

MR. PRESIDENT

"Mr. President," Jared said, as soon as he picked up the phone. Because Jared used those two pompous words, words which at times still had the power to make him feel like an imposter, the President knew what it was about. And even half-awake he felt trapped—a man supposed to control events being controlled by them.

"Tell me."

"They finished. Yes and yes."

He looked across the bed. Fran's eyes were open. "Jared. Details."

"Yes, prisoners. One a Syrian. The other, yeah. Roger Coyle."

"Fuck."

"Fog of war, Rick."

It wasn't just the fog of war but Jared knew that; he meant this should be their approach.

"Let's meet early. Seven. You, Nicole, and the new guy. Ephraim. He's working on this?"

"Finishing up. I cancelled your morning schedule. See you soon."

He was tempted to leave it at that. Instead, he summoned the nerve to ask about what he had dreaded since yesterday. "Wait. Who calls the Coyles?"

"All parents have a liaison," Jared said, carefully.

"They shouldn't hear it from a liaison." A beat. "How about you?"

Silence.

"Please."

"Sure."

As he replaced the phone he heard a soft knock. "We're okay, Brian," he said.

"They killed him?" Fran asked, whispering.

"We did," he said.

"Oh, no." Reaching over, she found his hand, gave it a squeeze and closed her eyes.

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Why couldn't his eyes close? Why was his chest still suffused with fear? Why not even ask Fran to stay awake so they could talk?

Or why not call to scream at everyone so giddily exuberant ("*Four mid-level bad guys! C'mon!*") in that room with such a stupidly evasive name he couldn't use it. He felt forced to approve. At first the news was good. The drone had hit the house dead on. No chance any of the four survived. An hour later a sober Jared gave him more. The drone had been streaming back "data." There weren't four bodies. There were six. Maybe—Jared paused, knowing how he'd react—hostages.

His stomach flopped like a fish. "They're sure?"

"Well, they bring the bodies out of the, you know, bunker. Carefully. Then two more they dump on the ground. One they leave alone. Ignore. The other, they start kicking."

"Him."

"Still analyzing. Maybe."

But he was already sure. Coyle, the 24-year old refugee camp worker, pulled from a car outside the compound three months before and accused of being a spy. "We will get him out," he had told Coyle's parents the day after they'd snatched the kid.

"You can't be sure, Mr. President," the father said, coldly.

For a second he felt angry—wounded. He didn't let it show. Coyle had caught him in a lie families were usually too intimidated to dispute. Besides, by then he wasn't at all sure they'd get

him out, a stupid phrase that sounded like a movie, since it had turned out the kid *was* an agent, reporting back every few days on the Afghans working with him.

He'd left denying that to Nicole, the new Press Secretary, who had impressed everyone with her passion and intelligence at briefings. "Denial's good. Makes beheading him a little harder," said the CIA guy whose name he had trouble remembering, staring to make sure the President knew talking to a President didn't make him too nervous to be a wiseass. But in the three months since that day no intelligence, no bribes, backchannels, or torture had uncovered where Coyle was.

Yesterday, a few hours after the hit, *they* announced it with the usual fulminations, including the fact that the drone had killed "Roger Coyle, the American spy."

He'd left this for Nicole, too. He watched her from the Oval, the CIA guy on speakerphone, Jared sitting beside him. "We don't know whether this *is* Coyle, Wolf," she'd said, "We hope not. And calling this idealistic camp worker a *spy* is simply ... *outrageous!*"

"Convincingly angry," the CIA guy said.

He felt a twinge of guilt; they had decided Nicole shouldn't know the truth. "She is angry. You've kept her in the dark."

"Maybe that's why she's so convincing."

Let it go. Eyes on the screen, he said, "We still deny it, right? If it's him."

"Sure. They don't have proof. If they did we'd know it."

"You didn't know where he was," Jared said, louder than he needed.

Jared could show the contempt he had to conceal. He made a thumb and forefinger circle. *Asshole*, Jared mouthed back.

"True."

"What if they have a confession?"

"Coerced."

Remembering that now, he was ashamed. He didn't object. Why not? He'd gone into politics because he wanted to control events. He wasn't naive about it. That first race for City Council came from his rage about urban renewal. He could control that. And through the years through the House, the Senate, the race for President when he went into the Iowa caucuses at 4% wasn't that about control, whether a war or a bridge for the district? Why was it as President he felt everyone controlled him?

Throwing back the covers he got up, turned on the lamp on his nighttable, and sat on the edge of the bed, hoping Fran woke up. She lay on her side, CPAP over her nose, the silly device that ended their fights about snoring. He stood, padded into the bathroom and sat. Sitting on the toilet he stroked his dick. Hard.

Shameful. Thinking about sex when in a few hours he had to see the Coyles, lie to them, and lie to reporters. Why? Because Al-Qaeda would be able to blast what he said around the world? There must be a way to avoid deceit. At least with the Coyles. Coming back into bed, he sat down hard enough to make her eyes open.

"Terrible," she said.

"It's not over," he said.

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"I told them," Jared said now, meeting him at the elevator.

"How'd it go?"

"Awful. For them and me."

"Sorry."

"Why I'm here." Jared told him.

The right response would be a simple "I'm sorry for them and you," but he was too obsessed with what lay ahead to worry about Jared. "Tell you this. They can bring the kid back from the dead to confess. I'm sticking to the story. He was not an agent."

"I know."

But then they stopped talking because Nicole and Ephraim were sitting in the Oval, along with Geraldine, the photographer, already squeezing off shots. Who told her she had to come? Walking in, he shook his head. She left, fingers wrapped around her camera, lens pressed up against her collarbone.

He sat behind the desk. "Quiz me," he told Nicole.

So young! She looked like all those women reporters on CNN, straight blond hair, lipstick even this early—mauve, Fran had told him— and a black blouse, the bra strap poking out under her collar. But she challenged him without a trace of timidity.

You say he wasn't an agent? Why'd they take a risk abducting him? They must have thought he was valuable.

You'll have to ask the terrorists.

Really. Wasn't this an intelligence failure? You pledged to get him back three months ago.

Nobody could have tried harder. We have the best intel in the world. And I'll tell you. We were very close.

What if they have evidence?

They can't. It's a lie.

"Bastards," Nicole said, moving out of character for an instant.

They *should* tell her. He should be able to trust someone like her—and she needed to trust him. Then he could talk frankly about how to make his answers less ... canned. But all he said was, "Right. By the way, nice job yesterday."

"Very nice," Jared said. "Also, we have a statement."

Ephraim jumped up. He slid it onto the desk. "Just a draft."

Poor kid. He'd put on his tie so fast the back half hung inches below the front. "Thanks for your work, Ephraim," using his name to show he knew it. He skimmed, hoping to like it. .

Mistakes inevitable ... especially heinous ... admire those who put life on the line ... Then,

(PAUSE)

SOME DAYS ARE TOUGH AROUND HERE.
WE ARE UP AGAINST AN IMPLACABLE FOE. DRONES SAVE
LIVES. IN THE FOG OF WAR ... DESPITE OUR BEST EFFORTS
INNOCENT PEOPLE GET HURT.

"Fog of *war*?"

"You've used it before," Jared said, protecting Ephraim, his pick for the new writer.

"*Days are tough*? Christ's sakes, what about Coyle's day?" To spare Ephraim, who looked terrified, he was looking at Jared.

"We'll cut it," Jared said, looking annoyed.

He'd forgotten the rule: don't argue with Jared in front of staff. He smiled and looked around. "Jared's got a point about fog of war. Acknowledge a mistake but don't make it sound like it's our fault. But Ephraim. Can you see what a reporter would do if I say I *have a tough job*?"

"Yes, Mr. President. But with all respect, Mr. President—"

"I know. You wrote *days are tough*. Reporters, they hear, *my day is tough*."

"Not that it is," Jared said.

He laughed hard to make sure they knew Jared wasn't in trouble. "Only because of this guy." Pointing at his Chief of Staff. Okay. They laughed, too. "Keep fog. Ditch tough."

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"Fog of war! Bullshit!" said the President, back upstairs. He whipped one end of his tie around the knot, slipped it through, and yanked.

Fran was already dressed, sitting in the red easy chair, holding the draft. "There's no fog of war?"

"You know what I mean."

"I know you're ambivalent. What the kid wrote I don't know—" she rapped the draft lightly with the back of her hand—absolves intel."

"Intel? Why absolve them?"

"Get it out, hon. Vent."

Goddamn it. He *was* venting. You couldn't help venting these days when every packet of press clips was full of photos of dead bodies. How was it possible to keep your imagination from spinning out of control, especially since they had DVDs of every strike? He'd never watched one. Jared said, *Don't let emotion get in the way*. Why not? Even a President should feel emotion!

"I don't want to vent. I want to know more."

"Like what?"

"Like whether I should of said 'No.' What do you think?"

"Above my pay grade." She reached over to help him slip his right arm, the one that hurt every morning, into his sleeve. "*Jeff! You dressed?*"

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"You may hear me announce something terrible," he told the kids at breakfast. And if he knew he had to be gentle, his voice grave, the result wasn't what he wanted. Jen barely looked up. Jeff, fourteen, put his spoon down in the oatmeal. "Okay, Dad. What'd you do?"

He knew before he had even declared that entering this place with two young kids would create an endless amount of fiction. People needed to think his kids were adorable; that the stream of photos emerging from this place should show them smiling at each other in ways every family would envy. Maybe it was his fear of what lay ahead: talking to the Coyles, angry and grief-stricken; the uncomfortable questions from reporters—even the friendlies. The flash of anger came right away. "What did I do? *What did I do?* You think anything goes wrong it's my fault?"

Jeffrey turned to Fran, palms spread. "What the hell?"

"Hon." To him. "It was a joke."

"No! He thinks I did something wrong! That calls for an apology!"

"Hon—"

"Yes it does!"

"It's about Mr. Coyle, Jeffrey," Fran said.

"Who?" Jen was looking around.

"A man died, sweetie."

If Jeffrey had only seen what that meant, the *sadness* of it! Instead, he made it worse. "Oh. The spy guy. It was him?"

"The spy? The *spy*? You take their word?"

"Is he or isn't he?"

"A young man killed! All you want to know if he was a spy? What kind of person are you?"

He'd gone too far. He knew as soon as he said it. Take it back. Maybe reach out and tousle his hair.

"Asshole," Jeffrey muttered.

"What?"

"ASSHOLE."

"Really? No videogames for a week!"

"Hon!"

Jeffrey slapped his palm on the table, jumped up and left.

"*You* should apologize," Fran said. She stood, walking towards Jeffrey's room.

"He can't talk like that!" he called to her back, and for the second time that morning, instantly felt shame.

Of course he was wrong. And it didn't matter that Jeffrey was wrong too! Maybe they could apologize to each other!

"Daddy, please stop fighting," Jen said.

He'd forgotten she was at the table. Looking down he saw her holding a slice of toast in one hand, a knife in the other, butter dripping off the blade. "You're right, sweetie. I'll try."

And that was the tricky part. Because when they came back out, Fran's hand cupped around the back of Jeff's neck, he, who could cut deals with the Speaker of the House, couldn't figure out how to apologize in any way that would make Jeff apologize, too. He kept silent even when he and the kids were waiting for the Secret Service guys to take them down in the elevator to the van for school.

"What did you do?" the kid had asked. Was there no answer to make Jeff understand? The limits! The complexity! Only at the last second, desperate, did he say, softly, "You can play Skyrim."

Jeffrey just stared at him and climbed into the seat.

Tricked. He'd made a concession and got nothing back. But as he turned to go back, Jeff jumped back down, ran around to catch up, and put a hand on his back. "We're with you, Dad," he said gravely, keeping his voice low.

His eyes stung. "Thanks." Then he did reach out and tousle Jeffrey's hair because if he said more the President might not have been able to get out the words.

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"They're here," said Mrs. Clark, someone so old and wizened he couldn't use her first name.

He would see reporters at 10:30 in the Press Room. But before that he had to face something he dreaded more.

"Bring them in," he said.

The Coyles had lost their *son*. As they came through the door, he should stand, stride across the room give them both hugs, and murmur his sorrow, whatever they thought of him.

But when they entered, Frank behind them, stretching out his arm to hold the door open, Mr. Coyle, black suit jacket buttoned, took two steps inside and said, "How did this happen?" his voice so accusing he might have asked if they were briefed—except the man's face hadn't crumpled, leaving him to stand in the middle of the room, making little hiccupping noises, desperately trying to hold back sobs.

Mrs. Coyle reached into her bag frantically rummaging for a tissue, then started to cry herself. The President had the presence to reach back for the box on his desk and hold it out until

they each took one. He started pulling one out one for himself to show he wasn't exempt. No. Manipulative. As the sobs came from both of them, gulping sobs, tears streaming down their cheeks, he walked over slowly, put his arm around the man, reached out for her and they all stood there, as if Mrs. Clark had vanished, until the sobs became sniffles and at last stopped and they all stood together in silence.

"So sorry," he said.

"You didn't do it," the man said.

If there was ever a time for honesty, for abandoning the platitudes he was supposed to utter, this was one. "I gave the order."

"You didn't give an order to ... kill our son."

For a moment the President felt not just satisfied but grateful. "Thank you, Mr. Coyle."

"But—" Coyle drew a deep, shuddering breath, "you do send the drones in."

"Yes. That's one of the responsibilities I wish I, I wish weren't necessary."

"Are you so sure? Do you watch these things?"

He knew enough about Coyle's father, a lawyer and on the other side, to expect hostility. He hadn't expected a question so close to what he had asked himself. "Enough," he lied. And then, feeling vulnerable, took a risk. "I'd be lying if I said I had, you know, no doubts."

Jared, standing behind Coyle, hands clasped behind his back, winced. Of course. How did he know a father, a Republican, wouldn't leak that? He could take no more risks. For the next ten minutes, much as he wanted to be sensitive, the meeting became what they usually were: a sentimental exchange of clichés! *I can't undo what happened ... I can't imagine what you're feeling.* And from them, maybe because by admitting doubt he had satisfied them.... *We don't*

want to make things harder for you ... So sorry, Mr. President. Yes. We're so sorry, Mr. President.

Apologizing to him! Trying to make him feel better! He didn't deserve to feel better!

"Thank you," he said, finally. He buzzed for Nicole; she put them through a rehearsal ("So you both stand on the President's right."), and soon they were walking down the hall to the East Room. "I will deny that canard," he whispered to them as they approached the podium. "The spy thing."

They nodded. The seats were full. There was no banter. Only Faywell, the white-haired, rigidly conservative "dean" of reporters who hated his guts, said, "Afternoon, Mr. President," earning not just a nod but a half-smile, lips closed, because his granddaughter was in Jeffrey's class at school. The President looked down at the script placed in the open binder on the lectern, then up. "Sometimes, in the fog of war," he said, "terrible things happen."

He thought he might be over the hard part. But the first question came from Faywell, patting down his white hair, looking nervous in a way he'd never seen, saying, "Mr. President. 'Pologies to the parents, we have a job to do. They say this boy was giving us intelligence. Spying. Your people have denied it. Where's the evidence they're wrong? I mean," he almost smiled despite himself. "Is this fog of war, or fog coming from the White House?"

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"Nice," Jared said when the Coyles were gone and they were alone.

"Except for Faywell."

"No. You handled him. *Absolutely!* Just the right tone."

"He wanted to get me on the record. You think he knows something?"

"You mean the evidence thing?"

"Jared. What if he knows something? What if Coyle confessed? They'd have it on tape."

"No. They wouldn't go to him."

"We don't fucking know!"

"Who's going to leak something to him? Your kids know each other."

"His grandkid. Okay, maybe not Faywell. But *somebody*."

"They would have released it. Speaking of which. Some reporters want to know if we got video. Satellite stuff."

"You heard Coyle. He wanted to know did I see it."

"Right."

"I want to."

And that was when Jared said something he had to fight. "Mr. President, no."

"No, what? You don't want me to see the reality?"

"A reporter could ask. Mr. President, have you seen surveillance—"

"I'll say yes. Don't be one of these guys trying to protect me, Jared. I want to see it. I'm Commander in Chief."

"*What will you learn?*"

"What will I learn? What will I learn? I don't know! Get it!"

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Jared was right, of course. There was almost certainly nothing to learn. All he knew was that when Jared said no, he felt a surge of fury he couldn't ignore. Telling what he couldn't do in his own house!

"I don't want to be insulated," he had said to Fran, coming back upstairs, the afternoon schedule cancelled.

"From what?"

"From whatever they think they need to hide. That's what."

It was mid-afternoon when one of the Secret Service guys brought in the DVD, saying only, "You wanted this." and putting it on his desk.

The question was, did he really care about being insulated? Maybe he said it to sound virtuous; a president who could unflinchingly face the results of what he ordered. Now, sitting there alone, DVD in his hand, he still wasn't sure. He had insisted on watching it alone. He didn't want Jared, or any of the Secret Service guys or the CIA people deputized to help in the room where they could see his reactions, not to mention his awkwardness with the disc. Did he even remember how to play it? Everyone always did these things for him.

Finally, he picked up the DVD, and pulled open the black plastic cover. **Prop of US Navy. TOP SECRET** it read. He slipped the DVD into the slot of the player. Thank God, his fingers remembered how.

0358 HOURS. FIRST TRANSMISSION.

There was a silent countdown, white numbers against a black background. 5,4,3,2,1. Suddenly, he saw roofs of houses.

Everything looked grey as if it was just beginning to get light. An orange circle jerked across the screen like the eye of an alien. It stopped. All at once he was staring down at the roof of one house.

"That's it," a voice said.

A caption appeared at the bottom of the screen. *That's it.*

A house! They said bunker! He didn't know it was a neighborhood! Trembling now, the President looked for the Stop button. But before he could reach out to press it, without a

countdown, came the dreadful white flowers of explosions, not one but four or five, soundless but bursting around different corners of the house, the flames landing around the house, then, quickly flickering and going out.

His entire body felt weak.

The voice said, "Damn." Whoever it was sounded young, white, maybe southern. "Missed."

Damn.

For just one second he felt relief. Missed! Good! As if by pressing Stop the whole thing would not have happened. Preposterous.

"One more time."

One more time.

0408 HOURS. SECOND TRANSMISSION.

He couldn't move. He couldn't look away. Jerking across the screen came the orange circle. Two men stood outside the house looking up. There must have been a sound. One of them had time to raise his arm above his head. *Run!* But suddenly came four flares of white, this time hiding the entire house and the men, surrounding them, then dying out. He watched the smoke thin out and the flames die. Oh, God. The house was a pile of brick and wood, open in the middle.

"Got one."

Got one.

"Other guy's crawling."

Other guy's crawling.

0415 HOURS. THIRD TRANSMISSION.

Now the film or video closed in as if he was maybe twenty feet above them. He saw two bodies on the ground and then men in hazmat suits running up, looking around, then bringing bodies from the house, laying two gently on the ground. One. Two. —*Three! Four!*

Those last two they throw on the ground. And yes it's Coyle, recognizable even with a beard, and the camera's zoomed in close enough to see his face streaked with blood—he was a kid!—and burns on his arms and legs. Torture? The drone? They kick him so hard in the head, again and again until it lies at a crooked angle to his body!

The voice, soft, quavering. Scared. "Oh, God. Why six?"

Oh, God. Why six?

For long minutes he sat, grateful to be alone, unable to stop his arms and chest from trembling. Seeing the Coyles, enduring the way Faywell stood to get him on record—nothing this day compared to what he'd experienced now, sitting alone, watching the screen at his desk. The men, craning their necks up consumed, he was sure, with fear! The bodies on the ground! His hand, still trembling so violently he had to steady it with the other even to press CLOSE!

Did he even deserve to be president? Maybe a president had to be able to shrug off the fact that he gave an order and six or a hundred—or a million! LBJ! Bush!—got killed as a result.

Even as the thought occurred to him, and why shouldn't he be bold enough to entertain any notion, he knew that was foolish. Who knew what other presidents felt.? Every time he picked up a newspaper—he was old-fashioned enough to do that—he read the crazy things people believed about him.

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"School good?"

Dinner time. He'd said it to both kids, but only Jeffrey answered. "Fine."

He was looking at his phone. Fran tried to make him look up. "Daddy had a tough day."

"Mom. You think I don't know?"

The President said, "You watched the announcement."

"Yes. In Civics."

"You see why I couldn't tell you."

"No."

"Jeffrey," Fran said.

"I wasn't going to blab it all over the place, Dad."

Nothing was going to make him mad tonight. "Never thought you would. Kids talk about it?"

"Like the whole *school*."

"Was—was anyone mean to you?"

"Mean? Everybody's *nice*. Mr. Joyce made a joke about it. But you can tell kids are—
nobody likes this thing!"

"Nobody?"

"Because we killed an American guy. Because you have this *drone* thing which kills people and you like don't know who they are. Like yesterday! And some kids say, like, what if he is a spy? Why *not* kidnap a spy? We capture their spies. Right?"

"Yes."

"So why shouldn't they, like, catch ours?"

He couldn't help saying, "Don't say like. Do me a favor. Yes, from their perspective, sure. But you know they are brutal people. They shouldn't win. That's what I think. I hope you do."

"Yeah. I do."

"A front page story all around the world," he said to Fran, "and right now all I care about is one kid."

"And if he says like," Fran said.

"Mom! Don't change the subject," Jeffrey said. "I just want to know the truth. You think I would say anything secret? I wouldn't." And maybe it was gratitude because Jeff seemed to be over his anger. The idea came to him without any warning, like a drone strike. *Tell him.*

Why not? Wasn't this what bothered him? They thought the only way to protect him was to keep the truth from his own son? And keep the truth from Nicole! And keep him from watching the attack because reality might be too much.

No. He didn't have to let them control him! Not in his own house! Oh, maybe not now, with Jen listening, and thinking God knows what. But maybe just before bedtime, he could come into Jeffrey's room, sit on the bed, and give him a hug. Tell him how dangerous it was to know classified information. Tell him he only trusted him because he was a responsible kid. Tell him a lot of people wouldn't approve of telling him *anything—and he couldn't tell everything.*

Jeffrey's smile would disappear. He'd lean in a little closer so he wouldn't miss a word. He'd say, "I know that, Dad."

That was when he could look at him soberly, swear him to secrecy and give him some version of what happened that wasn't a lie, or at least the kind of half-truth that maybe even a few decades from now could make Jeff understand the risk his Dad was willing to take.

And maybe, not everything needed to wait till bedtime. "You really need to know?"

"Dad. Everyone *thinks* I know."

"They told you that?"

"Fact, Priscilla Faywell asked me. Right in class. I told her he wasn't."

He saw Fran's face freeze in a half smile, lips open.

"Wasn't a spy? You told her that?" Calmly. As if he was just trying to be sure.

Now, Jeff was grinning. "Don't worry. I said I couldn't tell her *how* I knew. But I knew."

Fran said, softly, "You told that to Horace Fay—"

"It's okay, Jeff," he said, fast. "Mom worries because Mr. Faywell isn't my biggest fan."

"I said something wrong?"

"Not at all." But seeing relief and then triumph on Jeffery's face, seeing the fallacy, the naïveté of what a fourteen year old kid might think, he felt heat rush to his face and saw the cliff over which he might plunge.

Did President's son mislead reporter? Of course Jared and everyone else had to control their boss. Of course he was at the mercy of people around him. There was no way to be careless about telling the truth—about how he felt about drones or spies, or giving orders to kill people, or why he and Jared and everyone needed to spend so much time spinning a blend of fact and fiction people might accept, and certainly not about Roger Coyle.

He picked up his fork, jabbed it into his chicken, and then pushed it across the plate, as if even taking a single bite was far too much to swallow. He stared around at each of them and must have looked fiercer than he meant because Jen looked down at her plate. But then he fixed his gaze on Jeffrey. "You defended me, kiddo," he said, his voice gentle. "You want the truth?"

In the end, it came down to the way Jeffrey nodded, wordlessly, making as clear as if he had said the words, that it meant so much to know something the other kids didn't, that you couldn't take a chance he would keep anything secret.

"Course, Dad."

"*Anyone*," he said, and while for one panicky moment he thought that someday he might be sorry, by then it was too late to change. "*Anyone* who says Coyle was one of our agents, *not that being one is wrong*, tells a cheap, tawdry lie."

End