“Lining Pockets”

 In the fast-paced world of pharmaceutics, Mark Stapleton was the soon-to-be king—for several years, he had been at the top of his company, PharmaCo, and his dream job was within his grasp just as soon as he submitted his new weight-loss formula. It was the breakthrough of a lifetime, and it would make him more successful than he could ever have hoped for. He patted his jacket pocket where he kept his notepad with the formula zipped inside and smiled.

 His rival, David Ratner, from NetMed was working toward the same goal, and it was rumored that they were working on a very similar formula and were close to finding a solution, but couldn’t put the final piece in place. Mark’s smile grew even wider when he realized he had *finally* beat David at something and patted his jacket pocket again.

 Having graduated together from Princeton, Mark and David had been friendly rivals for as long as Mark could remember. But it seemed like David always had better grades, was more athletic, and got more attention, and generally more successful, but they were still friends of sorts. Now, they met for lunch weekly on Tuesdays, although Mark wasn’t sure why—he didn’t really like David all that much—David had become more ruthless since college, caring more about money than the people he helped. Not that Mark was exactly philanthropic—money mattered, but he liked to think he still had morals.

 “How’s it going?” David greeted him as they sat down at Sarantino’s, their usual lunch spot. He glanced at his phone, then set it beside him on the booth’s seat.

 “Good,” Mark answered, patting his pocket one more time contentedly and hanging his jacket on a hook outside their booth.

 “Are you close to finishing the formula?” David asked.

 Mark paused. He was surprised—they usually tried to avoid business topics, but David seemed to really be interested in Mark’s work. A little too interested, Mark thought. It was odd for David to avoid small talk and jump straight to business.

 “Well…” he started. He didn’t want David to know he was ready to submit his formula for a patent, but he had never been good at bluffing. David always beat Mark in poker, too. “It’s getting there,” he said evasively as a half-smile, bordering on a smirk, curled up the left side of his face involuntarily.

 David’s face turned a little paler. He understood. Mark did it. He beat him.

He glanced down at his phone and fussed with the screen for a minute, probably to cover his shocked reaction, Mark thought since David never did like people knowing what he was thinking or feeling—he liked control a little too much.

 They were just about to order when the waiter came over to tell Mark that there was a telephone call for him at the desk. He sighed heavily, wishing for the hundredth time that his mother would call his cell—she flatly refused to use “new-fangled” technology, believing that aliens or the government were spying on her to steal her brownie recipe or measure her brain waves. With the money he would be making, it might be time to look at a retirement home for her.

 Mark picked up the receiver, but only heard a dial tone. No one was there. Strange.

 Mark headed back to his seat ready for Sarantino’s famous alfredo—it was expensive, but this was a time to celebrate, a time to splurge. He glanced through the menu, skimmed the desserts, and since he was feeling so great, he even offered to pay for David’s lunch as well.

 David smiled at Mark and glanced back at the phone he was holding. If Mark had looked a little more closely, he might have noticed a brief look of satisfaction flicker across his face.

 “Just a sec,” David said, holding up one finger. “I need to finish this email…and done! Thanks, by the way--I owe you one. You’ve just made my day a little better.”

 Just then, the waiter came over to take their orders. As he was about to leave, he stooped down and picked up a small green notepad under Mark’s jacket.

 “Excuse me sir,” he said, “I think you may have dropped this.” He handed it over to Mark.

 For a moment, Mark exhaled and closed his eyes in relief—he couldn’t believe he almost lost the formula! A second later, his body suddenly became rigid, and his eyes grew wider as he stared at David.

 “Gotta run,” David said with a definite smirk, and he stood up, slipped past the confused waiter, and left, leaving Mark frozen to his seat, staring at the small green notepad in his hand.