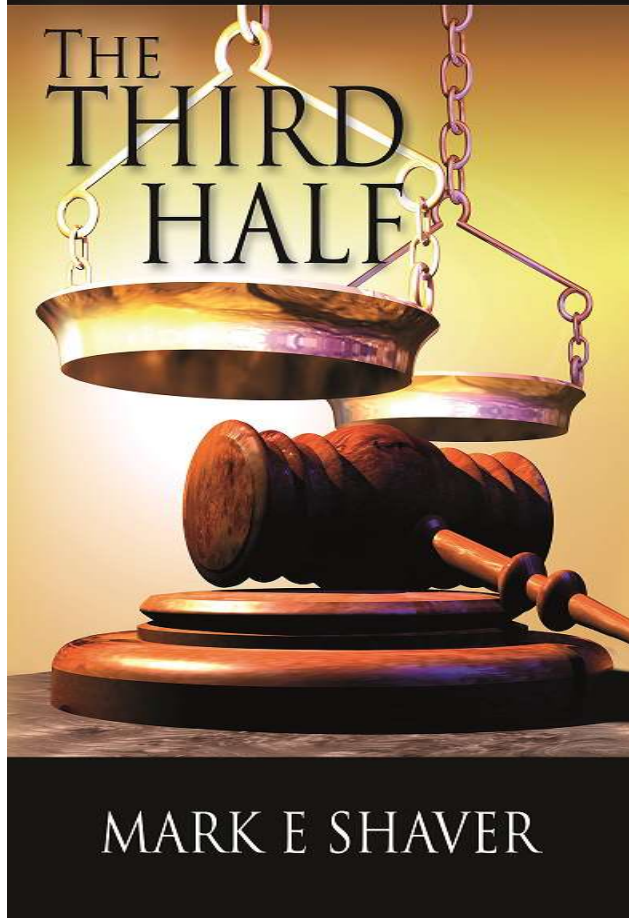


For every rule there is an exception.
For every exception there is a loophole.

THE THIRD HALF



MARK E SHAVER

PUBLISHER'S NOTE

This is a work of fiction. All names, characters, places, businesses and incidents are used fictitiously and are purely the product of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments or locales is entirely coincidental.

For my family, whose constant love and encouragement keeps me focused, and my readers, whose kind words and support keeps me writing, I am truly grateful. A special thanks also to Anne-Marie Houy for sharing her time and talents. Your work is much appreciated.

For Susan

Called home too soon

INTRODUCTION

For every rule there is an exception, and for every exception, there is a loophole. For those of sufficient means, or superior intelligence and cunning, the legal system can be manipulated, and its consequences evaded. For some offenses, this is considered merely an inconvenience, a causality of the game. For others, it is an atrocity. The trick is deciding which is which. Arthur Jensen learned this the hard way, and although it was not his intention, Jacob Severinson will find himself following in Arthur's footsteps.

In the pages of *'The Second Verdict'*, Arthur Jensen allowed himself to be drawn into a world not of his own choosing, but of his own making. Although a kind and compassionate man, Arthur harbored a strong, almost fanatical sense of right and wrong. This passion rested quietly within him, waiting for the right time to make itself known, and reveal the limits to which it would push him.

Arthur was part of a small group participating in a clinical trial of an experimental medication for a rare and potentially fatal disease. These participants were divided up into small groups and administered varying amounts of the treatment. There were three other members in his particular group, all different in their own way, but all sharing one thing in common; the disease.

Arthur worked in the stock market while Derek worked in an iron-works factory. Brad was a novelist while Evan lived on a trust fund.

Despite the differences in their backgrounds, the four men became very close, and it was through his relationship with these men that Arthur's sense of right and wrong was tested. Derek Williams was the youngest member of the clinical trial. His wife had been pregnant with their first child and Derek came home from work one night to find she had been attacked in their home. The assault resulted in the premature birth of their child. While her attacker was caught and sent to trial, neither justice nor punishment was forthcoming. The man went free with only the slightest of consequences.

This injustice was more than Arthur's conscience would allow so, unbeknownst to Derek, he and the others, Evan Marshall and Brad Martin, planned and executed, almost flawlessly, a plan to punish the man by engineering a malfunction with his car which stranded him on the side of the road in the dead of night. The man was then drugged, dressed in a white sheet that most would find offensive, and dropped off in a part of town where that garb, and the message it sent, would not be well received. The residents there voiced their objections to what he was wearing in a profoundly physical manner. And so, he was punished. Although the police never discovered what actually happened to him or why,

someone else had. The day after the incident, Arthur received an anonymous phone call from a man claiming to know exactly what they had done and why they had done it. Over the course of the next week, the man, who identified himself only as Sam, revealed to Arthur that he was a member of an organization that identified and orchestrated punishments for those who had managed to escape any consequences from the legal system. They operated in much the same way as Arthur and his friends had. In exchange for his silence, Sam required Arthur, Brad, Evan and Derek to perform those same services for him. Although their participation would be well compensated, there were risks for that participation, and an even greater one for choosing not to.

Reluctantly, the four men agreed, and soon found themselves leading a double life. They worked through several assignments, successfully punishing some of humanity's most deserving offenders, until they were offered one final assignment which promised the chance to leave the organization with a clean slate. They accepted and completed the assignment, though they barely escaped with their lives. Sadly, before Evan could experience his freedom from his indentured servitude of the organization, he fell victim to the disease he was battling, and the four men became three.

Brad and Derek quickly took advantage of the offer to withdraw from the group, while Arthur had grown to see it as something he needed in his life.

In much the same way as Arthur was drawn into this world, Jacob Severinson will be as well. It's easy to say *yes* when desperation blinds you to the consequences of your decisions. So, on the heels of *The Second Verdict*, we begin *The Third Half*.

THE THIRD HALF

CHAPTER ONE

As I squinted at the mirror through one eye, I quickly realized that the gash on my forehead was much deeper than anything I should be tending to myself. I should have gone to the emergency room instead of coming home, but they ask questions at the emergency room, questions that I'm not prepared to answer. That's why I found myself standing in front of my bathroom mirror with bottle of alcohol in one hand and a roll of bandages in the other. After painfully cleansing the wound, I bandaged it, trying desperately to convince myself that it wasn't as bad as it looked.

I walked out of the bathroom into the bedroom and sat on the edge of the bed. For the first time since all this began I started questioning myself, questioning what I was doing and why, but more than anything else, questioning my sanity. I thought about my ex-wife. I began to see it all more clearly now, clearer than I had when I was in the middle of it.

The signs were there alright, there's no doubt about that. I didn't believe it though, not until it had slapped me in the face. Then I had to believe it. I had no choice. My life had hit rock bottom. I knew it had when I realized that the cup of coffee I enjoyed at seven thirty every morning was the high point of my day. My life began to spiral downward when my wife of eighteen years found another man and filed for divorce. It began free falling when she went after the house and half of my business. It plummeted when the courts gave them to her.

Maybe I should start from the beginning. My name is Jacob Severinson, and for the most part, my life has been full, but absent of much of the mindless drama that can suck the life out of a relationship. I always viewed that as a virtue. Sadly, I was the only one in the relationship who did. If it's possible for a person to be attracted to someone based solely on their earning potential, that person would be Abbey. I guess I always knew that, but I found a certain comfort in allowing myself the indulgence of denial. But denial is like any other lie; it only masks the truth, it doesn't change it.

So there I was, after eighteen years, three months and twelve days of marriage, sitting alone in my apartment knowing that, even though it was only seven forty-five in the morning, the best part of my day had already come and gone. Don't get me wrong, it had nothing to do with money. I was still worth ten times that of most people my age, even after my wife's attorney surgically removed enough cash from my company to last the average woman a lifetime. Abbey managed to go through two thirds of it in five months. The math was simple. She got half and I got half, but somewhere along the line she became convinced there was a third half, and she wanted her share of it.

I must admit I did get a little stimulation from demonstrating to her the fundamental concept of one plus one equals two. Once she realized that the well was legally dry, at least as far as she was concerned, I never heard from her again. She rode off into the proverbial sunset with Duke, a former body builder, former rock star, former dot com entrepreneur and current unemployment recipient. They were the perfect pair. They truly deserved each other, though neither of them deserved a full half of the electronics company I had built from the ground up. I guess that's why I sold the business and split the proceeds with her. I couldn't imagine having her, and even more so, her current flame, Duke, as

business partners. Most of the time Duke demonstrated all the intelligence of a chunk of tree bark, but there were other times, brief moments, when his words had an unexpected clarity. It was almost as if his entire life was a deception, and every now and then a tiny bit of who he really was peeked out from under the mask. Despite my suspicions, I considered him to be her problem, and not mine. Looking back, I realize that was a huge mistake.

As badly as I wanted to believe that I'd played all my cards right, there was still a demon that I fought every hour of every day. That demon was boredom. An electrical engineer by trade, the devices that I invented and my company manufactured gave me a purpose and kept me going. The dream of not having to go to work, of being able to sleep late every morning and not having anyone to answer to, soon became a nightmare, and the demon that scripted my nightmare grew stronger every day. The day I almost stepped out in front of a moving bus, not because I didn't see it, but because I couldn't think of a reason not to, is the day the demon died.

I remember stopping at a coffee shop on my way home from nowhere in particular. I felt strangely rejuvenated. As I sipped a cup of coffee, I began to re-prioritize my life, and on the top of the list was investing some of the money that was sitting in the bank earning little more than the right to be there. I picked up my cup, tore off the paper ring that was there to protect my hands from the heat, and began to scribble a list across the back of it. As I wrote the words *financial planner*, I remembered my attorney giving me a business card. I reached for my wallet, unsure if I put it in there, but certain I never took it out. It took a little digging, but I found the card. As I slipped it out of my wallet, the wheels that would change my life forever, were set in motion, and it would all be because of one man, the man whose name was on that business card - Arthur Jensen.

The temperature had dropped into the teens the day I decided to go and see Arthur Jensen at the firm he worked for. I leaned into the stiff north wind as I made my way across the sidewalk and up to the doors of the twenty story building that housed the offices of Kirkwood, Tanner & Associates. The warmth embraced me as I pushed through and walked confidently inside. I glanced down again at the card I held in my hand, scanning it for the suite number-Suite 1215.

After a quick elevator ride I was greeted by a professional yet pleasant woman sitting behind a strikingly beautiful, highly polished walnut desk.

"May I help you?" she asked.

"Yes," I answered. "I'm here to see Arthur Jensen. I have an appointment."

She glanced down at her computer screen. "Mr. Severinson?"

"That would be me," I smiled.

"I'll let Mr. Jensen know you're here. Would you like some coffee?"

"I'd love some."

"I'll bring a cup to Mr. Jensen's office for you."

It wasn't long before I was being led down a long hallway lined with old issues of stocks and bonds displayed in ornate, antique frames. When we got to the last door on the right side of the hall, the receptionist gently tapped before easing it open. She stepped back allowing me to enter. As I walked in, a man who appeared to be somewhere in his fifties, stood up and walked around his desk, his hand extended.

“Jacob Severinson,” I said as I shook it.

“Have a seat, Jacob.”

I took a seat in the closer of two chairs sitting in front of his desk. Arthur walked back around the desk and sat down.

“It appears we have a mutual friend,” I began. “Your firm came highly recommended by my attorney.”

“Well, I’ll try my best to make him proud. Now, just what can we do for you?”

“Since you were referred to me by Ed Grayson, my divorce attorney, I suppose it’s reasonable for you to conclude that my visit here today is as a result of my divorce.”

“Unfortunately, I did make the connection, yes,” Arthur admitted.

At that moment, there was a faint knock on the door as the receptionist entered and placed a cup of coffee in front of me on the edge of Arthur’s desk. I thanked her. She smiled then quickly left, closing the door quietly behind her. I took a long sip of the coffee then cradled the warm cup in my hands.

“To make a long story short, I once owned a thriving electronics company that I was forced to sell and split the proceeds with my ex. I’ve been sitting on my half of the money ever since. Lately I’ve been thinking I’d better do something with it while the market is still fairly good.”

Arthur scribbled some notes on a legal pad as I spoke. “I had a good friend that was an absolute genius with all that electronic stuff,” he said with some degree of reminiscence. “I really miss him.”

“Did he move away?” I asked.

“He died,” Arthur responded with a hint of sadness in his voice, “from some rare, obscure disease that nobody ever heard of.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“And I’m sorry to hear you got divorced,” Arthur said, changing the tone of the conversation to a more positive one. “Let’s concentrate on you right now. How much money do you want to invest and how aggressively do you want to invest it?”

For the next forty-five minutes, Arthur and I discussed my options and I got an education in the virtues and pitfalls of investing. Arthur seemed fascinated with the fact that I was in the electronics business. He was curious about what my company built and what I had designed and created. His fascination was more than passing. It was almost obsessive. I indulged him, thinking it to be his nature. Strangely enough, each time I asked him what type of gadgets his friend made or the company that he made them through, he was deliberately vague and quick to change the subject. I figured he was just trying to establish a common link between us as any good salesman would. Looking back, I was wrong about that, too.

When I left his office I felt confident about my investment choices but curiously unsettled about Arthur. However, I figured as long as my investments made money, how I felt about Arthur really didn’t matter. I felt better about myself, and I felt as if I was climbing out of the hole that my divorce had plunged me into.

Over the course of the next few weeks I began to feel alive again. I moved into a townhouse and bought a new car. I was beginning to see the light at the end of the tunnel though I wasn’t quite there yet. Though as I laid awake in my bed one night, I realized there was still something missing from my

life, and the more I thought about it, the more the walls of that tunnel closed in around me.

So I began to take a mental inventory of my current state. Over the course of the past few weeks I had developed a purpose, I had taken steps to secure my financial health and made what I considered enough changes to leave behind that part of my life that was indeed behind me. But there was still something missing. I glanced over at the clock. It was almost midnight. I closed my eyes and began to count backwards from sixty in my head. At the very moment I reached zero, the numbers on the clock changed to midnight. As I stared at the clock, the problem became obvious. Despite the changes I'd made, my life was still painfully predictable, almost to the point of boredom. There was no excitement, no thrill or suspense, there was nothing in my life to challenge me. It was as if my life was once again scripted, only this time the author was dull and lifeless to an unimaginable degree. I needed a purpose.

I sat up in my bed as if I had suddenly been made aware of a life-changing revelation. Maybe I had. The hour was late and I was forced to take comfort in the fact that I now knew what was missing. All I needed to do was find a way to get some of it.

CHAPTER TWO

Sometimes the pieces just seem to fall into place. As I sat at my kitchen table reading the morning paper and sipping my coffee, which incidentally was now one of many high points in my day, I found it hard to concentrate on the article I was reading. My mind kept drifting back to the thoughts I'd had last night and to the revelation that my life still needed a purpose. That much I knew. Where to find it and what it would be, was still a mystery.

I was half way through the second section of the paper when the phone rang. I glanced at the screen and saw that it was the investment firm I had visited earlier that week. I answered it, thinking it to be a little odd that someone with a nine-to-five job would be calling me at seven fifteen in the morning.

"Jacob Severinson," I answered.

"Jacob, good morning. This is Arthur Jensen with Kirkwood, Tanner & Associates. I hope I'm not calling too early."

"Not at all, Arthur. I stopped sleeping late when I got out of high school."

"Me too, but the reason I'm calling doesn't really have anything to do with investments."

"Then this is a social call?" I questioned.

"Not exactly," Arthur confessed. "I have a client who owns a number of companies, one of which is an electronics manufacturing firm. In a conversation I had with him yesterday he mentioned that he was looking for someone to head up his research and development division. Naturally, the first name that popped into my head was yours. I've known this man for a number of years and I knew his son very well. He's a real straight shooter and everything he touches seems to make money. So, I thought I'd pass this information along to you. It's not like owning your own company, but it could be a stepping stone toward that end."

There was a pause as Arthur gave me an opportunity to speak. I thought for a second or two before answering. Maybe this was just what I needed. Maybe I would be challenged and driven again like I used to be. This could be the purpose I was looking for. What did I really have to lose? If it didn't work out I could always bow out gracefully and move on. "What's his name?" I asked.

"Marshall, Ashland Marshall."

"You know, Arthur, I think I'll give him a call. It might be just what I need."

Arthur gave me Mr. Marshall's contact information and we hung up. While I had never been one who believed in fate or predestination, the timing was, to say the least curious and to say the most, suspiciously opportune. Nonetheless, I believed it to be something I should try. So, I got up from the table and poured myself another cup of coffee, somehow feeling a bit better about myself than I had ten minutes before.

I must admit I didn't expect what I saw when I drove through the main gates of Ashland Marshall's electronics company. The complex was huge, made up of multiple buildings with a very distinct security presence. I eased my car into a visitor's parking spot and shut off the engine. The building in front of me was three stories tall and its architecture was quite impressive. I climbed the steps and passed through the front doors into a lobby that also served as a reception area. Once I

identified myself to the woman behind the desk, I was promptly escorted through another set of doors to an elevator that took me up to the third floor. When the elevator doors opened, I found myself stepping out into a large office. I realized why the woman wore a key around her neck, the key was required to get the elevator up to the floor. I found myself standing in what turned out to be Ashland Marshall's personal office. It occupied a good deal of the third floor.

Some thirty feet away from me, a man sat behind a very ornate looking antique desk. As I was led towards him, he put his pen down and took off his glasses. He stood up and put on a suit jacket that he had hung across the back of his chair before walking out from behind his desk and extending his hand. "You must be Jacob Severinson," he said in an enthusiastic tone.

"I am," I said as I reached out to shake his hand.

"Ashland Marshall," he said, motioning for me to sit down. "Please, have a seat."

As I sat in one of the leather-clad chairs that faced his desk, he thanked the receptionist that had brought me to his office and told her she could go.

He walked back around his desk and sat down. As he began to speak, he opened a file folder that sat in front of him. "Our mutual acquaintance, Arthur Jensen, tells me that you once owned an electronics company."

"I did, several years ago."

"He also told me the reason you found it necessary to sell it."

"It wasn't by choice, I assure you," I admitted.

"Nonetheless, a wise move under the circumstances, and certainly a good business decision. It's difficult to find someone with the kind of electrical know-how it takes to be successful in this business. It's nearly impossible to find someone that has business sense on top of it. Arthur seems to think you possess both. What do you think?"

I smiled at him. "I think Arthur's right."

He stared at me for a moment before smiling back. "How about a quick tour of our facility?" he asked. "I'll show you around, then I'll make you an offer. What happens after that is up to you."

I certainly wasn't expecting things to move so quickly, but I wasn't complaining. We both stood up and began walking toward the elevator at the back of his office. Ashland reached out and pushed the button to bring it up to the third floor. While we waited, he turned to me and asked a most unusual question. "Are you simply a client of Arthur's, or are you a part of his other life, as it were?"

"His other life?" I repeated. "What do you mean?"

Ashland turned away and looked at the elevator doors. "Never mind-you've just answered my question."

The facility was impressive and the offer he made me was equally generous. I didn't want to seem too eager and accept it on the spot, so I told him he would hear back from me by end of business the next day. He seemed pleased with my response, so I thanked him and left his office. As I drove out of the complex, the question he asked me at the elevator continued to nag at me as it had ever since he asked it. It was a most unusual thing to ask someone you'd just met, and a reckless one to ask of anyone else. So, left with no other choice, I filed it under the heading of 'none of my business' and tried to forget about it.

Returning home, I walked into the kitchen and tossed my car keys onto the counter. They came

to rest against the phone, which was flashing the number 'one', indicating I had a message. I hit the play button as I opened the fridge door and reached for a bottle of water. The voice I heard made me stop and look up over the fridge door at the phone. The message was from Abbey, my ex-wife. It took a few seconds for me to believe that she had actually called, that she actually knew how to reach me.

"Jake, this is Abbey. I know a lot of water has gone under the bridge since we split up and I'm ashamed of most of it. I know we agreed never to contact each other, and since we didn't have any kids, there really wasn't any reason for us to. I wouldn't be contacting you now but I'm in trouble, Jake, serious trouble. I don't know who else to turn to. I know you'd be totally within your rights to tell me to go to hell, but I hope you won't. I'm using a friend's cell phone for my own safety. I'll call you back at seven o'clock this evening. If you don't answer, I'll understand and I won't call you again. If I don't get to talk to you, please do one thing for me. I know you've stayed in touch with my parents, something I wish I had done myself. I want you to tell them...that is, I need you to tell them, that I'm sorry. I never meant for any of this to happen."

Her voice was breaking as she struggled to maintain her composure when she hung up the phone. I dropped onto a stool at the bar next to the phone and tried to process what I had just heard. Part of me thought it was a hoax, a desperate ploy to get something more from me, but another part of me heard a tone of desperation in her voice that couldn't be easily imitated. "Damn it," I said out loud. "Just when I finally get my life half way back together, she shows up." As badly as I wanted never to see her or speak to her again, the fear I heard in her voice convinced me to make an exception.

I put the bottle of water back in the fridge and made myself a drink. As I sipped on the whiskey I had poured over a handful of ice, I began to question myself. For every reason I came up with not to answer her call, I came up with one to answer it. I guess it's true, people really don't change. As hard as I tried to be cold and indifferent, I found myself too compassionate to do anything other than what I had always done. I looked down at my watch. Four forty five. This wasn't going to be easy.

As much as I wanted another drink, I wanted to be in possession of all my senses even more. So, after I finished the whiskey, I went to the fridge and got the bottle of water back out. The fact that Abbey was in trouble came as no surprise. The fact that the trouble was serious enough for her to call me was what worried me. The last thing she had said to me was how Duke was the answer to all her dreams. I couldn't help but think somehow that dream had turned into a nightmare.

For the next two hours and fifteen minutes I paced the floor, watched a few minutes of every channel the cable had to offer, and drank two more bottles of water. Then, as promised, the phone rang at precisely seven o'clock. I took a deep breath and nervously picked it up. "This is Jacob."

"Jake, it's me," she said, her voice trembling and sounding uncharacteristically insecure. She paused, giving me a chance to speak.

"It's been a long time, Abbey. I'd ask how you're doing but I think I already know."

"I'm in trouble, Jake. I'm in so much trouble and I don't know who else to turn to. Part of me is surprised you answered the phone, but part of me would have been even more surprised if you hadn't. You have no idea how hard this is for me. We parted on such bad terms."

I interrupted her, "Abbey, get to the point. What's the problem? What kind of trouble are you in? Or should I say, what kind of trouble did Duke get you in?"

"You had him pegged right from the beginning, Jake. I guess I just couldn't see it."

"Well, you were the only one," I said impatiently. "Now, are you going to tell me what's going on? What kind of trouble are you in?"

"The worst kind," Abbey said without hesitation. "The kind that will probably get me killed."

"Get you killed," I repeated, "Abbey, what the hell's going on?"

"Duke got involved with some guys that promised him he could make a lot of money. All he had to do was make some deliveries for them. Every time I asked him what he was delivering, he always told me he didn't know and he didn't care as long as he was getting paid. In reality, we both knew exactly what he was delivering, but neither one of us were willing to say it out loud."

"It was drugs, wasn't it?" I asked.

There was a pause before Abbey answered. "Yes, it was. Cocaine mostly, or at least that's what we figured. We never saw what was in the packages. All Duke did was pick them up from the bus terminal-or the airport-and take them to a truck stop by the freeway about thirty miles outside of town. It seemed simple enough."

"So, what happened? Did Duke get pinched carrying a shipment?"

"It's worse than that. He got robbed. Someone stole the package from him last week. Duke got beat up pretty bad. He went to his contact and told him what happened. That's when we learned that Duke wasn't just a delivery boy. They considered the packages to be consignments that he was responsible for. Then all of a sudden, we owed these people four hundred and fifty thousand dollars, and they wanted all of it right then. Duke laughed at them and told them it was their problem, not his."

"I suppose that comment got him beaten up again," I said sarcastically.

"No," Abbey answered timidly, "that comment got him killed. Now they're after me for the money."

I couldn't believe it. "Duke's dead? They killed him just like that? What kind of animals are these people?"

"The worse kind," she admitted. "They're ruthless killers with a reputation to protect and a secret to keep."

"So, why not just go to the police?"

"It's not as easy as that. They know where my parents live, and my sister."

"It's gone that far?"

"It's gone further than that. That's why I'm calling you."

"How much money will they settle for?" I asked.

"It's not about the money anymore. It's about making an example out of me. It's about showing what happens if you double-cross them."

"Just what exactly are you expecting me to do here?" I asked again. "I've got *some* money, if that's what it will take to get you out of this mess."

"I didn't call for money. It's time I started doing the right thing instead of what's easiest. All I want is a promise from you that you'll look out for my parents and my sister if this thing goes bad. I'm the one that let myself get drawn into this. For once in my miserable, unimpressive life, I'm going to do what's right, no matter the cost."

"Abbey, you can't just give up. We're talking about your life here. You owe it to your parents to fight. If you feel like you have something to make up for in your life, then give yourself the chance to

do it, but you can't just give up."

"I can't put anyone else's life at risk because of my mistakes. I've thought about this a lot, Jake. This is the best I can do."

"Then do one thing for me. Wait twenty-four hours before you do anything. Give me that long to see if I can come up with something." I found myself pleading with her.

"There's nothing to come up with, Jake," she argued. "These people will kill my parents, my sister, then they'll kill me if I can't work this out with them."

"I don't know where you're hiding, but hide there for one more day. Call me back at this same time tomorrow. If there's any solution to this, I'll know what it is by then."

"And if not?" she asked, her voice filled with skepticism.

"If not, we'll know tomorrow," I answered.

"All right," she agreed, "I'll call you at seven tomorrow night."

There was a click and she was gone. I felt bad for her, but worse for her parents and sister for being the unintended victims of Abbey's poor judgment.

I poured myself another drink and sat down on the couch. What the hell was I going to come up with in twenty-four hours? Nothing came to mind. I could figure my way out of just about any electrical problem, but I was way out of my league here. Maybe I was just trying to make Abbey feel better, or maybe I was simply forestalling the inevitable.

I spent the next four and a half hours trying desperately to come up with something that would get Abbey out of the situation. Of all the possibilities I considered, the only one that had any chance of success was money. She needed a little over four hundred thousand dollars and I had just invested twice that with Arthur Jensen and his firm. So, after all was said and done, I decided to pull the money out of my account and pay the killers off. When you got right down to it, what other choice did I have?

I felt a little awkward not having an appointment, but at nine am, I showed up at Kirkwood, Tanner & Associates and asked to see Arthur Jensen.

"Do you have an appointment?" the receptionist asked.

"No, I don't, but it's vitally important that I see him this morning," I answered, with a considerable degree of desperation in my voice.

The woman got up and walked back to his office. It was all I could do to keep myself from following her and barging in on him. She returned in a moment and told me he was on the phone, but as soon as he was finished with the call, I could see him. I thanked her and walked over to a plush looking couch next to the door and sat down. I had no idea at the time that the phone call he had taken would have a direct impact on me. Arthur was talking to a friend of his who was a writer. His name was Brad Martin.

"Brad," Arthur spoke, "I am by no means a writer, but I'm sure everybody who writes gets writer's block from time to time. I think you're over-reacting. Didn't you make a promise to Carol?"

"You know I did," Brad answered, "but I'll talk to her. She won't like it, but she'll realize it's probably the only thing that will work. So, let me worry about Carol, all right?"

"You do remember that you can't write about any of the things we do, don't you? Sam would have your ass in a sling before the ink was dry."

"I'm not going to write about anything, I promise. So, will you please talk to Sam and have him let me back in just for one assignment? I'd consider it a huge favor. Trust me, it's the only way, the only thing that will break this wall I'm up against."

Arthur drew in a deep breath. "I'll talk to him," he agreed, "but I hope you know what you're doing. You hated this stuff when we were forced to do it. You couldn't wait to get out."

"Just be convincing," Brad pleaded, "I need this. I really need this."

"I'll do my best," Arthur said as he hung up the phone.

Three minutes later I was sitting in front of his desk in the same chair I sat in a week before, and the receptionist brought me a cup of coffee just as she had then.

"Thank you for seeing me without an appointment," I said, trying to soften him up for what I was about to tell him.

"Not a problem," Arthur quickly answered. "What can I do for you?"

"As much as I hate to do it, I'm going to need to liquidate some of my investments."

"We can do that, but I must make you aware of the tax liabilities."

"Yeah, I know, but I really don't have a choice." I admitted.

Arthur took off his glasses. "Jake, I really don't know you that well, but you seem to me to be a man with a problem this morning. Tell me if it's none of my business, but is everything okay?"

I sighed. "No, everything is not okay," I confessed. "But then, that's just the way life is sometimes, isn't it?"

Arthur leaned toward me. "Is there anything I can help you with?" he asked in a strangely confident but compassionate tone.

"It's my ex-wife. She's got herself jammed up."

"Money problems?"

"Worse than that," I said without thinking, "much worse than that."

Arthur put his glasses back on. "Well, you look pretty upset about it. Are you sure there's nothing I can do to help you other than getting you access to your funds?"

As I spoke, I remembered the strange comment Mr. Marshall had made. I had no idea why I made a connection between that comment and Abbey's situation, but I did. "As a matter of fact, there is. Maybe you could explain a comment that Mr. Marshall made when I went to see him."

"What was that?" Arthur asked.

"He wanted to know if I knew you through your investment business or your *other life*, as he put it. Exactly what is your other life?" Arthur was visibly shocked at my question.

"I can't believe he said that," Arthur admitted. "I confided in him when his son died and told him some things I thought would make him feel better. I never thought he would speak to anyone else about them."

"So," I asked again, "what is it?"

Arthur looked uncomfortable, as if he was trying desperately to come up with something to say. "All right, I'll make you a deal," he finally conceded. "You tell me what your ex-wife's dilemma is, and I'll give you as much of an explanation as I can about Mr. Marshall's comment."

"Okay," I agreed, "I'll go first. My ex-wife's boyfriend got himself mixed up with the wrong people and wound up getting killed. As bad as that is, the people that killed him have threatened my

ex's parents and her sister. They are the nicest people you could ever imagine and I can't let something happen to them if I have the means to stop it."

"And that's what you need the money for, is it? You're going to pay them off?"

"I'm going to pay them back. It's a long story, but if I can keep three innocent people from being murdered just by giving away some money, I'm going to do it. I don't feel like I have any other choice. So, what's your story?"

As I watched Arthur, I could tell he was choosing his words very carefully. "Maybe you don't need to use your investment to keep her family alive. There may be another way."

I looked at him and smiled a little. "Are you avoiding my question?" I asked.

"No," he said coldly, "I'm answering it."

At the very same moment I was having the conversation with Arthur, Abby's father was having a conversation as well, one that would leave him feeling confused and intimidated.

"Simon, Simon Reese," a stranger's voice called as Simon crossed a busy downtown street.

Abbey's father turned in the direction of the man that called his name. "Do I know you?" he asked.

"No, I'm just a friend of your daughter, Abbey. I just wanted to ask you, how do you feel?"

"Excuse me?" Simon questioned, looking curiously at the man. Being of average height sporting a few days' growth of beard and an overall unkempt appearance, his look was not exactly intimidating. His eyes, though, looked cold and lifeless as he stared at Simon.

"Why would you ask me a question like that?" Simon asked.

"I wouldn't want to see anything happen to you or your wife, that's all," he answered.

"Are you threatening me?" Simon asked angrily.

"Not at all," the man scoffed, "just making a point."

"And what's your point?" Simon demanded.

The man smiled and began to walk away. "Why don't you let Abbey answer that question for you?"

Simon watched him walk down to the end of the block and around the corner. He pulled his cell phone from his pocket and called his daughter. He hadn't spoken to her in over a year and wasn't sure if the number he had for her was still a good one. It rang three times before she answered.

"Abbey, I know we haven't talked in quite some time, but I need to know what's going on. Some guy just stopped me in the street and asked me how I was feeling. He said you'd know why he was asking."

"I don't have time to explain it right now. Just get home and make sure mom and sis are safe. I'll call you back." Abbey hung up before her father had a chance to respond.

I looked across the desk at Arthur, giving him an opportunity to explain what he had just told me. The silence seemed to go on forever before he finally spoke. "I really can't say a lot, but I think I may be able to help you."

"And just how do you think you can help me?" I asked, still not understanding where this conversation was going.

"Trust me, the less you know about it, the better. Let me make a phone call and I'll let you

know something later today.”

As I contemplated what he had just told me, my cell phone rang. I’d had my home phone forwarded to my cell in case something happened with Abbey. I looked down at the number. It was listed as private. I looked up at Arthur. “This could be what we’ve been talking about.” I answered it.

“Jake, this is Abbey. One of them made contact with my dad this morning. They’re sending me a message and the message is that my parents are not safe. I don’t know what you have in mind, but whatever it is, it needs to happen quickly. I’m not going to let anything happen to them because of me.”

“Don’t worry,” I assured her, “it’s happening right now. Call me tonight at seven and I’ll fill you in.”

As I hung up the phone I looked up at Arthur. “Whatever help you can give me I’ll take, no questions asked.”

“What happened?” Arthur asked.

“One of them made contact with her dad.”

“Organized crime?” Arthur asked.

“No,” I answered, “just a drug dealer.”

“In this day and time they’re usually one in the same,” Arthur admitted. “Get me some names and I’ll see what I can find out. In the mean-time, somebody’s going to have to let them know what’s going on so they can be taken somewhere safe.”

“I don’t know of any place that would be safe,” I admitted.

“I do,” Arthur quickly answered. “Call me after you talk to her tonight.”

Arthur took out a business card and scribbled his cell number across the back of it. He handed it to me, and after staring at it for a moment, I slipped it into my shirt pocket. I thanked Arthur for his help and the help he was about to give me then left his office. As I pulled the door closed behind me, I saw him pick up the phone, and while I made my way up the hall to the entrance, he made a call.

“Sam, this is Arthur. How are you this morning?”

“I’m curious, Arthur, curious as to why you are calling me this morning.”

“I must say,” Arthur observed, “this is a first. Usually you already know what I’m calling for before I even call you. Are you just humoring me or is my call, for once, completely unexpected?”

“So am I to conclude this call has nothing to do with our business?”

“Not exactly,” Arthur confessed. “I think I’ve stumbled on a situation that merits our attention.”

“Arthur, I realize that benevolence is indeed a virtue, but, as with every virtue, it has its place. The decision for us to become involved in a situation is based on a number of criteria. Unfortunately, emotion is not one of them. So, as we have done so many times in the past, let’s review and determine if this situation fits our requirements. Has the person or persons in question been to trial?”

“No,” Arthur answered.

“All right. Has the transgression been punished at all?”

“No,” Arthur again answered.

“Has a transgression actually been committed?” Sam asked in frustration.

“Not yet,” Arthur replied, “but if we don’t do something, their transgression will cost three people their lives.”

There was a pause before Sam spoke again. “Why do I get the feeling that this is going to be

another caper just like that one with that kidnapper, Aaron Radcliff?”

“Sam, think of our organization as a corporation. In these uncertain times it is wise to diversify. Think of it as securing our future.” As hard as Arthur tried to make his words sound persuasive, he knew they were not.

“As clever as your analogy may be, ours is not a corporation, nor do we depend on our clientele for our financial well being. There is a fine line between what we do and what those people did that we have chosen to orchestrate a punishment for. Let’s not blur that line with semantics. We do what we do, and nothing more. If you choose to become involved with this I will assist you as much as I can, but please know you are not acting as a representative of our organization.”

“Understood,” Arthur agreed.

“Good,” Sam replied, “and since we’re talking, I must caution you to keep in mind we are following a trial, the outcome of which may require our attention. I say that only as a reminder that your obligations to this organization come first before any personal endeavors you may find yourself involved in. Do I make myself clear?”

“Perfectly,” Arthur answered. “I’ll be waiting for your call.”

Before I had made the trip back home, Arthur called me on my cell phone. I looked down at it and saw the name of the firm he worked for on the display. I didn’t remember giving him my cell number, but I must have or he wouldn’t be calling me on it.

“Jacob, it’s me, Arthur. I have arranged for your in-laws and their daughter to be taken to a safe place. You’ll need to tell them to pack for a stay of at least two or three weeks.”

“How did you make this happen so fast?” I asked.

“Jacob, one of the conditions of my helping you is that you don’t get to ask me questions like that. Is that understood?”

“No problem,” I agreed. “I probably wouldn’t want to know the answer anyway, would I?”

Arthur gave me the instructions. I was amazed that, in only ten minutes, he had arranged for a private jet to take them to a location that even I wasn’t told, and secured accommodation for as long as needed. I still had no idea what Arthur Jensen was into, but Mr. Marshall’s question about his *other life* was beginning to make sense.

I should have been more curious and skeptical of Arthur than I was, but the whole affair had me all twisted up inside. I was so anxious for all of it to be over that I never considered the cost. Had I known then what the cost would be, things would most certainly be different right now.

CHAPTER THREE

I'd been holding the phone in my hand for ten minutes, waiting for it to ring. At exactly seven, it did. "Abbey?" I asked.

"Yeah, it's me. What did you find out?" Her voice sounded broken and tired. She probably hadn't slept for days.

"I need some information from you. I need the names of the people in this guy's crew. Tell me who calls the shots, and who the man that made the decision to involve your parents is?"

"Look, Jake, I don't think there's any stopping these people. They're too powerful and they keep bragging about their friends in high places. If you can find a safe place for my parents and my sister to go until this thing works itself out, that will probably be all you can do."

"Abbey, this thing isn't going to work itself out unless you're referring to them making an example out of you by killing you." I couldn't understand Abbey's reluctance to tell me who these bastards were. "I've already got a place for your family to go where they'll be safe, so you need to focus on the big picture right now. What are you going to do to ensure your own safety?"

"As long as my parents and my sister are out of the picture, I can deal with these people."

"Names, Abbey," I urged, "give me some names. I can't help you out of this if you don't."

"I don't want to involve you in this, Jake. I've screwed your life up enough already."

"You're screwing it up again right now," I shouted, "so tell me who these guys are so we can do something about them, and then we can get the hell out of each others lives. I have found someone that I think can help." I was careful not to tell her too much, but I needed her to feel like I could indeed take care of this, even though I had serious doubts that either I, or Arthur Jensen, could do anything about it.

After a long silence, Abbey gave in and told me what I needed to hear. "Kimbrow, Elias Kimbrow is the guy that calls the shots. Warren Mapleton plans the deals and Gene Pembridge does his dirty work for him. From the description my dad gave me, Gene is the one that approached him yesterday." Her voice sounded somewhat defeated as she spoke. "A guy by the name of Zak is the only other one Duke ever mentioned. Gene was the one that told Duke when and where to pick up the packages. Those are the only names I know. They may be the only ones involved in this or there may be a hundred more; I couldn't tell you."

"You need to get a message to your parents and let them know what's going on. Tell them I'll be contacting them later today. You need to be totally honest with them, Abbey. That's the only way this will work."

Abbey promised she'd call them and come clean about the past three years of her life. She owed them that much. She owed it to herself as well.

And while all this drama was unfolding in my life, another drama was taking place in a courtroom downtown, a drama that I would soon be drawn into myself. Duncan Seafert sat stone faced behind the table next to his attorney. He stared loathingly at the judge who was about to read the verdict. The bailiff passed a piece of folded paper to the judge. She read it, then folded it and handed it back to the bailiff. The judge instructed Duncan and his council to stand. Before the jury foreman was allowed to read the verdict, the judge spoke.

"Mr. Seafert, you have been accused of a most serious crime. This state does not take lightly the

acts of extortion and blackmail, especially in light of the fact that a man wound up losing his life because of it. Regardless of the outcome, you and you alone will have to live with what you have done.”

At that moment, Duncan’s attorney looked down at the table and smiled a slight but noticeable smile.

“Have you reached a verdict?” the judge asked.

“We have,” the foremen replied. “In the matter of the state versus Duncan Seafert, we the jury find the defendant not guilty.”

The courtroom erupted into a heartbreaking combination of sobbing and gasps of disbelief. The judge pounded her gavel angrily on the bench until the courtroom was once again silent. Duncan sat smiling as one who had cheated the very system he loathed. He had. As the judge spoke, the tone of her words became angry.

“Mr. Seafert, just because this court has found you innocent doesn’t mean you are. In my eyes, the prosecution has done a less than adequate job of trying this case. You are being set free today despite the transgressions you have committed. See that you don’t make them again. I can guarantee you the next prosecutor you face will accomplish what this one did not. This court is adjourned.” With that, the judge brought her gavel down one final time, and it was over. Duncan Seafert thought his troubles were over as well. He had no idea they were just beginning.

It was less than an hour later that Arthur Jensen’s private line rang. He picked up the phone on the second ring.

“Arthur, this is Sam.”

“Good afternoon, Sam. What can I do for you today?”

“The trial I spoke of earlier has produced the outcome I had predicted. A very dangerous and guilty man has been set free and is now empowered by his verdict of innocence. There is no doubt in my mind he will continue to commit the crime he has become so proficient at. I am sending you a dossier on this man. Study it, then contact me when you have a plan.”

“Understood,” Arthur responded, “but there is something I need to talk to you about.”

“Not the business we discussed yesterday, I trust?”

“No, not that,” Arthur assured him. “Remember a man named Brad Martin?”

“Of course I do. I recruited him at the same time I recruited you,” Sam answered.

“Recruited?” Arthur questioned. “It felt more like blackmail at the time.”

“Ours is a pragmatic endeavor, Arthur. Please get to the point.”

“Brad would like to re-join our organization, on a temporary basis. I think his participation would be very useful in the job we’re about to do.”

There was a pause. “Correct me if I’m wrong, but Brad is a writer, is he not?”

“He is.”

“And was he not most anxious to be relieved of his obligation to this organization?”

“He was, at the time, yes.”

“And what has changed to make him want to re-enlist, as it were?”

“I don’t know,” Arthur explained, “it could be he still feels an obligation to us, or perhaps he misses the excitement and satisfaction of seeing justice done.”

Sam interrupted, “Or could it be the fact that he is experiencing writer’s block and needs a diversion from his day-to- day life to break it loose?”

Arthur was not really surprised. He could never get anything past Sam. “I suppose that’s a possibility,” Arthur admitted.

“And do you consider that to be reason enough to allow him back into our group? You do understand the importance of security, do you not?” Sam demanded.

“I do, and I am one hundred percent confident Brad will be an asset to us with this assignment,” Arthur replied.

“Arthur, I’ve never trusted your impetuous nature, but I’ve always trusted your judgment. If you’re confident he will prove to be an asset, then so be it. However, if he fails and we are in any way compromised, you will be called upon to account for it.”

“Understood,” Arthur quickly answered.

“Then proceed, and remember, my identity must remain known to you and you alone. Is that clear?”

“Abundantly clear,” Arthur acknowledged and the two hung up.

Later that evening I placed a call to Abbey’s parents. They were very quick to tell me Abbey had told them everything. Although the shock in their voices was profound, the disappointment was even more unmistakable. I felt bad for them, but I felt better being able to help them, or at least for being able to get them help. I had no idea at the time that the estate that would be their home for the next few weeks belonged to the man I was about to go to work for, Ashland Marshall.

I heaved a slight but audible sigh of relief once Abbey’s parents and her sister were airborne. I had no idea where they were going, and more importantly, neither did Abbey. Arthur figured it would be safer that way. Looking back, I’m convinced he was right.

I grabbed a beer out of the fridge and took it to my study. I sat down in front of my computer and typed in the name ‘Elias Kimbro’. A laundry list of newspaper articles and copies of court documents popped up. It was obvious this man had been in trouble most of his life. As I read, it became equally obvious that he’d managed to get himself out of most of it. He seemed to have more lives than a cat. I, by no means, consider myself to be worldly, but even by my standards, no one gets themselves out of that much trouble without some help. Anyone that lucky must have powerful friends somewhere, or at the very least, someone who owed them a major favor.

As I took the last sip of my bottle of beer, it dawned on me that I had been in such a panic all day today I never stopped to think how Arthur, a man who worked for a brokerage company, could manage to do the things he did for me today. His past relationship with Mr. Marshall’s son was, I figured, responsible for the private jet and the estate Abbey’s folks were hiding out in, but exactly what could a man in his capacity do to help Abbey out of the mess she’d gotten herself into? That question began to gnaw at me.

Arthur made me promise not to ask any questions about how he was able to do the things he said he could do. I was reluctant to ask them even of myself, but I was curious. I couldn’t help it, it was my nature. I glanced down at my watch. It was a little after eight pm. I slipped Arthur’s card out of my pocket and stared at the number for a moment. I looked at my watch one more time then picked up the

phone. He answered it on the second ring.

"How are you this evening, Jacob?" he asked.

"I must admit I'm doing a lot better than I was this morning," I confessed.

"Did you arrange transportation for your in-laws to the airport?"

"Yes," I answered, "they're in the air as we speak."

"Good. That should be a load off your mind."

"It is," I agreed, "and that's partly why I'm calling you. I have some of the names you were asking me about this morning."

"That's great," Arthur said as he got up to get a pen and paper, "let me have them."

I gave Arthur the four names and a brief explanation of what each of them did, but before the conversation ended I found myself giving in to my curiosity.

"Arthur, you have to understand how strange it seems for a man in your profession to be able to do something about my situation. I can't help but ask, who it is you work for, or with, that allows you to do this?"

I heard Arthur draw in a deep breath. "Jacob, remember when I told you there would be questions you wouldn't be able to ask?"

"Yes," I reluctantly admitted, "I remember."

"Well, this is one of them. I can help you with your problem, but the details will have to remain with me. Trust me, it's safer that way for all of us, especially for you."

I laughed a nervous laugh and wished I'd never asked the question. "You can't blame a guy for trying."

"Yes, I can," Arthur quickly answered. "If this is going to work between us, you can never ask those questions again, understood?"

"Completely," I promised. "It won't happen again."

"Good," he answered, his tone noticeably more cheery. "Now, let me see what I can dig up on these four characters and I'll get back in touch with you."

He hung up, leaving me with more questions than answers. It had crossed my mind that this whole thing could have been a scam to keep me from taking my money out of the portfolio, but then it occurred to me that Arthur was a manager and his income probably wasn't tied to any single investment. After a few minutes of contemplation, and another beer, I decided to reserve judgment until I heard back from him.

While I was struggling to make sense of the day, someone else was struggling with a demon of a different kind. Brad Martin, a man whom I had not yet had the chance to meet, sat staring in frustration at a blank computer screen. After twelve successful novels, number thirteen was fighting back. No matter how hard he tried, the words just would not come, and when they did, they were deleted as quickly as they had been written. The flashing cursor had become the object of his loathing. He stared menacingly at it as his wife, Carol, walked up behind him and gently caressed his shoulders.

"How's it going?" she asked, hoping for a different answer than the one she'd been getting for the past five weeks.

"See any words on the screen?" Brad asked in frustration.

"I know I keep telling you this," Carol said lovingly, "but you just have to give it time. The

words will come to you. They always do.”

Brad reached up and put his hand on hers. “I know,” he agreed. “The thing is, this has never happened to me before, and I don’t know why it’s happening to me now.”

“Have you thought of anything you can do about it that you haven’t already tried?” she asked

Brad drew in a deep breath. “There’s only one thing left that might help,” he admitted, “but I’m pretty sure you’re not going to like it.”

Carol took her hands from his shoulders. “What is it?” she asked, her tone a good twenty degrees colder.

“I know I promised you I’d never do this again, but I’m seriously considering working an assignment with Arthur.”

“Wait a minute,” Carol interrupted, “you promised me you’d never have anything to do with that group again. You told me the guy running it agreed to let you out after the last assignment you did with them. As I recall, that assignment almost got you killed. What’s to stop him from keeping you in this time?”

“My involvement would be conditional on participating in one assignment only with no further obligation.”

“Do you really think he’ll agree to that?”

“I don’t know,” Brad admitted, “Arthur’s finding out for me.”

Carol took a step back. “So you’ve already committed yourself to this, is that it?” she asked with a combination of anger and hurt in her voice.

“I haven’t committed myself to anything,” Brad quickly answered, trying to salvage the moment. He and Carol rarely had a cross word between them, and it made him uncomfortable to be having one now. “Arthur’s just checking into it for me. It may not even be possible.”

Carol walked back up to him and put her hands on his shoulders once again. “I just don’t want to see anything happen to you. Don’t you remember how close you came to getting killed by those organized crime thugs?”

“That was the exception, not the rule. I did four assignments with those guys and only once something happened that could have had a bad outcome for me.” Brad turned toward her and looked into her deep brown eyes. “This will break me loose. I know it will. It will push me past unlucky thirteen and it probably won’t happen again until number twenty-six. You’ve got to understand, Carol, this is the only thing left. It’s my only hope, but I can’t do it unless I know you’re okay with it.”

Carol looked back at him lovingly. “I won’t ever be okay with it, but if it’s the only thing that will get you past this it’s what you need to do.”

Brad smiled at her. “Nothing bad will happen, I promise.”

“I’ll believe that when this is over and you’re spending six hours a day, every day, writing.”