

One

January 1973. Yale Law School auditorium. Alec Brno looks out from the stage into a sea of expectant faces. “Five more minutes,” the dean whispers, as they watch another inflow of students find seats. Not so long ago, Alec would have been one of them. Now he’s the “attraction.” Happens. Win a few cases; make partner; kill a man. The last item is not listed on the program, although, Alec suspects, it’s why most everyone is there.

Breck Schlumberger, a bear-size man who is dean of the school, finally lumbers to his feet, quiets the crowd, recites Alec’s credentials for the advertised topic, “Winning High-Profile Litigation.” Alec rises with a different agenda in mind. “Trials in civil cases are like wars,” he says, without preamble, hearing his voice bound through the hall. “There’s no excuse for them. They don’t get fought unless someone’s being stupid. Or unreasonable, which is the same thing.”

And not, he realizes, what anyone came to hear. But no longer is he, in any way, like any one of them. Too many scars. He has yet to lose a case, but in the dozen years since graduation, he’s lost the music, most films, all theater—his wife. The coroner reported, as the cause of death: heart failure from an overdose of heroin. Alec’s aware of a more telling explanation. He wasn’t there. Not there to stop her at the last needle, or the first. For months, he was in another city, at another long trial.

He stands momentarily without speaking. Something he does. What the students see is a rawboned man in an off-the-rack suit who is too tall for the lectern and looks older than he is. His smile, which he gives now, seems a bit sad. Some there have the impulse to feed him or, at least, take him to a barber. No denying the energy, though, no matter how downcast his tone. It’s as if he were saying, *Stand with me—walk with me—down the long corridor of my discontent.*

“You probably thought,” he says, “when you read the poster for this event, here’s another self-promoter who wants to come back and tell us how important he is. How he’s conquered the courts and crushed his opponents. And how *we*, if only *we’d* listen, might be as fabulous as he. Sorry. Not me. Nothing fabulous. What I know, and can talk about, is, if you’re trying a case at all, someone screwed up, probably you.”

Alec strays off, downstage, taking the hand mic with him. “Who is this hypocrite?” he says, pointing back to the lectern. “He lucks out winning some cases, and he wants to talk about getting to yes?” Alec scoffs at the notion. “Settlements are for wimps! We all know that. We were born to be heroes. To smash our opponents in the mouth. To grind them into the mud. Settle cases? No payoffs there. No glory. Not for the lawyer.” He looks upward. “But whatta you know!” he says, as if finding words on the ceiling. “For everyone else—including the client, whom you’re supposed to be representing—it’s likely to be the best damn way out of the mess he’s in. If you can figure out how to do it. And trust me, for this is the little I’ve learned. There are damn few cases where you can’t.”

Afterward, when Alec finishes what he came there to say, and answers the questions, and the last of the students stop milling about, Dean Schlumberger, who was once Alec’s classmate, ushers him to his car. “Was there any of that spiel you meant?”

“All of it,” Alec says.

Schlumberger adds a skeptical squint to his bearded demeanor. “I know what it means to settle one of those monster cases you do. Win-win? Bullshit. Blood on the floor is what I see. Because you’re dealing with bloodthirsty people.”

“You know them?”

“They’re my donors,” the dean says. “Atoning for their sins.”

Alec laughs and opens the back door of the limo.

“It’s strange, don’t you think?” says the dean, detaining Alec a bit longer. “The way we turned out. You the idealist now cavorting with demons; me the cynic now preaching ideals. To children! Before they march off to your hell.”

“Someone’s got to do it,” Alec says.

“Preaching, you mean.”

“The hell part. Preaching’s just fun.”

“Okay,” Schlumberger says, “so how 'bout you joining me?”

“The law school faculty?” Alec treats this as a joke.

“You’d be good at it. Not great, necessarily, but good.”

“You might have had me with great,” Alec says, with a smile.

“How 'bout you seriously thinking about it?” Schlumberger says.

“Sure.” Alec taps the man’s shoulder—as if to say, *Thanks for an offer you know I’ve no intention of accepting.*

“Like when will you consider it?” the dean asks.

“When I have time.”

“So that’s a never.”

“Probably right,” Alec says.

They’re standing on Wall Street—in New Haven, of course, not New York—and the wind slaps in, because the winter here is wetter and worse. “I was so sorry to hear about Carrie,” Breck Schlumberger says.

Alec drops into the back seat of the limo. “Thank you.” It’s all he ever says to condolences, though he’s gotten a lot of practice saying that.

“About the other thing,” Breck says through the open car window. “I don’t believe in never. One of these days you’ll say yes.”

“No doubt. When I’m as wise as you.”

The car pulls out, taking Alec through the streets of New Haven and to the highway back to Manhattan. His firm insists on laying on the limousines. At the rate billed for one hour of Alec’s time, it’s a profit-making investment. Which implies that Alec is expected to work when traveling, and record time for it. Normally he would. Of necessity. Tonight, he has too many other things on his mind.

Like his fifteen-year-old daughter, Sarah Brno. He changed her last name to his when he adopted her. Which he did when he married her mother. Which happened after he plunged a samurai sword through the gut of her father, Phil Anwar, in a marsh in Maine, when Phil came there with four made men to kidnap his wife and kill Alec. Seems now like a Japanese opera. But it was real enough then.

Sarah deals well with the problems of adolescence. Less well with her nightmares. When angry, she knows how to hurt. She hurts herself by lashing out with self-denigrating remarks, especially in earshot of anyone, like Alec, who loves her. As in, “What do you expect? With my blood lines? Daughter of a junkie and a sadistic killer!” As often, she simply engages in self-wounding behavior. Obvious stuff, like getting great grades for a while, then bailing and crashing. Or finding gang boys to party with. She’s smoked some pot, and they’ve fought fiercely over that. But he loves her deeply and

thinks she loves him. She doesn't blame him for her mother's death. She blames herself, even though she was eleven years old when it happened.

"You have a daughter, Schlomo?" Alec asks his driver.

"What?" says Schlomo. "So now you're talking?"

"I don't talk?"

"Not so anyone would notice."

"I'm usually working, it's true," Alec acknowledges.

"But now you want to talk about your daughter, so you ask about mine." The driver twists to fix on Alec a long, condemnatory Old Testament frown before returning his eyes to the road. "Well, I have three daughters, as it happens."

"A blessing, right?"

"Sometimes," Schlomo says mordantly.

"Ages?"

"All are marriageable, except the youngest."

"Ah," Alec says.

"Ah? What's this 'ah'? You think you know something about my situation?"

"It's the way you said it."

"Like what? Like I'm some Tevya? Like this is *Fiddler on the Roof*?"

Alec laughs, seeing his old friend's large face in the mirror. "Sorry I mentioned it."

"Why should you be sorry? We're just talking. Two fathers. It's a long drive."

"Getting longer," Alec says.

"You wanna hurt my feelings?"

"Last thing I want."

"Look," Schlomo says. "I know your daughter. Sarah, right? I pick her up from school sometimes. She's great. Smart, beautiful. What more could you want?"

"You're right." Alec stretches out in the back seat.

"So, what? You're going to sleep now? This is the end of our conversation?"

The roads are icy. Makes no difference to Schlomo. "This is nothing," he always says about road conditions of any sort. "I come from Siberia."

On the still-amazing superhighway I-95, the trip is a mere eighty-five minutes. Alec remembers being limited to the Merritt and Wilbur Cross parkways, which added a good forty-five minutes to the drive. They pull off the FDR onto Ninety-Seventh Street by 10:30. Alec's building is on the corner of Fifth Avenue. He occupies the former apartment of Grantland Rice, the great sportswriter, who died several years earlier. When Alec first saw it, Rice's papers still littered his writing room, which enjoyed a striking view of Central Park, the reservoir, and the surrounding swirl of paths and roads. Alec bought the apartment for that view. The track circling the reservoir is where Carrie had said to him, "Don't be slow, Alec"—which was her way of announcing what she already knew about them, and he didn't, that they were already in love. She never saw the apartment. She died before Rice did.

Upstairs, Sarah's bedroom door, tightly closed, features its customary sign: "Mafia Princess—Beware." But he hears the music and knocks.

"Who is it?" Her voice, not inviting.

"Who do you think?"

"You ... okay," she says.

He enters. She's splayed on the bed doing homework and doesn't look up.

"*You* okay?" he asks.

"Why wouldn't I be?" Eyes still on the books.

"Overload of homework, for one thing."

"Nothing new there." Finally she smiles, which he takes as permission to sit on the bed.

"How long tonight? Best guess?"

"The usual." She sits up in her PJs, a twig of a girl with a Roman nose and unruly brown curls. Her fingers are ink-stained. "Two, maybe 2:30."

"It's too much."

"Yeah, well you're on the board, Alec. Do something about it."

"I'm trying."

"Try harder."

He laughs. "Look ... about your aunt Jesse."

"What about her?"

“She’s picking you up tomorrow.”

“Which is entirely unnecessary and about the fiftieth time you’ve told me.”

“You’ll recognize her?”

“Jesus, Alec! Whatta you think? I’m going to go marching off with some strange woman? To be sold off as a sex slave in the Middle East? I’ll recognize her. We met at the funeral.”

“That was four years ago.”

Sarah stares him in the eyes. “She looks like Mom.”

“You remember that?”

“Yes,” she says. “That I remember.”

“Good.”

“Night, Alec.”

“Meaning get the hell out of your room?”

“I wouldn’t have said hell. It’s not ladylike.”

Alec laughs, kisses her forehead, and does as he’s been directed to do.