

**RELATIVE  
JUSTICE**

## ALSO BY ROBERT WHITLOW

*Trial and Error*

*A Time to Stand*

*The Witnesses*

*A House Divided*

*The Confession*

*The Living Room*

*The Choice*

*Water's Edge*

*Mountain Top*

*Jimmy*

*The Sacrifice*

*The Trial*

*The List*

### THE CHOSEN PEOPLE NOVELS

*Chosen People*

*Promised Land*

### THE TIDES OF TRUTH NOVELS

*Deeper Water*

*Higher Hope*

*Greater Love*

### THE ALEXIA LINDALE NOVELS

*Life Support*

*Life Everlasting*

RELATIVE  
JUSTICE

ROBERT  
WHITLOW



THOMAS NELSON  
*Since 1798*

*Relative Justice*

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*To those who are willing to look beneath the surface in the search for truth. Your perseverance will be rewarded.*

It is the glory of God to conceal a matter;  
to search out a matter is the glory of kings.

Proverbs 25:2 NIV

# PROLOGUE

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**EMERSON CHAPPELLE, PHD, REMOVED HIS GLASSES** and rubbed his eyes. He'd been grading papers for the chemistry class he was teaching as an adjunct professor at a local community college. Emerson didn't like teaching. Research was his passion. But money was tight, especially now that his wife had moved out and taken her significant income as a real estate broker with her. Emerson had put off getting a haircut, and his thinning brown hair was careening off in rebellious directions. His thin legs poked out of the shorts he'd been wearing all week, and his new polo shirt was stained with spaghetti sauce. Well-worn brown sandals sat beside the door.

The cell phone resting against the stack of papers on his desk vibrated. When the number popped into view, Emerson's heart started pounding. The phone calls were more frequent, and the voice mails, which began seven days ago, had become threatening. It was mid-August in Durham, North Carolina, and even though the air conditioner for his home office was set at sixty-eight, Emerson broke into a sweat.

"Hello," he said tentatively.

"Where have you been?" the voice demanded. "You were supposed

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to meet me two days ago in the parking lot for the Kingfisher. I waited over an hour for you to show up.”

The Kingfisher was a bar on East Chapel Hill Street. Emerson and the bookie often rendezvoused there but never went inside. The caller was a burly young man in his mid-thirties with dark hair. Emerson knew him as Nick, but he never was sure that was his real name.

“I didn’t have the money.”

“That’s not an answer,” Nick replied.

“I know, I know, but there’s a problem with the loan. My wife moved out and hired a lawyer who’s filed papers in court that froze our home equity line. I’m financially hurting right now.”

The phone was silent for a moment. Emerson checked to make sure they were still connected.

“There are other ways to hurt,” Nick said.

Emerson swallowed. “There’s no need to talk like that. You’ve made a lot of money on my account. If you give me time, I’ll pay you back and lay down a deposit to hold in case I have a loss in the future. I was on a hot streak before this happened.”

“And now you owe \$278,000.”

“Wait. I thought it was \$272,000.”

“Interest. If you want a lower rate, borrow from a bank.”

A high-stakes gambler, Emerson had experienced exhilarating highs and devastating lows. This, however, was the worst situation he’d ever been in.

“What about your retirement account?” Nick continued. “You told me it was worth over half a million.”

Emerson bit his lower lip. That, too, had been frozen by his wife’s attorney.

“It is,” he said. “But after I pay taxes and the penalty due for early withdrawal, that will wipe me out.”

“Not my problem.”

Emerson glanced at a letter he'd received several days earlier from a major pharmaceutical company. It was the fulfillment of a lifelong dream. His wife knew nothing about the contents.

“I just received an offer from a drug company that wants to license a medication I patented. What if I give you a percentage? When the company sells the new drug, I'll receive royalties. This is going to be huge.”

“No way, Doc. You're the gambler, not me. I'll give you a week to cash in the retirement account. If you pay me in full by next Friday, I'll reduce the payoff to \$280,000.”

“Ask Lance about the drug company deal,” Emerson said desperately. “He'll appreciate the opportunity.”

“Ask him yourself,” the bookie replied. “He's listening to this call.”

Lance Tompkins oversaw Emerson's gambling account. Over the past ten years, the chemist had gone through numerous runners and local contacts. Lance, who lived in Houston, remained constant. Emerson suspected the former MMA fighter had links to an organized crime syndicate. He had steadily increased Emerson's credit line, the big advantage of using an illegal bookie over betting through Las Vegas.

The first time Emerson met Lance was at a big bash in Texas for high-stakes clients. Since then, they'd gone fishing in the Bahamas and to a couple of Super Bowls. Their best junket was to the Masters Tournament. Emerson picked the top three finishers in the correct order and parlayed a modest bet into an upper-six-figure recovery. It was the one time he considered cashing in and quitting. But the lure of the next big score was too great. Eighteen months later, he was back in the red.

“Lance, sorry about the delay,” Emerson said in a subdued voice. “I got overextended, not that I'm blaming you.”

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“I totally understand,” Lance said in his Texas drawl. “But Nick has a job to do. I have a job to do. We all do. And your job is to get your account level. You and I’ve gotten along fine for a long time. I’d hate to see it end badly.”

“I don’t want that to happen.”

“Tell me about this drug patent.”

Relieved, Emerson switched to teaching mode. “It’s a nausea suppressor that works directly on the sympathetic nerves instead of having to—”

“Plain and simple,” Lance interrupted.

“It will help people taking chemo from getting sick to their stomachs. I’ve been interested in that type of problem ever since my mother suffered terribly from nausea when she went through chemotherapy for esophageal cancer.”

“There’s already a bunch of stuff that does that,” Lance replied. “My aunt took something when she had breast cancer. It kept her from throwing up. She said it was a miracle drug.”

“But every drug doesn’t help all patients. And there can be side effects.”

“Yeah, whatever my aunt took made her feel dopey.”

“Correct. This one is based on natural compounds and has fewer potential adverse reactions than anything else on the market.”

“Natural compounds?”

“It’s plant-based. Compare it to penicillin, which came from a plant fungus. But my drug isn’t something you can buy at a health-food store. It will only be available with a doctor’s prescription. The market for this is huge.”

Emerson knew he was exaggerating the economic potential of the antinausea drug, but penicillin was the most well-known comparison that came to mind.

Nick spoke. “Lance, are you sure you want to listen to this? The doc has been dodging me, and this sounds like just another stalling tactic.”

“Shut up!” Lance said in a tone of voice that sent a chill down Emerson’s spine. “If I wasn’t interested, I wouldn’t ask. What’s the name of the pharmaceutical company?”

“Brigham-Neal. Their home office is in Connecticut.”

“Yeah, I’ve heard of them. Are they offering you any up-front money?”

The letter mentioned \$100,000 as consideration for the agreement, but the real return would be paid upon successful marketing of the medication. Emerson was past due on several high-limit credit cards, and he’d earmarked the advance to pay off those debts.

“It’s a back-loaded deal. They don’t want to risk up-front capital—” Emerson stopped. He was arguing against himself.

“I’m risk-averse too,” Lance said. “But you’ve been a longtime client. Are you the sole owner of the patent?”

“Yes. I don’t have any collaborators. I transferred ownership of the rights to a little company I set up to keep everything clean, neat, and confidential.”

Emerson had filed the patent in the name of First Flight Research and Development, a corporation he set up to hide his involvement from prying eyes, such as creditors or his soon-to-be ex-wife.

“What’s the drug called?”

“Relacan is the trade name the company is going to use. It sounds kind of like ‘relief’ and ‘can.’”

“Has this Relacan gone through all the tests and trials the feds require? I know that can take years.”

“Brigham-Neal did that as part of their due diligence. Because the components are known to be safe, it was an expedited process.

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Everything came back good, and this week they notified me that they wanted to move forward.”

Lance grunted. “Sounds like the real deal.”

“Oh, believe me, it is.”

“What percentage ownership are you offering me?”

Emerson had brought up the possibility in desperation without thinking it through. “Uh, twenty-five percent in the company that owns the patent.”

“Don’t insult me,” Lance said in the same voice he’d used to shut down Nick.

“How about forty percent?”

“I don’t do minority shares in anything,” Lance replied crisply. “Because I like you and think this will be a fun deal, I’ll take fifty-one percent and leave you with forty-nine percent. Otherwise, Nick will have my full consent to move forward and take any action necessary to collect on your debt.”

As Lance spoke, Emerson felt the crushing weight of his life collapsing around him.

“Okay,” he said.

“Fifty-one percent,” Lance repeated.

“Yes, fifty-one percent.”

“My lawyer will be in touch with you. If the paperwork doesn’t back up what you’re telling me, then we’ll have a much shorter, less friendly conversation.”

Now Emerson was fearful about being caught in a lie about the advance being paid for the contract.

“I may be able to get a small amount up front to sign the deal,” he added.

“You just said that wasn’t possible,” Lance replied with the sharp edge returning to his voice.

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“I’m working on it, but I can’t be sure.”

“How much are you shooting for?”

“Around \$100,000,” Emerson sighed.

“An extra \$51,000,” Lance replied in a more relaxed tone. “That will be a nice down payment.”



# ONE

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IT WAS A COLD, RAINY MORNING IN LATE MARCH. Closing her umbrella that was sprinkled with damp cherry blossoms, Katelyn Martin-Cobb followed Lynwood Bancroft and Suzanne Nixon into the US District Courthouse for the District of Columbia. Wearing a gray suit, white blouse, and black shoes with medium heels, Katelyn ran her fingers through her short, dark hair. Petite at five feet three inches tall, she was physically fit from years of outdoor activity that included hiking, swimming, and skiing. She still loved the outdoors, but getting a chance to enjoy it was tougher given she usually worked sixty to seventy hours a week at the law firm.

The E. Barrett Prettyman building on Constitution Avenue in Washington, DC, was named in honor of a former federal appellate judge appointed by President Harry Truman. A muscular security guard with a military crew cut addressed the group of five lawyers and two paralegals.

“You’ll need to leave your umbrellas over there,” the young man said as he pointed to a row of round brass urns.

The guard’s instructions were unnecessary. The litigation team from Morgan and Monroe knew the drill. The courthouse was like

a second home. Katelyn placed her black umbrella beside the aqua-blue one used by Suzanne Nixon. A special order from the trial judge allowed the lawyers to bring their cell phones into the courthouse as long as they didn't record or video any of the proceedings.

Katelyn owned twelve conservative courtroom outfits and kept up with when she wore each one on a spreadsheet. The blue, gray, and black ensembles were her litigation armor.

LASIK surgery had enabled her to stop wearing contact lenses, and her brown eyes missed nothing. It was Katelyn's ability to spot important details and remember what she'd seen and read that convinced Suzanne to bring the twenty-nine-year-old associate into the senior partner's inner circle at the law firm. Otherwise, Katelyn would still be spending most of her days in front of a computer monitor, crunching out thirty-page legal memos. If Mr. Bancroft had his way, that's exactly what she'd be doing. Large law firms weren't homogeneous kingdoms. They consisted of many fiefdoms.

Katelyn returned her Virginia driver's license to her purse after showing it to a security guard. She'd had a sense all morning that this might be the day when the lawyers would find out if the \$32 million their client had spent litigating the case over the past three years would turn out to be a good investment. According to an expert who'd testified at the trial, every commercial airplane and private jet manufactured for the next ten to fifteen years would incorporate navigational components based on the disputed patent. The projected revenue for Morgan and Monroe's client over the life of the patent would be at least \$2 billion.

Inside the courtroom, the lawyers and paralegals took out their laptops and powered up. The boxes of evidence and stacks of exhibits presented by both sides of the case were in the jury room

where the group of seven women and five men had been deliberating for three days. While the attorneys waited, they had nothing to do. There had been halfhearted settlement discussions after the jury retired to begin their discussion of the evidence, but both sides believed victory was at hand, and their positions were hardened by the lengthy battle.

The corporate representative for Katelyn's client was a distinguished-looking older gentleman who was a mid-tier manager, not a top executive. He was there more for show than substance and didn't have the authority to make a decision. It didn't matter. Now, as they waited for the jury, the top lawyers from both firms passed the time talking about vacation homes and upcoming trips to Europe, Africa, and Asia. Katelyn and her husband, Robbie, were still paying off student loan debt and usually went to the beach near Wilmington, North Carolina, where Robbie's family lived, or to the mountains of Vermont where Katelyn grew up.

This morning, Katelyn heard Mr. Bancroft and Mr. Stanfield greet each other and begin discussing the pluses and minuses of sixty- versus eighty-foot yachts. Apparently, the eighty-foot length was a booming category. Sitting beside each other, they pulled up yacht photos on their laptops.

Katelyn glanced across the courtroom at Phoebe Jacobs, a lawyer on the other side of the case. Phoebe was a five-year associate attorney who was now eight and a half months pregnant. Even though they were on opposite sides of the lawsuit, Katelyn and Phoebe had developed a friendship. The two women didn't talk about yachts or exotic vacations. Instead, they focused on Phoebe's life as a mother with a three-year-old daughter and a son on the way. After four years of marriage, Katelyn and Robbie had begun seriously discussing starting a family.

“You just have to go for it,” Phoebe told her during lunch a couple of weeks earlier.

“How do you handle your workload at the firm?”

“With a thick skin.” Phoebe patted her growing abdomen. “I’m not afraid to use my sick days, and we hired a live-in nanny to avoid the germs Aaron would pick up at day care. I work hard at the office so I can afford the nanny and unplug when I walk out the door to go home.”

The idea of a live-in nanny was a stretch for Katelyn, who’d always been a do-it-yourself person.

“What’s it like at your firm for female attorneys with kids?” she asked. “Most of the ones who stay at ours end up off the partnership track and become permanent associates.”

“It’s the same with us. Tell me about Suzanne Nixon. I saw a big diamond on her ring finger. Does she have kids? I assume they’re older by now.”

“She had a lot of help from nannies and private schools. She has a daughter in college at Brown and a teenage son who goes to a prep school in Virginia. She’s on her third husband.”

“Except for going through multiple husbands, becoming a partner is what I’m aiming for,” Phoebe replied. “But if the partnership track doesn’t work out, we’re committed to our children. My father was CEO of a small company in Upstate New York. He was very successful in business but left raising my siblings and me to my mother. We even took vacations without him. Philip and I aren’t going to make that mistake.”

“My father abandoned my mother and me and moved with his girlfriend to Oregon,” Katelyn said. “After that, he never sent a birthday card, gifts at Christmas, anything.”

“How old were you when he took off?”

“Eight.”

“Your mother must be a remarkable woman.”

“Yes.” Katelyn hesitated. “She died in an auto accident when I was a senior in college. Hit by a drunk driver. My world collapsed.”

Phoebe stared at Katelyn for a few seconds as her eyes filled with tears. Katelyn’s reservoir of tears had filled and emptied many times during the seven years since she’d received the call from the police about the fatal accident. Today, the tank was dry. Phoebe took out a tissue and touched her eyes.

“That’s terrible. Looking at a person, you can’t tell what they’ve been through. How did you make it?”

“Threw myself into college and then law school. I’ve had my moments, but I kept pressing on. That’s what she taught me to do.”

“I’ll bet your mom would be proud of you now.”

“I hope so. She knew I wanted to go to law school.”

Phoebe took a drink of water. “Did your mother get to meet your husband?”

“No, but his mom died around the same time as mine from breast cancer. Robbie and I met at a ski resort in Vermont during my third year of law school. He was a ski instructor.”

“And gave you a lesson?”

“No, I’ve been on skis since I was little,” Katelyn said and smiled. “He was teaching a beginners’ class. Robbie has always liked kids and I’m sure he’ll be all in with children. If we can’t afford a nanny, he told me that he’d adjust his career so I would be able to keep my job.”

“That’s cool. What does he do?”

“He’s a case manager for a nonprofit that places troubled teens in alternate living situations. Basically, they get them off the streets.”

Phoebe stopped eating. “Aaron just gave me a big kick,” she said. “That’s his way of saying you’re going to be a good mom.”

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Katelyn looked across the courtroom and saw Phoebe shifting uncomfortably in her chair. They made eye contact. Phoebe pointed to her stomach and counted from three to zero with her fingers, then made a motion of rocking a baby in her arms. Baby arrival imminent. Katelyn smiled and silently clapped her hands. She’d already bought a baby gift. A few minutes later, Phoebe left the courtroom. Judge Belhaven entered and everyone rose to their feet.

“Be seated,” the judge said and cleared his throat. “The jury has reached a verdict. If both sides are ready, I’ll ask the bailiff to bring them in.”

“Yes, Your Honor,” Mr. Bancroft and Mr. Stanfield both replied.

Katelyn’s heart started pounding. She glanced at Suzanne. The litigator was staring ahead with a steely look in her eyes.

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The law firm of Cobb and Cobb, Attorneys at Law, occupied the main floor of a hundred-year-old house two blocks from the New Hanover County Courthouse. David Cobb, the junior partner, leaned back in his chair. Slightly under six feet tall, David weighed only ten pounds more than when he was offered a baseball scholarship to Wake Forest. A third baseman, he relished the opportunity to snag balls that screamed down the foul line from home plate. Early in his freshman season, though, he ripped apart several tendons and ligaments in his right shoulder in a collision at second base, ending his athletic career.

David's dark brown hair was neatly trimmed, and he was wearing gray slacks, a white shirt, and a yellow tie. Carter Cobb, his father, always wore a suit and a tie to work. David did so only when meeting with a client or on the rare occasions when he went to court. The two men shared similar facial features, including brown eyes and a square chin. The main differences were Carter's size, as he was a robust six feet three inches tall, and in contrast to David's calm communication and reserved style, Carter had a booming voice and oversized personality to match. The elder Carter handled almost all litigation and was the primary business generator for the law firm he'd started almost forty years earlier.

The walnut desk in David's office had been passed down from his great-grandfather Cobb, who was a cotton and rice merchant, and the desk had survived from his ancestor's era. In the early 1900s, the Cobb family fortunes collapsed along with the prices of rice and cotton.

There was a knock on David's door, and his father entered. Sixty-three years old, Carter had made a remarkable recovery from a serious heart attack that struck him down five years earlier. His brown hair was making the transition to white.

"Lunch?" Carter asked. "It's chicken casserole day at Lupie's."

David checked the calendar on his computer screen. "I have to be back at one thirty for a meeting with the Jordan family."

"Don't tell them where you ate lunch."

The two Jordan brothers and their sister owned a competing restaurant where David and his father often ate.

"You drive," Carter said as they stepped across the porch and down three steps.

David's car was a four-year-old Audi that he'd bought from one of their clients who owned a dealership. It was a ten-minute drive

to the restaurant located in a concrete-block building with a large mural of an underwater seascape spray-painted on one side of the structure. A slender, brown-haired waitress named Lindsay, whose sassy personality they were familiar with, pointed to an open table. She knew what they wanted to drink and soon reappeared with a sweet tea with three lemons on the edge of the glass for Carter and unsweet tea for David.

“The usual?” Lindsay asked David.

“Yep.”

David always ordered the chicken casserole special with a bowl of Italian vegetable soup and corn bread.

“What about you, sweetie?” she asked Carter.

“Casserole, carrots, and green peas.”

David and his father often ran into someone they knew at the restaurant. Today, though, it was a roomful of strangers.

“Zeke Caldwell called me this morning,” Carter said after the waitress left. “Do you remember when I helped him get a drug patent for one of his home remedies?”

“Yes. I considered calling our malpractice insurance company to let them know a claim might be coming their way.”

“Hey, it worked.”

“True.” David smiled. “It was an impressive piece of legal work. Does he have another one?”

“No, but he thinks someone has infringed the patent we filed. When he comes in, I want you to meet with him too.”

“Why me?”

“You have a better eye for detail than I do. And it’s been a shorter time since you took chemistry in high school.”

David laughed. “I think the statute of limitations has run out on any expertise either of us had with chemical compounds, but I’ll

be glad to join the meeting. I've liked Zeke ever since he spoke to us at Camp Seacrest. Anyone who can hold the attention of ten- to fourteen-year-old boys has skills."

"Recently, he's been selling so much stuff at craft fairs and out of the back of his truck that he's cutting back on his hours at work."

"Is he still at Hester's Pharmacy?"

"Yep. Maybe Ralph Hester can keep going until both Ralph and Zeke retire."

The locally owned drugstore had managed to stay in business due to intense client loyalty and a delivery service. Zeke worked as a pharmacy assistant and delivered medications.

The waitress arrived with their food. David bowed his head. Carter prayed. Out loud. Even without peeking, David knew customers three or four tables over would look in their direction.

"And all God's people said, 'Amen!'" Carter finished with enthusiasm.

"Amen!" said a man at a nearby table.

The voice of agreement was from a man in his fifties wearing jeans and a faded T-shirt. He grinned and pointed skyward with his right index finger.

"Feels like church to me," he said to Carter.

"Because church happens whenever and wherever God's people show up," Carter replied. "It's not limited to Sunday morning."

David didn't mind his father's boldness. It was who he was. They started eating.

"I talked to Robbie early this morning too," Carter said after a few moments passed. "This time, I believe he's really made the turn toward the Lord."

Younger than David by four years, Robbie grew up with a mischievous streak that in his late teens turned into open rebellion. His

personal life and faith crashed and burned after two years of college at the local branch of UNC in Wilmington. Taking off in a pickup truck, Robbie roamed the country for several years, working mostly as a fishing and hunting guide with spells of unemployment when he drank too much. Part of the time he lived in the back of the truck. Eventually, he settled down and returned to school at a community college in New Hampshire where he earned a degree in social work. When he met Katelyn Martin, news of their engagement sent shock waves through the rest of the Cobb family. So far, the marriage had lasted. David respected his sister-in-law as a very smart attorney who practiced law in a stratosphere far beyond anything David and his father knew. But what Katelyn saw in his brother remained a bit of a mystery. The family got together only a couple of times a year.

“I don’t want to react like the older brother in the prodigal son story,” David replied. “But Robbie’s had spiritual spasms before.”

“You’re right. But I think it would be good for you to reach out to him.”

“I can do that.”

“And I think it would be great for all of us to spend more time together.”

Puzzled, David asked, “What are you talking about?”

“To cross-pollinate. Especially to encourage Robbie and Katelyn.”

“Okay,” David responded slowly. “Is Katelyn positive about the changes in Robbie? She’s never seemed interested in faith. They never go to church with us when they visit.”

“I’m not sure what he’s told her, or what she thinks. And he didn’t ask me to bring this up with you. It’s my idea, but I think it’s a good one. I’m going to invite them to come and stay longer than a weekend.”

David shrugged. “Fine with me.”

Carter placed his fork beside his plate. “And we need to tell

Robbie that we forgive him for what happened with the boatbuilding business.”

During his prodigal years, Robbie had started building fiberglass float boats to sell to river fishing guides. Carter and David each lost \$40,000 backing the venture in hopes it would succeed and help Robbie settle down.

“I haven’t asked him for that money in years.”

“But you’ve never released him from the debt.”

“For all practical purposes, I have. And \$40,000 is a lot of money.”

“So is \$80,000.”

David looked at his father with wide eyes. “You loaned him \$80,000?”

“Yeah. Not all of it for the boat business.”

David shook his head. “Wouldn’t it be right for him to pay some of it back now that both he and Katelyn are working? I know he had some student loan debt, and there’s no telling how much she borrowed to go to Cornell Law School. But they’ve both been working steadily for several years, and they’re able to pay the rent on a nice townhome in Arlington.”

“Just pray about it,” Carter said. “That’s been on my heart for a while, and I wanted to talk to you about it.”

“Yes, sir,” David said. “The son who stayed at home obeyed his father.”

“And when I move on, you’re going to step into my shoes and go places with the Lord I’ve never seen. You have a gift of helping people in trouble that goes beyond the practice of law. And you’ll be better glue to hold this family together than I’ve ever been.”

“Don’t talk like that,” David replied. “Eat your peas.”

## TWO

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KATELYN WATCHED THE JURORS FILE INTO THE COURTROOM. Their faces revealed nothing.

“It’s my understanding that you’ve reached a verdict,” Judge Belhaven said.

A middle-aged woman on the front row stood. A former high school teacher, she’d been Katelyn’s pick as the most likely foreperson of the jury. Both Suzanne and Mr. Bancroft predicted an executive with an investment banking firm would be the foreman. They were wrong. Katelyn zeroed in on the teacher because of the way the other jurors interacted with her during breaks in the proceedings. And the woman took notes.

“We have,” the woman said.

“Have you answered all the questions given to you?”

“Yes, sir.”

The forewoman handed the verdict form to the bailiff. Katelyn had been part of a team of three lawyers who billed over two hundred hours formulating the thirty-seven questions given to the jury. The bailiff transferred the verdict to the judge. All the attorneys for both sides stood in expectant attention. Few things in life rivaled the drama of waiting to hear a verdict.

It took Judge Belhaven several minutes to silently read the responses to the questions before announcing them in open court. His face remained inscrutable. The wait was excruciating. Finally, the judge began to read. The jury's response to the first, nontechnical question would chart the course for what followed.

"We find by a preponderance of the evidence that the defendant has infringed plaintiff's patent," the judge read.

In major corporate litigation, outbursts of emotion in the courtroom are rare. Judges frown on spontaneous reactions and professional decorum prevails. Katelyn stole a glance at Suzanne, but her face remained emotionless as stone. As the judge moved through the verdict, it became increasingly clear that Morgan and Monroe's client would be the only company able to offer the new technology. They'd won the future. The big issue left was the amount of damages owed for the defendant's violations of the patent in the past.

"We find that as a result of defendant's actions, plaintiff is entitled to compensation of \$222 million."

Katelyn stifled a gasp. Privately, the litigation group had told their client that an award of \$100 million would be a win. The main return on investment would be in the future sales. Again, Katelyn glanced at Suzanne. This time, the senior partner didn't try to stifle a satisfied smile. The faces of the other attorneys across the aisle revealed shock. The judge kept reading.

"We find that plaintiff is not entitled to any punitive damages."

This wasn't a surprise. The evidence of egregious conduct necessary to support a punitive damage award was weak.

The judge finished and turned to the jury. "Is that the decision of the jury?"

"Yes, it is," the woman replied.

The judge thanked the jurors and dismissed them. The courtroom cleared.

“Any postverdict arguments?” the judge asked.

A middle-aged attorney for the defendant, whose job was to object to an adverse verdict, began to speak. A junior partner who worked closely with Mr. Bancroft had been assigned to handle the response by Morgan and Monroe. Later, there would be a posttrial motion to reduce the verdict and a notice of appeal. Katelyn made notes on her laptop. She would be called on to research some of the issues raised. An hour later when they left the courtroom, Phoebe was still absent. As the contingent from Morgan and Monroe exited, Katelyn stayed behind and approached a paralegal who worked with Phoebe.

“I was wondering about Phoebe,” Katelyn began in a low voice. “I saw her walk out before the judge read the verdict, and she didn’t return. Is she okay?”

“Oh, she was having contractions. They started right before we arrived at the courthouse and were getting stronger and closer together.”

Katelyn caught up with the Morgan and Monroe group that was buzzing with excitement.

“Great result,” Katelyn said to Suzanne as soon as they were in the hallway.

“In every way,” Suzanne replied with a grin. “Come see me this afternoon after I return to the office.”

The sun was peeking through the clouds when they stepped outside. Mr. Bancroft announced there would be a celebration after work for everyone who worked on the case. As soon as Katelyn was alone in her car, she called Robbie and told him about the verdict.

“That’s awesome,” he replied. “I knew you were awake for a

while during the night, tossing and turning, but I didn't want to say anything because I thought I might make it worse."

"Oh, that had to do with another case. I've been working so much on the trial that I was worried I'd overlooked something in a memo I sent Suzanne last week. I checked on it before I came to the courthouse, and everything was okay."

"Are you taking the rest of the day off?"

"No, Suzanne wants to talk to me this afternoon. You know her. She's always moving on to the next project."

"Will the firm do something to celebrate the verdict?"

"Mr. Bancroft said there will be cocktails and hors d'oeuvres late this afternoon off-site."

"Are you going?"

"Of course. I worked over two thousand hours on this case."

"What about us celebrating on our own?"

Katelyn paid to exit the parking garage.

"I hadn't thought about that," she said. "Do you mean tonight?"

"Or any other time you can fit on your calendar."

The high number of hours Katelyn had to work was a constant source of tension. Robbie understood, but that didn't mean it wasn't a strain on both of them.

"No, I'd like to do something with you. I just have to put in an appearance at the firm event, then I can slip out."

"We've been talking about trying that new seafood place on the river."

"I'd love that. I'll call you as soon as I get away."

Katelyn wove her way through traffic. In her mind, she was already transitioning to the posttrial issues the firm would have to address. Ever since graduating in the top ten percent of her law school class, Katelyn had wanted to work in a world with the highest

level of intellectual stimulation. Morgan and Monroe was that place. She was being trained by some of the top legal minds in the country, and as Suzanne Nixon's protégée, she'd linked her career to a powerful mentor who could potentially propel her upward through the law firm hierarchy. Katelyn had already jumped over lawyers who'd been at the firm longer and attended law school at Harvard or Yale. The only thing missing was the chance to be in charge of cases. Katelyn always felt like a cog. Someone else operated the controls.

She pulled into her reserved space on the parking deck for the law firm. The fact that Katelyn had a specific space was a sign of validation by the management team. She'd been shocked when she received the news. She maneuvered her small, imported sedan between a Jaguar and a Mercedes. Robbie, who needed a vehicle for hauling camping and hiking gear, still drove an older-model gray pickup truck he bought shortly before their marriage. He preferred spending money to fix the old truck to buying a new one.

There was a glass-covered walkway between the parking deck and the office building. Ahead of her, Katelyn saw Franklin Deming, one of the law firm's best paralegals. The lanky young Black man with dark-rimmed glasses waited for her.

"Did you hear about the verdict?" she asked.

"No," he said. "But from the look on your face, it was good."

"Very."

She summarized what happened as they made their way into the building. Morgan and Monroe occupied two floors. There were twice as many lawyers at the headquarters in New York City, and a roughly equal number spread across Washington, Chicago, Atlanta, and L.A. Smaller branches existed in several foreign countries.

“Do you think the verdict will hold up?” Franklin asked.

“It should, given the deference Judge Belhaven gave the other side in drafting the questions for the jury. It would have been better for them posttrial and on appeal if the judge had leaned our way.”

“Now that it’s over, maybe we’ll end up working together.”

“That will be up to Suzanne.”

“Yeah, she’s the queen bee.”

“And we’re the worker bees.”

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The phone on David’s desk buzzed.

“The Jordan family is here for their appointment,” said Candy Palmer, the young receptionist. “They know they’re fifteen minutes early. And Zeke Caldwell called again about scheduling an appointment.”

“My father couldn’t talk to him?”

“No, he’s on a long conference call with Marvin Stancill.”

“Okay, we’re both going to meet with Zeke. I’ll call him later.”

David reached for the Jordan corporate file that lay on the credenza behind him. The family pronounced their last name as if the “o” were a “u.” The purpose of the meeting was to discuss who would take over the family business now that their father, who started the restaurant, had passed away.

Bruce Jordan was sitting several chairs away from his brother, Morris, and his sister, Fran, who had their heads close together as they talked quietly. All three of them stood when David entered and shook Bruce’s hand.

“How’s your dad doing?” asked Bruce. “I’ve not seen him at the restaurant recently.”

“Busy, but we were in a couple of weeks ago for lunch.”

“I saw them,” Fran said, cutting her eyes toward her older brother. “You probably weren’t working that day.”

“Come back to the office,” David said.

There were three side chairs in front of David’s desk. He preferred meeting in his office if possible. Bruce scooted his chair farther away from his siblings’.

“I reviewed the notes when you contacted me last year after your father’s death,” David said when he was behind his desk. “It looks straightforward. Each of you would own a one-third interest in the restaurant.”

“No,” Bruce said before anyone else could speak. “That’s not going to work.”

“And whose fault is that?” Fran asked sharply.

“I’m looking at her,” Bruce retorted.

Fran picked up her purse and pulled out a small, ragged-looking notepad that she held up in front of her.

“And I’m ready to answer that question,” she said. “Since January, I’ve recorded every day you showed up late or didn’t come in at all. And the times you came in and caused a problem with the employees, I’ve written that down too.”

While Fran talked, David glanced at Morris, who was the quietest member of the trio.

“Did you list the employees who’ve quit because you worked them so hard that you ran them off?” Bruce shot back. “And if you’d had a knee replacement and surgery on your elbow in the past nine months, you’d have missed more days than I did. There’s no use in me being there if I can’t contribute.”

“Contribute?” Fran scoffed. “I didn’t run anybody off who wanted to do an honest day’s work. You cause way more problems playing favorites than Morris and I do. We treat everyone fairly.”

“What about Kenny Robinson?” Bruce replied. “Want to tell David why he’s no longer baking the best biscuits in the county for us and went down the street to work for John Holcomb?”

Fran’s face grew red, and she took a deep breath.

“Hold on,” David said, raising his hand. “Can we hit the pause button for a minute?”

“You need to know the truth!” Fran exclaimed.

“He sure won’t get it from you,” Bruce shot back.

“Okay, one at a time,” David said. “Everyone will get a chance.”

David leaned back in his chair and waited. Both Bruce and Fran started to speak but then stopped in midsentence as they talked over each other. They made a second effort with the same result.

“Go ahead,” Bruce said to his sister. “I’ll wait my turn.”

“No, you first. I’ll need to straighten out your lies.”

David winced at the older sibling’s choice of words. As he continued to listen, the acrimony was worse than he could have imagined. Finally, Bruce and Fran were silent and sat back in their chairs.

“Go ahead,” Bruce said gruffly to Morris.

“No,” the youngest sibling said and shook his head. “I have nothing to add. I want to hear what David has to say.”

Morris’s words hung in the air for a moment. Looking at the Jordan family, David felt a deep compassion for them well up inside. Along with compassion, a tiny seed of an idea emerged. Instantly, the idea was challenged by fear. He waited a few seconds longer before speaking. David was about to step out of the boat of his comfort level onto waters of uncertainty.

“You’ve been through a lot together,” he said, clearing his throat. “And learned a lot about getting along when you were kids.”

David knew his words made no sense.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Bruce said. “What does anything that happened when we were kids have to do with us now?”

David held up his cell phone. “This morning I was reading Proverbs 22:6: ‘Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it.’ I thought about that verse in relation to my own two children. But listening to you, I wanted to share it with you now . . .” His voice trailed off.

Then Fran made a sniffing noise. David turned toward her. Fran Jordan had never struck him as the kind of woman who would easily cry.

“I know exactly what you’re talking about,” she said. “Driving down here, I was thinking about how Mama used to make us stand in front of her in the kitchen when we’d get in a nasty fuss. Remember? She wouldn’t let us move until we told her the truth about what happened and admit how we were wrong.”

David’s heart beat a little bit faster.

“Yeah, Mama was a foot-washing Baptist,” Bruce said. “One of her favorite sayings was, ‘If you ain’t humble, you ain’t right.’”

“I haven’t thought about that in a long time,” Morris added. “She sure tried to train us in the way we should go. That verse could have been put on her gravestone.”

“Mama’s gone,” Fran said, taking a tissue from her purse.

And in that moment, David knew exactly what to say next. “But she still lives in each one of you.”