



Self-Deception

By A. Scott

“Only by believing, against the evidence, that our lives have meaning and that there is hope for the future do we keep having children, or washing the windows, or spending twelve hours a day designing software that will be obsolete six months after it hits the shelves. Take away the thousand and one delusions we weave, and we will be paralyzed by apathy, or run screaming for the hills, or turn to stone while staring into the unblinking void of a Godless, purposeless, blind universe.”

Professor Ron Samuelson turned and looked out over the packed classroom. “Can anyone tell me what Sullivan is trying to tell us?”

Twenty hands were raised out of sixty. “Yes, Miss Markenson.”

“We deceive ourselves to survive,” the senior answered. “We are, and therefore, we lie.”

A few students chuckled.

“Very clever, Miss Markenson. I don’t think I’ve heard it put so succinctly. Anyone else? Yes, Mr. Jacobson.”

“Sullivan believes self-deception makes us feel better about ourselves. Lying helps us manage the day-to-day stress of everyday life.”

“Both good points,” Samuelson replied. “Now let me ask you this. Can you always tell when someone is lying? Do you always know when you’ve been deceived?”

The classroom grew quiet. Finally, only two hands were raised.

“Yes, Miss Feinstein.”

A petite brunette in the third row rose to give her answer. “Not always, I think, Professor Samuelson. Sometimes, fact can be fiction, and fiction can be fact.”

He paused to let her words resonate with the other students. “I’m afraid you’re wrong Miss Feinstein,” he replied smiling. “The truth always comes out in the end. Deception or self-deception are only a means to an end. And the end can only result in the truth.”

As he began to elaborate, a bell sounded. “Ok, class, that will be all for today. See everyone next week, and remember, practice your lies this weekend.”

He smiled again as several students chuckled. He could tell they enjoyed *Introduction to Lies and Self-Deception* as much as he enjoyed teaching it. And his enjoyment was only surpassed by his considered belief that he was an expert on the subject.

Samuelson had come to the small, private college in Scottsbluff, Nebraska two years ago with a master’s degree in Social Humanities from Iowa State. He was a war veteran and had served overseas in Afghanistan. He was single, never married, and came from Quakers in Iowa. But the only truth was he was single, had never married, and was in his early forties. Beyond that he was of average height and build and not particularly attractive. Still, he looked the part of a maturing, college professor: scruffy beard, early gray at the temples, patchy sweater, slightly overweight.

At first, he had taught freshman Sociology. Fortunately for him, it was ‘by the book,’ as requested by his department head. But after his first year, he was asked if there were any new or more interesting courses he could teach, and so, Samuelson thought of lying.

“How about a course on deception?” he asked the chairman of the Social Sciences Department.

Dr. Earnest Kaplan had hired him shortly after arriving at the college and taking over the department. A former marine, Dr. Kaplan was older, in his mid-fifties, and like Samuelson not

from Nebraska. He seemed to enjoy Samuelson's company and considered him a friend and a colleague.

"Sounds interesting," Dr. Kaplan replied. "Quite clever, actually. Might give these hayseeds something to get off their asses about. But can you create a curriculum around lying and deception? Can you fill an entire semester?"

Samuelson nodded. "I can. There are several excellent textbooks on the subject, authors who've done real research, and, of course, plenty of real-world examples."

And the class had worked out well. *Introduction to Lies and Self-Deception* quickly became one of the most popular classes on campus. There was even a waiting list; the only waiting list ever known to exist at Barnsdale College. It turned out there was plenty of interest in deception. Who knew students from one of the most rural parts of a conservative, mid-western state would be interested in what Samuelson knew more about than most. Who knew so many farm hicks would fall so easily for his bullshit.

After class, Samuelson walked down to the cafeteria for lunch. Black coffee, a grill cheese, and then outside for a smoke before his next class. It was January and quite cold, so he was quick. Three or four drags before his hands started to freeze. It was a Friday before a three-day holiday, and he smiled when he realized he was only one class away from a peaceful, uninterrupted weekend. He planned to do a little writing of his own. Nothing much, just a few short story ideas he had running around in his head, but he was mostly looking forward to driving down to Cheyenne and spending the weekend with Lorie. They had met six months ago at a bookshop in Cheyenne and struck up a conversation about Hemingway and Fitzgerald. Lorie did most of the talking. They had a coffee down the street and agreed to see each other again. Lorie wasn't overly attractive, a little frumpy, a little over-weight, brown hair, big glasses, but

she was good natured and great in bed. Samuelson had started coming to town every few weeks to see her. They had sex on their second date. A bit awkward at first, like they both had forgotten how to do it. But over time, he felt comfortable enough to spend the night and then several nights with her when he came to Cheyenne.

When he finished his cigarette and came back inside, Samuelson was about to walk into his classroom when Dr. Kaplan approached him.

“Excuse me, Ron, I wonder if I might have a word?” he asked.

“Absolutely.” Samuelson knew the chairman was considering renewing his contract for another two years, and he hoped to hear good news.

They huddle in the hallway across from his classroom. “We’ve hired a new professor for the department. A Miss Davenport. And I was hoping you might show her the ropes by having her audit your class for a week or so. Just until she’s up to speed.”

Samuelson looked surprised. “Why me?” he asked. “There are plenty of other professors with more experience.”

“That’s the thing. Miss Davenport, or Mindy, you can call her Mindy, she asked for you specifically. When I mentioned your name, it was like she knew you. She perked right up and said if there was anyone she could work with it had to be you.”

Samuelson was even more confused. “Mindy Davenport? I don’t know any Mindy Davenport,” he said. “And I still don’t understand why she wants to work with me.”

“I don’t either, Ron, but I’ve already told her she could, so let’s leave it at that,” Dr. Kaplan said, patting him on the shoulder. “She’ll be here bright and early on Tuesday when classes resume, so let’s welcome her with open arms, okay?” Then he turned and walked away.

On the drive down to Cheyenne that evening, Samuelson racked his brain trying to think if he knew anyone named Mindy or Davenport, but he didn't. At least, no one who was an aspiring college professor. But once he got to Lorie's apartment, he forgot about Mindy Davenport and spent the weekend watching movies, browsing the local bookstore, and sleeping in Lorie's bed.

On Tuesday morning, after his coffee and sweet roll and cigarette, Samuelson walked into his classroom early and found a thin blonde woman in a tight, black skirt, sitting in the front row. Samuelson guessed she was in her late thirties.

"Good morning, Professor," the woman said in a nervous tone when she stood up and approached him. "I'm Mindy. Mindy Davenport. I believe Dr. Kaplan told you about me."

Remembering her request and Dr. Kaplan's comment that she had acted like she knew him Samuelson searched her face for some sense of familiarity, but nothing came to mind.

"Yes, Miss Davenport, welcome," he offered. "We're happy to have you here."

"Thank you. When I heard your name, I knew immediately I wanted to meet you. And I was hoping to work with you."

He tried not to seem too curious. "I'm sorry, but do we know each other? Dr. Kaplan said you acted like you knew me."

"Oh, yes, I know all about you."

Samuelson frowned. "I'm sorry, I'm still a little confused. What's that supposed to mean?"

She turned and gathered up her books and a small handbag she had hung on the back of the chair. "Let's leave it at that for now, shall we?"

Before he could respond several students started walking into the classroom.

“Now, where would you like me to sit?” she asked.

“Anywhere you like, Ms. Davenport,” he said over the growing noise. Then he watched her walk to the back of the room and sit in the last row.

“Good morning, class. I trust you had a restful holiday,” he began as students settled into their seats. Then he opened his textbook. “According to evolutionary theorist Robert Trivers, ‘*we hide reality from our conscious minds the better to hide from onlookers.*’ That is, we engage in self-deception in part to make ourselves more adept at deceiving others. Liars who are aware of their lies are more likely to be caught. Liars who are less aware are more likely to project sincerity in their communications. Or as a familiar Seinfeld character George Costanza once put it, ‘It’s not a lie if you believe it.’”

As usual, his often-used line drew several laughs.

“Now who can tell me why liars who are aware of their lies are more likely to get caught?”

Several hands went up, but then Samuelson noticed Davenport had raised her hand as well, and now several students were looking at her.

“Class, everyone, this is Miss Davenport. Pardon me, Miss Mindy Davenport. She’s a new professor in our department, and she’s monitoring our class. Yes, Miss Davenport did you have a question?”

“No, Professor Samuelson. Just an answer,” she replied. “I think liars who are aware of their lies are more likely to get caught because there’s always someone who knows the truth.”

There was a noticeable rumble from the audience.

Samuelson smiled. “That may very well be, Miss Davenport. Thank you for your input. Any other answers?”

Before anyone responded, she continued. “For example, you could be lying right now in this class. About everything, your career, your background. But we would all believe you because you’re the professor. Our professor. But what if someone here knew you were lying. Knew your entire life was a lie. Now that would be something.”

Samuelson glared at her. Was she serious? he wondered. What did she know? How? He started to feel slightly uncomfortable. He had been extremely careful. Covered his tracks. There was no way she could know everything.

He quickly decided not to overreact. “Thank you again, Miss Davenport. Now, as I said, are there any other answers?”

When the class ended, Samuelson looked up at the row where Davenport had been sitting, but her seat was empty. He looked for her outside the classroom and in the teacher’s lounge, and then later in the cafeteria, but he couldn’t find her anywhere.

That evening he was grading papers when his mother called. Contrary to his bio, she wasn’t from Iowa, and she wasn’t a Quaker. His mother lived in Scarsdale, and she and her son had grown closer in recent years. They talked almost every other Sunday around six o’clock. But it was a Tuesday, so he was surprised to hear her voice when he answered the phone.

“Hello, Ronnie, am I disturbing you?” she asked meekly.

“No, mother, I’m good. What’s up? How are you? Is everything okay?”

“Everything’s fine,” she answered, “but I just got the strangest call.” Mrs. Samuelson was in her early sixties had lived alone since her husband had suffered a heart attack two years ago and died. “I was sitting here watching television. You know, one of those *Matlock* reruns I like so much. And anyway, the phone rang, and this woman was on the phone. She said she knew

me, and that she knew all about your father. Then she said she knew you and what you were doing. She said her name was Mindy Davenport.”

Hearing his mother mention the new professor’s name surprised him even more.

“Davenport? Did you say Mindy Davenport?”

“Yes. Do you know her? She seemed to know you.”

“No, I don’t know anyone by that name, mother,” he insisted. “What did she say? What does she know about me?”

“Well, that’s the thing. She called you a liar. Said you had been for years. Then she quoted someone named Sanford. D.H. Sanford, she said, like I’m supposed to know who that is. She said Sanford tells us the ‘thirst for rationality’ is a major source of lies. She even quoted him: *‘I have acted improperly and am guilty. I have done nothing wrong and am not responsible.’* What does that even mean, Ronnie?”

Samuelson was stunned. Davenport was quoting from today’s lecture. She was using his own words to harass his mother. Who was this woman? he wondered. And what did she know about him? And more importantly, what did she want?

He spent the next half-hour calming his mother and assuring her he would get to the bottom of who Davenport was and what she wanted. He continued to tell her he didn’t know the woman, but when they ended their call, he wasn’t sure she believed him.

The next morning, Samuelson decided to find out more about Mindy Davenport, where she came from, and how she had turned up in Scottsbluff. So, he went to see the Chairman.

“Tell me again where this new professor, Miss Davenport, came from. And how she got here. Barnsdale is not necessarily on everybody’s list of desired academic institutions.”

Dr. Kaplan looked at him over the top of his half-moon, reading glasses. “I’ll take your comment into consideration when I review your new contract, Ron.”

“Sorry. You know what I mean.”

“I guess I do. Anyway, if you must know Miss Davenport contacted us. Then she sent over her credentials. They were quite impressive. Yale undergrad and Masters’ degree. With high marks. She could teach anywhere. Write her own ticket. But when I asked her why she was interested in Barnsdale, she simply said we were the only school she was considering. Barnsdale or nothing she said.”

Now Samuelson knew something was wrong. Back in his office he went on the Internet and did his own research. He found her on Facebook, Instagram, and Google. She was originally from Stamford, Connecticut, where she went to high school and then college up the road in New Haven. She appeared to have many friends and a family in the area. So, why was she here in Scottsbluff making trouble for him? And why had she called his mother and told her he was a liar?

That evening he went to dinner at the only decent Italian restaurant in town. Luigi’s was more of a diner with a full menu of hoagies and pizza, but it made a tasty chicken parmigiana, his favorite. He was finishing a second glass of merlot when Davenport walked in and spotted him. Without any hesitation, she walked over, slipped into the booth, and faced him.

“I knew I would find you here,” she said. “It’s Wednesday night. You eat here every Wednesday.”

He put down his wine glass. “You seem to know a great many things about me, Miss Davenport. You’ve come all the way to Scottsbluff, to Barnsdale, to meet me. You interrupted my class, intimidated my students, and apparently, you called my mother and harassed her. Told

her you knew about my father. That he was a liar. That I'm a liar. It doesn't matter. Just tell me why you are here and what you want?"

She offered a thin smile. "Can I get a glass of wine, first?"

He waved at the waitress and asked for another wine glass. Then he poured Davenport a glass from his half empty bottle.

She took a slow sip and then set the wine glass in front of her. "Lying and Deception. That's an interesting subject to teach don't you think? I mean, what a great topic. Who wouldn't be interested? I must admit when I saw you, of all people, were teaching a course on lying and deception I almost fell out of my chair."

Samuelson's eyes grew cold. "What do you mean, me of all people?"

"I think you know."

His shoulders tensed. Her sarcasm grated on him. He didn't like her very much. He wrapped his hands around his wine glass and tried to relax. And when he spoke again, he looked away from her.

"Are you familiar with the term paltering, Miss Davenport?"

"No, I don't think I am. Enlighten me."

"Paltering is the use of facts with the intention of misleading. Unlike a lie, paltering uses the truth as a way to actively mislead."

"And that's what you think I'm doing? Paltering?"

"Precisely, Miss Davenport."

"Please, call me Mindy."

He stopped and looked at her. "Why are you here?"

“I’ll get to that,” she said, before taking another sip of wine. “But let me begin by answering the other big question on your mind. What do I know?” Then she reached over and took a breadstick from his plate.

He watched as she ate half of it before continuing.

“I know a great many things about you, Professor Samuelson,” she said. “And some things you don’t know. Or at least I don’t think you know. So, where would you like to begin?”

He sneered. “I don’t know, surprise me.”

“Happy to. First, I know you didn’t go to Iowa State. You’re not even from Iowa. And you don’t have a degree in Sociology. In fact, you’ve never been to college.”

“And how would you know that?”

“Because unlike Dr. Kaplan I checked you out. I called the school. I didn’t just rely on a piece of paper you showed up with or information you put on a resume.”

He felt warm and drank from his water glass.

“And Afghanistan. You were never there. No military record to speak off. That claim was easy to dispel. I don’t know how anyone could have missed it. I don’t even understand why you would make up such a thing.”

“A military record never hurts,” he said without thinking.

“Is that how you bonded with Kaplan? Over the military? It’s no wonder he didn’t check your credentials. The guy’s a moron.”

“But you still haven’t told me why you’re here Miss Davenport. Why you’ve come all this way to call me a liar.”

“I’m getting to that part. Now, those are the lies you know about. That you created. Let’s talk about what you don’t know. Lies created without your knowledge. Lies before you were born. And lies affecting my life as well.”

He pushed his wine glass away. Where was she going with this? he wondered. What lies affected her? He didn’t know her. And what lies could possibly have been created without his knowledge? She was making no sense.

“Did you know your father had an affair before you were born?”

“What? That’s absurd.”

“It’s true.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“I wish it weren’t. But it gets even worse. The woman your father had an affair with got pregnant, and when she found out she was distraught. She already was a fragile person. High strung they called it. So, your father conspired to have her institutionalized. It was the only way to keep her quiet. Lock her away, so the scandal wouldn’t ruin his precious life.”

“That all sounds preposterous.”

“It’s not.”

“And how do you happen to know this?”

She sat back in the booth. “Is there more wine?”

Reluctantly, he poured more and watched her. She seemed nervous. Was she lying? he wondered.

“I know because she was my mother,” she said with little emotion.

Samuelson sat there speechless. Her tale had taken an evil twist. He didn’t know quite how to respond.

She put her hands together on the table. “I was born in that sanatorium. When my mother gave birth, I was sent to an orphanage. I don’t know why. No one ever told me. But I suspect your father had a hand in it. When I called your mother, I started to ask her if she knew, but I didn’t have the heart. I’m sorry about the phone call, by the way. It was cruel to involve her, but I was feeling particularly bitter that day. It was first time I had met you, and it scared me. Do you know how much you look like him? Your father, I mean.”

He had heard this before, but Samuelson was too busy sifting through pieces of her story to respond.

“So anyway,” she continued, “let me get this all out, okay. I know it’s a lot, but the truth will set us free, right?” She forced a laugh.

“Please, just get on with it.”

“Fortunately, for me, I was adopted by a wonderful family in Stamford. The Davenports. And they raised me as their own. I had a wonderful childhood, and since I was an infant when I was adopted, I had no knowledge of my real mother. No memory. When I turned twenty-one my parents told me I had been adopted. They were, they are good people, and they thought I should know. That I should hear it from them. And I love them for that. I started searching for my birth mother and was able to put the pieces together finally. Learned what had happened. That’s when I found out about your father.”

Samuelson couldn’t keep from asking. “So, you met him? My father?”

“No, never,” she replied quickly with the first hint of uncertainty in her voice. “When I learned what had happened to my mother, how she had been committed to a sanatorium against her wishes, I was so angry I couldn’t image confronting him. For me, he was a monster, and I wanted nothing to do with him.”

She paused and looked down. “I did know where he lived. Where all of you lived. Scarsdale. Pretty nice if you ask me. Not so far from where I grew up, but worlds apart. And I knew he had a son, a young boy. You.”

She teared up suddenly, and without thinking Samuelson slid his hand across the table to comfort her.

But he stopped short of touching her. “That’s quite a story,” he said. “It almost sounds too good to be true.”

She wiped her tears with a napkin. “Why? You think I made it up? That I’m lying?”

“I’m not sure. I’m just saying there is a lot to consider. There are things we know and don’t know. You said yourself you didn’t confront him, my father. And now he’s dead.”

“I’m not that good of a liar. That’s your area of expertise.”

He smiled finally. “A good lie is one that cannot be proven to be untrue. And I do know a good lie when I hear one.”

She sneered at him. “You know what I think?”

“What?”

“You should ask your mother.”

Samuelson opened his textbook *Lying and Deception in Human Interaction* and read from the page he had earmarked before his plane took off.

“The German physician Anton Delbruck (1891) is credited with being the first to describe the concept of pathological lying in patient case studies. He observed that some of his patients told lies so abnormal and disproportionate as to deserve a special category he described as *pseudologia fantastica*.”

Was that what was happening? he wondered. Was Davenport a pathological liar? Was any of what she had told him true? Was she an even better liar than he was?

When his plane landed at the Westchester Airport he still hadn't decided. Nor on the drive to Scarsdale in his rental car. He didn't know what he was going to say to his mother. What he would ask her. He knew she loved his father very much. When he had his heart attack and died, she was devastated. Samuelson had spent several weeks with her helping with the funeral and putting his father's affairs in order.

Growing up, Samuelson admired his father. He was a lawyer and worked for a big law firm in the city. But they weren't close. His father traveled extensively for business and was gone for weeks at a time. When he graduated from high school, Samuelson wanted to see the world, too, so he packed his backpack and headed for Europe. But his father thought it was folly and called him a bum.

"You'll never amount to anything," his father warned him. The comment stuck with him to this day.

Five years later it started. At first, just little white lies. He was on sabbatical. Working on his dissertation on clinical sociology at NYU. Women seemed to like that. Since he was a ferocious reader of psychology and sociology the language came naturally to him. When he ran out of money, he returned to the States and decided he wanted to be a college professor, but he didn't have a resume. Or a degree. So, he created one. Slowly, carefully. He picked Iowa State because no one he knew had ever gone there. And a master's degree in sociology was necessary for him to apply for most teaching positions at smaller colleges like Barnsdale. Facebook and LinkedIn helped. Coming from Iowa sounded good and coming from Quakers even better. In the end, he wasn't sure why he started lying, but the more he did the more he found he enjoyed it.

And it turned out he was good at lying. Now he taught a college course on lies and deception. How cool was that?

Of course, his mother thought he was a software engineer in California because that's what he had told her when he showed up for his father's funeral. He reminded himself of that fact when he pulled into her driveway.

"Did you ever figure out who this Mindy Davenport woman was who called me?" she asked as she cleared the dinner table that night. "She really scared me with all her innuendos about you and what she knew about us."

Samuelson smoothed the lace tablecloth with his hands. "Actually mother, I did. I spoke to her last week."

"You did? You spoke to her?"

"Yes, she called me in San Francisco," he lied. "At home. After work."

"What did she say? Did she tell you what she knew about you? About your father?"

He watched her reaction carefully. If his mother was lying, and it turned out she knew who Mindy Davenport was, he would be able to tell. After all, he was an expert.

"This Miss Davenport said quite a lot actually, but it was mostly about Dad. She told me he had an affair before I was born. And when the woman got pregnant, he had her committed to a sanatorium in Hartford."

His mother frowned. "How would she know that?" she asked.

"You mean it's true?"

"Not quite."

"What's that supposed to mean? It's either true or it isn't."

His mother's hands were shaking. She gripped the sides of the table to steady herself, but he couldn't tell what she was thinking.

"Ronnie," she said. Her voice sounded edgy. "I loved your father very much. I did. But he wasn't perfect. He was a hard man to love as you know."

Then she paused as if lost in the past. "But I don't know why this woman thinks she knows what happened."

"So, she's wrong?"

"Let me finish," his mother insisted. "Just listen. Yes, we had a maid years ago. Before you were born. Isabel. She was originally from Spain. Came here on a work visa your father arranged. She was so young. Barely eighteen, and quite attractive. I should have known better. Your father had wandering eyes, as they use to say. Anyway, they had an affair. Before it ended, she got pregnant and was very upset. Threatened to go to the police. Tell them she had been raped, if you can believe it. But your father had power of attorney over her, and he sent her away. Had her admitted for psychiatric evaluation."

"What happened to her? This maid."

"I don't know."

"And the baby?"

"I heard she lost it."

"Mother, that's awful. And you never told anyone? You stayed married to Dad? You forgave him?"

"What else could I do?" she said, sounding indifferent. "It was Scarsdale."

"So, this woman. Miss Davenport. She's lying."

"Apparently, but there's no telling what else she knows."

When Samuelson returned to Scottsbluff, he was uncertain what to do. So, his father had had an affair. It was sordid, messy. But it wasn't his lie. It may have upset his mother that Davenport knew, but he didn't care. But why had Davenport lied to him? If she wasn't Isabel's daughter then who was she? And what did she want? Had she come all the way to Barnsdale to expose him? Why?

As it happened none of that mattered.

"She's gone," Dr. Kaplan told him when he asked how he could contact Davenport. "Vanished. Turns out she was a complete fraud."

"What do mean?" Samuelson said, hoping not to sound too relieved.

"Never showed up for class. So, I checked her credentials. And you know what? She made it all up. She never graduated from Yale. They have no record of her. Created a resume out of thin air. And her teaching credentials. False. Can you imagine? What kind of person would do such a thing?"

Samuelson cleared his throat. "No, I can't imagine."

The following Wednesday night he was back at Luigi's unsure if he would ever see Davenport again. He hoped not. Half-way through his salad she slipped into the booth across from him.

"Surprised to see me?" she said smiling. She looked different. She had cut her hair short and was wearing a heavy, wool sweater over blue jeans. More college student than professor.

He didn't smile back. "Yes, I am. Kaplan said you had vanished."

"Kaplan didn't look very far. I'm still in town. Just not at the college. After all, I'm not a professor. Never was."

“So, I hear.”

“Did you miss me?”

“Afraid not. So, why are you here? Why did you come to Scottsbluff in the first place?”

“Wine, please.”

A waitress brought him another glass, and he filled it.

Then she continued. “I told you. I came to find you.”

“And now that you have what do you want?” he asked. Then he put down his fork and pushed his salad away. “I talked to my mother, by the way, and she told me everything.”

“Everything? Did she mention Isabel?”

He paused. “Ah, yes, she did mention someone by that name. Their maid, I believe.”

“Did she also mention your father took advantage of her, told her he loved her, and that he would leave his wife for her?”

“I don’t know anything about that. Mother said when she got pregnant, she became hysterical, threatened to go to the police. So, my father had her committed. It’s not pretty, but it was a long time ago and has nothing to do with me.”

She stopped smiling and looked away as she spoke. “Did you know pathological lying is characterized by a long, perhaps lifelong, pattern of frequent lying for which no apparent psychological motive or external benefit can be discerned.”

“I’m not lying,” he shouted.

“No, but I am,” she said, staring at him.

“Yes, I know. Mother said Isabel lost the baby. So, I know she wasn’t your mother.”

“Interesting. What else did she say?”

“What do you mean?”

Then she smiled again. “Sounds like your mother doesn’t know everything.”

“Know what? What’s going on? You lied about Isabel being your mother. And I’m guessing you lied about being adopted. So you’ve pretty much lied about everything.”

She paused and drained her glass. “Not everything, Ron,” she said, pausing. “Can I call you Ron?”

“Yes, whatever,” he said, exasperated. “What didn’t my mother know?”

“That your father had another affair after you were born. With my mother. But it wasn’t an affair. They were married.”

“They were what?!”

“They were married. For many years. In Stamford. We were one big happy family. And then one day Isabel showed up and told my mother about her husband’s other family. The one in Scarsdale. She was so upset she threw him out of the house. That’s when everything changed. When everything started going downhill.”

“Wait a minute. You’re saying my father had an entirely different family in Connecticut. While he was married to my mother?”

“That’s what I’m saying.”

“But you said you never met him. You said you never met my father.”

“Your father, Ron. I said I never met your father. My father raised me until I was almost six, and then one day, he was gone, and I never saw him again. My mother never got over his dishonesty. His deception. She died a broken woman. And after she passed away six months ago, I was angry. He ruined our lives. And I wanted revenge. So, I searched for him so I could expose him for the liar he was. But then I discovered he had died two years ago of a heart attack. His obituary said his son was a software engineer in Silicon Valley.”

Samuelson looked away.

“But I couldn’t find a software engineer named Ron Samuelson,” she continued. “What I found was a professor at a small college in northwestern Nebraska who taught a popular class on lies and deception. And boy did that pique my interest.”

Then she slid her narrow fingers across the table toward him like tenacles.

Samuelson had an idea and touched her hands. “So, what are you saying? I’m your brother?”

She frowned and recoiled her hands. “No, Ron, I’m saying the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree. While you may think you are a great liar you will never be as good a liar as your father.”

“So, what is it you want?”

Her smile slowly returned. “Exodus, my brother. Sins of the father visited upon those of the son.” Then her eyes turned ice cold. “Kaplan told me your contract is up for renewal. And I doubt he would like it very much if he knew the truth. Once you’re exposed, you’ll be exposed forever. So, I think it’s better if you resign. Immediately.”

Finally, he saw what she wanted. Vengeance. End his perfect world, his perfect life. It was over. There was no place to hide. At least not in Scottsbluff. He was a victim of his own self-deception. He believed his father’s lies could not hurt him, but he was wrong. His father’s lies had exposed his. And now he had to pay for his lies and his father’s. In that moment Samuelson heard his father’s fateful warning: “You’ll never amount to anything.” And it made him smile. For he had become something. A better liar than his father.

Placing his hands on the table, he looked at Mindy. “That’s fine with me,” he said. “I’ll just find another life. Another lie. For me, it comes easy.”

Then he stood up and walked out.