

at it for the last half hour. Some cats make things way more difficult. You want me to hit you up on game?”

“Enlighten us,” Dorian answered, trying to sound unimpressed.

“It’s simple. You bring ‘em the check when you get home. And give ‘em the pole in the morning before you leave.” Ricky followed his alleged wisdom up with a hardy laugh, as if he’d just told some classic Robin Harris joke.

“This from a man who eats a child’s cereal.”

“Yo, man. Don’t sleep on Fruit Loops.”

“Well, thanks for the education, Einstein.” Dorian added sarcastically.

I jumped back into the conversation. “I know, right? This dude’s taking us back to caveman days. Next thing you know, he’ll tell us to drag babes around by their hair.”

“Think nothing of it,” Ricky replied, addressing D directly.

It was weird. They sometimes had this crazy competition thing. I guess it was just like that with family sometimes, though their personalities differed even more than their physical appearances.

“I want my boys to benefit from the wisdom of my experience,” Ricky half-joked.

“What ‘chu know about wisdom? Dorian’s tone roared past disdain and sped toward contempt.

“I know more than cats who think about stuff rather than just doing it. That’s what I know.”

Damn! Good thing we were headed to a gym to work off some of this testosterone.

CHRISTIAN



“Christian, do you have those papers?” That voice belonged to Ethan Daniels. An ever so slight twinge of southern dialect played peek-a-

boo with the end of his sentences, just so that you knew where Ethan came from.

Besppectacled and of slight build, he possessed a lawyer's tan. He was pale to the point of stereotype. He likened the gray at his temples to distinction. He also enjoyed lamenting about his blue blood origin. Prep school followed an exclusive elementary. Ivy League college and law schools followed these. Self-effacing and judgmental, a legal career was the perfect outlet for such character flaws.

Like so many of his kind, he assumed the arrogance of his station in life. For the Ethans of world, everyone and everything had its proper place. He never said it, but the look in his eyes told me that he thought that once upon a time, his people owned my people. Which was corporate for n***a. In his mind, such belief anointed him with superiority over me.

Unfortunately, he was also the right hand man to the firm's managing partner, Dirk Matheson. In country club-ese, that meant he was Dirk's protégé. Since I wouldn't play Steppin' Thomas to his worldview, he was the bane of my professional existence. Hell, if they wanted Clarence, they should've hired him. Instead, I found myself frequently in the cross hairs of his political agenda.

"Ut-um." I cleared my throat. "What papers are you referring to Ethan?" *I knew exactly what he was talking about, but didn't appreciate his grandstanding at my expense.*

Allan Rubenstein recognized the storm brewing and threw himself in its path. "Ethan, you know that the hospital just received the subpoena to turn over all its patient records for the last five years. They couldn't possibly respond so quickly."

"Well, Allan, I want to make sure we stay on top of this case. It's very important to the firm." Ethan addressed Allan, but looked at me. He concluded his statement with a smile, but not even expensive veneers concealed the venom filled in his insinuation about my competence. Nor was the substitution of the pronouns lost on me.

“We” referred to the firm’s aspirations, but “you” represented my effort.

“One more thing, Chris. I glanced at your brief for the Richards DUI case. Is that the strongest precedent that you could find?”

I always hated when he shortened my name. It sounded informal, almost cordial, but in a world filled with titles and degrees, it was just another attempt to minimize my professional abilities. Hadn’t generations of Black men from slavery and beyond suffered the indignity of being called by their first names while having to address non-Black men with the highest levels of etiquette?

“What precedent were you referring to, Eth?” I countered, shortening his name. *Equals again.*

“Oh, I don’t know, Christian. Why not something like State of New York vs. Myers?”

I stroked my goatee, waiting for the madness to finish. “That case is ten years old. The one I cited is now the gold standard in DUI cases.”

He threw a last jab. “All I’m saying is that if you need some extra help on this thing, I could free up some paralegals.”

I slipped and countered with a hook. “A realignment of resources is in order, but it would probably make more sense to do so in the Jackson Memorial Hospital case than in this one.” Management competency questioned. Touché.

Ethan received my message with a smile. “We’ll see what we can do. If there’s nothing else, we’ll adjourn.” No one stirred. “Ok! Let’s get back to work.”

Allan caught me as we left the meeting room. “What’s going on with you and Ethan today,” he inquired. “You seem to be going at it a little more than usual today.”

“The heck if I know. His maid must’ve forgotten his morning coffee.”

“Yeah, well, good help is so hard to find.” He busted out his best Thurston Howell III voice. “I hate when that happens.”

We cracked up. “Thanks for the trip down memory lane, Allan, but I suspect you have more on your mind than reminiscing about ‘Gilligan’s Island’. What’s up?”

“Have you selected anyone to second chair on the Jackson Memorial Case, yet?”

“Not yet. Who’d you have in mind?”

“Christian, you know I’m your guy.”

“I don’t know. You’re my boy, but this is business.”

Allan wasn’t sure of what to make of my stern facial expression, so he continued. “You know my specialty is civil tort research. You’re going to need help that, right?”

Allan was correct. I was going to ask him anyway, but hadn’t gotten around to it. His asking was even better.

Born to working class Jewish parents in Brooklyn, Allan grew up with anything but a silver spoon. Since his father was a believer that a neighborhood worth owning a business in was also worth living in, his childhood friends came in all shades and all religious persuasions. As long as they came from families that believed in hard work, they were welcome in the Rubenstein Home.

Mr. Rubenstein owned a local butcher shop. By the time he was six years old, young Allan was helping out in the store. With his father’s example, he transferred this ethic to his studies. Soon good grades grew into recognition certificates for his performance. Certificates grew into plaques. Plaques blossomed into scholarship offers.

Before long, Allan found himself seated in Ivy League classes right next to the Ethans of the world. He once joked that he never doubted his ability to compete with his more privileged colleagues. They recalled summers spent on the Cape. He spent his in the furnace heat of New York, mopping up animal entrails and washing bloody aprons. They could never understand where his motivation came from or what awaited him if he failed. He talked about his drive with such idealism and passion. Though he looked more like Clark Kent,

he definitely had a Superman-sized heart beating in his chest. *A cat with a cause . . . Man, was I glad he was on my side.*

“Alright Al. You got a deal.” We shook on it. Between friends and equals, name abbreviation was okay.

“Chris, you won’t be disappointed. I promise.”

“I’m sure I won’t. By the way, Dorian & I are going to this club Friday night. You want to roll?”

“Count me in.”



The info stared back at the man in the suit from the computer screen. Unbelievable. The information available on the internet was incredible. It could cause major problems.

He picked up the receiver of the phone on my desk, but thought better of it. This was no time to share. Not yet. There certainly was no easy way to explain away this situation. No. The thing to do here was to stand pat. When the time came, if it came, the details would be revealed. Until then, the better strategy was misdirection. He picked up the phone again. This time he knew exactly whom he needed to call, whether that person liked it or not.

CHRISTIAN



A zillion messages awaited my attention. Six were from Ethan. Damn, didn’t I just leave that jerk? Some were from the lawyers for Jackson Memorial. One was from Nona Jones. We played phone tag over the last week. One thing I can say for her. She had a vibrant tone phone voice.