



**THANK YOU  
FOR SMOKING**

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## PROLOGUE

Nick Naylor had been called many things since becoming chief spokesman for the Academy of Tobacco Studies, but until now no one had actually compared him to Satan. The conference speaker, himself the recipient of munificent government grants for his unyielding holy war against the industry that supplied the coughing remnant of fifty-five million American smokers with their cherished guilty pleasure, was now pointing at the image projected onto the wall of the cavernous hotel ballroom. There were no horns or tail; he had a normal haircut, and looked like someone you might pass in the hallway, but his skin was bright red, as if he'd just gone swimming in nuclear reactor water; and the eyes – the eyes were bright, alive, vibrantly pimpy. The caption was done in the distinctive cigarette-pack typeface, 'Hysterica Bold', they called it at the office. It said, WARNING: SOME PEOPLE WILL SAY ANYTHING TO SELL CIGARETTES.

The audience – consisting of 2,500 ‘health professionals’, thought Nick, who, leafing through the list of participants, counted few actual MDs – purred at the slide. Nick knew this purr well. He caught the whiff of catnip in the air, imagined them sharpening their claws on the sides of their chairs. ‘I’m certain that our next . . . panelist,’ the speaker hesitated, the word just too neutral to describe a man who earned his living by killing 1,200 human beings a day. Twelve hundred people – two jumbo jet planeloads a day of men, women, and children. Yes, innocent children, denied their bright futures, those happy moments of scoring the winning touchdowns, of high school and college graduations, marriage, parenthood, professional fulfillment, breakthroughs in engineering, medicine, economics, who knows *how* many Nobel Prize winners? Lambs, slaughtered by Nicholas Naylor and the tobacco industry fiends he so slickly represented. More than 400,000 a year! And approaching the half-million mark. Genocide, that’s what it was, enough to make you weep, if you had a heart, the thought of so many of these . . . victims, their lives stubbed out upon the ashtray of corporate greed by this tall, trim, nicely tailored forty-year-old yuppie executioner who, of course, ‘needs . . . no . . . introduction.’

Not much point in trying to soften up this crowd with the usual insincere humor that in Washington passed for genuine self-deprecation. Safer to try insincere earnestness. ‘Believe it or not,’ he began, fidgeting with his silk tie now to show that he was nervous when in fact he was not, ‘I’m delighted to be here at the Clean Lungs 2000 symposium.’ With the twentieth century fast whimpering and banging its

way to a conclusion, every conference in sight was calling itself Blah Blah 2000 so as to confer on itself a sense of millennial urgency that would not be lost on the relevant congressional appropriations committees, or ‘tits’ as they were privately called by the special interest groups who made their livelihood by suckling at them. Nick wondered if this had been true of conferences back in the 1890s. Had there been a federally subsidized Buggy Whips 1900 symposium?

The audience did not respond to Nick’s introductory outpouring of earnestness. But they weren’t hissing at him. He glanced down at the nearest table, a roundtable of dedicated haters. The haters usually took the closest seats, scribbling furiously on their conference pads – paid for by US taxpayers – which they’d found inside their pseudo-suede attachés, also paid for by amber waves of taxpayers, neatly embossed with the conference’s logo, CLEAN LUNGS 2000. They would take those home with them and give them to their kids, saving the price of a gift T-shirt. *My folks went to Washington and all I got was this dippy attaché.* The haters, whipped by the previous speakers into ecstasies of neo-puritanical fervor, were by now in an advanced state of buttock. They glowered up at him.

‘Because,’ Nick continued, already exhausted by the whole dreary futility of it, ‘it is my closely held belief that what we need is not more *confrontation*, but more *consultation*.’ A direct steal from the Jesse Jackson School of Meaningless but Rhymed Oratory, but it worked. ‘And I’m especially grateful to the Clean Lungs 2000 leadership for . . .’ a note of wry amusement to let them know that

he knew that the Clean Lungs 2000 leadership had fought like marines on Mount Suribachi to keep him out of the conference ‘. . . finally agreeing to make this a *conference* in the fullest sense of that word. It’s always been my closely held belief that with an issue as complex as ours, what we need is not more talking *about* each other, but more talking *to* each other.’ He paused a beat to let their brains process his subtle substituting of ‘issue’ for ‘the cigarette industry’s right to slaughter half a million Americans a year.’

So far so good. No one stood up and shouted, ‘Mass murderer!’ Difficult to get back on track after being compared to Hitler, Stalin, or Pol Pot.

But then it happened, during the Q and A. Some woman about halfway back got up, said that Nick ‘seemed like a nice young man’, prompting guffaws; said she wanted ‘to share a recent experience’ with him. Nick braced. For him, no ‘shared experience’ with anyone in this crowd could possibly bode well. She launched into a graphic account of a dear departed’s ‘courageous battle’ with lung cancer. Then, more in sadness than in anger, she asked Nick, ‘How can you sleep at night?’

No stranger to these occasions, Nick nodded sympathetically as Uncle Harry’s heroic last hours were luridly recounted. ‘I appreciate your sharing that with us all, ma’am, and I think I speak for all of us in this room when I say that we regret your tragic loss, but I think the issue here before us today is whether we as Americans want to abide by such documents as the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights. If the answer is yes, then I think our course is clear.

And I think your uncle, who was I'm sure a very *fine* man, were he here today, might just agree that if we go tampering with the bedrock principles that our Founding Fathers laid down, many of whom, you'll recall, were themselves tobacco farmers, just for the sake of indulging a lot of frankly unscientific speculation, then we're placing at risk not only our own freedoms, but those of our children, and our children's children.' It was crucial not to pause here to let the stunning non sequitur embed itself in their neural processors. 'Anti-tobacco hysteria is not exactly new. You remember, of course, Murad the Fourth, the Turkish sultan.' Of course no one had the faintest notion who on earth Murad the Fourth was, but people like a little intellectual flattery. 'Murad, remember, got it into his head that people shouldn't smoke, so he outlawed it, and he would go out at night dressed up like a regular Turk and wander the streets of Istanbul pretending to have a nicotine fit and begging people to sell him some tobacco. And if someone took pity on him and gave him something to smoke – *whammo!* – Murad would behead him on the spot. And leave the body right there in the street to rot. WARNING: SELLING TOBACCO TO MURAD IV CAN BE DANGEROUS TO YOUR HEALTH.' Nick moved quickly to the kill: 'Myself, I'd like to think that we as a nation have progressed beyond the days of summary executions for the crime of pursuing our own definition of happiness.' Thus, having compared the modern American anti-smoking movement to the depredations of a bloodthirsty seventeenth-century Ottoman, Nick could depart, satisfied that he had temporarily beaten back the horde a few inches. Not a lot of ground, but in this war, it was practically a major victory.

# ONE

There was a thick stack of WHILE YOU WERE OUTs when he got back to the Academy's office in one of the more interesting buildings on K Street, hollowed out in the middle with a ten-story atrium with balconies dripping with ivy. The overall effect was that of an inside-out corporate Hanging Gardens of Babylon. A huge neo-deco-classical fountain on the ground floor provided a continuous and soothing flow of splashing white noise. The Academy of Tobacco Studies occupied the top three floors. As a senior vice president for communications at ATS, or 'the Academy' as BR insisted it be called by staff, Nick was entitled to an outside corner office, but he chose an interior corner office because he liked the sound of running water. Also, he could leave his door open, and the smoke would waft out into the atrium. Even smokers care about proper ventilation.

He flipped through the stack of pink slips waiting for

him at the receptionist's stand. 'CBS needs react to SG's call for ban on billboard ads.' ABC, NBC, CNN, etc., etc., they all wanted the same, except for *USA Today*, which needed a react to tomorrow's story in *The New England Journal of Medicine* announcing medical science's conclusion that smoking also leads to something called Buerger's disease, a circulatory ailment that requires having all your extremities amputated. Just once, Nick thought, it would be nice to get back to the office to something other than blame for ghastly new health problems.

'Your mother called,' said Maureen, the receptionist, handing him one last slip. 'Good morning,' she said chirpily into her headset, exhaling a stream of smoke. She began to cough. No dainty little throat-clearer, either, but a deep, pulmonary bulldozer. 'Academy of' – *hargg* – 'Tobacco' – *kubbb* – 'Studies.'

Nick wondered if having a receptionist who couldn't get through 'hello' without a broncospasm was a plus.

He liked Maureen. He wondered if he should tell her not to cough if BR walked by. Enough heads had rolled in the last six months. Murad IV was in charge now.

Back in his office, Nick took off his new Paul Stuart sports jacket and hung it on the back of the door. One advantage to the change in Academy leadership was the new dress code. One of the first things BR had done had been to call in all the smokesmen – that is, the Academy's PR people, the ones who went in front of the cameras – and tell them he didn't want them looking like a bunch of K Street dorks. Part of tobacco's problem, he said, was that the sex had gone out

of it. He wanted them, he said, to look like the people in the fashion ads, and not the ones for JC Penney's Presidents' Day sale. Then he gave them each a five-thousand-dollar clothing allowance. Everyone walked out of the meeting thinking, *What a great boss!* Half of them got back to their desks to find memos saying they'd been fired.

Nick looked at his desk and frowned. It was very annoying. He was not an anal person, he could cope with a certain amount of clutter, but he did not like being the depository for other people's clutter. He had explained this to Jeannette, and she had said, in that earnest way of hers, that she completely understood, and yet she continued to use his desk as a compost heap. The problem was that though Jeannette was technically under Nick in communications, BR had brought her with him from Allied Vending and they obviously had this rapport. The odd thing was how she acted as if Nick were her real boss, with rights of high, middle, and low justice over her.

She had dumped five piles of EPA reports on secondhand smoke on his desk, all of them marked URGENT. Nick collected knives. She had carefully placed his leather-sheathed Masai pigsticker on top of one of the piles. Was this insolence masquerading as neatness?

Gazelle, his secretary, buzzed to say that BR had left word he wanted to see him as soon as he got back from Clean Lungs. Nick decided he would not report to BR immediately. He would make a few calls and *then* go and make his report to BR. There. He felt much better, indeed swollen with independence.

‘BR said soon as you got back, Nick,’ Gazelle buzzed him a few moments later, as if reading his thoughts. Gazelle, a pretty black single mother in her early thirties, was very bossy with Nick, for Nick, having been largely raised in a household dominated by a black housekeeper of the old school, was powerless before the remonstrations of black women.

‘Yes, Gazelle,’ he said tartly, even this stretching the limits of his ability to protest. Nick knew what was going on in Gazelle’s intuitive head: she knew that Jeannette had her beady eyes on his job title, and that her own job depended on Nick’s keeping his.

Still, he would not be ruled by his secretary. He had had a harrowing morning and he would take his time. The silver-framed picture of Joey, age twelve, looked up at him. It used to face the couch opposite his desk, until one day when a woman reporter from *American Health* magazine – now *there* was an interview likely to result in favorable publicity; yet you had to grant the bastards the interview or they’d just say that the tobacco lobby had refused to speak to them – spotted it and said pleasantly, ‘Oh, is that your son?’ Nick beamed like any proud dad and said yes, whereupon she hit him with the follow-up, ‘And how does *he* feel about your efforts to promote smoking among underage children?’ Ever since, Joey’s picture had faced in, away from the couch.

Nick had given some thought to the psy-decor of his office. Above his desk was a quote in large type that said, ‘Smoking is the nation’s leading cause of statistics.’ He’d heard it from one of the lawyers at Smoot, Hawking, the Omaha law firm

that handled most of the tobacco liability cases brought by people who had chain-smoked all their lives and now that they were dying of lung cancer felt that they were entitled to compensation.

Above the couch were the originals of two old cigarette magazine ads from the forties and fifties. The first showed an old-fashioned doctor, the kind who used to make house calls and even drive through snowdrifts to deliver babies. He was smilingly offering up a pack of Luckies like it was a pack of lifesaving erythromycin. ‘20,679\* Physicians say “Luckies are less *irritating*”’. The asterisk indicated that an actual accounting firm had actually counted them. How much easier it had been when medical science was on their side.

The second ad demonstrated how Camels helped you to digest your Thanksgiving dinner, course by course. ‘Off to a good start – with hot spiced tomato soup. And then – for digestion’s sake – smoke a Camel right after the soup.’ You were then supposed to smoke another before your second helping of turkey. Why? Because ‘Camels ease tension. Speed up the flow of digestive fluids. Increase alkalinity.’ Then it was another before the Waldorf salad. Another after the Waldorf salad. ‘This double pause clears the palate – and sets the stage for dessert.’ Then one *with* the plum pudding – ‘for the final touch of comfort and good cheer.’ It amounted to five, and that was just during dinner. Once coffee was served, you were urged to take out that pack and really go to town. ‘For digestion’s sake.’

BR, on his one slumming expedition to Nick’s office so

far, had stared at it as if trying to make up his mind whether it was the sort of thing his senior VP for communications should have in his office. His predecessor, J. J. Hollister, who had hired Nick after the unpleasantness – now *there* was a tobacco man of the old school, a man who in his day would have put away ten Camels with the Thanksgiving turkey, a man born with tar in his blood. A lovely man, kind, thoughtful, loved to sit around in his office after work over highballs and tell stories about the early days of slugging it out with Luther Terry, who had issued the catastrophic Surgeon General’s Report back in 1964. Nick’s favorite JJ story was—

‘Nick, he said right away.’

Really, it was intolerable. And he would not put up with it. ‘I *know*, Gazelle.’ To hell with it, he thought, flipping through his pink message slips like an unruly hand of poker; let Gazelle *and* BR wait. He would do his job.

He called the networks and issued his standard challenge to appear ‘anytime, anywhere’ to debate with the surgeon general on the subject of cigarette billboard advertising or indeed on any topic. The surgeon general, for her part, had been refusing all Nick’s invitations on the grounds that she would not debase her office by sharing a public platform with a spokesman for ‘the death industry’. Nick went on issuing his invitations nonetheless. They made for better sound bites than explaining why the tobacco companies had the constitutional right to aim their billboard messages at little ghetto kids.

Now for Buerger’s disease. This was trickier. Nick thought

for a few minutes before calling Bill Albright at *USA Today*. He didn't like getting into disease specifics and he didn't particularly want his name attached to quotes containing the word 'amputation'.

'Well,' he began, more in sadness than in anger, 'why *not* blame us for Buerger's disease? We're taking the rap for everything these days. I read somewhere a week ago that cigarettes are widening the ozone hole, so why not Buerger's? What's next? Dolphins? The way things are going, we'll be reading next week that dolphins, arguably the most majestic of the smaller pelagic mammals, are choking on filters that people on cruise ships toss overboard.'

Actually, Nick had not read that cigarettes were widening the ozone hole, but since Bill was a friend, he felt that he could in good conscience lie to him. He heard the soft clacking of the keyboard at the other end. Bill was taking it down. They were each playing their assigned roles.

'Nick,' Bill said, 'this report was in *The New England Journal of Medicine*.'

'For which I have the highest respect. But can I just ask one question?'

'Yeah.'

'Where are the data?'

'What do you mean, where are the data? It's *The New England Journal of Medicine*. It's *all* data, for Chrissake.'

'This was a double-blind study?'

'... Sure.'

Fatal hesitation. Attack! 'And how big was the control group?'

‘Come on, Nick.’

‘Was this a prospective study?’

‘You want to be in the story, or not?’

‘Of course.’

‘You want me to go with “Where’s the data?”’

“‘Where *are* the data.’ Please, I don’t mind your making me out to be a soulless, corporate lickspittle, but at least don’t make me sound like an ignorant, soulless, corporate lickspittle.’

‘So your comment is *The New England Journal of Medicine* doesn’t know what it’s talking about?’

‘My comment is . . .’ What was the comment? Nick looked up at the Luckies doctor for inspiration. ‘Buerger’s disease has only recently been diagnosed. It has a complex, indeed, *extremely* complex pathology. One of the more complex pathologies in the field of circulatory medicine.’ He hoped. ‘With all respect, I think further study is warranted before science goes looking, noose in hand, to lynch the usual subjects.’

From the other end came the soft clack of Bill’s keyboard. ‘Can I ask you something?’ Bill was frisky today. Usually he just wrote it down and put it in and moved on to the next story.

‘What?’ Nick said suspiciously.

‘It sounds like you actually believe this stuff.’

‘It pays the mortgage,’ Nick said. He had offered this rationalization so many times now that it was starting to take on the ring of a Nuremberg defense: *I was only paying ze mortgage . . .*