

# 1

Mom and Dad raised me with the mindset that there are easier ways to live well. They also taught me that if God had meant us to fail, He would not have given us the ability to break the rules. Who better than my devious parents to give such priceless advice? They never worked a day in their lives. We lived very well on their hustles, scams, and thefts.

As a rebellious youth, however, I tried to go against my parents' wishes. I wanted to be an upstanding, respected citizen. But during my quest to achieve respectability, I observed things that proved my parents' theories of life to be true. In every level of my education, for example, I learned that a few brief minutes of cheating were far more effective than long hours of studying. My brief exposure to a nine-to-five job convinced me that eight hours in a cubicle was not going to bring me things Mom and Dad had provided. So I compromised. I decided to work in both worlds. I would try their way to see if I was good at it. I started out picking pockets, advanced to misdemeanors, and graduated in felonies. I took Scams 101 after that. I was ready.

To exist in the straight world, I became an airline pilot, a respectable profession that paid me well. Flying was also the perfect cover story for my other behavior, and it gave me plenty of time off to practice and perfect the larcenous skills I learned. The compromise made Mom and Dad partially proud of their handsome, charming, and charismatic son. Both professions allowed me to live an exceptional lifestyle. What my airline paycheck didn't provide, my larceny made up for.

I did want one thing more than anything else. Something I desperately needed in my life. It was something buried deep inside of me. I craved it as much as lungs craved oxygen. It was my Holy Grail. I wanted *freedom*. Not just normal freedom with a constitution and a bill of rights. I hungered for pure and absolute freedom. I wanted the kind of freedom that would give me complete and unequivocal control of my life—a never-have-to-answer-to-anyone kind of freedom. I wasn't going to get that kind of freedom flying with all of the Federal Aviation Administration's regulations and rules. I had to steal what I needed to be free.

One summer afternoon, my life took a devious detour. While waiting for the light to change at Tenth and Peachtree, my eyes danced around the intersection. The Margaret Mitchell House was fenced in on the corner lot to my left. A sweet-looking chica in shorts and a halter-top with a pouty face advertised her goods on the corner to my immediate right. Catty-corner to the Mitchell House was a sports bar. There were a few high-end condominiums in early stages of construction also in the neighborhood.

On the far left corner, I saw my future, the answer to my dream. I had driven past the building hundreds of times, but it wasn't until that moment, that precious moment, that I realized its potential. It stood out like a beacon. Maybe the planets were aligned that day. Maybe something mystical was going on. There it stood, so regal, so powerful and secure, covered in magnificent marble. I was looking at the first yellow brick on my road to Oz. I forgot all about my previous destination. Instead, I turned left and parked across the street from the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta. Was it possible? Was I reaching too high? Could I pull it off? I drove home to begin planning.

My computer booted up. I Googled the Federal Reserve and found a directory of

names. The one that drew my attention was at the top of the directory—Portend Ulysses Buford, Chairman. Buford’s bio provided a general look into his public life. In a photograph attached to the article, he was cheesing for the camera along with other high-profile types. It mentioned that he was a favored patron of the High Museum in town.

My next search took me to the High’s upcoming social events calendar. There were nights with featured artists, brunches, Friday Night Jazz, and one that leapt off the screen. It was the High’s social event of the year the *Art for Life* fund-raising gala. It was perfect. There was no doubt in my mind that Buford would definitely attend because the museum was one of his soft spots. If I could get close to him, and work my game, I just might get to the next yellow brick on my road. I scrolled down to purchase some pricey tickets for the event, which was only days away.

A heist of the magnitude I was planning could not be handled by me alone. Murray and Ethel Wood, my parents, would have been the perfect cons to assist me. They’d have loved to be in on their son’s biggest score. Unfortunately, after failing health, they had followed one another to their final days then to their eternal resting places, days apart—proof you can’t cheat death.

Since they weren’t available, I had to make some calls and solicit a few of my closest associates, fellow thieves—co-conspirators to assist. I didn’t have to ask them twice. Their enthusiasm was electric. We discussed the possibilities and the dynamics. We calculated the risks versus the reward. Three days later, dressed in my Armani tuxedo, I strolled into the *Art for Life* Gala at the High Museum.

Passing through the lobby, I entered the main hall. It was crowded and the conversations reverberated off the walls. The director of the museum stood at the center of a long, white, linen-covered table, and acknowledged with platitudes the top ten donors seated on either side of him. They returned smug smiles. The rest of the guests were seated in plush, chairs at circular tables. I sat down at one of the tables near the rear and watched as the director stroked the attendees in order to assure large donations for the museum’s survival. A side note here, the High Museum shared art with the Louvre.

I was an unfamiliar face in the room so I initiated the introductions around my table.

“Good evening, my name is Brandyn. I mean nothing to you. Could you pass the butter, please?”

For my charming efforts, I received superficial handshakes, forced smiles, and never was handed the butter. I didn’t care. I wasn’t there for them. My table companions were as dismissive as cats failing to acknowledge someone stroking their furry heads.

Warehoused within the High Museum, a striking edifice in Midtown, were the works of the masters. The multiple viewpoints and shifted planes of Picasso and Braque twisted visual perceptions. Cubism stated “maybe, yes, maybe, no.” Mondrian expressed the “line” as art. Pollock shouted, “It is okay to dribble and splash, to go outside the lines.” Monet’s tranquil landscapes faded when late-nineteenth-century canvases were stroked with the traumas of civil war, the Industrial Revolution, epidemic immigration, and the exodus of ruralites to stockyard cities while in search of the American dream.

The guests did not debate the meaning of the art. They preferred, instead, to pontificate about who had provenance over each *object d’art* because to them, art was money. It was a good bet that they had not noticed the homeless in the dark corners outside of the High when they first arrived. The museum’s staff was completely indifferent about provenance because they saw art as art. The media were not allowed in,

but everyone still mugged for the museum's photographer, believing their photo might grace a local magazine's celebrity collage. Photos and honorable mentions enhanced social standing. No one paid attention to the working mime in the room pretending to cry.

Morton's Steak House catered the event. The steak was grilled to perfection, and the lobster was bathed in butter. The soufflés teased as they melted on your tongue. Each dish was a work of art, much like the framed pieces hanging on the High's walls. Aromas hovered in the air as the esteemed scavengers devoured the feast.

Loitering between the expensive china were crystal chalices of Torres Mas La Plana, Louis Roederer Brut Premier NV, and Au Bon Climat Chardonnay. A few of the goblets were smudged with shades of designer lipstick. A small contingent of guests was still hung over from the previous evening's fund-raiser, but they were not going to let that get in the way of acquiring tonight's buzz. Whatever the guests' condition, all ears were on-guard for the latest gossip and insider information. The real good tidbits were exchanged in conspiratorial whispers so that only those who really needed to know—could know. After dinner was devoured in the main hall, everyone dispersed to the gallery, while the help cleared the tables.

The pond was full of edible fish, but the one I was after was swimming in the deep water. He was standing at center stage telling Federal Reserve war stories when I arrived at the shoreline. I waded in. The water was warm. His current story took place in the sixties and had to do with the desegregation of the Federal Reserve's staff. The longer his stories droned on, the faster the members of his audience swam away, until a few remained. After *they* left, I was the only one left to listen to the rambling history of Chairman Buford. Noting that everyone had wandered off again while he was speaking, he paused, then zeroed-in on me.

"Have we met before? I don't recall seeing you at any of our events here," Buford said.

"No, sir."

I shifted my fishing pole with the baited hook behind me, and then reached out my hand.

"I'm Captain Brandyn Wood with East Coast Airlines."

During our handshake, I felt his bony, bat-like, vice grip.

"I've actually been a member for two years now and regularly enjoy the museum, but because of my flight schedules, I haven't been able to attend this particular function until tonight."

"Well Captain Wood, it's my pleasure to welcome you to the High Museum's Art for Life night. Brandyn, was it?"

"Yes sir."

"Brandyn, I have flown on your airline. I mostly travel to Washington for the Federal Reserve. They've never lost my luggage, and they're always on time, probably due to the fine flight crews!"

"Thank you sir, we do our best."

"Hope you brought along your checkbook. We can't have such a splendid museum as this if *we* don't make it happen."

He studied its inner sanctum with affection.

"I would most certainly like to contribute."

I saw that coming so I reached for my checkbook inside my breast pocket.

“Whom should I make the check to?”

I started filling in other blank spaces before he told me.

“The Art for Life Fund will do. I appreciate your energetic response. I wish more folks in this room took that attitude.”

He was gracious, entertaining and delivered all of his words with a solid, down-home Georgia drawl. Mr. Portend Ulysses Buford, a spry, sixty-five-year-old, was the life of the *Art for Life* celebration at the High Museum, and a major contributor to its financial health. He could hardly sit because his ass was raw from all of the museum director’s kisses. He savored every minute of it. As soon as I became a contributor, he launched into the history of the Federal Reserve, his other passion, while I feigned interest.

“They finished the new building in 1964, the last century. The one in which I was born. Henry Toombs was the original architect. He wasn’t a Portman, mind you, but he was capable enough. I knew him, a nice fellow. They kept five of the original building’s sixteen marble columns in honor of Toombs, even though the columns don’t hold up anything. I believe they are marked with a plaque or something.”

I jacked up the awe, and nodded affirmatively at the appropriate times. I maintained positive eye contact with Buford. While he rambled, I paid close attention to his choice of words, facial expressions, grimaces and body movements, pupil dilation, variations in facial skin tone, subtle head motions—the “tell” signs. Like a snake, I waited patiently to hear an accidental, priceless slip-of-the-tongue that might take me yet another brick closer to Oz.

“The Atlanta branch of the Federal Reserve is just one part of the Central Bank of the United States. There are twelve altogether, with the Board of Governors sitting in Washington.”

He had that old school, federal-government, and 1950s kind of presence.

“The Board of Governors decides monetary policies, bank supervision, and regulation, that sort of thing.”

With a glass of the Mas La Plana in hand, he took a hard look around the museum, and pressed his lips together tightly before proceeding with the rest of his oration. He confided in me that it had always been a personal challenge to recite the entire verse in one breath.

“It provides for a nationwide payment system, supplies cash to operate the banks, and through FedWire, electronically transfers funds, not to mention clearing checks on a daily basis, and storing bearer bonds and gold. The ACH, the Automated Clearing House, electronically clears debits and credits between financial institutions.”

Not making it through the entire speech, he swallowed a deep breath.

“The Fed is really just a warehouse for money.”

Like Deputy Barney Fife sitting on the front porch with Sheriff Andy Taylor, I listened intently and prodded.

“So you used to do it the old-fashioned way?”

A small grin appeared below his knob of a nose as he looked off.

“Let me see if I can still get this right—mag, magnetic ink, recognition, reader. Now there you go! How’s that for a man of my years?”

I raised my glass in a complimentary gesture to the grand old man, and he bowed in return.

“Sir, I heard you say earlier that the Reserve remained segregated until 1962. How

was that received by your crew?"

I intimated that he was the commander of the ship. His eyes lit up brighter than the marquees on the Vegas strip. Beneath a Roman crown of white hair, he looked me in the eye.

"Yes, yes, it was a very cold and dreary day in January of 1962. When I was a boy, everything was 'colored.' Now it's all black and white. Television, by-the-way, went the other way."

I joined him in laughing at his weak joke. He stared off at a distant horizon for a moment.

"I'll never forget how quiet it became in the room when I announced that segregation was over. The reactions of my crew?"

He leaned forward and puffed up like a rooster.

"Well, it depended on which side of the fence you were on."

His knobby nose wiggled above his scrunched, pale lips then he made an official pronouncement.

"I, as chairman, could not take a position, of course."

Mr. Buford could recite all of his employees' names, not a small task considering there were hundreds of them. He recounted visiting his legions to do the back-slapping and high-fiving necessary to maintain his image as the "best boss ever." Looking to another horizon on another wall, he recalled how he used to "shake the bones" with the boys down in the warehouse, which was quite a landslide from his posh office on top of Olympus. Several of his upper and middle management buds returned to join us, and confirmed his claims.

They reminisced with Portend about the glory days, back before the arrogant Yankee yuppie boys came to town with all of their hubris, and transformed the shop into purgatory, or worse.

Buford began another barrage of "Remember when" stories. I hung on every syllable, but his friends began another slow retreat, drifting away to other reefs, grateful that he had a fresh audience.

It was game time. Buford was the mark I had come to the High reception for. Carnival-come-to-town carnies called them *marks* because they literally marked the target with chalk. That way, every one of them could take a turn. It was my turn on Buford.

As much as I hate to admit it, there are rules to playing the con. You mirror your mark as much as possible because finding a like-spirit makes a person's defenses drop. You have to appear non-threatening, harmless. At all times, you have to remain impersonal, detached. Success came when you walked away clean with everything that you came for. The consequences of not following the con rules meant walking away empty-handed, or worse, living out many painful, financially unrewarding years while incarcerated. So, I stayed close and didn't wander off like the rest of them. Eventually, Buford's instincts took hold of him. He had been around the block. Even at his ripe mid-century age, he knew he had to get a good feel for who I was. In spite of the attention, he needed a break from lecturing, so he initiated a subtle interrogation.

"So, Brandyn, if you don't mind me asking, what is the lineage of Wood?"

"Mutt. Wood was my adopted parents' name. I never knew my real parents."

He had a momentary sympathetic look, but then chuckled.

“Mutt, huh, I knew I liked you. You’re a regular guy.”

The rest of the interrogation descended into mundane things like, where I currently resided, where I grew up, what kind of hobbies I had, and whether, or not, I golfed. But that was pretty much it. The interrogation ended and we moved on. I found that odd and made a mental note. What he wanted to know more than anything were the same things the rest of the flying public asked when they cornered you in an airport terminal.

“Brandyn, I’ve been an enormous aviation enthusiast ever since Lindbergh crossed the Atlantic! I have a great respect for the men and women who fly those big jet airplanes. There are things I’ve always been curious about in your line of work. Perhaps you can enlighten me?”

“I would be happy to, sir.”

For the next several minutes, I cascaded answers to his questions. It was easy, and it was the perfect hook. We seemed to hit it off naturally anyway. Had I not been there to “take” him, I believed we might have become good friends. At one point in the evening, after more alcohol, he began to tell me some personal stories, like the one about the girl in the office that I suspect he had never revealed to anyone before, especially Mrs. Buford.

“She was a pretty little thing, worked in supplies, maybe it was the mailroom. I could have danced all night, if you know what I mean.”

Mr. Buford’s inner devil glimmered at me through the squint in his eyes and the smirk on his craggy face. I flexed for his pretend jab to my ribs. Buford’s comfort zone was buffed up. I attributed that to having learned the finer points of deception from a man whose path I had crossed many years earlier in Boca Raton. He was the consummate professional con. I watched him work a crowd at another charity event. Peter Lonng, a.k.a. “Smooth,” was able to chameleon his way into each subculture. He blended in and became one of them. He applied what he coined, “Smooth’s Rules,” a variation of the basics. Tonight, he was working some of the women across the room from me.

Buford then surprised me with an invitation to dinner at his home the following Friday evening. He gave me directions. I had no doubt that by the time I arrived, before I ever rang his front door bell, Mr. Buford would have me investigated by the best in the business. I had no problem with it. Buford would find nothing out about me except that which I had cultivated for years: a respectable career at the airline, a life in a respectable neighborhood, a sound financial portfolio, and no criminal record. I have never been handcuffed and charged. I always walk away clean, because I do my homework. I don’t move until everything is absolutely in my favor—luck, fate, no Mercury retrogrades, and my game plan intact.

The bobber dipped, the hook set, and I reeled Buford in. All I needed now was to net him and get him ashore, so that the filleting could begin. With that pretentious thought in my head, I watched as Buford timed the level of alcohol in his glass to the proximity of a passing waiter, and I was reminded of another con rule—never underestimate the mark. Like a snake, I coiled.

“Mr. Buford, sir, your story is quite remarkable.”

I pushed the pandering up a notch.

“Well, thank you, son. That means a lot to me.”

The old man placed his hand over his old heart.

I motioned outward as I surveyed the guests.

“Sir, this is where the big money walks. It appears to this observer that you are their shepherd.”

“Yes, they’re all here.”

He placed a hand at the back of my neck and guided me, like a periscope, pinpointing my focus on the power brokers in the room. He stopped briefly at each one to give me his story. He had a working dossier about each one in his head. I memorized names, faces and whatever else was of value. They were all targets, and he was giving me the launch codes.

*Chalk them up, Buford, you old carney!*

He pointed and said, “Look, that guy chairs SunTrust Bank. The short, stubby one over there owns Chick-Fil-A, hates *different* people, but his ads are funny, cows on billboards. The tall guy in the gray suit to his left is one of two gentlemen who started the Home Depot chain.”

Buford leaned in closer.

“The man took out his checkbook, and with the stroke of his hand, signed his name to a two-hundred-fifty-dollar check, so they could build the new Georgia Aquarium! I saw the check when it came through. His partner owns the Atlanta Falcons now. Son, the men in this room, as a group, could replace every dollar and cent should the Federal Reserve ever go bust!”

I wondered for a second if Buford were reading my mind.

Spying Buford from across the room, the twenty-four-hour news czar, Ted Tumor, waved. He undid the vice-like grip of his future ex-wife’s hand from his arm and approached rapidly. He firmly pressed flesh into the rising hand of the old man. As they began to talk about interest rates, I *lost interest* completely. The only numbers I’m interested in were the denominations I was planning to steal. While Buford was tangled up with Tumor, I took the opportunity to slip away to scope out the other marks in the room. The two power brokers ignored my departure.

As I maneuvered among the chosen ones, I found myself agreeing with David Brin’s observation that humans have a propensity for self-delusion. To entertain myself, I played a game of anthropomorphism in my head. I assigned each mark animal traits and visualized the result. *Mustela nivalis*, the weasel, a quick predator, hovered near the Morton’s chef. He constantly, and annoyingly licked his fingers. He owned several high-end car dealerships. He wore a black tuxedo with a silver vest over an open-collared, ruffled, pink dress shirt. His hair plugs were subtle and included a widow’s peak.

Toward the emergency exit doors, big arms, and square jaw, dental veneers, in a black crew neck T-shirt, under a gray tuxedo, stood the mighty Stallion, owner of the Ultimate Fitness Center chain. He didn’t believe in socks. He was snorting with one of the gazelles wearing a BCBG leopard-print dress. She hung on every word as he described his days as a Chippendale’s dancer.

The slender investment banker, *Gulo-gulo*, a wolverine, was stalking one of the leaf-eater models, a stick-thin girl with very long legs that were wrapped in an orange and fuchsia, polka-dot mini. She had fingers almost as long as her legs. He told her he was a *friend* of Tyler Perry’s and had just been to a private screening of Perry’s latest film. She asked if she could meet Mr. Perry sometime. The wolverine whispered that anything was possible after oral sex. The young woman changed the subject.

In a pink satin gown with matching Frederick’s fuzzy-toed, sling-back heels, a

platinum blond flamingo fluttered in all directions. It was like watching Joan Rivers canvassing the red carpet at the Academy Awards. The old girl, late sixties, even carried pink tissues to tend to her perpetual Atlanta allergies. Her face had been surgically stretched so tightly that she could not close her, now permanently smiling, lips. I wondered what she saw in the mirror. Her Louis Vuitton purse accidentally fell to the marble floor, discharging its contents in several directions. A recent-model cell phone, Dior lip-gloss, hand sanitizer and a hairbrush scattered across the floor. A prescription bottle spilled a healthy supply of Xanax across the floor. I watched individuals assisting with the recovery of the goods fail to return all of the little pills. A few of the art patrons had redlined on the recreational pharmaceutical oscilloscope. They were pleasantly high at the High.

Classical Beethoven played in the background performed by a stuffy female duo that diligently bowed while looking intensely at their music scores. They were plain women, with barely any shape, dressed in black curtains. His or her music was the perfect alternative to anyone who regularly dosed on Ambien. This gathering desperately needed some serious noise like Ludacris, Usher, Snoop, or Marley to make the blood flow again. Music could rotate your attitude. It could help you cartwheel from one personality to the next.

The only other guests who understood my music needs were two stunning girls in vivid red and pink PVC dresses that were so tight each dress could have caused circulatory asphyxiation. They wore spiked collars and spiked heels. Their sleek, salacious, toned bodies gyrated and contorted pornographically to the stringed tunes. They giggled like teenage girls, giving the impression that they were vulnerable. They wanted to cause an equal and opposite reaction from the other guests, especially from the men who were watching from the perimeters and trying to conceal their lust. The women were aghast.

Summer and Mysty were part of my team of irreplaceable collaborators. Their conspicuous attire was intended to blind the guests at the party, which would, in turn, keep the heat off the Big Dawg. The tactic was also being used to keep the alcohol-saturated males off balance and spilling intimate details of their personal lives. Later, that information would be used against them.

I looked back and saw Tumor still ratcheting down on Buford. I started to feel bad for the old guy, but then I figured he was used to it after all of those years. Because Buford was still in the vice, I continued to move about among the other soon-to-be victims. I started to feel the exhilaration of the hunt, the rush. It was another reason for playing the con.

All of the men were GQ except that none of them had the twenty-something, putout smirks, the two-day chin stubble, the spiky hair, and the half-unzipped trousers, like inside the magazine ads. Personally, I considered myself one of Armani's best customers. I felt at ease going shoulder-to-shoulder with Gucci, Boss, and Burberry from New Bond Street and Versace.

I was careful to flash my diamond ring with the colors of the rainbow from Yurman. The receipt was in my pocket for the return in the morning. I despised rings. To me they were just another form of confinement, like miniature handcuffs. They didn't fit my concept of pure freedom. For the same reason, I considered marriage the ultimate sacrifice of my freedom. To me, growing old, angry and spiteful together was like

taphophobia, like being buried alive.

The conversations I overheard, although not complete, reinforced why the elite were so out-of-touch with the masses. They had no interest in the nuke threats from third-world countries, climate change, bioterror and pathogens, hurricane devastation, the flu epidemic, or the three ways that a particle accelerator could hypothetically annihilate our planet. I thought such issues would be of *paramountus importantus* to those who had so much to lose, to those who dined with presidents. Whether to take in the south of France, or the Monaco Grand Prix was bland. I forced myself to keep an open mind, though, because I hadn't yet been jaded by mega-wealth. I took another glance toward Buford.

*Let go Tumor!*

The women were a mixture of matrons and maidens, peach-sweet Georgia ladies, and proper debutantes, on the surface. Scratch that surface and you found treacherous, conniving and conspiratorial daughters of the Confederacy, some of who were almost on life support, while others were seeking a lifetime of support. None of their names included an "I" any longer. His or her tans were all machine-baked, as no one considered the sun to be a viable alternative, at least since Missy Schlossberg got the melanoma on the tip of her realigned, laser-perfect nose. Breast implants arrived inches before tummy-tucks and liposuctioned thighs. If you listened closely, you could hear the sound of satin against silicon and nylon as they passed.

Coach handbags were a favorite. They strapped big-ticket Zaotti, Blahnick, and Jimmy Choos to their manicured feet. A few rebels wore Yurman while old money went with jewels from Tiffany and Cartier.

Each of them possessed the ability to carry on multiple conversations across vast distances. And each had the vision, and predatory skills of the American Bald Eagle allowing them to target, pounce and finish off their male prey before he saw it coming. Those rodents, with their testosterone and competitive arrogance, remained confident in their ability to dominate the women. The female predators fearlessly allowed the male's belief of dominance, mirroring a con playing a mark. They knew a good score when they saw him. They would wait patiently and pick their moment. It was because of them that I had to play my role as well if not better than a Connery, a Pitt, or a Depp. It hurt my feet to have to stay on my toes all night.

I heard some of the single men ragging the married guys about being in lock down with their "cell-mates." The married guys, careful not to let their momma hear that she wasn't everything in their universe, retaliated by pointing out how their mistresses were the "best mates" because they were "all-day play, with little say." Neither male competitor saw marriage as a monogamous agreement.

Both maintained vigilance in the event their trophy would arrive. She would not only turn every head, she would give the best. She would be attentive to her master's needs and desires, only permitted to change his furniture, but never his thoughts. Her willingness to surrender was completely the result of her realizing the futility of previously failed relationships.

Fortunately, I wasn't there to hook up, so I was free to view the game playing from a third-person point of view. Game one, the extreme workout types tried to muscle their way onto other self-centered individuals. Game two, the laid back trolled for partners who wanted uncluttered independence, punctuated by naughty, raucous sex. It was refreshing that no one cared about astrological signs any longer. There was one thing we

all did have in common. It was an intense fear of abandonment in a dangerous and screwed-up world.

A look at my watch told me the clock was ticking. I had to get to Buford and close the deal. I needed something to stop Tumor's interference.

Finally, I saw Tumor walking away. I swear I saw Buford mouth the word "dickhead." A second before I went mercenary on Buford, I was struck by lightning.