

October 2025

Morris Eccleston carefully descended the grand, winding, carpeted staircase leading down to the Carrara marble foyer, grasping the metal railing with as firm a grip as he could muster. The trembling of his pale, skeletal hand providing a challenge and a constant painful insult to his pride. He recalled the times he would sweep down these stairs, across the marble floor and out the front door to his Mercedes parked out front in the courtyard-like driveway, his toned body and incessant drive to achieve propelling him forward. But that was a long time ago, a lifetime ago. He now lived alone in his mansion, bachelorhood being the obvious result of his drive for success. And failing health now being a by-product of time and maybe a bit too much enjoyment of that success.

He paused as he reached the bottom, holding the curved metal end with both hands. He took a deep breath, which was not as deep as he probably needed, and peered over at the door to his study where he would find the cure for all his ills. He crossed the foyer, and entered the oak-paneled room which prominently featured a fireplace outfitted with identical Carrara marble, framed by full-height bookshelves offering original volumes interspersed with artificially bound current novels. This was his favorite place now. He found it difficult to read sometimes, his eyes struggling to focus and his attention span even worse. But the premise of it, the luxury of having such a room, was enough to make sitting here for most of every day worthwhile. He settled into his chair which sat to the right of the fireplace, next to the window looking out to the courtyard. The small marble table to the side of the chair, perfect to hold a book as well as the elegant gold tray holding his brandy and snifter. He reached over, grabbed the brandy and poured a third of a glass. The trembling hand again rearing its ugliness. Maybe a reminder of why he drank. *Didn't matter, did it?*, he thought.

He brought the snifter to his mouth, angling it slightly while also leaning his head forward a bit, to allow his nose into the interior of the glass, and breathed in. This time his abbreviated breath was enough, sure a fuller breath might get more of the essence deeper into his core, but the slight inhale gave him all he needed. He then tilted his head back, and tilted the glass towards him, allowing some of that brilliant amber mahogany elixir to flow into his body. Eyes closed, as always, he let it idle for a few seconds, and then allowed it to pass down into him. He opened his eyes, placed the snifter back on the table, and then leaned his head back against the well-worn leather of the chair. He closed his eyes. He never opened them again.

April 2023

Dean Acheson sat patiently in the small room outside the office of the college president. The secretary informed him it would just be a few minutes, he was finishing up a call. Dean was not the most patient man, but he tried not to let that be visible. He was here for an interview, for the head of the Alumni Relations department, and appearances mattered. He was well aware the interview had already started – most executives he knew asked their secretaries what the candidate was doing

while waiting, and to describe their demeanor. And that sometimes they intentionally made them wait for just this evaluation. So he sat there very upright, with what he hoped was a friendly but confident look on his face. He glanced through the college brochure but wasn't actually reading it. He already had a copy and had pretty much memorized what was inside.

Finally the door opened.

"Mr. Acheson, I'm so sorry for the delay, my 1:30 call ran over and you know how some folks just can't help but keep talking."

"Not a problem, I completely understand. I know those people!" A forced chuckle, which President Cooper returned. "And please, call me Dean."

"I considered that, but you're not hired yet!" more artificial chuckles all around, as they entered his office and he shut the door behind him. "And call me Fred."

"Yes, interesting for me to choose academia with this name. Very presumptuous. Have to blame my parents, I guess."

"It's your fate. You were meant to be a school leader."

"Maybe, yes."

"Can I get you anything to drink, coffee, water?"

"No, I'm good, thanks. Two cups already today."

"Great, then we'll get started," Fred announced, settling into his leather desk chair behind an expansive oak desk. The spoils of reaching the top, Dean surmised. "I have to say, your resume is spot on for what we're seeking. As you probably know, our Alumni Relations has never been a strength here at Charlton College. We have a pretty robust alumni in terms of success in business, the arts, politics, education, etc. And annual giving is reasonable I suppose, maybe in line with some of our peer group of schools. But we have a bold growth plan, for facilities and programs, and frankly we don't have the resources to fund it. We're looking to amp up our alumni giving to levels more in line with premier schools. And the only way we get there is to be creative, to bring cutting edge finance and marketing to the approach."

"That sounds exactly like what I've been trying to do."

"Yes, I see that in your resume. What you've accomplished at McClain was impressive, the growth you engineered. That's what we're looking for, but I'll be honest, we need to go even further. Push the boundaries to get alumni on board and opening their wallets. We have to almost be shameless in our approach. It's not something I'm particularly good at, which is why we need to hire the right person to drive this."

"Well, Fred, this is the kind of opportunity that my skill set and my career goals are positioned for. I think I've probably maxed out at McClain in terms of what we can achieve, so the timing is right. And, if I can be perfectly honest, they really can't pay what I feel the position has become worth, at least how I've evolved it. They're still thinking along old guidelines." That was Dean's planting of the seed.

"Well, I don't know exactly what they're paying you, I'm obviously not privy to that, but I do understand where the market has been, and just know that the approach we're considering allows you to share in your success. A strong base, of course, but the real money would come from meeting and exceeding various thresholds. Eat what you kill, basically." Odd choice of words, Dean thought.

"That's great, it's what I've been pushing for. They couldn't really get beyond a traditional salary & bonus structure. Part of the reason why I'm sitting here. But truly because I like the challenge of

getting Charlton to that next level so it can grow to become the school you envision.” Dean had rehearsed that line.

And with that, Dean Acheson became Dean of the Alumni Relations department. Though it wasn’t called that, just Director.

Two weeks after the interview

Dean was meeting with his team, which comprised all of two people. MaryAnn Murphy, the Alumni Relations Coordinator, and Helga Thomas, the administrative assistant who had been at Charlton possibly since its founding 128 years prior. It was Dean’s first day on the job. After exchanging pleasantries around the small conference room table, discussing family and previous jobs, Dean got down to business.

“So I was brought here to grow the school’s endowment, frankly. They have pretty bold plans in terms of facilities and programs, basically moving Charlton to that next level in terms of colleges. But they can’t do it without alumni chipping in. And by chipping in, I mean major contributions. I was able to start some initiatives at McClain which I think will work here as well. But those programs won’t be enough. We’re going to have to think outside the normal box of alumni outreach and giving programs. And the first thing we need to look at is alumni who’ve had major success. Particularly financial success, since to be blunt we’re looking for money. But even those who’ve gained notoriety even without wealth can help us, especially for marketing purposes. Because at its heart, alumni relations is about marketing and communication. The money will follow if we do both of those things well.”

“What kinds of new programs did you run at McClain?” MaryAnn inquired. She seemed somewhere halfway between curious and suspicious. Bringing in a new leader was fine, maybe her six years didn’t qualify her to lead this team, but it would have been nice to be considered. She had even worn her best suit today, her power suit, to let the new guy know there was a considerable player here, maybe even competition.

“We did a few things. We brought in a tax professional to guide us on how alumni could donate not just cash but other items like securities or real estate, and then we created marketing materials around those ideas and sent them out. Worked well. And then we focused attention on the whales.”

“The whales?” MaryAnn said, questioning what seemed to be a derogatory term to her.

“Those very successful alumni. We figured they were in position to give more, so we tailored some programs around them.”

“So what do you have in mind here? I’m not sure we have so many *whales*, as you put it.”

“Well, I hope we have some,” he countered, a slight laugh and nod as if seeking agreement. “I’m going to talk to President Cooper about naming for some of the buildings they have in mind. It’s a huge fundraiser at many schools, but Charlton for some reason has never done this. That’s a game-changer. After that, I have some ideas for other investment vehicles which have charitable features, but I need to get some more info on them before moving forward.”

MaryAnn honestly hadn’t thought about building naming, never figured they had the kind of alumni that could afford that. Seemed presumptuous to her. But she could play along, be the good soldier for a little while. She knew she didn’t have the big ideas, but was very good at getting things done with speed and professionalism. She always figured that would be enough to take charge, but she was seeing now there was a difference. Wasn’t a good feeling.

"Sounds good. What can I do?" she offered.

"I'll need a detailed list of the top 25 alumni in terms of wealth. Names, addresses, contact info, source of wealth. If you're also able to tap into where they've given before that can be extremely helpful as well, see who or what we're competing with. These folks are usually major donors to the arts or to health initiatives."

Helga finally spoke up, after sitting patiently and listening the entire time but thinking in her head that this seemed like every other first meeting she'd been to. Big plans, new ideas, and then the same old-same old thereafter.

"I can get that for you. It'll take some research, but we have some of it in our files."

"How quickly do you think you can get it together?"

"Maybe the end of the week?" It was Monday morning right now.

Dean looked at her, folded in his lips, looked away towards the door for a moment, and then turned back.

"Any chance it can be done sooner?" he asked, raising his eyebrows up, slight squint to his eyes and closing his lips afterward. "Even maybe piecemeal. Names and contact info first?"

"Sure, I can do that," Helgo replied, not looking very enthusiastic about it. "I can get you an initial list maybe by end of day today."

"That's great, thanks Helga."

He continued. "MaryAnn, I'd like you to research college and university building namings, see if you can put together a list of them. Looking to see what kind of money has been paid, and for what kind of buildings. And whether any were for older buildings being named for the first time."

"I can do that, shouldn't be any problem." She actually sounded interested in doing it. She was good at project work, and this was an easy one.

They adjourned, and Dean went back to his office excited to get started. He had some interesting ideas he didn't tell them about. Ideas he considered at McClain, but wouldn't have been compensated for so he shelved them.

The list he received at about 4:45 that day was underwhelming. The wealthy alumni network that McClain could tap into just didn't exist here at Charlton. The first couple names had big numbers, then dropped off significantly to what Dean would consider really rich. Not super rich, with FU kind of money. This might be harder than he imagined.

September 2023

Dean pulled his 2017 Honda Pilot into the courtyard, parking behind a silver Mercedes S Class sedan. He turned the car off and then sat back, gazing ahead. He looked at the house, a mansion basically. Then he looked at the Mercedes. And he considered his apartment and his Honda Pilot. He was in his mid-40's, made less than he knew he should for all the talent and brains he possessed, and couldn't stand pulling up to these palaces owned by people with far less of both. At least that seemed to be the case far too often. But then he looked closer at the Mercedes. The model was once a symbol of luxury and serious wealth, now twenty years later it just looked dated. Especially with its dulled finish and slight vegetation growing in some of the seams and along the door handle. He wondered how many more relics he'd be seeing today.

He was paying a house call to Morris Eccleston, Charlton class of 1965. The list Helga had produced featured Mr. Eccleston prominently in the second position. Only a twenty-something who hit it big in tech was ahead of him. Dean had already been in contact with the kid – he sort of considered him a kid before speaking to him, definitely considered him one after – and managed to get him to quintuple his giving this year. That would have been impressive had last year's amount been more than just \$20,000. The 100 grand was nice, but when you're worth something in the hundreds of millions, potentially a billion if you had a good day in the stock market, it seemed paltry. He had proposed the building naming concept, and the kid scoffed at that. Said it was an old timer's thing. Dean held his tongue, despite starting to boil on the inside. He intended to press the matter next year.

As for Mr. Eccleston, they didn't have a good estimate of his wealth. Unlike tech boy, who's wealth could be pretty accurately gauged every day, Mr. Eccleston was long past his time being active. He made his money many years ago, decades in fact, in a business which no longer existed. Now it was invested in unknown places. Plus, he was a fairly private person, so the age of social media and everybody knowing everybody else's business didn't apply. Lastly, he didn't get out much, and if he was a major contributor or benefactor of anything it was unknown. So the fact that they placed him second on the list was simply the belief that he had to be worth north of a hundred million, maybe well north. And no other Charlton alum was in that neighborhood. Dean was here, after several ignored or rejected attempts, to try to learn more and maybe pry loose some of that wealth. And also see if this would be another undeserving multi-millionaire.

The door was answered by an elegantly-attired black woman, probably in her mid-sixties. Graying hair swept back off her face, which had a few delicate aging lines, the kind that make people say you're aging gracefully. She was about five-seven, no more than 130 pounds. Dressed in cream-hued slacks and a burgundy cardigan, over a russet-toned silk blouse. Either the lady of the house or the most well-groomed servant he'd ever seen.

"Mr. Acheson?"

"Yes, please call me Dean"

"OK then. Dean. Please come in."

Dean passed through the doorway into a grand foyer. Marble floors, a classic winding staircase. He must have been a bit agape, as he heard from his right side, "Yes, quite an entry. Mr. Eccleston is extremely proud of his house."

OK, not the lady of the house, concluded Dean.

"I'm Veronique. I work for Mr. Eccleston." There you go.

They shook hands, Dean's insistence. Though she seemed comfortable with the gesture.

"Have you worked for him for many years?"

"Oh, well, yes. Nearly twenty years. Next March. But it's changed a lot over the years. He used to travel so much, and have dinner parties here too. Now he's mostly just home by himself every day. So I come in for a few hours every morning to cook and clean up, that kind of thing. He really values his privacy."

"Interesting. Well I'm sure he's lucky to have you. If I may be so bold, let me say that you add to the elegance of the house." He knew how to turn it on when he needed to.

Veronique put her head down and closed her eyes, bringing her right hand to her mouth. "Oh my, thank you. But I'm sure you're exaggerating."

She then asked him to follow her, and she led him into the study, which was just to the right of the foyer. The door was closed but she opened it with only a slight knock. Mr. Eccleston was obviously awaiting his guest.

Seated in a leather chair by a magnificent fireplace, at an angle to the window facing the courtyard, was an older gentleman wrapped in what appeared to be a velvet smoking jacket, though it was larger, almost as big as a robe. The look brought him back maybe ninety or a hundred years, when smoking jackets adorned the wealthy in rooms like this, along with cigars and brandy. Looking at the small marble table to the side of Mr. Eccleston, Dean saw a gold tray holding a bottle of amber-colored liquid and a snifter. There's the brandy. Image nearly complete.

"Mr. Acheson, welcome to my house. Please sit down."

"Thank you for having me Mr. Eccleston. I'm sorry it took so long for us to meet. But I'm really honored to make your acquaintance. And let me say, this house is magnificent."

"Thank you. Yes, it is something, isn't it. I'm quite lucky to have it."

"Oh, I don't imagine luck had much to do with it. I sense it's the product of years of hard work. Decades." Dean laid it on thick. He could blow smoke with the best of them, and what better place to do it than an old smoking room.

"Maybe you're right. But that certainly was a long time ago. But let's get down to business, shall we?"

The old guy hadn't forgotten his mojo, obviously. He didn't look the part anymore, obviously pushing eighty. But even with the age he didn't look like he was going anywhere anytime soon. Dean's experience was that old folks nearing the end lost that spark in their eyes, they seemed to be just living out their days and you could see it. He didn't see anything like that with Mr. Eccleston.

"I agree, let's do that. And by the way, please call me Dean."

"Is that your first name, or your title?"

"Yes, my first name. I know, I get that all the time."

"Interesting. Please go on."

"So you know I'm with Charlton, your wonderful alma mater. I joined about five months ago, with the directive to grow our alumni relations department and thereby grow our endowment. Charlton has an extraordinary vision for the future, and discrete plans in the works to get them there. New cutting-edge facilities, bold educational initiatives, and an overall approach to join the country's elite small colleges. But as you know, these things don't happen without significant funding, and when you're talking colleges, that funding has to include alumni in a significant manner. Charlton historically has not done enough to maintain their alumni relationships, and obviously therefore the donations have been mediocre when you compare them to their peer group. What we're seeking to do is embolden the program to bring new approaches to the alumni, make donations work for them in terms of their estate planning, tax planning, etc. And I have some ideas that I think might be of interest to you, specifically."

Mr. Eccleston sat there, staring directly at Dean. He seemed to be waiting for something. Maybe Dean's pause wasn't significant enough to indicate a hard stop. Finally he spoke.

"Well, that was a nice pitch, Dean. As you probably know, I've been giving to Charlton for many years. Quite significantly. I think I gave \$10,000 last year."

"Yes, you did, and we thank you for your generosity. But I have some thoughts on how we might be able to increase those amounts in a way that could be quite appealing."

"Ok, I'll listen but I'm not sure I'll be able to."

Dean figured the old guy was a tough negotiator in his day, and wouldn't give an inch until it made financial sense to him to do so. But c'mon, he thought, \$10,000, with your wealth? Dean thought about if he himself had that kind of money. He wouldn't be so stingy with it. Even if it was just to be showing off.

"One of the things the school has never done, but is strongly considering going forward, is naming the buildings. Both the new ones to be built as well as the existing buildings which serve as a link between the past and the future. As you may know, many other schools do building namings to honor important alumni. And we consider you a very important alumnus of Charlton."

"Hmm." He thought for a moment, looked down at the floor in front of the fireplace to his right. "And the naming comes with a cost, I assume. A large donation?" He then looked up and stared directly at Dean. An expectant look on his face, not necessarily negative, but knowing he was correct.

"Yes, of course. It's a way for the school to raise funds at the same time as it honors an alumnus. Everybody wins, right? Plus, the tax write-off can be structured any number of ways depending on how the donation is implemented."

"I see. Of course I'd have to talk with my financial team to see if this makes sense for me. But my first reaction is that I don't like notoriety. I never have. This house is the only audacious possession I've allowed myself over the years. He looked out to the courtyard. Oh, well maybe that old Mercedes too, but that was so long ago. I'm not sure I want to go putting my name on buildings, it's not who I am. But I can consider other ideas if you have any."

Dean was caught off guard. He thought for sure the old guy would go for this, putting your mark in a permanent way in such an honorable place like your college. The building naming idea really had only two potential candidates, and now both had kiboshed the idea. Made him wonder how all these other schools around the country have made it happen. He had another chip to play, but it was a long-term play, even for a codger like the one in front of him. But it was worth a shot.

"I do have another idea. Think of it as an investment with a charitable bent to it. It's called a charitable remainder trust. CRT. Are you familiar with the idea?"

"I don't believe so, no. How does it work?"

"Well, you invest into a fund, effectively, either with cash, stock, or other potential assets. It pays you a dividend each month, right now in the six-to-seven percent range. The investment into the fund is permanent, and you get an immediate significant tax deduction for the charitable contribution. You name a beneficiary, or even a few if you want. When you pass, many years in the future," he gave a short pause and eyebrow-raising smile, "whatever balance remains in the fund is donated pro rata to those charities. So long story short, you can take some of your investible assets and place them into this investment, get a very reasonable annual return, a large tax write-off, and donate to Charlton in the future. It doesn't help us much until then, except for the knowledge that you've done something significant for us."

"Interesting idea. I imagine I can donate stock and get the market value without paying any gains tax."

"Yes, exactly. One of the many benefits."

"But like you said, how does this help Charlton with its grand plans? I assume these are initiatives which are near-term."

“They are, and yes, truth be told it doesn’t help much to that end. We’d still be hoping for a near-term increase in contributions. I do have some other ideas for those, nothing as elaborate as the CRT or building naming, but maybe of interest.”

And soon after that Dean walked out, got in his car, and sat there for a while. He had now basically struck out with the two big whales. He got the hundred grand out of the kid, and just now got fifty grand out of Mr. Eccleston, but his hopes of blowing away the compensation thresholds for the first year were basically gone. He’d eclipse the number he and Fred agreed on as a reasonable reach target, but the home run target was a no-go at this point. He took this job because he thought he could kill it, and make the kind of money he deserved. Now he was questioning that. He stared out at the Mercedes, sitting there underutilized and unloved.

“I know how you feel.”

December 2023

Dean turned into the massive parking lot, which currently contained far more cars than it should for a random Tuesday night before the holidays. But then maybe there were a lot of people like him – nothing else to do, no family to spend time with during the holidays, and nothing better to do with your money than to gamble it. So here he was at the casino built on reservation land an hour from his apartment.

He hadn’t been to a casino in a couple years. He swore to himself to stay away, nothing good would come of it. No matter how much he loved the thrill of it all, the adrenaline rush when you hit it big. But those hits hadn’t been seen in far too long, so he stayed away. Lately though he’d been doing some thinking, some calculating. He fancied himself a math whiz, though he wasn’t. He devised a plan, it seemed nearly foolproof, unless the unthinkable happened. He had some money coming his way next month with his annual bonus. He knew the number he’d be getting, it was all formula-driven, which made it easier, less subjective like at McClain. But that number was going to be disappointing. Tonight was his chance to rectify that a little, make his holiday season really joyous.

He strode into the Spirit Winds Casino, the immediate lights and sounds a shock to the system for the uninitiated. He crossed the lobby and pointed himself at a slight angle to the right, into the casino proper. He paused once inside, looked around, and saw where the blackjack tables were, which was right in the middle of the room. He made his way to a table with a fifty dollar minimum. No need to waste time with amateurs at the table.

He placed three thousand two hundred dollars on the table.

The player in seat one said “Whoa, Jeez, how much is that?” The dealer looked down at the stack, then at Dean, and called out “New player coming in.” He looked over towards the pit boss, who started walking over. The pit boss looked at the stack, had the dealer count it, nodded to the dealer and to Dean, and then walked back to his station. The dealer placed two large stacks in front of him, and said good luck.

Dean placed a \$50 chip on the mark, and focused on the cards being dealt. He drew a Jack and a four, the dealer drew blackjack. One down.

He placed a \$100 chip on the mark. He received an eight and a five. Dealer showed a nine. On his turn he tapped the table, and saw a ten. Bust. Dealer also turned a ten.

Dean then placed two \$100 chips on the mark. He saw the dealer give an extended glance at him, checking to make sure the bet was right. And that the bettor was right. Dean nodded and looked back down at the table. Two and a three, dealer showing eight. He drew a nine and then a Queen. Three down.

Dean wasn't worried. He was playing the odds. He placed four \$100 chips on the table. Dealer again glanced, but moved on knowing what was happening. Dean drew a King and a nine. Dealer showing an Ace, but no blackjack. Dealer turned a nine. Four down.

He placed a \$500 chip and three \$100 chips on the mark. Dealer quietly said good luck this time. The woman in seat five looked over as well, her expression could have read concern or confusion. The gentleman to his right just fiddled with his chips, adeptly working one through his fingers. The draw was a Jack and a five. Dealer nine showing. Hit, drew a seven. Bust. Five down. \$1550 down. Just win the next and you're up.

He placed three \$500 chips and one \$100 chip on the mark. The dealer asked him, "Are you sure sir?" He just nodded. The dealer called over his boss again, got approval and started dealing. He drew a nine and an eight, dealer a six. He stayed. Dealer turned a four. Shit, he thought. Dealer then pulled a King. Six down. \$3150

Dean then reached into his pocket and pulled another \$3200 out and placed it on the table. The dealer looked at Dean, who looked back and nodded, and then grabbed the money and did a quick count. "Changing thirty-two hundred." The pit boss came over again, looked at Dean, and said good luck sir. The dealer did as well once he placed the chips on the table.

Dean moved all of them onto the mark. Six \$500 chips and two \$100 chips. He needed this one to break even and get slightly ahead. So far his strategy wasn't working, dumb luck that he didn't win a single hand. He drew a trey and an eight. Dealer showing a seven. He wanted to double down, it was the perfect setup, but he only had about two hundred left in his pocket. No way they'd advance him money, would they? The dealer made his way past the first two positions, and got to Dean.

"Do you take markers?"

"Only from pre-qualified players. And not in the middle of a hand. I'm sorry sir."

Dean swallowed his lips. This wasn't his night. The perfect hand to capitalize on, and he couldn't. He'd have to settle for a straight bet. He tapped the table, and the dealer dropped an eight. Nineteen. Not bad, not great. Just had to hope for the dealer to pull a face card.

But he didn't. He turned a four. And then a face card. The beatdown was complete. \$6350 lost. How the hell did his strategy not work? Dean got up and strode out of the casino, invisible tail between his legs.

January 2024; Year-End Review, President's Office

"Dean, I got to tell ya, you've done great work. The rise in the endowment this year was extraordinary. Well beyond expectations. To think we've gone from \$355,000 raised last year to \$642,000 this year. You've nearly doubled the donations in only what, eight months of work. Incredible. And just as important, you've nearly doubled the number of givers. That's yeoman's work. And your bonus this year will reflect this."

"That's great. I'm certainly happy with the totals. But always hoping to go even higher." Much higher.

"Of course, and so are we! As for your bonus, as you know you reached the target we were really hoping for, the six hundred grand and the improved participation rate, so you'll get the \$40,000 for that as we agreed. We're adding another \$5,000 on top of that for going well beyond the thresholds. Not a percentage bonus, as you know we can't do that with our ethics standards, but an acknowledgement that you went above and beyond. How does that sound?"

"That sounds great." Dean maintained a smile, though inside he was simmering. His smile punctuated that comment, and Fred smiled as well. "But I'm gonna tell you right now, next year's discussion is going to be even more impressive."

"Music to my ears, Dean."

Now he just had to figure out how to make that happen.

March 2024

Dean received some much-needed good news in the form of a call from an attorney. Morris Eccleston's attorney to be exact. He said that Mr. Eccleston agreed to create a CRT, and would be naming Charlton as the beneficiary upon his passing. The CRT would be set up with two million dollars. Dean was yelling "Yes!" to himself internally. "Finally!". He didn't ask how it would be funded, whether with cash or some other asset like stock, that was none of his business. But he was curious. How liquid was he, a factor for future years. The condition Mr. Eccleston gave was that this gift could not be announced or made public in any way until after his passing and the estate was settled. He really did have a need for privacy, Dean mused. That's OK, he could share this with Fred. Not sure how he could get compensated for it, he'd have to figure that out. Some schmo shouldn't get the benefit ten years down the line if it took that long for the old guy to pass and Dean had moved on.

He knew he needed to get creative. He didn't want to sit through another year-end bonus discussion where he was told he wasn't good enough to earn real money. They never said those words. They didn't have to. They let the money say it for them. No, he wanted to hear them say words and numbers they couldn't ever imagine saying. And saying it to him.

Dean was looking at the proposed building plans over lunch in his office one day. He focused in on one area in particular, and the thought hit him. It was brilliant. The Charlton Alumni Walk. The name came to him as quickly as the idea. There was a walkway to be created from the quad to the first building to be built, the new Student Center. Dean proposed amending it from a simple concrete walkway to pavers, each with an alumni or current student family name. He'd offer them at, say, \$2000 each. That seemed reasonable. You're placing your name in the center of campus for

perpetuity. Hell, it might even be a bargain. There was space on that walkway for at least 250 of them, but potentially twice that if they continued it past the center to the next building. That could be a million dollars from this initiative.

He brought it to Fred, basically fully cooked. Just needed Fred's blessing and he'd get started on the marketing plan. But it stopped there. Fred liked the idea, matter of fact he loved it, and said he'd bring it to the architects to make sure it was doable. But he said that given the timing of the construction, which wasn't going to be happening until next year at the earliest, he wouldn't be able to start this campaign so soon. There were still building approvals yet to be received, and most obviously and painfully, funding shortfalls which still needed to be made up. This campaign, though plenty significant, wasn't of the magnitude to bridge the gap sufficiently to be able to just go ahead and start committing alumni financially. It would have to wait until later in the year once more hurdles were cleared.

Dean understood, put on a Charlton-first professional face, but turned and walked out dejected. Pissed, actually. This would not get him where he needed to be this year. Maybe next year. If he was still here.

December 2024

Dean was invited back to Morris Eccleston's mansion, with the premises of "toasting the holiday season" and "celebrating the donation" Mr. Eccleston had made. Dean had no intention of clarifying those words, that no donation would reach Charlton until the old guy croaked. He was a professional, and this was \$2 million after all.

Veronique answered the door.

"Nice to see you again," Dean offered. "I guess it's my good luck I keep getting to see you even though you're only here sometimes."

Veronique smiled and briefly closed her eyes and tilted her head down. "Nice to see you as well. Morris asked me to stay for the afternoon since he was having a guest."

She showed Dean into the study, where Mr. Eccleston was sitting as always.

"Mr. Acheson, so good of you to come. Please, sit down."

"Thank you for inviting me back," Dean said, taking the same seat as he did his previous visit. It was a chair placed in front of the fireplace, across from Mr. Eccleston's leather lounge. Obviously not its normal placement. Although the chair contained some elegant flourishes in its design, it was a somewhat basic wooden chair, not a match for the classic leather club chair across from him. Was obvious that Mr. Eccleston didn't receive many guests in here, or maybe at all.

"I want to thank you again for making such a tremendous commitment to Charlton," Dean added. "\$2 million, that's such a game-changing amount of money. It's very much appreciated by everyone at the school."

"Well, you know, I thought quite a while about your offer of the Trust, the CRT. Never heard of it before this. Then I spoke with my team, and they agreed it would work well with some other things we're doing with my portfolio."

"That's great, I'm happy it worked out."

"Well, let's celebrate. Join me in some brandy? I know it's the middle of the workday. Maybe a little nip?"

Mr. Eccleston was already pouring some brandy into a second snifter. Dean saw the shaky hand, was about to offer to help but thought better of it. Mr. Eccleston was not one to cede this kind of thing, or admit a weakness. But he did give on one aspect – after pouring the second glass, he lifted it up, but otherwise didn't move, making it clear he expected Dean to come get it. Dean got up and took two steps forward to grab the snifter. "Thank you," he said graciously, somewhat falsely.

"Here's to Charlton College. And its future. I'm truly happy I can help it achieve its goals of becoming that next-level college you talked about."

Dean had to bite his tongue. This man in front of him wasn't going anywhere anytime soon, probably last another ten years if he had to guess. That next-level future would be happening without his money. But he raised his glass and smiled, ever the good soldier and representative of his employer.

"Hear hear," he announced, and raised his glass further in the air before taking a sip.

"Quite good, isn't it?" Mr. Eccleston said with an air of sharing the wealth with the help. There was a smugness in his expression. Dean had the familiar feeling of being the kid at the adults table.

"Yes it is, thank you for sharing it with me," he obliged, answering accordingly.

"So with this CRT, and the additional donations I've made these past two years, I think we can agree you don't need to come calling on me anymore. Let's just say I've done my share, shall we?"

"You certainly have given a tremendous amount, there's no question. But I feel I wouldn't be doing my job if I didn't reach out with some new ideas for you if they arose. Is that fair?"

"That might be fair. But what I'm saying is I'm not likely to be very receptive to any more big ideas. You managed to get the big donation out of me, you did your job. I'll still give the fifty or so each year, you can count on that. But otherwise it'll just be the CRT, when I'm all said and done."

"OK, I understand. You won't hear from me. Except for our thanks every year." Dean kept a smile on his face. Behind the smile his brain was uttering "you prick" so loud he made sure his lips stayed together to make sure the words didn't escape.

They sat and made small talk for another five minutes, during which Dean managed to finally put away his brandy while Mr. Eccleston poured a second for himself. Dean thanked him again, got up, shook his hand, and said he needed to get back to work. Mr. Eccleston said he could call Veronique to escort him out, but Dean insisted it was fine, he'd show himself out. He walked out to the foyer, and headed towards the door. Veronique was not there, but he thought he could hear something upstairs, maybe in a bedroom. He looked at the elegant wooden table at the base of the wall containing the winding staircase. It was a round mahogany table, with a small vase sprouting fresh tulips, and a jeweled keepsake box. He walked over to it, and looked up the staircase and back at the study door. Seemingly safe to satisfy his curiosity, he opened the top of the box. There were miscellaneous items, including a small flashlight, a bottle of Advil, and a keychain with a single key on it. There were also two matching keys on the bottom of the box. Without thinking, Dean grabbed one of the keys, closed the box, and headed out the door, taking a quick look back up the stairs and at the study to make sure nobody was watching. He walked back to his car, pocketing the key, and wondering why he just took it.

“Well, Dean, here we are again. You know, I like these meetings, because I feel like it’s the culmination of a long successful season. Like when they give out the trophies in sports, most valuable player, leading scorer, all that good stuff. You a sports guy?”

“Not much, sad to say. Never really got into it. Played some soccer as a kid, but was never a team sports kind of guy. Just ended up becoming a gym nut for a while.”

“Yeah, I can’t say I was much of an athlete either. But I am a big football fan. Guilty pleasure I suppose. Supposed to be an educated man, but I tend to go a bit crazy on Sundays.”

“That would be interesting to see.” Dean tried his hardest to sound engaged. This was not a meeting he was excited for. Should have been, but he sensed it wouldn’t go well.

“Not according to my wife. Heh”

“Heh, yeah,” Dean echoed, playing along.

“So, the reason I bring all that up, Dean, is we look at you as our MVP. Our top scorer. What you’ve accomplished in your short time here – and it is still a short time, not even two years – is remarkable. Well beyond our expectations. We want you to know how valued you are, and such a big part of the Charlton 2030 mission.”

“That’s awfully nice to hear Fred. I certainly feel valued, and I’m fairly happy with what we’ve achieved. But I’d never say I was satisfied. It’s not in my blood.”

“And that’s what we love to hear, to be honest. Sure, we want you to be happy, but knowing you’re not satisfied even with such great results is very reassuring that we have the right guy steering the Alumni Relations ship.” Fred wrinkled his eyebrow. “Relations ship. That was odd phrasing, wasn’t it?”

“A little, but I got it.”

“Good, thanks. So, let’s get to the part you’re really here for. The bonus. You got donations up to \$955,000, that’s such an amazing figure, something we never could dream of just two years ago. Nearly triple. And nearly a million. That’ll be a great threshold to cross next year.”

“That’s my plan.”

“Great. Ours too! As for the bonus, the year two agreement was for \$60,000 for hitting the \$900,000 plateau, and of course significantly increased participation which you and your team also achieved. That’s a serious bonus, do you agree?”

“Sure, that’s a big number. But I have to ask. The \$2 million dollar CRT I got Mr. Eccleston to create, is there no credit for that? That’s a game-changing donation. Sure, it may not happen for a long time, but the work was done this year. By me. I would hate to think that someone down the line who might be sitting in this chair after me would get credit for it. Doesn’t seem right, does it?”

Fred looked at Dean, obvious he didn’t have a good answer at the ready. He nodded, pursed his lips a little as he then looked down at his desk, and just said “Yes, I see that.”

Dean waited patiently. And stared directly at Fred, not wanting to give him an easy out.

Fred looked up, and offered “Let’s do this. I can’t do anything about your bonus this year, it’s already been agreed to by the Board. And it’s in line with your compensation agreement. But let me revisit it with the Board at the meeting in March, see what I can do to maybe amend the terms of the agreement, or at least create a carve-out for this. You’re right, you should get something for this, even if the donation won’t come for many years.”

And with that, the meeting was basically over. And once again, Dean walked out of Fred’s office feeling pinched.

Follow-up meeting, late March

“So, the Board met Tuesday night. Your compensation was on the agenda, as I promised. Didn’t go as well as I imagine you’re hoping, but they did recognize your hard work and ingenuity, especially on this. They did have a question, which I had to do some research and get back to them. They were asking if the naming of Charlton in the CRT was permanent, or if Mr. Eccleston can change it at any time. And it turns out he can change it. He can add or subtract as many recipients as he wants up until he passes. Is that your understanding as well?”

“I believe that’s the case, at least with many CRT’s. Not sure if there are any that are permanent. But you need to understand that he created this solely for the Charlton gift. I imagine he contributes to other charities, probably nowhere near as much as this amount. So I seriously doubt he’d ever make any change.”

“I hope not, that would be a shame. But given that, here’s what the Board is prepared to do. They’ll give you a \$10,000 bonus for 2024, payable immediately. And going forward, any new CRT’s you create would get similar treatment. And of course, once they do come to pass and the donation is made, then your contract thresholds arrangement comes into play, and that would obviously be a massive payday for you.” He smiled, paused. “And us, of course! Hah!”

Dean had a smirk on his face. Not awful news, ten grand is ten grand. But it’s not two hundred grand. He was unlikely to ever see that money. But he had to play along, again. “Yeah,” he uttered, slight chuckle in his voice. “Ten is great. Thank you for bringing this to the Board. I appreciate it. And give my thanks to the Board as well.”

October 2025

Dean nodded to the bartender, said “another.” The bartender came back with another pint, and grabbed the empty away.

“Thanks,” Dean muttered. He wasn’t drunk, this was just his third. But between his general depressive nature the past few weeks and adding this fuel tonight, he sure resembled it. He was in the final quarter of the year, and unless they were able to pick up the pace, they were looking at nearly matching last year’s total contributions. In other words, flat, in terms of growth. Not even hitting the million mark. His bonus would drop down to about forty. He started to think about what field he could go into since this one wasn’t getting him where he wanted to go.

A woman in her late thirties, maybe early forties, walked in and sat down about five seats away at the bar. Attractive, medium height with dark long hair, and very well dressed. A professional, maybe an attorney. The bartender came over immediately, though since the bar was sparsely populated it wasn’t odd. She ordered a chardonnay, and then as she reached into her purse and came out with her phone, she glanced over at Dean. He was staring at her, somewhat daydreaming. She smirked and then turned her head back straight to look down at her phone. Dean could see she was side-eying him, but not smiling anymore. Dean looked down at his beer. Another beautiful expensive thing he couldn’t ever have.

He took a last swig of his beer, then pushed the half full pint forward and got off his chair. He looked over at the woman, who couldn't be bothered to look away from her phone, and headed out the door. He got into his car, and sat back closing his eyes. He opened them up and looked around. There was a silver Mercedes a few cars over. Hers, obviously. Looked like the modern-day version of Morris's, he thought. He looked down at his console, where he had miscellaneous crap. He saw the key sitting there. He stared at it for a minute or two, thinking. He finally came to a decision.

He drove up to Morris's street, but parked about 50 feet short of his driveway, next to some woods. He turned his car off, and waited a moment, looking around. Seeing nothing, he got out. Absolutely dead quiet neighborhood, no movement and just a few lights from some houses. He walked onto Morris's driveway, along the right edge. He stopped and looked at the front of the house, checking for security cameras. He didn't see any. Surprising, he thought, but maybe that's just Morris's old school nature. He made his way across the plaza cobblestones, to the front door. He grabbed the key out his pocket and, as quietly as he could, inserted it into the keyhole. It was 11:48pm, he assumed the old guy was asleep, but couldn't take any chances.

The foyer was dark, the only light was up ahead in what was likely the kitchen. He didn't have a game plan. He felt sure when he saw the key in his car that he should come here. Get something. Now he was wondering what he was doing. Too late, he realized. He walked into the study, and looked around. Lots of old volumes of books, but as he thought about it he realized he had no idea what these were worth, and which ones would be the ones to take. And how he could sell them without raising suspicion. Other than the books there were some fountain pen sets, other expensive looking knickknacks like a an old globe, picture frames, candle sticks. What was he doing here, he again thought to himself.

Then he saw the brandy. A beautiful crystal decanter. He thought about pouring a snifterful, but he knew he didn't need any more alcohol. Something more sinister entered his mind. He walked out of the study, across the foyer to the table. Before he touched it, he grabbed a tissue out of his front pocket. He then opened the keepsake box and grabbed the Advil, all using the tissue. He walked back into the study to the side table. He could tell the small Advil bottle was nearly full. He put it down and removed the stopper from the decanter, again using the tissue. He grabbed the Advil bare-handed, twisted the cap, and poured the entire contents into the decanter. It fizzed a little as the pills dissolved. He used the tissue to replace the decanter, pocketed the Advil bottle and walked out.

He quietly opened the door and left, again using the tissue to also wipe it down. He locked it and wiped the outside, and went back to his car. He didn't take anything, after all.

Yet.