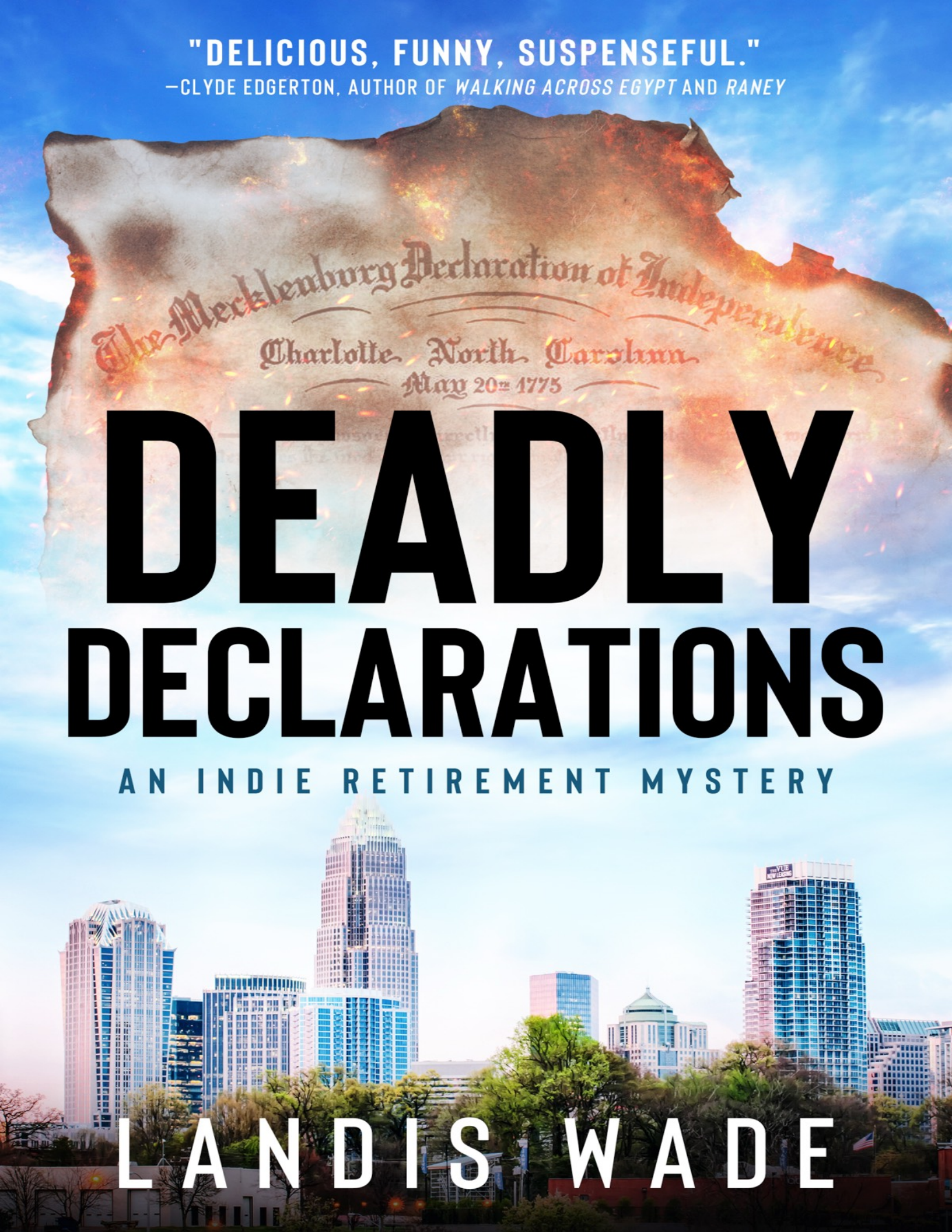
"DELICIOUS, FUNNY, SUSPENSEFUL."
—CLYDE EDGERTON, AUTHOR OF *WALKING ACROSS EGYPT* AND *RANEY*



DEADLY DECLARATIONS

AN INDIE RETIREMENT MYSTERY

LANDIS WADE

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PART I

AT DEATH'S DOORSTEP

CHAPTER 1

CONCEALMENT

June 22, 1819,
John Adams's Letter to Thomas Jefferson

Dear Sir:

May I enclose to you one of the greatest curiosities and one of the deepest mysteries that ever occurred to me? It is in the Essex Register of June 5, 1819. It is entitled the Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence.

How is it possible that this paper should have been concealed from me to this day?

Had it been communicated to me in the time of it, I know, if you do not know, that it would have been printed in every Whig newspaper upon the continent. You know, that if I had possessed it, I would have made the hall of Congress echo and reecho with it fifteen months before your Declaration of Independence. What a poor, malicious, short-sighted, crapulous mass is Tom Paine's Common Sense, in comparison with this paper.

I am and always shall be affectionately and respectfully yours,

J. Adams

CHAPTER 2

WAKING UP DEAD

Yeager Alexander's motto for retirement living was, "Ain't dead, yet," but when he heard a siren and saw an ambulance, lights flashing, heading for one of the residential buildings at the Independence Retirement Community, he said aloud, "Waking up dead is rarely a good thing." The red and white swirling lights came into view as he finished his pre-dawn walk. This was not the first time he'd seen this vehicle at the Indie. He was sure it wouldn't be the last.

Yeager stood on the crushed gravel path that fronted his cottage and bordered Lost Cove Lake, the smaller of the two Indie lakes. He liked to get up early and walk the land. Around the community center. Past the five-story residence buildings. Between the cottages that fronted Freedom Lake. And across the property line to admire the Hezekiah Alexander Rock House, the jewel of the Queen City History Museum. The house was built in 1774 and had stone siding with strange carvings (if you knew where to look, and Yeager did). It had been home to one of the signers of Mecklenburg County's controversial and long-vanished declaration of independence from Britain, signed on May 20, 1775.

Yeager's best friend, Matthew Collins, was taking him on a road trip in a few hours that had something to do with the Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence. The ninety-six-year-old Collins was known to everyone as the professor because of his love of history. The professor did not believe the Meck Dec had ever existed, but he'd promised Yeager a surprise on their outing, one he said Yeager would like.

What Yeager didn't like was the ambulance being parked in front of the professor's building. He walked the fifty yards up the hill and stopped in the shadows, not twenty feet away from a woman dressed in a medic uniform who was talking on a radio. The early morning air was cool and smelled of pine and rain. Clouds gathered. The quiet before the coming storm allowed the seriousness in her voice to carry on the freshening breeze.

"He's dead. Collecting the body now."

Yeager followed the paramedic into the building and onto the elevator for a ride to the third floor. He let her step out first, held the door until she was out of sight, and slid into the elevator lobby. He peeked around the corner of the narrow hallway and saw her enter room 312, the residence of his best friend. Yeager felt unsteady, like the floor had pitched. He squeezed his eyes shut and reached out to the wall for balance. He bit his lip to suppress the tears he felt coming, but it didn't do much good. He thought of Lori, the professor's granddaughter. She would be heartbroken too.

Minutes later, the paramedic and her partner came out the door of 312, rolling a stretcher that held a covered body.

A woman in a pink silk nightgown and robe walked beside the stretcher. She had her right hand resting on the body's chest. Yeager knew who the woman was, and it was a shock to see her there. He leaned back against the faded green wall. He had nowhere to hide.

The woman's eyes widened when she saw him. "What are you doing here?"

"I saw the ambulance."

Sue Ellen Parker turned away and watched the paramedics load the professor on the elevator.

"Anything I can do?" Yeager said.

She stepped past Yeager onto the elevator and turned around. "People will talk. You should keep your mouth shut." And then for emphasis, as the doors closed, she said, "For once."

Yeager was alone in the quiet of the dim hallway. He wiped his eyes and ran the fingers on his right hand through his thick, tangled beard like a comb. What would people talk about, and what did she want him to keep quiet about?

The professor hadn't mentioned any spend-the-night parties with Sue Ellen, and Yeager hadn't heard any rumors about them. But rumors grew faster than weeds at the Indie and were harder to kill.

Still, Yeager didn't believe cohabitation was the issue. He owed it to the professor to find out what secret Sue Ellen really wanted to keep. Yeager took out his key, the one the professor had given him, and let himself in the professor's place.

Yeager wasn't sure what he was looking for, but since the motivation for his unauthorized inspection was the sight of Sue Ellen Parker coming from the professor's unit in the early morning and in her night clothes at that, he started in the master bedroom. The double bed was not the answer. Covers and sheets were pulled back on one side only. The bedside table held a clock, a lamp, and a pill bottle turned on its side, with the cap on the floor and pills spilled on the table and the floor. Yeager inspected the bottle. It was the professor's prescription medication for insomnia.

Yeager opened the closet and found it full of men's slacks, shirts, and sport coats. No woman's clothes in sight. The bathroom was next. Just one toothbrush and cup next to the sink. No blow dryer. Nothing under the sink but a man's Dopp kit and extra shaving lotion.

After his brief search, Yeager surmised the professor bedded down without Sue Ellen Parker at his side. It didn't mean she'd never slept with him. Anything was possible when it came to old-people sex at the Indie, but other than a few pillows and a blanket strewn on the sofa in the great room—the only clue she or somebody else might have spent the night there—Yeager found no other evidence to explain her presence.

Raindrops streaked the large window in the great room. Normally, Yeager liked early morning rain, but this was no mist. Droplets pelted against the pane as limbs on trees swayed. He saw lightning streak and heard thunder boom. It sounded like God was angry. As she should be.

Yeager reached over to the side table and picked up *Trout* magazine. The professor had dog-eared the page with the latest in rod and reel technology. The pictures reminded Yeager of the conversation he'd had with the professor by Freedom Lake three weeks ago, the last time they fished together.

"My fly rod," the professor said, "may not be as efficient as your .22, but it gives the fish a fighting chance." Yeager smiled at the memory.

The professor was a man who never threw away books, even when they were torn and worn. Where there wasn't enough space on the professor's shelves, books spilled onto the floor or were stacked in corners. The one concession he'd made to what seemed at first glance like disorder was how he grouped his books by topic.

The section Yeager liked the best held the Revolutionary War books. Out of habit, he glanced toward his favorite section and was surprised to see empty shelves. Those books were missing, even the books about the Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence.

Yeager was one of the few people who could ask the professor questions about the Meck Dec without the professor getting riled up. Yeager's mother told him there were no stupid questions, so he kept asking them, stupid question after stupid question after stupid question. It made the professor laugh. "Chuck Yeager Alexander, you think you're related to Hezekiah," the professor would say. "You want the story to be true."

The professor was right. Yeager did want to believe that local patriots had declared independence from Britain over one year before they got around to it in Philadelphia. He loved the idea, thanks to his mother who had been a high school social studies teacher. Yeager was an only child, because, she'd said, "After you, I didn't have the energy to raise another devil." She was the reason he fell in love with history and the reason he came to the Indie when he was fifty-five years old, to look after her. When she died of cancer, he stayed on and became the youngest resident, despite the hiccup with the business office when they checked his credit. Once they confirmed his mother left him the cottage, the rest of her teacher's pension, and a nice life insurance pay-out, they reluctantly accepted the likes of a man who never would have lived at the Indie were it not for his mother. That was twenty years ago, the same time he struck up his friendship with the professor and the same time he learned about the Meck Dec.

The professor had been adamant the Meck Dec never existed. "It's a fairy tale, nothing more."

But a week ago, in a strange twist, things changed. "Yeager, you can't tell anyone what I am about to tell you. I'm working on a sequel to *An American Hoax*."

An American Hoax was the professor's bestselling book that debunked the Meck Dec story once and for all. Why did the professor

need to write a sequel? What more could he say? It seemed like overkill to say it twice. But Yeager had kept his thoughts to himself when the professor told him about the sequel. Something was different and serious about the professor's behavior that day.

Over the next five days, the professor ordered his meals sent to his room. Every time Yeager checked on him, he was hard at work on his laptop. He said he needed to finish the book before it was too late. He didn't explain the urgency.

Yesterday, Yeager stopped by at lunchtime and the professor was wearing the same clothes from the day before. He hadn't slept, and he'd acted nervous, like he'd had too much coffee. Yeager encouraged him to take a break.

"I can't."

"Why not?"

The professor's nervous energy must have provided a spark. His face lit up. "I found something. Something that changes everything."

Yeager wondered what that meant. Would the professor's sequel reveal the Meck Dec was not a hoax after all? And if so, what had the professor found?

He asked the professor to explain, but the only answer he got was, "Wait until tomorrow. Meet me at eight in the morning. Pack an overnight bag."

Now the professor was dead.

Yeager swept the great room, looking for the professor's laptop. Like the Revolutionary War books, it was nowhere to be found. He approached the open rolltop desk, touched the papers on the desk, and pushed them around. The pile was mostly bills, medical records, and letters from insurance companies. The laptop was not under them.

As he nosed in the pile, he accidentally knocked a piece of paper to the floor. When he picked it up, he saw four words at the top: "Last Will and Testament." It was dated the previous day, within twenty-four hours of the professor's death.

Why did the professor have a will that fit on one sheet of paper? He could afford the most expensive law firm in the city to give away his assets.

Curiosity trumped respect for his friend's privacy as Yeager examined the document under the small lamp on the professor's desk.

All the words appeared to be written in the professor's hand. They said:

"I, Matthew Collins, being of sound mind and body, do hereby revoke all prior wills, disinherit my only heir, my grandchild Lori Collins, and bequeath my entire estate to Sue Ellen Parker."

Yeager would have laughed aloud if someone had told him this story in a bar. But here he was, staring nonsense in the face.

The professor said nothing to Yeager about making a new will or anything that would cause him to change the old one. Yeager knew how much the professor loved Lori, and as best Yeager could tell, the professor never loved Sue Ellen Parker. Why would he cut Lori from his will and give his fifty-million-dollar fortune to Sue Ellen? The missing books and laptop bothered Yeager too. They were important to the professor.

Yeager found it hard to accept the professor had fallen in with the likes of Sue Ellen Parker. He was a courageous man who made a pile of money in the magazine business and—a veteran himself—used it to start a foundation for veterans. That was long before finding his passion—or his obsession—as the amateur historian turned famous author who liked to keep to himself.

Sue Ellen Parker was the opposite of reclusive. She was the self-appointed captain of the Indie ship and queen of the biting quip, a snob without an empathetic bone in her body. And while the professor was opinionated about things that truly mattered—like getting history right—she was opinionated about things that didn't matter—like the flower arrangements in the lobby, the color for the carpet renovation, and the uniform style worn by the staff. She gave no quarter to residents who dared disagree with her decorating, renovation, and style judgments and was not a pleasant person to be around, period.

Yeager faced too many questions to tackle them alone. There Sue Ellen was in her pink silk robe, warning him to stay out of—what? The reason she was with the professor when he died? The reason the professor gave her his entire fortune? The reason the professor's history books, laptop, and manuscript on the Meck Deck sequel were missing?

Yeager needed to speak with Harriet Keaton, the smartest and most practical woman he knew. Next to the professor, she was the

only resident who treated Yeager like he mattered. She was also the only resident who could take on Sue Ellen Parker.

But Harriet Keaton wasn't a lawyer. They would need a lawyer to know if the will was valid. That gave him an idea.

Yeager's sources among the Indie staff told him the vacant cottage next to him was about to be occupied by a lawyer named Craig Travail. Yeager decided he'd make a good first impression on the man and then secure his help.

CHAPTER 3

TAKE THIS JOB

Craig Travail ripped the envelope open, then gripped the court's ruling in one hand while he used the other to flick a soiled tobacco leaf from the page. It was from the superior court judge's office, and it smelled like chewing tobacco. Chief Judge Roscoe "Chaw" Brady must have sealed it himself. The county had a no smoking policy in public buildings, but Judge Brady found a loophole that led to his nickname and the installation of the gold-plated spittoon under his courtroom bench. Lawyers could measure their impact based on the spittoon's use. The judge spit when he didn't care for your argument, and Judge Chaw Brady spit often during Travail's argument in this case, the biggest case Travail had argued in ten years.

Travail scanned the document, dropped it on his desk, and took a deep breath. He'd lost again. And this time, the dollar amount the firm's client had to pay was staggering.

Rain beat against the ceiling-high window of Travail's skyscraper office like someone tap dancing on his head, and the fog blocked his city view and his next step. It was as if he was short on fuel and flying on instruments when his office phone rang. The extension number on the phone's digital screen belonged to an unfriendly navigator.

"We need to talk." The phone slammed on the other end. The law firm's principal had called Travail to his office.

Travail had an acute feeling his career waging conflict was about to find a resolution at age sixty-five. The management committee of the Am Law 100 law firm, where he'd worked for forty years and been a partner for thirty-three, demanded victories and profits and

saw nothing of value in a well-fought contest that came up short, not even when the lawyer did it while dealing with the emotional burden of a family tragedy.

It wasn't so much the law's demands that brought him to this point; it was the natural order of things, where priorities, desires, and competence got sorted out with age.

Why did he continue to practice law? And what was the purpose? These were questions he'd asked himself often during the last two years. And yet he'd kept at it, every day, like a dutiful paper boy, up and at it every morning and never missing his route. He just kept showing up, tackling old and new cases, and filling out his time sheets, because he didn't know what else to do with his life.

It was a problem for trial lawyers his age, and he knew it. They didn't know when to let go, when to let something other than the legal profession define them. They achieved Super Lawyer and Best Lawyer status and thought it gave them special powers. It didn't. It only blinded them to the reality they should do something else with their lives. A lawyer-turned-artist friend explained it best over a pitcher of beer. "Lawyers need to transition to their Act 3 before they turn sixty-five. After that, it's like practicing law at the Hotel California. They can check out, but they can never leave."

No matter how well Travail tried to compartmentalize his personal loss from his work life and how effectively he'd used his courtroom skills, he'd come up short in his last three cases, come in second to be exact, and second was no good for a trial lawyer where first and second places are the only two options. Travail's brain told him he was not a bad trial lawyer, that facts were facts and even the best lawyers lose cases. Yet he knew a losing streak was like a trial lawyer's poison. Clients didn't want to bet on you. And in his case, the firm's managing partner would not allow one more loss.

Did Travail care? Yes, and no. He cared about doing a good job for his clients. He didn't care one lick about pleasing Robert Elkin, the firm's managing partner, who was known by all who worked for him as the biggest jerk of all the jerks who'd held the position.

Travail measured his breath, something he'd learned to do to manage his stress and anxiety. Sometimes the tactic worked, but today, the in-and-out breathing exercise was an irritant, a reminder he was still alive and someone he loved wasn't. He stepped from his office and walked with a regular stride down the east corridor, where

the law firm's commercial litigators breathed but barely lived. No one appeared in the hallway to give him encouragement. Solid wood doors with brass handles were shut, with lawyers huddled behind them, typing, dictating, or talking on their phones. Unsociable is what the billable hour had made the uptown lawyer. Not like the old days.

Travail walked past the elevator and into the stairwell, where he climbed four flights to the forty-fifth floor of the America Bank office tower. When he emerged, he was within view of Elkin's corner office, the one the firm leader used when he worked in Charlotte. He could hear the man yelling through the door. He counted to ten before he knocked and entered.

Charlotte was a New South city where staid law firm traditions had given way to more casual operations. It was why the Charlotte lawyers in the firm called Elkin—behind his back, that is—by a nickname that drew inspiration from Walt Disney's Cruella de Vil. Three clever associates who preferred to remain anonymous coined the nickname based on Elkin's attitude that tradition was important, and Virginia had more of it than North Carolina. He issued most law firm edicts from the Charlottesville office, the city of his birth and education. When he tried to turn the more casual Charlotte into Charlottesville, coat and tie only, solemnly Southern, and everything else old Virginy, he became Robert de Vil.

Elkin and the other two management committee members were waiting for Travail. One, a thin rail of a man named Birdsong who rarely spoke to Travail, reached behind him and closed the door. The other man was Dunkler. He was a bit on the heavy side and always had a dour look on his face.

"Have a seat." Elkin's words came out as a demand.

"I'll stand, thanks."

Elkin came around from behind his expansive mahogany desk with the inlaid gold border and walked to within a Dictaphone's length of Travail's nose, close enough for Travail to smell his breath. He expelled breath that had a caramel flavor with a briny, salt-water touch, the aroma of a pungent cigar with a liquid chaser, most likely, whiskey with an *e*, as Elkin liked to remind the less informed. Elkin's choice of Jefferson's Ocean Aged at Sea Straight Bourbon Whiskey was more about the name on the side of the bottle than it was about

drinking whiskey aged in a ship's bow after it traveled the seven seas.

It was ironic, Travail thought, that Thomas Jefferson—who Elkin idolized—didn't like distilled spirits and Elkin lapped them up. Elkin breathed his next question on Travail's face.

"What the hell is this?" Elkin tapped him twice on the shoulder with the rolled paper.

"You know what it is."

"Damn it, Craig, what the hell is wrong with you? Another loss, and for our firm's biggest client."

Travail knew how he wanted to respond. He wanted to say this was no surprise, that "I warned you and I advised the client to settle, but you stepped in and convinced the client it could win." He also wanted to say Elkin's approach was typical of corporate lawyers who knew nothing about litigation, making unrealistic promises and leaving the heavy lifting to the trial lawyers. But Travail kept quiet and let Elkin vent. The man had built up a lot of steam.

While Elkin babbled, Travail glanced at Thomas Jefferson's bust on the pedestal in Elkin's shadow and thought of the speeches Elkin made to the law firm every quarter when he invoked the words and deeds of the former president. He did it to inspire the partners to generate more bucks for the bang. Thomas Jefferson doubled the country's size with a pen's stroke, Elkin would say time and again, "and we can double the firm's size too, if only you think strategically and work hard, as did Jefferson."

Amidst Elkin's droning voice, Travail wondered if Elkin really was related to the former president, as he liked to claim. Travail doubted it, but he never figured it was worth the trouble to call him on it, nor was it time to pick that fight now.

Birdsong and Dunkler stood still like well-behaved mannequins in a department store window. They added nothing of value to the conversation. Elkin fired at Travail again. "What? No excuses?"

Travail remained silent, which triggered another outburst from Elkin. "You should have retired after the accident."

When Elkin spoke, there was no appendage of "God rest her soul" nor any sympathetic words for Rachael, the wife Travail had grieved for the past two years. They'd married the month before he took the job, and he never thought her life would end before he stopped practicing law. Law was a career, one Travail thought he

loved, but that turned out not to be true. Rachael had been his true love and law his true regret. Regret for spending too much time at the office and not enough time with her.

Elkin's insensitivity shook Travail. He'd prepared himself to stand silently while the man blew through his anger. But because of his caustic and uncaring mention of Rachael, as if she were to blame for the case Elkin torpedoed, he felt anger boil deep inside his gut. Until now, it was an emotion he had controlled in Robert Elkin's presence.

Elkin scowled at Travail. "Do you know what kind of hit it will be to our bottom line if we lose this client?"

The bottom line was Robert Elkin's clarion call of progress. To Elkin, law practice was more about collections and billings and prospecting and sales than it was about the flare and excitement of pretending to be the fictional English barrister, Rumpole of the Bailey. That symbol of change—from noble profession to stark business enterprise—now stood less than one foot away making noise with his mouth and disrespecting Travail's loss of Rachael.

Elkin was four inches taller and bellowed from a frame that had Travail by a good thirty pounds, but Travail was not intimidated. In his younger days, he'd been an undersized but scrappy outside linebacker on his high school football team. That fifty-year-old memory about how to make a solid tackle came into focus as Travail eyed Elkin's silk tie, his frame's center.

The slow building heat in his stomach reached the boiling point. He was not a violent man, but he was human. He needed to stand up for his wife, if he did nothing else right today.

Travail bent his knees, dropped his arms to his sides, and sprang forward like he'd done under the Friday night lights on the gridiron.

"What the—?" Elkin couldn't finish before Travail planted his head in Elkin's chest, wrapped his arms around the managing partner's buttocks, lifted him two feet off the ground, and drove him over the most expensive desk in the law firm. Papers and pens flew in all directions. They toppled the pedestal that held the former commander-in-chief's bust. Thomas Jefferson fell headfirst, glancing off Travail's shoulder and headbutting Elkin. They landed in a stack of Bar Quarterlies.

Birdsong and Dunkler shrieked and dove onto the pile to rescue Elkin. They grabbed Travail by the collar and pulled at him while

Elkin, eyes wild with fury, pounced on the former president's head like it was a fumbled pigskin in a Virginia football game. Elkin shouted curses, grabbed at the desk, and pulled himself up with Jefferson's bust cradled in his left arm.

Travail was stunned by the aftermath of his adrenaline surge, but he had perfect vision. De Vil's designer shirt was torn, his hair disheveled, and blood trickled down his brow to the top of his nose.

"You're fired."

"No need. I quit." Travail spoke in a calm voice as he dusted himself off.

"Even better. When you quit, you forfeit your year-end profit share. Your pay ends today."

That was fine. It was a small price to pay to be away from Elkin and those like him. Travail turned his back on the threesome and walked out the door. Elkin yelled at him.

"Insurance ends today too. From now on, you pay for your own therapy. Lot of good it did you."

Travail returned to his office, where he wasted no time packing a few personal files and family pictures in a paperboard box. He slipped his personal laptop in the leather satchel Rachael gave him for his sixtieth birthday. That was the night she pitched the idea of the trip she wanted them to take to visit national parks in an RV. She wanted to go that summer, but he negotiated to wait until he was sixty-three, figuring he'd be closer to retirement and better able to take two months off. Her accident happened two days before they were scheduled to leave. He cancelled the trip, buried Rachael, and went back to work, because he didn't know what else to do.

Travail shook his head as he looked around the work prison he'd built for himself the last two years. He picked up his stuff and walked to the cubicle closest to his office, where he found Angela, his longtime assistant, sadness etched on her face. News traveled fast through the firm's grapevine.

Travail stumbled through an apology, which she said wasn't necessary. He apologized anyway for leaving her at a job with Elkin in charge. With misty eyes, she smiled a dutiful smile as she dusted some of the grime from Elkin's floor off his shoulders.

"What can I do to help?"

"Please send everything else that belongs to me to the house."

"The new address?"

The reminder made him stop and consider how he had compounded one transition—the end of his law career—with another, his move from the place he and Rachael had called home. Only Angela, his two grown children, and his therapist knew he'd bought a small cottage at the Independence Retirement Community.

"I'm not retiring," he'd told Angela. "I just need less space." The statement was half true. He needed less space, but his therapist and adult children had urged him to move out of the shadow of loss and into the light.

"Yes." He shrugged. "Send everything to the new address."

"Did you hear Professor Collins died this morning? It was on the radio."

He hadn't heard. It was not a shock though. Professor Collins had to be in his mid-nineties. But the news made him think about his prior representation of the professor, and he could hear the professor's voice in his head like it was yesterday. "Of course I did my own work."

Fifteen years earlier, he'd handled a defamation case for the professor. A newspaper ran a story saying the professor committed plagiarism in *An American Hoax*. Travail had taken the case at the urging of Elkin, who for some reason, loved the professor's book. The jury came back with a ten-million-dollar verdict for the professor.

"Strange coincidence, the professor died the same day you move to the Indie," Angela said.

Not so strange. One dies. Another takes his place. Circle of life. But it caused Travail to reflect. The professor had been indignant when he'd shown Travail around his Indie condo. "Do you think this is the library of a man lazy enough to copy work from other people?"

The shelves in the professor's great room were more cluttered than Travail's garage, but with papers and books, not lawn and sports equipment. The mess helped Travail prove to the jury the professor had done the hard work of researching and writing the book himself, a man obsessed with his topic.

"You don't think his death had anything to do with the Meck Dec, do you?" Angela had always enjoyed a good mystery. It was why she was such an excellent assistant, always asking "what if" when Travail was stumped on a case. Her eyes sparkled when she

asked the question and her grin was wide, as if she were trying to create a distraction to take his mind off his last day at the law firm.

Professor Collins had made enemies at the chamber of commerce and the May 20th Society by denying the Meck Dec was real, but the friction's source was couched in local tourism and historical debate, hardly enough to warrant foul play. His detractors didn't like the fervor of his ultimate conclusion in *An American Hoax*, which the professor insisted was fact, not opinion. He also became the go-to guy every May 20 for a soundbite for media outlets in any cities jealous of Charlotte's growth and economic success. "Is there any truth to the story," they would ask, "that the first declaration of independence from Great Britain was signed in Charlotte on May 20, 1775?" The professor, clutching his *New York Times* bestselling book, would put on a show, saying "absolutely not" every time, with a great deal of passion and enthusiasm.

"I'm sure it was old age," Travail said. "He was ninety-something. As for the Meck Dec, it is just an interesting bit of disputed local history, and as far as I'm concerned, rather insignificant history in the twenty-first century."

"Still, I have to wonder." Angela opened the satchel on his shoulder and stuffed "something you might need" inside.

Travail hugged her tight. "Thanks for everything you've done for me."

Five minutes later, he departed the elevator into the parking deck and walked away from the law firm where he'd devoted his entire legal career. He was now convinced there was no higher purpose to helping big companies win legal battles. And yet, he felt a touch of sadness. Law practice was all he knew how to do to make a living. It was all he knew how to do, period. It was his identity. Who was he now?

The motor in his aging sedan came to life as he had a feeling he was about to be buried alive among people with nothing to do. He was convinced they would turn him into a do-nothing clone. And it was only 11:00 am.

When he left the parking lot, the storm had passed, but the pavement was wet. He glanced at the sunlit Carolina blue sky, but it didn't feel sunny or bright. He lowered both front windows and touched the radio to try to turn off the noise. Instead, he accidentally changed the channel. A disc jockey on a country music station

thanked God it was Friday and introduced an old favorite by Johnny Paycheck, "Take This Job and Shove It." As the song's refrain filled the air, he couldn't help himself. He let slip a half-hearted smile and hummed along. The country music gods had a sense of humor.

A fresh breeze blew through the front windows as Travail turned left onto Third Street, crossed Tryon, and sped through one green city stoplight after another. He nodded at the courthouse, passed under the I-277 loop, and cut over to Independence Boulevard, his pathway to the Indie. On the way, he would pick up his four-legged best friend from the old house and let Blue ride shotgun to the new one.

At the song's finale, Travail spoke a question to the radio. "Was it worth it, Johnny?"

The musician didn't answer. It was no matter. Travail figured it wouldn't be long before the Indie answered the question for him.

CHAPTER 4

SPURIOUS

Monticello, July 9, 1819
Thomas Jefferson's Letter to John Adams

Dear Sir,

I am in debt to you for your letters.

What has attracted my peculiar notice, is the paper from Mecklenburg County, of North Carolina, published in the Essex Register, which you were so kind to enclose in your last letter of June the 22nd. And you seem to think it genuine. I believe it spurious.

I must not be understood as suggesting any doubtfulness in the State of North Carolina. No state was more fixed or forward. Nor do I affirm, positively, that this paper is a fabrication: because the proof of a negative can only be presumptive. But I shall believe it such until positive and solemn proof of its authenticity shall be produced. And if the name of McKnitt be real, and not a part of the fabrication, it needs a vindication by the production of such proof. For the present, I must remain an unbeliever in the apocryphal gospel.

I am and always shall be affectionately and respectfully yours,

TH. Jefferson

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