

THE SHOW STOPPER

By

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Third Novel in THE CASE RUNNER Series

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I don't love flying: Getting to the airport early. Getting through airport security, where I am still occasionally a person of interest. Waiting in a crowded lounge for a more crowded coach section and the dash to find an overhead slot for my wheelie case.

I don't fly much, but here I am between a fully wired business guy and a kid plugged into a game system on my way from South Florida to New York, in February.

Since I haven't asked myself why in at least 30 seconds, I adjust my headphones up a notch for Brad Paisley and review. As founder and principal of Jasme Research LLC, a plaintiff research and referral firm, it is my job to grow from being a Fort Lauderdale case runner to a larger audience and maybe broader service offering, maybe computer forensics, maybe jury consulting, or litigation finance. To do any of this, I need to network.

When my best client, Bree Wayland, announced that she would speak at the Global Law Institute's GLItech Conference, I'd thought *why the hell not?* Jasme had just made a nice payday on Bree's North Hollywood Aerie case, so it was as good a time as any to invest in marketing.

In my bag are handbills, a letterhead list of case studies and firm references, and fresh black-on-maple grain cards saying *Jasme Research LLC / Jaden Smerlow, CEO* with mobile, email and social media contact info only. I would be sharing a booth with my P.I. and former parole officer friend Pete Simonetti's old Army buddy Dave Mahon, a retired law enforcement guy opening a forensics shop in the Maryland suburbs of D.C. At least I'd get to network with him.

Brad Paisley was cut off mid-riff by a sturdy accentless voice.

This is Captain Collfield. We have a slight delay on the ground at Newark from earlier weather, so it looks like we're getting wheels down about twenty minutes later than scheduled, still well inside the window for your connecting flights. Meanwhile, I invite you to settle back and continue to enjoy the hospitality of our ace cabin crew. I'll update you as soon as we're cleared for approach.

Did I mention that I don't love flying?

I glanced at the spreadsheets on the screen to my left with comments popping in over WiFi and wondered if he knew how many shadows could get in between his numbers and his intended viewers. Then I turned Brad up another notch and settled back as much as I could on a damn plane.

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I live in a city, but Fort Lauderdale isn't New York, not even close. Emerging from a tunnel to a canyon of buildings in every direction I saw more pedestrians on a single block on a blustery February Sunday afternoon than I'd see on the Riverwalk all day. After passing more stuff than I could process, the cab pulled into a slot in a building wall that brought us to the hotel entrance.

I rolled through the automatic doors and took stock of what initially appeared to be an upscale shopping mall that went on for quite a way. There was a concierge desk to the side of the entrance, besieged by people in coats bearing handbills. It was just a little after one o'clock. I shrugged my shoulders to loosen up the knots and rolled on to explore.

At length I found the registration desk at the far end of the mall. Following the script, I asked for David Mahon's room.

"That's 1214," the desk uniform replied.

"Is there a house phone I can use to call up?"

"Yes, there," she pointed, "but check-in is not until 3."

"Well, can I check my bag?"

"Are you a guest?"

"Yes, I'm sharing a room with David Mahon," I replied, hoping I wasn't subverting the plan.

She tapped.

"He is not checked in yet. If you want to check your bag with the concierge, we would need some identification, for security purposes."

I thought about the lines at the concierge desk, and had a better thought.

"Where is the setup for the GLItech Conference?"

"That's on Conference Level 1," she said, clearly relieved as I was about finding our way out of this chat. "Across the lobby and up the escalator one level."

The conference level smoothly revealed step by ascending step as a confusion of dollies, racks, bins, ladders and people with tablets and clipboards milling about a broad concourse lined on three sides by ochre walls and a multitude of doors lit by pale February

windows along the outer wall. The confusion was fronted by a table populated by two brightly composed young women and a barricade of laptops and card boxes.

“Good afternoon!” they greeted in unison.

“Hi, I’m Jaden Smerlow, Jasme Research LLC, I’m a vendor?”

One delved into her laptop while the other flicked through a card box.

“Hmmm...”

I pulled the registration printout from my inside jacket pocket and handed it to the laptop lady as the card woman said “Ah!” and plucked a card. She showed it to the other.

“Addendum,” she said.

“Got it.”

A blue cloth tote bag with a bright orange logo was produced already stuffed with booklets and papers. It was joined by a lanyard of a different brand clipped to a clear card pocket stamped with a third logo into which my green-framed VENDOR card was slipped and the whole of it presented.

“Welcome to GLItech, Mr. Smerlow,” Laptop Lady smiled. “You are in booth 2449. That’s up the escalator straight and left at the last aisle. The map is in the centerfold of your program,” she added, pointing out the directions on her sample.

“Uhh, thank you.”

“And there’s a meet and greet cocktail hour tonight at 6:30,” the Card Woman added, slipping two tickets into my card holder. “Those are for complimentary drinks.”

“That’s the best news I’ve had all day,” I smiled, and rolled off to ascend another level.

There was far less bustle at this level, which I took as a bad sign. The booths being framed out in the initial lanes of the deep hall were promising, the kind of cutting-edge companies whose products would draw traffic. The scale along the right wall diminished noticeably as I approached aisle 2400. A big storage vendor was set up at the outside corner, and a leading early case assessment software shop was building a multi-block encampment at the inside corner, but once I turned the corner there was just a long row of segmented spaces with a rug, a table and two chairs backed by a framed blue curtain with a plain black on white placard. Here mostly service outfits lay table cloths with pinned banners, unrolled projector screen-type displays, arranged demo monitors and tested slide decks and wireless access, all this along the left side of aisle 2400. To the right was dead open space.

I rolled on, looking for booth numbers, but recalled from the map that the count started from 2401 and my claim was at 2449. At the far frontier, I saw a squarish, solid man with a silvery buzz cut and close-trimmed goatee over a pale blue Oxford shirt setting out a drive dock next to a large tabletop display. The placard on the blue curtain read **DM FORENSICS / JASME RESEARCH.**

“Dave?” I asked.

“Who wants to know?” a chesty voice replied, still focused on connections.

“Jay Smerlow, Jasme Research. Your booth partner and bunkie for the next three days.”

He looked up, tugged his shirt straight and offered a thickly calloused hand.

“Good, you’re here. Dave Mahon. What you got to set up?”

Pleased to meet you too, I thought.

“Not much. My laptop. I rented a basic display. A tabletop rack for brochures and case studies.”

His blue eyes behind thick rectangular glasses studied me like a case. He had broad, even features marred only by a long nose that had been broken at least once and set a little left of true. He nodded toward a paltry 17-inch display at the far end of the table.

“Great. We’ll have enough power, then. Paying enough for it. Do you need Internet?”

“Don’t we all?”

“Yeah, but here ya hafta pay for it through the freakin’ nose.”

I sized him up a moment: a friend of Pete’s from their Army days as MPs.

“Considering our service offerings and skill sets, I’d say that won’t be a problem.”

At that, his smile lines framed his goatee grin.

“For demonstration purposes only.”

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“So when Sim mustered out I re-upped for five years and found myself working counterintelligence investigations with DIA, so next go-round I kind of moved in with their tiger team and forensic ops.”

Dave sipped a free beer at a window counter in the main lobby bar while I nursed a complimentary speed-rack bourbon with club soda chaser and tried to parse what sounded like English in discussing our mutual friend Pete Simonetti.

Dave Mahon studied the dimming buzz of the street and flicked an appraising eyebrow to me.

“How is ol’ Sim doing?”

“Living the dream as a P.I.”

“Yeah,” Dave chuckled, “he would like that.”

I sipped the blended bourbon.

“He’s as good a man as I know. Really, the reason I’m here.”

“At this trade show?”

“No, in business.” My turn to appraise Dave. “He told you about me, right?”

Dave swigged, nodded.

“What’d he say?”

“That you’d got off to a bad start, but were smart, a quick learner, just needed a steady guide to learn the right things.” Dave’s goatee framed a smile. “He’s proud of you, son.”

A tinny-sounding guitar was being strummed at a corner table where a bald, sharp-featured man in a black turtleneck had produced a skinny backpack guitar to the liquor-fueled delight of the crowd at the table. Prominent next to the polished bohemian was my best client, Bree Wayland, her blonde hair framing a laugh that had been absent for the past year.

“That’s Judge Hamilton Tyler from down the District of Virginia,” Dave said.

“Plays guitar, I see.”

“Word is, that’s not all he plays,” Dave murmured to his beer.

I took a second look at Bree, seated with a mostly older group. She was a rising plaintiff’s attorney whose reputation had clearly spread from South Florida. I had seen her abducted in one case, break off an engagement over another, boot her first associate in a fit of rage and then support that new practice starting the next day. She drove herself hard. It was good to see her acknowledged and happy as Judge Tyler played some Jackson Browne. Bree spotted me and proffered her glass. I raised mine to return the salute.

“Well, he’s certainly entertaining my client.”

“The blonde?”

“Yeah. Bree Wayland. She’s built a mass tort and class action boutique to reckon with down my way.”

“O-kay, right, she’s on that class standing panel with Tyler and, lessee, yup, there’s Hossel and Piotkowski. I don’t know the others.”

A waiter came to ask about refills. We gave him our chits.

“How do you know them?”

“I’ve attended other conferences at one time or another.” He pointed to a man with a round red face, rimless glasses and thin dark hair combed straight back. “Judge Hossel from Ohio there says law should be made by individual suits. Judge Piotkowski,” indicating a robust older woman with a full head of salt and pepper hair, “heartily disagrees, and has said so on many panels, but she’s retiring in April.”

“Sounds like fun,” I said, finishing my bourbon as the second round arrived.

“You may want to check it out. I’m guessing attendance won’t be great, so you might as well.”

“Attendance won’t be great?” I waved at the jam of cars framed by moving bodies outside. “In New York?”

Dave grinned past his beer.

“Oh, that’s right, you’re not from these parts. In the Mid and Upper Atlantic Coast we get a little thing called a Nor’easter, which whips in a lot of rain or snow. They’re predicting one of those for tomorrow night, coupled with a blizzard working down from the Northwest. My wife asked if I didn’t think I’d just as well stay home.”

“What, and miss all the fun?” a sudden female voice interjected. Its owner was a slight, pale woman with a black pixie cut. “Mind if I grab that stool? Thanks.”

She slipped into the seat to my left and parked a glass of red wine on the counter.

“Isabel Ratliff,” she said, setting out cards for each of us. “I write the LawScape blog.”

“Jaden Smerlow, Jasme Research,” I bid, playing my card.

“Dave Mahon, DM Forensics,” Dave said shortly with a tilt of his beer.

“Forensics, yes. What kind of research?”

“Plaintiff research and referral,” I replied.

“Ooooh, you’re a case runner!” she beamed. “I’ve never met one. Wasn’t sure that was condoned by the GLI.”

“The GLI condoned my check,” I said.

Isabel laughed, a hint of tinkling glass.

“We do other background services as well,” I added.

“Well I may just ask you for an interview before this show wraps up,” she said, and clinked my soda with her wine glass.

“What sets you down at the edge here with two lonely guys,” Dave asked, “seeing that there are places at plenty other more chatty spaces around?”

The sprawling bar area was populous but not full. Isabel swept the scene at a glance.

“True, but you were the only ones here I didn’t know. I practice as well as blog, have for years, so I see these folks, most of ‘em, several times a year.” Her gaze drifted to the group in the corner, where it lingered. “Has Tyler done his ‘Hotel California’ yet?”

On cue, he plinked a couple of introductory notes and strummed into that song.

“We were discussing the weather,” Dave said, studying Isabel.

“Yeah, how about that?” Isabel said with a long sip of wine, “we could all be shut in together.”

I turned the whiskey glass in my hands, as though warming them.

“I’m getting out to have a look at the place first.”

“Have fun,” Dave said. “I need to check in on a couple of things that seem more attractive than walking this City in the cold.”

“And I’m going to see if someone will buy me a drink.” Isabel tossed back the last of her wine. She picked up my card. “Do have fun – it’s a trip out there. We’ll sit down for a real interview before this is over – maybe breakfast of our snow day.”

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It took me less than one block to realize that I was stupidly underdressed. A lined raincoat and Jeff Gordon #24 ballcap barely paused a cold wind with teeth. My hands stayed in my pockets and still grew numb. At least I'd changed my Italian loafers for sturdy Timberland brogans, but that was as prepared as I got.

I ducked into a mid-block cut-through walk and did the only thing I could think of that would warm me up right away: call Taryn.

My belle was now Bree Wayland's senior associate. She was probably still in the office, but I called her cellphone. Her voice filled my ear after two rings.

"Hey, Jay, how's New York?"

"Kind of cold," I said, "and they expect a blizzard. You home?"

"Oh, yeah. I just got out of the shower..."

"I'm warmer already."

"And I'm yanking your chain. Bree's off north getting potted, we have two cases going to trial next week and I've got a para and a newbie associate to break in. I'm just going home to change clothes till y'all get back."

"I saw Bree just before."

"Did you."

"Having drinks with a guitar-playing judge and her panel."

"And not returning calls or texts about, y'know, her actual business."

I was guiltily reminded to check in myself.

“But the payoff may be a kinder, gentler Bree when she gets back.”

Taryn sighed volubly.

“Well I can arm-wrestle the bitch, but the noobs should be grateful. They’re still here too.”

“How they working out?”

“It’s early days. Still eager. Bree insisted that I take Julie’s old office and put Matty the para into my old walk-in closet. Somehow it looks like the same walls of paper.”

A cab honked in the street, arousing a chorus.

“Where are you now? Sounds noisy.”

“A mid-block walkway near the hotel.”

“Where’s the hotel again?”

“Midtown. The Metro New York.”

“Oh, yeah, the old Ambassador after the face-lift. So, ya want a tour? I could use a little break.”

“Uhh, sure,” I said, walking past a potted yew redolent of urine to the next street.

“Okay. Sounds like you were walking west of the hotel. Keep going to the end of the block and turn left.”

“Did I mention that I’m underdressed, slightly drunk and haven’t eaten?”

“What am I, your mother? Don’t answer that. The Carnegie’s gone, but there’s another deli at the corner nearby if you want mass quantities of corned beef.”

“Nah, if I eat I’ll stop. Here’s the corner-- Whoa!”

Just a few blocks down was a valley of electronic daylight filled with motion.

“That would be Times Square. That’s where you go to rub elbows with everyone in the world who’s not home.”

When I turned toward the maelstrom the wind was at my back for a bit. I found a street vendor and paid five dollars for a pair of knitted black gloves. I told Taryn.

“Better than nothing,” she said.

As I approached Times Square the crowd thickened, going every which way.

“Getting a little dizzy just looking at it,” I reported.

“What’s your cross-street?”

“West 50th.”

“Good,” Taryn said. “Turn left.”

The side street was lit and commercial, but nothing like the spectacle I’d cut away from. There was another bright avenue, the one I’d started from, a long way ahead. I was walking into the wind again, and had to keep switching the phone between gloved frozen hands.

“Thanks for the tour,” I said. “You grew up here?”

“Early on, yeah. Haven’t been back in, jeez, ten years.”

“That’s the problem with this place. You’re not here.”

She gave a little laugh.

“They, that’s your choice, your problem. But I miss you too.”

“So, hey, there’s Radio City Music Hall.”

“Ah, you’ve reached Sixth Avenue disguised as Avenue of the Americas. Who’s playing?”

“Nobody tonight.”

“Too bad. It’s worth paying for a night of Tibetan throat singing to sit in that auditorium. Anyway, you’re at Rockefeller Center. There should be a stairway down from the northwest corner that’ll put you in the underground concourse.”

I descended to shelter, a sterile corridor extending far ahead. After about a block there was a subway entry with turnstiles and stairs down to shrieking trains, with a crossover to the other side under the avenue where I went through revolving doors into an underground mall that I followed to a broad plaza walled at the end with a window on a skating rink. Taryn talked me to an escalator that swept me up to a vaulted deco lobby lined with murals. I stood just off the escalator a moment trying to take it in.

“Nice, huh? NBC Studios are upstairs. Now do a 180 and go outside.”

I stepped out to the cold again at a plaza set around the skating rink with a shopping mews beyond leading to St. Patrick’s Cathedral across Fifth Avenue.

“How you doin’?”

“Good,” I said.

She talked me up Fifth Avenue, the swankier and grittier template for what upscale Florida malls tried to be. I felt larger and smaller than usual here. The cold wind went right through me, but people were strolling, snapping selfies, annoying others.

“Hey, I’m walkin’ here!” a male voice expostulated through a knot of Asian tourists at the windows of Bergdorf Goodman.

Just past this scene was the fountain before The Plaza Hotel, and across the way the black hem of Central Park.

“Feel like a carriage ride in the park? They have blankets.”

Tonight the way looked bleak, and certainly bare of horses.

“They don’t seem to be out tonight. And I kind of get why.”

“Poor baby! Your teeth are chattering. Okay, about-face.”

Starting back, I had a sense that the hotel was to the right, but Taryn made me cross Fifth Avenue going left at 57th.

“Last stop on the tour. Read the name of the shop on the corner please.”

“T’s a little bigger than a shop-- oh, Tiffany’s.”

“Do tell? Anything interesting in the displays?”

“There’s nothing on display.”

“Pity.”

“Okay,” I said, “my phone battery and I are nearly dead. Can you get me home now?”

“No, but I’ll get you to a diner a block from your hotel -- at least where there was a diner a block from your hotel.”

“Thank you.”

I heard a sigh, a creaking chair and a ruffle of papers over the wind.

“Sure. Just get your ass home soon, and safe.”

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