Titus out of the room. Of course he'll be up with all that coke downstairs. The remaining men in the room are Elmer, Justin the business manager, and Titus's talent manager, whose name escapes me, but he gives off vibes of a budding Harvey Weinstein. I give Justin my account number and watch him make a real-time wire for $120,000 to me.

Once I see the confirmation, I take the laptop and head back downstairs with Elmer. He's smiling like a proud father as we descend the steps. "Well done, kid. They're coked out of their minds, and I think the paranoia was pushing them over the edge. Good that you came and played the consummate pro. Not a bad Saturday night. Twenty grand?"

"I appreciate the work, as always, sir. I'll send you your piece in the morning."

"Attaboy. Now go get to work." Elmer gives me a wink and a quick rub of my shoulders. He then disappears into the backyard

in the direction of what looks like a pool full of skinny-dippers. The party has fewer people now but is only getting wilder, with an even greater female-to-male ratio.

I'm in the living room taking it all in, and I deserve a drink before I go to celebrate a grand scheme well-schemed.