

PROLOGUE



Death stood in the doorway of Paul Mahesian's study.

"I didn't hear you come in," Paul said evenly. His sweaty hands clutched the decanter of Dalmore 25 as he splashed another finger's worth into the tumbler.

Death remained silent, framed in the center of the doorway.

Paul sipped the scotch. The action was neither sensuous nor luxurious; it was somewhere between a kid tasting an unfamiliar cough syrup and a drug dealer testing the purity of a shipment. He bared his teeth after the sip, like a chimpanzee playacting at scientist.

"It's not a big deal, you know," Paul protested. He suddenly became aware that the heavy crystal glass in his hand could become a makeshift weapon. Just as quickly, he realized the futility of such a weapon against Death.

Paul was much stronger and faster than he looked. But he knew he was no match for Death. Even if he could somehow reach the decorative revolvers mounted on the wall behind him or the brutally functional Glock in the drawer of his liquor stand, it wouldn't matter. No one was faster than Death.

Perhaps Death's arrival should have frightened him or at least made him nervous. But it made him feel relaxed. The chase was over. It was like watching a tournament after you'd already been

eliminated. You have no horse in the race because you were your horse in the race. Now you're just a casual observer.

Eventually, death catches everyone. Today, Death had caught him.

He took another sip of scotch. "No one would have found out. It was just...you know."

"I found out," Death replied simply.

Paul tried to force a chuckle. It came out more like a forced exhale, like he was trying to dislodge something from his throat. "Yeah, but...you already knew. No one else could have found out."

Death didn't bother to dignify the whining with a response. Paul Mahesian was everything that Death wasn't: soft, lazy, undisciplined. All the luxury and pretentiousness made him seem even weaker. The preposterous, overdone "study" that he only ever used for drinking, the fancy revolvers combined with pitiable marksmanship, the stone inlaid globe that only highlighted his unwillingness to explore any part of the world other than five-star spas—Death's lip curled in contempt.

Paul noticed. "As if anyone lives up to your standards," he retorted. Death ignored the complaint.

"Fine," Paul blurted. "I was showing off. People do it."

Death simply replied, "Shortsighted."

"So," Paul asked with sarcastically ebullient curiosity, "how are you going to do it?"

Death almost smiled. "I've already done it."

"Oh yeah?" Paul asked.

"I poisoned your drink."

Paul laughed at the sarcasm and took a gulp of scotch, wincing

as he swallowed. “Even you wouldn’t be sacrilegious enough to do that to the 25. The 12, maybe.” He sipped a bit more. “Want some?” he asked.

“Sure, why not,” Death replied.

Paul poured a second glass. “Ice? Soda?” he asked rhetorically. Death didn’t respond. Paul knew that Death preferred it neat.

Suddenly, Death was next to him, taking the glass. Paul wasn’t sure if it was Death’s actual speed or if his perceptions had started to fray. An instant later, Death stood in the center of the room.

“You should sit,” Paul insisted. He gestured at one of the high-backed maroon leather chairs. “It’s not polite to loom over someone like that.”

It didn’t matter one way or the other. Death sat.

“Don’t I get to challenge you to a game for another chance?” Paul asked.

“Chess? Candy Land? The Silent Game?” Death inquired.

Paul smirked but said nothing. Parts of the room were starting to glow.

“What will you do with the body?” Paul asked.

“Does it matter?”

“Is it a secret?”

Some people smile with their eyes. Death shrugged with them. “A ceramic incinerator.”

Paul knew the incinerator that Death would use. He had seen it used once, seen the surreal glow its heat produced even with the door shut, not unlike the surreal glow in this room as whatever hell Death had unleashed on his nervous system did its work.

“Seems a bit...overkill,” Paul remarked.

“I prefer to be careful,” Death replied.

Last month, the electric grid in the building had been adjusted to meet some new environmental certification guidelines. The incinerator wouldn't...he had to warn Death while he could. The room was glowing. He tried to tell Death, to warn Death about the incinerator, but his mouth wasn't working anymore. Then all was brightness.

CHAPTER 1



Aldair hadn't been to his office in months. He preferred to handle clients via email, although "handle" was an exaggeration. He occasionally responded to clients via email, and sometimes even picked up phone calls if he was feeling especially ambitious or especially desperate.

Today, he wasn't feeling particularly desperate. He'd had enough clients last month to pay his overdue internet bill after switching to a cheaper plan. He was only two months behind on rent for his apartment, a month behind on rent for his unused office, and his student loans were only as big as a small country's GDP, so he was feeling about as financially flush as ever.

And there wasn't a hint of ambition in him or anywhere he looked in his sterile, beige office. His bookshelves were completely bare. He had never hung anything on the walls or otherwise pretended to decorate. He had found his three pieces of janky, plastic furniture by the side of the road outside his apartment. Others had been upgrading and throwing out the old; the old worked just fine for him.

The only thing he felt today was somehow hungover, although he hadn't drunk anything the night before, or the several years before that. When he had woken up bright and early at 2 p.m. this afternoon, he had felt like garbage, as usual. He had pulled out

his cell phone to begin a ten-hour TV binge but had accidentally pressed the button to accept an incoming call just at that moment. Bad luck.

And now here he was in his barren office, having combined a college shower (water to the face) with a French shower (sprays of cologne), desperately hoping that the pushy client would decide to choose a competitor over him.

His bare plastic desk was half a step above an outdoor folding table. He had an empty trash can and a forever-empty brochure holder. His diploma had never touched these walls. It was just embarrassing; on the rare occasion that anyone discovered his alma mater, it only ever caused problems.

He didn't know what else he was supposed to put on the wall. He didn't have any awards—no recent ones, anyway. He had considered putting up some driving safety posters, but his clientele wasn't exactly the "drive cautiously" type. They also weren't usually in town by the time they needed his services, so they didn't find their way to his office with any frequency.

The last few times he had been in his office had been with girlfriends. His last girlfriend had been particularly enthusiastic about seeing his office, expecting something that looked like an actual law office. Her face had fallen upon seeing it. To her credit, she had quickly rebounded and offered to help him decorate the place.

Technically, she had said "rebrand," not "decorate." Aldair was pretty sure that something had to be initially branded to qualify for a rebrand, and knew, without question, that putting thrown-out plastic furniture in a low-rent room didn't count as "branding."

He had declined the rebranding offer. That had been the last straw for her. Or maybe the second or third last straw. He didn't remember how it had ended, but he was pretty sure it had been the way most of his half-baked relationship attempts ended: a mutually agreed upon two-way ghosting.

The door opened behind him. He turned.

The client was in his late teens or early twenties, wearing trendy black jeans, a gray clubbing shirt a bit too tight for his not-quite-chiseled torso, and a frumpy black hoodie. "Mr. George?" he inquired as he put out his hand. They shook.

"Nice to meet you. Justin?" The kid nodded. He looked at Aldair like a model scout sizing up a potential recruit and then looked carefully around the office. "Clean trash can," he commented.

"I aim to provide the best," Aldair replied. "Shall we sit?"

The kid nodded. Aldair took his official plastic chair behind the plastic desk and opened his laptop. Justin sat down in the less fancy guest chair. The client had to know who was boss, after all.

"You didn't put much in your online bio," Justin observed.

"You need to know my favorite ice cream flavor to trust me with a speeding ticket defense?" Aldair asked.

"You didn't even put your law school," Justin countered.

True enough. Most people lied upwards on their resumes. Aldair lied downwards, by omission. When people saw his credentials tied to someone who submitted half-baked plea bargains for out-of-state speeding tickets, it just looked weird. And not good weird. Not like, "My orthopedic surgeon was once a Navy Seal" weird. This was like, "The guy cleaning bathrooms at Starbucks was a Heisman Trophy Winner" weird. It made you feel both sorry for the person and vaguely unsafe, as if whatever

flushed his life down the toilet would either make him dangerous, or worse, somehow infect you.

Even here in Hicksville, NC, people knew that Yale Law grads didn't do this kind of scut work.

"I've been to law school," Aldair replied. "Passed the Bar and everything."

The client nodded slowly, considering. "I have a ticket," he finally said.

"I assumed as much."

"I'd like to fight it," he continued.

"Okay," Aldair replied. "So here's what we do. You take an online driving course. Then, I talk to the judge before the court date and try to get any points removed so your insurance won't..."

"Sorry to interrupt," interjected the kid. "I was unclear. I don't want to plea bargain. I want to fight the ticket."

He put a yellow traffic ticket on the desk. 130 mph.

Aldair raised an eyebrow. "Impressive."

"I want to fight it."

"You want to take this to trial?"

"Yes."

"You're from out of state?"

"New York."

"You drive through North Carolina often?"

"Nope."

"The points won't transfer. This looks bad, but worst-case scenario, it will only add points to your privilege to drive—"

"Right to drive," Justin interjected.

Aldair paused. "I can see that you would feel that way, but legally, it's referred to as a privilege to drive. And points, if any, will

only affect driving in North Carolina. Even if the judge gives you the worst, it won't stop you from driving in North Carolina unless you plan to get caught speeding like this five or six more times."

"Can I ask you something?"

"Sure," Aldair replied.

"What is it that you do? Specifically?"

"Mostly plea bargain out-of-state speeding tickets."

"Mostly?"

"Entirely."

"So, someone from another state speeds in North Carolina, they pay you the 795-dollar flat fee you advertise on your website, which doesn't mention your law school, and you represent them in court?"

"I represent them mostly out of court, but that's the gist of it."

"And if you plea bargain down to, say, 200 bucks, then you make 595 in profit?"

"Pretty much."

"Do you?"

"Do I what?"

"Do you plea bargain down to 200?"

"Not usually. Usually around 500, since people only hire me when they have mandatory court dates. Otherwise, people just pay the tickets."

"Do you ever? Plea bargain down to 200?"

"Yeah. Sure. Sometimes." Every so often, some weird ghost of a former life would take over, and he'd fight like a crazed bulldog on some random ticket. He'd negotiate it down not through any clever legal argument, but rather by convincing the judge and the prosecutor that he wasn't going to let it drop, no matter what.

“I’ve heard of lawyers that do a whole production where they measure the distances to signs, sign visibility, lane width, and all that, and then create a big, huge, complex legal case.”

“Sure, some do that.”

“Do you know how to do that?”

He could probably figure it out. “It wouldn’t make sense. You’d be spending twenty grand to try to get out of a 700-dollar ticket.”

“Unless I went to one of your competitors.”

“Then you’d be spending forty grand to get out of a 700-dollar ticket.”

“You’ve passed the Bar?” Justin asked.

If he only knew. “Yup.”

“How many?”

Aldair felt suddenly uneasy. That was not a run-of-the-mill client question. This kid knew.

“How many what?” Aldair sensed he was only prolonging the inevitable.

“How many Bar Exams have you passed?”

It had been before the Universal Bar Exam. Fifteen years ago, Aldair and his best law school friend, Rick Johnston, had decided to try to pass every Bar exam in the country. Rick had passed a dozen. Aldair had passed almost all of them.

He tried to hide his discomfort. “Does it matter?”

“What law school did you go to?”

“I’m getting the sense you already know that.”

“You were the editor of the Yale Law Journal?”

“I was *an* editor. There were eight others.”

“And this is what you wanted to do with your law career?”

Aldair didn’t bother to answer.

“Do you keep in touch with the other editors?” Justin asked.

“No, not really.”

“Classmates?”

“Not really anyone’s business but mine. How about we get back to your ticket?”

“Sure. You take credit cards, I assume?”

“Yup. It’s 795, with the agreement that you’ll do an online driving school.”

“No, I’d still like the other option. The twenty thousand dollars to mount a full legal battle.”

If Aldair had had any friends, he would have assumed one of them was playing a prank on him. But this kid seemed serious.

“As your attorney, I’m legally obligated to give you the best advice I can, and in my view, this course of action is an expensive mistake,” Aldair said.

“Your advice is noted. I still want to fight this all the way.”

“But...why?”

“Not really anyone’s business but mine.”

Aldair didn’t know if complex traffic law trials were like riding a bike. But it wouldn’t have mattered. He had never brought a complex traffic law case to trial. He had never brought any traffic law case, or any other kind of case, to trial. His business was lazy plea bargaining, period.

He had helped with other cases. While at Yale, he’d helped with tenants’ rights cases, contract disputes, medical malpractice claims, and even one capital case. But he’d never even worked on a traffic law case.

Traffic law cases didn’t need trials. All of his clients were guilty. 100%. No exceptions. Every person who had been clocked

going more than twenty over the speed limit had been going more than twenty over the speed limit. For that matter, everyone who wasn't his client was probably guilty, too. Everyone speeds. Everyone sometimes speeds by a lot. There was no one who was falsely accused, no one who might be exonerated by DNA, no one who was innocent. It made the job simple. He told the judge that the client had gone to driving school, was a pretty good person, and shouldn't pay more than, say, \$450, and definitely not more than \$795.

During an international law class, he'd learned that no one in the history of Laos's court system had ever been found innocent. If you were in court, you were found guilty. The lawyer's job was to negotiate down the punishment. Aldair was practicing Laotian law.

Or, at least, he had been until a couple of hours ago. Now he was reading subsection something-or-other of section who-knows-what about exigent circumstances. The kid hadn't been transporting someone having a medical emergency, so none of it was applicable.

The next phase would be to go after the radar gun, the officer, or the chain of custody. He grabbed the phone to call the county clerk's office.

"Aldair?" Aldair glanced at the phone. It was Lanie, the girl he'd been seeing for the last couple of months. He'd accidentally picked up the phone again.

"Oh hey, Lanie. What's up?"

"Glad you actually picked up your phone for once. I'm in your apartment."

Damn. "How? Why?"

"'Why' is because we were supposed to meet twenty minutes ago, and I got tired of waiting. 'How' is I picked your lock."

He shoved the laptop into its case. “You can pick locks?”

“No, doofus. You left your door open. Not just unlocked, but wide open, for any criminal to walk in.”

He was already out the door, striding quickly from his office to his apartment. “Which appears to have happened,” he quipped.

“Ha, ha. Where are you?”

He walked faster. He didn’t want Lanie rummaging through his apartment. “Just needed to get something from the office.”

“What could you possibly need from there? Did you need to get some more...nothing? Do you need more nothing in your fridge?” He heard the fridge door open. “Nope, all good on that. You have enough nothing here to feed an army.”

“Very witty. I had some fancy lawyer stuff to do. Don’t worry your pretty little head about it.”

“Not a lot of guys call me little.” Lanie was 5’ 10”.

“Oh, did you bring a lot of guys over there with you? Ask them if they want to play Pictionary. Or maybe gin.”

“Would it kill you to be a little jealous?” Lanie grumbled. “Also, I thought you didn’t drink.”

“I don’t.”

“There’s a bottle of Macallan 12 in your cabinet.”

“By now, it’s basically Macallan 25.”

“Huh?”

“I’ve had it for well over a decade. Ask your friends if they want some.”

“Hey boys,” she called out, “anyone want to do shots off my—”

“Okay, okay. You win. I’ll be jealous.”

Lanie was in Phase 1. That was when girls thought that since he was a lawyer, he was either successful and ambitious, or at least

dedicated to some noble cause. It wasn't gold-digging; none of the girls he dated were exactly on food stamps. It was more like significance-digging or brag-digging. It was finding someone whom your parents could be proud of, a father your kids could look up to, or at least someone to brag about to your friends or sisters.

In Phase 2, they realized their mistake and figured that he might at least be a social connection to, well, real lawyers. That's when they stopped trying to encourage, fix, or "rebrand" him, and 90% of the conversations became about his friends, his alumni network, whether they were going to any local Bar Association events, etc. Interestingly, in Phase 2, women became more sexually aggressive. It was like they were paying with sex for using him as a stepping stone. A headhunter fee.

There was no Phase 3. When they realized he had no friends, no connections, no network, and no interest in building one, they were gone.

"You have a letter from Yale," she announced.

Oh, no. "It's a crime to open another person's mail," he informed her.

"Oh well, you shouldn't leave your door open to criminals," she replied.

He broke into a run. It wasn't too late. The building was just 100 yards away. Didn't Olympians do that in about ten seconds?

"Oooh! Your class reunion!"

He stopped running. It was over.

"It's in Richmond this year! That's pretty close."

"Not that close."

"Closer than Connecticut," she countered.

"I guess."

“Wait, it’s tonight?”

“I’m not going. But don’t let me stop you.”

“Please?”

And Phase 2 begins. “Nope.”

He did some quick calculations. Worst-case scenario, she picked a fight, yelled at him, or black-cloud sulked. That would be, say, eight to ten hours of annoyance. The reunion would take less time, even including driving time. But it would be infinitely more miserable.

Another option presented itself. Preemptive breakup. End it now. Probably the least total misery in the short term. And in the long term, as John Maynard Keynes had put it, we’re all dead.

“But I have the perfect outfiit,” she mock-whined.

Yup. Preemptive breakup.

A few seconds later, he was in the apartment.

She wore only a black thong and black heels that made her a bit taller than him. She was covering her breasts with the reunion invitation and the envelope it came in. Her black hair fell—no, cascaded—in curls over her bare shoulders.

Damn. There was no possible way to work a preemptive breakup into this conversation.

“Do you like this way, or...” she switched the invitation and the envelope, crossing her arms, “this way.”

“Let me see the first way again.”

An hour and a half later, they were driving to Richmond. More precisely, she was driving his car. He still felt woozy.

“I can’t believe you tricked me into this.”

“Yup, I was incredibly subtle and devious. But seriously, you must be looking forward to seeing at least some of your friends again.”

“Nope.”

“Are they all stuck-up assholes?”

“No idea. Haven’t seen them in fifteen years.”

“Were they stuck-up assholes when you were in law school?”

“No idea.”

“How is that possible?”

Because I was the stuck-up-est asshole. “In law school, I...didn’t have much time for a personal life,” he lied.

“Riiight. Who did you hang out with? Or get up to hijinks with? Oh, sorry, with *whom* did you study?” she inquired.

He almost smiled at a sudden memory. During a constitutional law class, Rick Johnston had whispered his tagline, “My God, who have I done?” The answer, as it turned out, had been a chemistry grad student they had both been competing for.

Unfortunately, the professor had noticed and asked Rick what he needed to say that merited disrupting his class. Rick had stood up and clearly announced exactly what he had whispered, followed by a military style, “Sir!”. When the class had started laughing, Rick had protested, “What? I was under oath, right?”

Even the professor had smiled...and then taken 10 points off the recent midterm for Rick and, for good measure, Aldair. It hadn’t changed anything important: they still had the highest two scores on that test.

Out loud, he answered, “Mostly with a guy called Rick.”

“What kind of law does Rick do?”

“No idea.”

He was a bit curious, though. Aldair’s goal had been to argue cases before the Supreme Court. Rick had wanted to do international human rights law. Some part of him hoped that Rick was doing just that, that at least one of them had made it. Most of him didn’t care.

Aldair wore his work clothes—khakis, a blue and white pinstripe button down with a white collar and white cuffs, and a navy tie. Lanie wore—he didn't know what to call it. “Black silk short-sleeved overalls” seemed technically accurate but didn't capture the haute elegance of the ensemble.

When they stepped onto the top floor of the upscale bar, he realized two things. First, he was woefully underdressed. Second, Lanie wasn't.

The attorneys were easy to spot. And yes, these were attorneys, not lawyers. The men wore sharp suits, ties, and pocket squares. Most of the women wore tailored skirt suits or pantsuits, though a few wore elegant cocktail dresses.

The dates were different between the male and female attorneys. No. Not dates. Spouses. These people had moved forward through real lives. The husbands had the calm cockiness associated with surgeons and, of course, attorneys. The wives had the harried “having it all” look of professionals with stressed-out teenagers at home.

Rick was next to a stunning blonde, as expected. She had the opposite of the harried mom look—the kind of distant, bored-by-everything but also simultaneously intrigued-by-everything look you see in perfume ads.

“Holy shit,” Rick exclaimed as Aldair approached. “The legend is real.”

Aldair grinned. He put out his hand, but Rick turned it into a hug.

Rick's angular, high-cheekboned looks had softened and rounded over the years. But the cocky smile and the cat-eyeing-the-canary look were still there.

“It's good to see you,” Aldair said.

Aldair introduced Lanie, and Rick introduced his wife, Tara.

“Let’s get you guys some drinks,” Rick proclaimed.

“Aldair doesn’t drink,” Lanie interjected.

Rick laughed. “The hell he doesn’t. This dude showed up drunk to a tax law final. Not hung over. Drunk. Aced it, too.”

Lanie looked shocked. “Oh.”

He hadn’t explained it to Lanie. Or really to anyone. Aldair didn’t drink. He celebrated with alcohol. The two went together: celebration and drinking. The alcohol was icing on the cake.

He hadn’t had anything to celebrate in a long time. And he hadn’t fallen to the level of just eating icing, so to speak. Yet.

“Not so much anymore,” Aldair explained.

He was saved from more explanation by the arrival of Max Eldrich, who had given himself the nickname “Max Cash” in law school. From the first day, he had made it clear that he was going to be the richest corporate lawyer in the universe.

Some people say that every human experience could be found in Shakespeare’s plays. For Max, every human experience that mattered had been portrayed in *The Devil’s Advocate*, a movie about a lawyer who worked for the Devil. The Devil, played by Al Pacino, had a human life surrounded by money, power, and women. For Max, the movie had all the necessary lessons on how to live, where to live, how to work, what to wear, how to act in court, how to act in life, and most importantly, how to use legal knowledge to create an international, multibillion-dollar empire. From his clothes and expression, Aldair was pretty certain Max had reached that goal.

Max made a show of looking over Aldair’s clothes. “Sorry, sir,” he smirked, “the regional tractor convention is next door.” He

immediately started laughing uproariously at his own “joke” about Aldair’s attire.

“Great to see you, Max,” Aldair deadpanned.

“You know this guy,” Max pointed to Rick, “is a big corporate lawyer now?”

“Thanks for outing me, Max,” grumbled Rick.

“He works at Erickson and Haley.”

That was a shock. In law school, E & H had been enemy number one. They defended oil companies, dictators, corrupt (albeit democratically elected) politicians, mining conglomerates, and pretty much anyone who was doing something terrible for profit. They worked to hamstring international law to make it impossible to institute or enforce environmental regulations on polluters, or fair labor practices in sweatshops. Rick and Aldair had helped on a tenants’ rights case involving an asbestos spill in an apartment building. E & H had represented the real estate management company that owned the building and had gotten the case dismissed before trial.

“Oh. Okay,” Aldair replied. “Really?”

Rick shrugged. “Yeah. What can you do?”

“Rick is improving things from inside the system,” Tara, Rick’s wife, stated matter-of-factly. Her voice had a dreamlike distance to it, the kind you hear in perfume ads. Aldair wondered if she actually was a perfume ad model.

“Right, of course,” Aldair hastily agreed.

“Plus,” Max added, “making that cash helps you get inside...” he managed to stop himself before finishing whatever sexist joke was coming. “Hey, did you guys try the crab wontons? Amazing.”

They were, as were the rest of the passed appetizers—tiny burgers cooked rare, mini chicken fingers which were actually different from chicken nuggets, and duck eggrolls.

A few minutes later, a guy named Doug, who would have been the class clown if not for Rick, took the mic.

“It’s time to present this year’s alumni awards,” he announced in a tone that suggested he was building up to some joke. Aldair didn’t get how alumni awards were going to be funny.

They weren’t. Amanda Barry, a somewhat birdlike woman whom he vaguely remembered, got an award for advancing public policy. James McNerny won an award that had something complicated to do with medicine. Reading between the lines, it sounded like he had won a lot of malpractice suits. Aldair wondered how the surgeon-husbands would take that.

His mind wandered, and he stuffed himself with appetizers as other awards were announced. He looked around the room. Lanie was drawing a decent number of glances from the men, not surprisingly. She was also drawing glances from the women, albeit far less kind.

Aldair wondered how deep Lanie was into Phase 2 (the phase of using Aldair as a networking gateway). It was a first for Aldair. No other woman had successfully used Aldair to upgrade to a real lawyer. Would Lanie find some way to exchange business cards? Write her number on a napkin? Hook up in the bathroom? Leave it at significant glances and hope to be found on social media? Screw it. If she could do better, she had the right to do so. And in this sea of successful attorneys, she could certainly find someone better than a lawyer who was too lazy to chase ambulances. Wasn’t this around the age that successful men started looking for their second wives?

“And for the final award, the Petersen Award for Human Rights Advancement,” Doug was still presenting in a way that suggested he was building up to a punchline, “we’re honoring someone truly exceptional. This person has helped establish human rights legal centers in the forgotten and neglected parts of the world. He has risked his life to defend the unserved against oppressive regimes and exploitative corporate empires. He’s fought for justice in village courtrooms, in the Hague, and in front of the United Nations. Please join me in congratulating...Max Eldrich.”

Aldair burst out laughing. It was an amazing setup, albeit in questionable taste. Max Cash volunteering in a village court...

The entire room was looking at him. Shocked. Pissed off.

He looked questioningly at Max. “Yup. Changed my priorities, bud,” Max confirmed.

Aldair watched, red-faced and dumbfounded, as Max Cash accepted a human rights award. Everyone was already standing as they clapped, but if they hadn’t been, they would have stood for this ovation.

“People move on,” Rick muttered to him as the applause continued.

Aldair nodded. “Yeah.”

Afterwards, nearly everyone lined up to congratulate and talk to Max. Lanie was one of them. No surprise there. Aldair wandered to the back of the room. There was nowhere to vanish—the room was a simple rectangle with bars on either end. Unless he hid behind the bar...

He decided to step outside onto the landing. The world moved on. People moved on. They found what was great within themselves. They deserved to.

Max Cash had won the Petersen Award. The Christopher Andrew Petersen Award. The late Professor Petersen. Former Dean of Yale Law. Faculty advisor to the Yale Law Journal. Mentor to a Supreme Court justice. Personal mentor to a handpicked few in every class, the best of the best. Including, of course, Aldair and Rick.

Downstairs, he could hear the forced cheer of the bar. It echoed through the concrete staircase, which maintained none of the upscaleness of either the ground floor bar or the event room that was hosting the reunion. The stairwell looked like something from a one-step-above-slum apartment, minus the graffiti.

He heard footsteps clanking up the stairs. Two men, neither of whom he recognized from Yale, approached. They were dressed at Aldair's level of style—one with an ill-fitting blue blazer, one with an ill-fitting tweed jacket.

They pushed past him into the reunion. Curious, Aldair followed. Rick nodded at Aldair with a smirk as he reentered the room.

One of the men looked down at his cell phone, turned to the other, and nodded. They walked directly over to Rick.

“Richard Johnston?” said the one in tweed.

“Hey, what's up?” Rick replied warmly, extending his hand.

“Richard Johnston, you're under arrest for the murder of Paul Mahesian.”

“Wait, what?”

The handcuff was already on Rick's right hand, which he'd extended for a handshake. Blue Blazer turned him around and cuffed the other hand.

They started reciting his Miranda rights and pushing him towards the door. His wife, the cool and disinterested Tara, ran over, suddenly neither cool nor disinterested.

“Are you crazy?” she demanded. “My husband is a respected attorney. I demand you release him.”

Tweed turned around. “Ma’am, you need to step back. Please.”

“You have no right to arrest him.”

Tweed calmly removed a piece of paper from his jacket. An arrest warrant. “Ma’am, we have a warrant, signed by a judge, for his arrest.”

“I’m coming with him.”

“Ma’am, you can’t do that. You can travel to the station on Monroe Street independently if you choose.”

“Let me tell you something. I’m coming with him, one way or . . .”

“Tara,” Aldair interjected quietly, “it’s best if you do nothing right now. Say nothing right now. You can follow him if you want, but you won’t want to.”

Tweed muttered a quick thanks to Aldair.

“Why not?” Tara snapped.

“Your husband works for one of the most powerful law firms in the world. They’ll handle it, and they’ll handle it quickly. The best thing to do is say nothing, do nothing, and let the pros handle it.”

“It’ll be okay, T,” Rick agreed. “Whatever misunderstanding this is, we’ll figure it out.”

Tara nodded. She blinked quickly.

A few dozen people had crowded closer. None of the lawyers did anything. They knew, presumably, whom Rick worked for and the needlessness of intervening.

The entire rest of the room was watching. He caught Lanie's eye. She was still in the line to meet Max. She gestured walking over to him as if asking, "Do you need me to come there?" Aldair shook his head.

"What would they need for a warrant?" Tara asked.

Aldair sighed. "Less than you'd think. A person's statement. Some bit of evidence. An arrest warrant isn't proof of guilt or even proof that there's enough evidence for a trial."

"Rick doesn't do criminal law," she pointed out. "Will he know what to do?"

"All he needs to do is call his office. He knows how to do that, right?" He tried to sound comforting.

She smiled and nodded, and her resting perfume-model face returned.

The dozens of attorneys responded with nonchalance, calmly turning back to their conversations as if one of their own hadn't just been arrested for murder. The spouses followed suit. Aldair couldn't tell if the nonchalance was social bravado or real indifference. Would couples be gossiping in their cars on the way home, speculating about whether Rick had murdered someone? Or would the momentary drama be forgotten as quickly as the bartender's name?

Lanie had gotten to the front of the line and was talking animatedly to Max. Max was clearly enjoying the attention, and Aldair realized he had come without a spouse. Maybe Lanie would trade up tonight. So be it.

Aldair was almost completely certain that Rick hadn't killed anyone. Rick was a mischief maker and had been a legendary playboy, but there was no malice in him. Or at least none that Aldair had ever detected.

But then again, Aldair's ability to detect malice wasn't exactly well calibrated. Some people could sense evil and knew to avoid it. Others could sense it and were drawn to it. But some people were too gullible, too stupid, too blind to see the most patent and obvious evil—even when it was right in front of them.

Aldair had grown up assuming he was in the first category, the sharp-eyed evil avoider. Fifteen years ago, he'd realized that he was in category three, the too blind to be trusted kind.

He didn't think Rick was a murderer. But it wouldn't be the first time he had been totally wrong about someone. But even if Rick had killed someone, videotaped it, had the video notarized, and had two witnesses confirm the murder, it wouldn't have mattered. E & H would free him and have the charges dismissed within a few hours.

Aldair wondered what allowed Max Cash to create good where there was none and to avoid evil even when it was everywhere. He wondered what had made him, Aldair, the opposite: unable to avoid evil when doing so should have been easy.

What did Max call himself now? Max Cash wouldn't make sense anymore. Max Help? Max Humanitarian? Maybe just Max Good.

Aldair walked out of the event room and back onto the landing. He played with the idea of going to the bar downstairs. If Lanie could trade up, maybe he could trade...sideways? Realistically, probably down.

He went downstairs, past the bar, and out onto the sidewalk. It was chilly enough that he wished he'd worn a blazer. He walked partially to warm himself, mostly to get away from

the night of embarrassment. An old lady in a heavy parka sat on a bus stop bench. She turned at his approach. He smiled at her. She frowned back.

He kept walking, turning randomly, hoping to get lost. His Eagle Scout sense of direction didn't let that happen. He knew exactly where he was, exactly where the bar was, exactly where his parking spot was, and the fastest way to get to either. If only any other part of life was like that.

In the distance, he heard a clock chime. He wondered absently if that chiming drove property values in its vicinity down, or if houses in the area were built to be as soundproof as the hotels inside of large airports.

His phone rang. Lanie.

"Hey, what's up?" he asked.

"Where are you?"

"Just taking a walk around. How's it going?"

"Were you going to ask me if I wanted to come?" she demanded, irritated.

"I thought, well, you know..."

"Actually, I don't know. I've been putting up with your creepy-ass friend hitting on me for the last half hour. Were you ever going to, you know, step in?"

"Sorry, I misunderstood. I didn't think you were coming home with me."

"What?"

"I mean, considering the circumstances."

"Did you think I was going to walk a hundred miles home? Or what, get a hotel room with your weirdo friend?"

"I...uh..."

“Holy shit, you did think that.”

“I mean, come on, look at the other options.”

“Are you serious?”

“You know literally everyone in there is more successful...”

“Wait, did you think I wanted to go with you so I could meet another lawyer?” she asked, shocked.

Aldair tried to come up with some clever legal phrasing. Eventually, he came up with, “Kinda.”

“Jesus. Whatever is making you crazy, you need to let it go. I came with you because I wanted you to know I had your back.”

Something about the way she said it made him feel like he’d been sucker punched right under the ribs. “Yeah. Sorry, I figured that when you were talking to Max...”

“I was talking to Max because YOU clearly didn’t want to, so I picked up the slack. Not because I wanted to date him. And just for the record, if I wanted to date rich lawyers, I wouldn’t need your help.”

She had a point. “Yeah, you’re right. Sorry. I’m close by. I didn’t mean to, you know...”

“It’s okay. Now, can you please come and rescue me from YOUR reunion?”

He smiled. “On my way.” He picked up the pace. He passed the old lady on the bench. She gave him the same frown. He smiled and nodded at her. She turned away.

The phone rang again and he picked up. “Yeah, I’m almost there.”

“Huh?” It was Rick.

“Woah. They got you out insanely fast.” It hadn’t even been an hour.

“Not exactly. I’m still here.”

“Wait, how are you calling me? Don’t tell me E & H can get a cell phone into a prison that quickly.”

“They probably can,” Rick admitted. Aldair noted the grammar. *They* probably can. Not *we* probably can.

“But,” Rick continued, “that’s not how I’m calling. I’m legally entitled to a phone call.”

“Okay...”

“You’ve passed the Bar in Virginia. You’re a member of the Virginia Bar.”

Aldair didn’t like the direction the conversation was taking. “Your point? E & H has about a thousand lawyers that can practice in Virginia.”

“Yeah. But the thing is...I’d rather they not handle my case.”

“Because...”

“I’d rather not say more over the phone.” Rick paused. Aldair knew what was coming. It was like watching someone about to fall down the stairs but being too far away to stop them.

“Aldair, I need you to be my attorney.”