

## **Part Nine – Junior Year, Spring Semester**

Good, excellent. That was our attorney, and she insists this deal of yours is good down to the letter, granting not only me but my family and associates complete and total immunity for all things past, present and future relating to our time as C.A.R.P. students, and that you aren't trying to fuck me for *your* mistakes along the way, Agent Shetterly.

Oh, I'm aware that you think you were following protocols regarding this sort of investigation, but I think that when the full report comes out, you're going to be the one with the most egg on their face because of your actions.

The fact that you came to me with this immunity deal tells me that you're stuck, and you need the information in my head to start to make sense of all of this, which I told you that you would be when we started down this road. And again, I'd like to remind you that I came to *you* for protection, so I expect the FBI to live up to its fucking end of the deal, or all of this story will come out after my death, and there isn't a damn thing you or anyone else can do to stop it.

Alright, alright, I'll get back to telling the story 'as it happened,' as you asked me to do, but I'm urging you to pay close attention to the details, because that's where all the important things happen in my tale.

By the time spring had rolled around, Abi and I had established an understanding about how we fit into each other's lifestyles. We weren't in love. We never have been. She enjoyed how I fucked her, I enjoyed fucking her, and I certainly enjoyed the access to the upper echelons of society that my relationship with her afforded me.

It had taken her a little bit of time getting used to playing with Julia and Chelsea, but soon enough, she came around. In turn, I'd done my best to take all my cues from her to learn how to fit in among the rich and powerful of the San Francisco Bay Area. You might think that would mean exclusively tech geeks and business magnates, but the truth is that the silent power behind the Silicon Valley has always rested in the investment houses and their shadowy cabal of powerful men and women (but mostly men) who had take some amount of money and turned it into a larger amount of money, mostly by making sure the systems were tilted in their advantage, and that they would continue to be so.

I fucking *hated* it.

I learned how these investment firms were the robber barons of our modern day, how they would use their money to circumvent any law on the books if it stood in the way of them making a few bucks. They were using their power to increase an institutional advantage and leveraging that advantage to push it even further. They were, for lack of a simpler explanation, walking into the banks, robbing them blind, walking out and then locking the front doors so no one could go in and see how much had been stolen. It wasn't just brazened; it was systematically cruel.

I wasn't alone in my detestations of what these people were doing to not only our country, but all the countries across the world. We were witnessing a new rise of the 'strongman' deception, someone using authoritative power to decimate their opponents in the name of 'peace.'

Money was power, and those who had a taste of power refused to let it go even in the smallest amounts. They wanted to be sure that what they had taken could never be taken back. That was what we as C.A.R.P. students had identified as the biggest problem to be approaching humanity for the next hundred years.

It wasn't just oppression – it was the use of automation to speed up the *process* of oppression, and using modern deception tactics to convince the masses that it was being done in their best interests.

People often ask me if I think the average person is stupid, and I'm always tempted to fall back on the George Carlin line: "Think of how stupid the average person is and realize that half of 'em are stupider than *that*." But in the end, I think people just aren't aware of how easy it is to distort, manipulate and con people.

Look back just a few hundred years, and you'll find advertisements for all sorts of 'elixirs,' claiming to solve all sorts of ailments – rheumatism, neuralgia, sciatica, lumbago, toothache, sprains, rickets, gout, dropsy, scurvy, you name it.

To our modern eyes, it's obvious that these things are full of shit, and aren't backed by anyone, but to the people a few hundred years ago, despite the fact that they dealt with liars, swindlers and cheats all the time, none of them figured that could apply to *medicine*, so they decided the claims must be true, and they bought into these things, only to find out they often just had things like cocaine, opium, alcohol or amphetamines in them, so they definitely felt *something* from the potions, but it wasn't them getting better.

The modern-day scams were doing the same thing, just in more complicated ways in order to convince people that what they were seeing with their own eyes was just an expected step on the way to them getting what they wanted eventually.

One of my favorite movies came out in 1992, because it predicted all of this. If you've never seen Phil Alden Robinson's "Sneakers," I can't stress enough that you go watch it. Because the core lesson of the movie is that *actual* reality is far less important than the *perception* of reality. If you can *convince* something is happening, it doesn't matter if it actually *is* happening or not, because people will *act* like it is.

Manipulating people is as simple as convincing them what you're telling them must be happening. It's going to get a lot worse before it gets better, because these people are working at such high levels that the average person won't be able to draw correlations between their problem and the bigger issue.

We've begun designing poison pills for the new aristocracy, but they're going to take time for them to really take hold.

Some of them center around this concept we're calling 'missing out,' the idea that you can make something they wouldn't normally want because someone *else* is doing it, and because *they're* doing it, we can get *you* to want to do what you didn't have any interest in.

Others require technological gaps we haven't gotten there yet, including things like a digital ledger, or an object that exists only in computer space. We're talking about fraudulently duplicating art, replacing things that people claim have high value with worthless duplications that they can't tell the difference between. If you think you have a priceless piece of art, but you can't tell the difference between that and a copy... where does the value truly lie?

So yeah, if you're experiencing a rash of people finding out they've been holding onto counterfeit art for some indeterminate period of time, well, you can mark that all up to Robert Cross, C.A.R.P. graduate, class of 2002. He's not just an artist, he's a legend.

But I had to spend loads of time with these people, because I needed to trick them almost the exact same way *they* were tricking everyone else. I needed them to be convinced that the sorts of projects we were working on at C.A.R.P. were going to change not just one field, but hundreds. I needed to come across as being in the know on theoretical advancements in the fields of telecommunications, medicine, banking, media, transportation, shipping, art, manufacturing, agriculture and about a hundred more, but thanks to our wide collection of disciplines over at C.A.R.P., I could, because it was distributed knowledge. I didn't *know* the things, but I knew the people who *did* know the things, and that was more than good enough.

The investments I'd made were continuing to bring in good amounts of cash, and I'd just published my first novel with Ballantine Books, called 'Last of the Luddites,' which was about an old-style company attempting to resist a new style business corporate raider's attempt at a hostile takeover. It was sort of both social commentary and farcical comedy with some truly bleak moments in the middle of it. I'd expected no one to notice, and while sales numbers weren't amazing, it was being described as "an instant cult classic" in more than a handful of reviews. Lionsgate Films bought the rights to the movie adaptation, although I made it a point to remove myself as much from that process as I could, simply because I figured it would both detract from my studies and leave me frustrated with the Hollywood process.

Most of my time was spent studying, though. Not just literature, but an entire category I'd called 'applied literature,' using historical precedent to document which books had led to social, cultural, mental or physical revolutions, and what sorts of things had produced demonstrable change. It was a wild and definitely creepy look at how subversive thinking could be established in the mind of a reader, simply by presenting your concept as the norm, and asking the reader why they couldn't follow that. It's a basic tactic used by anyone who wanted to come across as an authority, and I realized it was just yet another entry in the line of snake oil tactics that had been updated to the modern age.

I was learning how to use both short and long form writing as a weapon, as a tool that I could use to warp, distort and shape the minds of my readers into changing their opinions on a subject to whatever my own personal opinions on that matter were.

I wasn't the only one. We had a couple of musicians on campus who had formed a band, and I'm sure you've heard of them – The Revolutionary Gravediggers. Yep, that four-time Grammy-winning hard rock five piece formed in northern California is composed of all C.A.R.P. graduates. They opened for Rage Against The Machine on one of their tours. I know it's not in their label released bio, but they decided being associated with what you in the government are calling "a cult" would not be good for their image.

Has it helped, by the way, you describing the university as a cult? Did that make up for you raiding the campus and killing off a couple of hundred people? Oh no, I saw the footage, thanks, and heard your claims that the students inside of the university fired first, but, shock of shocks, you haven't released any footage showing them firing first. In fact, all the footage that you've released show them *only* returning fire. It's Waco, Texas all over again, and this time, you have even less proof that any of the students were involved.

Oh I'm sure you're in the process of doctoring something up now, but c'mon. Look at who you're talking to here. We've spent at least part of our time here talking about how easily information can be manipulated, and you're expecting me to trust that the university where I grew up had changed so much in the few years between when I left it and when you raided it that the students only a few classes beneath me were bloodthirsty revolutionary monsters.

You've mistaken what *type* of revolutionaries we *are*.

We're the big ideas type, not the bang bang type.

At least... at least, I didn't *think* we were.

Yes. Yes, I agree, maybe I didn't understand Dr. Igarashi's plan quite as well as I thought.

Fine, back on track.

With the publication of 'Last of the Luddites,' I was becoming something of a figurehead on campus, a sign that what they were teaching was useful, was powerful, was something they could gain from, and that if Dr. Igarashi was right about one thing, maybe she was right about all things.

That's the problem with success – everyone thinks it means *everything's* going to work.

I tried my best to stay humble but Julia and Chelsea both thought I was hot shit the likes of which they'd never seen. They also enjoyed seeing my more dominant side when it came to Abi, watching me show the iron will I could employ when it came right down to it.

Julia enjoyed me controlling Abi, but she also enjoyed playing with her as well. Chelsea as well. She'd described those encounters as the time I was writing a masterpiece only to be read by five people, and one not to be shared publicly.

My professors all described me as excelling in my studies, but the truth is I'd just gotten remarkably better at hiding what I was up to, not letting anyone know that I was moonlighting a bit. You see, I too had been getting paranoid about what Dr. Igarashi was up to.

It sprung from what investigations I'd done into Will Bierko. We keep coming back to that name, don't we? Don't worry, it won't be much longer. It'll all start to make sense in just a little bit. You're nearly to the point where you can start to see the picture from the puzzle pieces you've threaded together, even if you don't know the full image.

It was an ordinary Tuesday in March when everything began to fall apart.

"They can't possibly be planning on another dorm move in our last fall, can they?" I asked Chelsea, glancing out our window at the light mist that was falling down onto our campus in the early evening. "I keep seeing there's three different buildings under construction here, but I can't figure out what they're possibly trying to expand our campus into."

"One of them is going to be a computer lab," Julia answered instead. "I expect the second is probably an expanded dorm area, and yeah, they're going to move us again. If they want to bring in a large wave of freshmen, they're going to need someplace to put all the students they're displacing, and Dr. Igarashi's made it clear, we're not living off campus. Scuttlebutt is whatever change they've got planned for senior year, it's going to be a doozy."

"I swear, sometimes I think the doctor holds onto surprises just to see all our faces at once," I said to them.

"Nah," Chelsea replied. "She's just a careful planner, and careful planners don't like tipping their hands early as to what they're planning or how they're going to do it. She's cooking something up, but I'm sure it's all in our benefits."

"You trust her a lot more than I do," I said to her.

"She's done right by us, Josh," Julia said. "Not just by you, but by all of us."

"We have to have faith in C.A.R.P., Josh, otherwise the whole project doesn't work," Chelsea added. "You know this whole project is based on belief, and the combined conviction of everyone working to ensure that we're pushing towards the common goal. If we don't have that sort of faith, then what are we even doing here?"

"It's okay to have doubts here and there, Chel," I replied. It was clear I was the one who had my share of doubts, but that I was still trying to keep a positive outlook on things. The amount of time I'd been spending among the rich and powerful had definitely soured my outlook on both life and people, but I was doing my best to try and stay on task. The problem was that I was afraid we might *become* the very people we were setting out to *stop*.

"It's still better to have faith," Julia replied. She's always been the strongest believer in the C.A.R.P. project, so I understood that. "We'll get through it, Josh. Just have faith."

"I think I'm going to go out for a jog," I told the girls as I pulled on my grey hoodie and grabbed my Discman.

"You want company?" Julia asked.

"Nah, I'm just going to get a few laps in while I have a chance," I replied.

“You going armed?”

“Julia, I’m just doing a few laps around campus,” I said with a soft laugh. “It’s like I’m going up to the Tenderloin.”

“It’s past midnight, though, Josh,” Chelsea added.

“It’s just campus! I’ll be fine.”

“Yeah, okay,” Julia said. “Just don’t be out too late. You’ve got that meeting with Abi’s people tomorrow and they’re notoriously picky about people showing up late to lunch.”

“I’ll be back in like an hour, tops,” I said. “If you two want to head to bed, I’ll just sneak in and try not to wake you.”

“That’s probably for the best,” Chelsea said. “I think I’m gonna go to bed now, actually.”

I moved over and kissed Chelsea on the lips, holding her face against mine for a long, tender moment. “Okay. I’ll see you in the morning. Love you.” I shifted over and kissed Julia’s lips as well, feeling her squeeze my hand for a few seconds. “Love you, too.”

“Love you,” they both echoes as I opened the door to the dorm room and headed out into the hallway, not realizing what I was just minutes away from walking into.

The campus at night is mercifully very quiet, but also quite well lit, as long as you’re staying in the portions near the dorms, the faculty housing or the classroom buildings. But if you start venturing into the botanical gardens or the construction areas, it can get pretty dark. I was used to the dark. I liked to jog around the less well traveled areas, just to let me listen to my music while I was jogging. What I wasn’t used to, however, was hearing construction equipment at work that late at night.

I wouldn’t have heard it if I hadn’t stopped to change CDs. I’d brought a few with me, just in case I wanted to listen to something else, and when I did, I could hear a low, heavy rumbling just down a ways, so I decided to take off my headphones and to go investigate, because I couldn’t think of any possible reason the construction crews should be busy at night.

I kept quiet because... you know, I’m not entirely sure why I kept quiet. I think maybe I figured that since things were happening that late at night, maybe I shouldn’t get spotted. So I wandered along the side of the building, trying to stay in the shadows, as I made my way closer to the noise.

It turned out the sound I was hearing was a cement mixer.

“No, I understand that this isn’t an ideal outcome,” a voice said around the corner. It was Dr. Igarashi, and she was talking into a phone attached to a small briefcase. “But we knew setbacks were going to be part of the process, and that we would adapt when the time came.”

I did my best to peek, and I could see Dr. Igarashi and the political studies professor, Dr. Lebedev. They were standing over a body laying flat on its back on top of plastic tarping. I knew *that* couldn’t be good.

“It’s fine,” Dr. Igarashi said. “There are other candidates who are probably better options for you, now that they’re a bit more molded and skilled. Mr. Bierko was an attempt to jumpstart the process, one, as you recall, I strongly advised against. I said that deploying an asset in the field so early into training would result in a lackluster result, and that it would compromise the longevity and stability of the asset, but you demanded immediate results, and you got them.”

She paused, listening to the voice on the other end of the phone.

“Look, he did the work that was needed, but I warned you about leaving him deployed for too long, and exactly what I warned you about is what happened,” she said.

Another pause.

“It’ll be fine. There’s a couple of students who will be much better fits for the kind of

work you're asking them to do, and they can transition out at the end of the semester," she said. "We'll say they're doing remote study and graduating via mail. It's being done by enough people these days that the rest of the students won't suspect a thing."

One more pause, this time a long one.

"I said we'll handle it. Don't worry. We know how to dispose of bodies. This isn't the first student we've had to make disappear. Fine. We'll see you again in May when you come to pick up Will's replacements." She hung up the phone, shaking her head, looking over at Dr. Lebedev. "Did you have signs he wasn't adapting well to field work?"

"He'd made contact with his mother a couple of times," Dr. Lebedev responded. "I warned you that wasn't the kind of behavior we wanted from a skilled field asset, but you assured me that it wasn't going to be too much of a concern."

"No, I said it *sounded* like it wasn't a big deal, but that if *you* thought there were problems, you should come and tell me before they got out of hand."

"How do you define 'out of hand'?"

"Somewhere well before this," she said, annoyedly, gesturing to the body on the tarp between them. "Did you bring the weights?"

"Twenty-pound barbell, same as always," he said. "Nobody's found the other bodies. Relax. We're good."

From my corner hiding position, I watched them tie the twenty-pound barbell to the feet of Will Bierko's body, lift him up and then drop him down into one of the structural pillars of the new building they were working on. He'd been shot in the chest a few times, it looked like, judging by the blood splotches on his chest. After that, they moved to get the concrete mixing truck to pour concrete down into the center of the pillar on top of the body, slowly covering it up, taking the time to smooth the top of it off, plenty bits of rebar poking up from inside of it.

It was when they were pouring the concrete that I tried to quietly make my way away from the construction site. I slipped a little, and I thought for sure one of them must have heard me, because my heart was pounding in my chest, but no one had followed me back to my dorm room, and I was trying to make sense of what I'd seen.

When I got back to the room, Julia was the only one still awake, and she took one look at me, and grabbed her coat. We walked back out into the night, and headed down to a place on the edge of campus where the two of us would go to have deep conversations on those nights when we were talking about the really big shit. It was just our private spot. We hadn't brought Chelsea or Abi there, so it was a place where Julia and I could talk without anyone else stumbling onto us.

"You look like you've seen a ghost, Josh," she said, taking my hands in hers. "What's up?"

"Julia, I have to ask you something I never thought I'd have to ask you – if it came down to choosing between me and C.A.R.P., who would y—"

"You, you dummy," she said, squeezing my hand. "I'd choose you over anyone and everything, ten out of ten, no hesitation, no reservation. I love you, Josh. I didn't think I was ever going to fall in love with anyone, but I fell in love with you, so I'll choose you. Why?"

I inhaled a deep breath and slowly let it out. "I saw Dr. Igarashi and Dr. Lebedev getting rid of a body. Will Bierko's body."

"Wait, what?" she said. Her hands weren't letting go of mine. "That doesn't make any sense, Josh. He's been gone from C.A.R.P. for years."

"I heard them talking about how he hadn't done the job he'd been hired to do and that

they were going to come and get a replacement at the end of the semester.”

“Could you see how he’d been killed?”

“Shot, I think. Looked like three bullet holes in his chest.”

“Doesn’t sound accidental, then,” she said with a soft sigh. “Are you going to tell Agent Shetterly, now that Costello’s dead?”

“Of course I’m going to tell Shetterly,” I said to her. “Although hopefully I’m not putting him at risk like I apparently did to Agent Costello.”

“Hey now,” she said, reaching one hand over to lift my chin up. “We talked about this. You’ve been doing what you’ve been told, and none of this is your fault. Whatever it is the government thinks C.A.R.P. is being used for, you aren’t responsible for that. You didn’t get Agent Costello killed and you certainly didn’t kill Will Bierko, so stop talking like that, okay?”

I remember smiling a little bit, nodding, knowing how right she was. I wasn’t an agent of change in any of *this*; I was just another gear spinning in place, doing its job, not really understanding the greater purpose.

It would be another week before we told Chelsea, and two more after that before we told Abigail, both times making sure their loyalty was to us before C.A.R.P. And a month or so after that, I had my meeting with Agent Shetterly, and hopefully you’ve read the transcript of that meeting, so we won’t need to waste anyone’s time covering it all over again.

You *will* note, however, that he didn’t take my warnings seriously enough to investigate at the time, insisting on keeping me ‘in place’ at C.A.R.P. I told him that I fully suspected we had several bodies concealed within the concrete and foundations of the buildings on campus, and he chose not to take those reports seriously. You’ll see that he said he thought I was a ‘deluded young kid’ and that I was making things up ‘in order to get attention.’

You’ve shut the campus down, and I know you didn’t burn all the buildings down. There are extra support columns in the basements of most of those buildings, and a number of them aren’t really even load bearing. Those are the places to look. You’ll find body-shaped holes in some number of them, I’d wager, and that’s where Dr. Igarashi buried her bodies.

So, being that I now knew the head of my college was a multiple murderer and the FBI didn’t seem to have any interest in arresting her for that, you can imagine why I was more than a little paranoid heading into my final year at C.A.R.P.

I tried to keep myself as even keel as I could, but there were more than a few times where we as a group would have ourselves a pod cry. We did our best to not let Dr. Igarashi know anything was wrong, but I remember when she called me to her office in May how I felt like I was sweating bullets.

As it turned out, she just wanted to see if I was ready for my senior year, and for me to autograph her copy of ‘Last of the Luddites.’ I couldn’t tell if she knew. I’m still not sure how much she knew and how much she didn’t, especially since you didn’t find her on campus *or* in the Jakarta raid. Shit, unless you have pictures of her dead body, I don’t know that—

Okay, yes. I can confirm that does indeed appear to be Dr. Igarashi, or what’s left of her. How many bullets did you put into her?

...

Yes, I think I’ll take you up on that offer of a stiff drink now.