

Earning Freedom

Section 1—The Arrest



Blurb:

This section shows the final moments before my arrest in 1987. I made terrible decisions that led to a criminal indictment. Authorities arrested me. Criminal charges exposed me to the potential of a life sentence. Early decisions would influence my life for decades to come.

August 11, 1987:

I can feel the DEA agents waiting. I don't know where or when they'll strike, but I know they're near. I've never been arrested before, and I'm scared. My wife, Lisa, sits next to me in our Porsche convertible, clutching my hand. We've only been married five months. She's a glamorous South American blonde who looks spectacular in her form-fitting designer clothes, better still in a bikini. With Lisa beside me, I feel powerful. I've built my life on extravagance and appearances, and Lisa completes the image I want to project. She's five years older than I am and I always try to appear strong for her—man enough for her. I don't want her to see my fear, but inside I'm shaking.

Shadowy forces feel like they're closing in, but I don't have a grasp on what's coming. Instinct, intuition, and a sense of impending doom keep crowding my consciousness. This high-flying life is about to change. I can feel it.

Lisa and I have just left Miami where I learned from Raymond, a well-known criminal lawyer I've had on retainer, that a grand jury in Seattle just indicted me on drug trafficking charges. Raymond said that my arrest was imminent and that the criminal charges I was facing could include the possibility of decades in prison. After hearing that unsettling news, I followed his instructions and gave him my diamond-faced Rolex to hold. Then I told Lisa how to pay his \$200,000 fee.

After leaving Raymond's office, I drive us toward the Rickenbacker Causeway that leads to Key Biscayne. Despite my attorney's warning, I'm going home. He convinced me that a huge difference existed between an indictment and a conviction. By paying Raymond all the money I've got to fight the case, I'm hoping for a fresh start from the mess I've made of my life. I've been miserable for months, knowing that I needed to make a change.

We arrive at the entry into Key Colony, the private oceanfront community on Key Biscayne where Lisa and I live. The security guard raises the gate and I drive the Porsche forward. We make eye contact, and I sense resentment in his phony smile as he waves us through. I'm half his age, and for the past year, I've driven through this gate every day in my flashy sports car with Lisa beside me, wearing a gold



watch that cost more than he would make in a year. Today he's sporting a smug grin. Maybe I'm paranoid. No, I shake my head as I accelerate through the gate and turn right. My gut roils with a subconscious awareness that I'll never drive through this tropical paradise again.

I park in the garage beneath Botanica, the building where we live. Lisa and I walk arm-in-arm to the elevator, not speaking. I'm alert, watching, expecting the feds to rush me at any second. With heightened senses, I'm acutely aware of the salty ocean air filling my nostrils. My stomach churns as I push the elevator button and we ascend.

The elevator door slides open, and we step onto the top floor. An open breezeway with palm trees and lush, tropical vegetation on either side leads to our apartment.

There they are, in front of us. The three men wearing dark blue jackets wait, eyeing me as I approach.

"Are you Michael Santos?"

"Yes."

In an instant, I see three guns aiming at my head.

"Freeze! Put your hands out where we can see them!" One of the agents then begins to recite my Miranda rights.

I comply with their orders. Lisa steps away from me, gasping. One agent clasps my hands behind my neck as he searches me for weapons, though I've never carried a gun. Then he lowers my arms, pulling them behind my back. I hear clicking and feel cold metal as he slams handcuffs over my wrists. When the agents see that I'm not resisting, their tone becomes less hostile. They begin to question me and, following Raymond's instructions, I refuse to answer.

"I want my attorney present before I say anything." I'm embarrassed that Lisa sees me so helpless, so impotent in the grip of authority.

"Do you want to say good-bye to Lisa?"

I cringe at the familiar way her name rolls off the agent's tongue, and I realize I'm really being taken away.

"Michael!" Lisa's tortured cry echoes across the breezeway. "Michael! What should I do?"

I don't turn around. To see her face would only prolong the agony of the moment. One agent is in front of me. I'm sandwiched between the other two and I feel hands gripping the chains of my handcuffs. I keep walking with my head down, humiliated.

It was 1987 and I was 23. For nearly two years I'd been the leader of a small group that distributed cocaine in Seattle. The scheme wasn't sophisticated. Those at the core of our little enterprise were my

classmates from Shorecrest High School, in the North Seattle suburb of Lake Forest Park. Sensing a huge market for cocaine among Seattle's young professionals, I joined my friend Alex in a partnership to capitalize on it.

I found suppliers in Miami. My friend John and his girlfriend, Lori, drove the drugs across the country and delivered them to Tony in Seattle, who stored them in his apartment. Alex coordinated deliveries to customers using Loren and Rico as local drivers.

The shallow layers of people separating me from the actual cocaine fed my delusions that I wasn't really a drug dealer. Instead, I liked to think of myself as an entrepreneur. To the extent that I thought about it, I provided a simple service. No weapons. No violence. My friends and I only sold to consenting adults, so I equated our actions to those who supplied speakeasies during prohibition. It was my way of glamorizing the scheme to camouflage the severity of potential consequences.

The government, of course, saw things differently. Ronald Reagan occupied the White House and was ramping up the "War on Drugs." I may have previously seen myself as a businessman, but riding through the streets of Miami in the back seat of a black Ford LTD with my hands locked behind my back, in the custody of DEA agents, left no doubt that I was in big trouble. I thought of Lisa. I thought of my parents. I wondered if my attorney, Raymond, could really get me out of this mess.

"So, what's up? Did you think you could run from us forever?" The two agents in the front seat switch to a friendlier approach. The driver has carrot-red hair, styled with a flattop and military fade. His partner looks hip, wearing feathered brown hair that he holds in place with his stylish sunglasses. They try to engage me in conversation, but I'm silent, deep in thought as I stare out of the tinted windows at the glass-faced, high-rise buildings of downtown Miami.

"Talk to us," the driver pipes in. "This may be your last chance to save yourself."

I'm mute, afraid, sensing that I've reached a pivotal moment.

"Alex and Tony have given us plenty already. Who're you tryin' to protect? This is the time," the driver speaks with authority. "No one knows you've been busted but us. Your pals cut sweetheart deals, left you hangin' in the wind. Take us to your suppliers and I'll turn this car around right now."

"You don't have much time." The other agent stares at me, tempting me, trying to persuade me. I can tell that he isn't much older than I am. "Once we move forward, you're booked, game over. Speak up now and you'll be able to go home to that pretty little wife of yours."

I don't say a word. It's not that I feel an allegiance to any criminal code. As crazy as it sounds, I don't even consider myself a criminal. It's simply that escaping problems by betraying others doesn't appeal to me as much as the chance for total vindication. Raymond suggests we can win through a trial, and I'm swinging for the fences, going for it. I cling to those hopes, but I'm also conflicted because a deep shame seeps through me. For years I've been telling lies, though I'm yet not ready to confront the reality of who I am, of what I am. I desperately want to resume a normal life and spare myself the humiliation of having to admit that I'm a drug dealer.

As the DEA agents urge me to confess everything, I think about Lisa. I've come to define myself through material possessions, and she is my trophy. I live a fantasy life with her, locked in a constant struggle to mask my shallowness. Cooperating with the DEA and informing against others to spare myself would show weakness, implying that I lacked the wits and enough power to resolve the situation. It wouldn't be the forceful image I've worked so hard to project. I remain silent, sealing my fate.

Retention Questions:

1. What city was Michael arrested in?
 - A) Seattle
 - B) Miami
 - C) Los Angeles
2. What kind of car was Michael driving on the day of his arrest?
 - A) Toyota
 - B) Chevrolet
 - C) Porsche
3. What agency of the government arrested Michael?
 - A) Securities and Exchange Commission
 - B) Federal Bureau of Investigations
 - C) Drug Enforcement Administration

Critical thinking question:

1. In what way would telling your story influence prospects for your future success?

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