



FATAL CONVICTIONS

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*“If you’ve been called to be a lawyer,
don’t stoop to be a king.”*

JOHN PATRICK MADISON

1

ALEX MADISON PULLED his black Ford F-150 into the designated clergy parking area, loosened his tie, rolled up his sleeves, and walked briskly across the parking lot toward the emergency room door. He clutched a Bible in his right hand and checked his shirt pocket for his pen and business cards with his left. The business cards were double-sided. On one side, *Alexander Madison, Pastor of South Norfolk Community Church*; on the other, *Alexander Madison, Attorney-At-Law*.

Alex's grandmother had called four hours ago to let him know that Evangeline Buford was in the hospital, suffering from an obstructed bowel. Doctors had stabilized her and were trying to treat it without surgery, but they were monitoring her closely. She was in the ICU—a place Alex could find in his sleep.

When the automatic doors slid open, Alex greeted the skinny gentleman sitting behind the intake desk. His name tag said *Foster*, but Alex had never heard anyone call him that. "What's up, Bones?"

"The Right Reverend Alexander Madison," Bones said, looking up from his magazine. "You're running late tonight. The ambulance got here fifteen minutes ago."

"That's because you didn't call," Alex said. He opened his Bible, retrieved a church bulletin, and tossed it in front of Bones. "Five bucks off at Shoney's," Alex said.

"Your generosity knows no bounds."

"You got something against Shoney's?" Alex reached into his back pocket and withdrew two tickets for a Norfolk Tides game.

“Now you’re talkin’,” Bones said, eyeing the tickets. The man could tell stories for hours—*had* told stories for hours—about every major league star who had spent time in Norfolk on the way to the big leagues.

“You doing anything next Friday night?” Alex asked.

“Callin’ in sick. The Orioles got two players rehabbing from the majors.”

Alex handed Bones the tickets. “You got a room number for Evangeline Buford?”

The information desk was in a different part of the hospital from the ER entrance, and Alex knew that if it were anyone else asking, Bones would say as much. But for Alex, he punched in a few keys. “Four-three-one-two.”

“Thanks.” Alex stood there for a moment, shifting his weight. A mom carrying an infant in one arm and pulling a toddler with the other came through the door and lined up behind Alex.

For some reason, Bones always made him ask. Alex lowered his voice. “Anything serious tonight?”

Bones smiled—the big toothy grin of a man who had something his buddy wanted. “Nothin’ tonight. But there’s a closed head injury in 4103 that transferred in from Chesapeake General last night. She’s still in ICU. Unfortunately for you, she might make a full recovery.”

“Whose fault?”

“Don’t know. Definitely an auto accident.”

Tides tickets were a small price to pay for this type of intel. “I owe you,” Alex said.

“Just say a prayer for me Sunday.”

Alex left the ER and navigated his way through the hospital, breathing in the sterile smell of antiseptics mixed with meat-loaf leftovers from the nearby cafeteria. He said a quick prayer for Bones and tossed in a word of thanks for the new client he was hopefully about to land. His practice needed a closed head injury about now. With any luck, she’d been hit by a truck driver running a red light—a couple of independent witnesses would be nice—and the trucking company would have lots of insurance coverage. The pastor in him

hoped the woman would be all right. But the fatalist in him, as well as the lawyer, knew that accidents were bound to happen. And if they did, they might as well happen here in Hampton Roads, to people who would get dragged in to Norfolk General, and they might as well have a long and expensive recovery before being released.

Alex arrived at the elevators about the same time as two older women. When the elevator arrived, Alex turned on the charm and stepped aside, then followed them in. He smiled, and they tried to return the gesture, but their eyes betrayed an unshakable sadness. They thanked him, punched a number, and rode in silence.

The women exited on the third floor, the cancer ward, a place Alex knew all too well. Two years ago he had practically lived there, watching his grandfather waste away. Even now, when Alex got off on the third floor to visit other senior saints from his small congregation, the sadness still washed over him.

His grandfather's passing had rocked Alex for a number of reasons. It was tough to watch a man who had once been so vibrant—a civil rights lawyer who taught Alex everything he knew about how to practice law—reduced to an emaciated shadow of his former self. Spiritually, Alex had never prayed harder—and never felt more betrayed when his prayers weren't answered. And emotionally, Alex had lost the man who helped raise him after an automobile accident killed Alex's parents when he was just twelve.

For Alex, the cancer ward wasn't hell, but you could smell it from there. He was thankful that Evangeline was on the fourth floor—one story above the scent of Dante's *Inferno*.

When Alex entered her room, Evangeline's face lit up to see him. He told her how good she looked, which was a stretch, even for Alex.

She had multiple machines attached to her body and looked like she had been shrink-wrapped. She wore none of the makeup that she normally layered on for church. Her gray hair was matted against the pillow, and her skin sagged on the exposed portions of her arms and around her neck. Her right arm was blue where the nurse had inserted the IV, and it made Alex feel a little queasy. He would have made a terrible doctor.

Evangeline gave Alex a detailed rundown of her condition, including the precise time and place of her last bowel movement, pausing occasionally to catch her breath. Alex chatted for a few minutes but could tell that the excitement was taking a toll on his parishioner. He held her hands and said a quick prayer.

“You’re going to be all right,” he told Evangeline. She braved a small smile at his words. “The whole church is praying for you,” he added quickly. He didn’t want Evangeline to think her healing would be hanging on his prayers alone.

“You’re the best pastor we’ve ever had,” Evangeline said, her voice hoarse. “Pastor Bob didn’t get to the hospital for two days when I had my kidney stones. I’d passed ‘em by then. You practically followed me here.”

“I’m good at tailgating ambulances,” Alex said, but Evangeline didn’t smile. He squeezed her hands. “We’re going to get you through this.”

2

A FEW MINUTES after leaving Evangeline's room, Alex found himself outside 4103, where he hesitated in the hallway, arguing with his conscience. The woman in the room probably needed legal representation. She could either get it from some shyster who advertised on television, or she could get it from Madison and Associates, a firm that would treat her with a little respect. They would work her case hard and take the insurance company to the brink of trial before cashing in. Most importantly, she would be more than just a case file to Alex and his partner, Shannon Reese. Alex would minister to her spiritually. Shannon would befriend her. She'd get Christmas cards from the firm for the rest of her life.

The nameplate on the door said *Ghaniyah Mobassar*. Alex decided to call her ma'am.

He stepped inside and flashed a friendly smile—nothing over the top, the professional kind of smile your attending physician might give you.

Ghaniyah was in rough shape. Her right eye was black and blue, and she had a sizable lump on her forehead. Machines cluttered the area around the head of her bed, buzzing and beeping and pumping life-giving fluids into her body.

Her eyes were closed, which presented a problem. *The family members must be in the waiting room*. Alex pulled a chair up next to her bed, took a seat, and began praying. He prayed softly, just loud enough to be heard from the doorway if somebody entered but not loud enough to sound like a lunatic. He peeked a couple of times. Ghaniyah kept her eyes closed. She was breathing but hadn't moved.

After a few minutes, Alex ran out of things to pray. He took out a card and decided to leave a note, pastor side up, saying he had stopped by and she should call if she needed anything. He thought he heard footsteps outside the door and quickly bowed his head again, mumbling another quick sentence or two.

“What are you doing?” a deep voice said.

Alex turned and looked toward the doorway, where an older gentleman scowled at him. He was about Alex’s height—six-one or so—with the long limbs and the square shoulders of a scarecrow. He had dark hair, a long black beard, and brown eyes that were filled with a mixture of sadness and surprise.

“I’m a pastor,” Alex quickly explained. He stood and took a few steps toward the man, extending his hand. “I heard your wife was in a bad car accident, and I came to pray for her.”

The man shook Alex’s hand—a strong grip—but didn’t relax. Alex clutched his Bible with his left hand.

“Are you with the hospital?” the man asked.

“No, sir. I’m just a local pastor.”

“We’re Muslim.” The man’s tone was matter-of-fact, not harsh. “I’m the imam for the Norfolk Islamic Learning Center. I appreciate you coming by, but lots of our people are already praying.”

“I’m sorry,” Alex said, kicking himself for not picking up on the name. He had been intoxicated by the thought of a profitable case, and his brain had shifted into neutral. He quickly switched back into lawyer mode. “Do you mind me asking what happened?”

The man looked past Alex at his wife. He lowered his voice, perhaps not wishing to disturb her with memories of the event. “Ghaniyah ran off the road and hit a tree. We don’t really know how it happened.”

Alex resisted the urge to pester the man with questions. Were there skid marks? witnesses? Could she have been run off the road by a driver who didn’t even bother stopping? What are the limits on your liability policy? Do you understand how uninsured motorist coverage works?

“The doctors say she suffered closed head injuries,” the imam con-

tinued. “Now, if you’ll excuse me . . .” He stepped around Alex and moved to the side of the bed.

Lesser lawyers might have succumbed.

But not Alex. He stepped back toward the bed and delicately placed a card on the nightstand next to the gentleman. “I’m also a lawyer,” Alex admitted. The man glanced at Alex as if the words hadn’t registered. He returned a concerned gaze to his wife and took her hand, checking on the machine readouts.

“I’m not like most personal-injury lawyers—only worried about the money,” Alex spoke quickly, as if a trapdoor might open beneath him at any moment. “I care about my clients’ spiritual health as well as their physical health. I take cases on a contingency fee and normally charge 10 percent less than most lawyers so my clients can give that money to their church or mosque or whatever.”

The man turned to Alex, contempt beginning to fill the dark eyes. “This is not the time or the place,” he said simply. “I am not concerned about American lawyers or American lawsuits or, as you say, a cheap deal on a contingency fee. My prayer is that Allah will restore Ghaniyah to full health.” He paused, pinning Alex with his gaze. “And now, if you don’t mind, I would appreciate some privacy. Certainly there are others in this hospital in need of your prayers.”

“You’re right,” Alex replied. “This is no time to worry about a lawyer.” He nodded and started backing toward the door. “But when she starts to feel better, give me a call if she wants to talk.”

The man turned back to his wife, taking a seat.

I’ll never see them again, Alex thought. Why not go for broke?

“I may seem a little over the top,” he admitted, “but trust me, when you need someone to take on the insurance companies, you’re going to want someone brash and obnoxious.”

The man didn’t move.

“I’m actually handling another case for a Muslim client,” Alex added, though he suddenly felt a little stupid for bringing it up. “A store is trying to make her ditch her head scarf.”

The imam did not look impressed. Or even remotely interested.

“Blessings on you,” Alex said softly, standing in the doorway. “I’ve

handled closed-head-injury cases before. I know that the first few days are critical. May God be merciful to your wife.”

The man turned and looked at Alex, his eyes sad and subdued. “Thank you. Now, if you don’t mind . . .” He returned his attention to Ghaniyah, and Alex finally took the hint.

On the way out, Alex made a point of circling back around through the ER. Maybe somebody had been admitted in the last few minutes.

“How’d it go?” Bones asked.

“It’s not quite a lock,” Alex admitted. “But then again, her husband didn’t take a swing at me.”

“That’s progress,” Bones said.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Another book, another page of IOUs. It's getting to be like the national debt.

A big chunk of that debt is owed to Kamal Saleem, a former Islamic terrorist who wrote about his conversion to Christianity in *The Blood of Lambs*. I interviewed him at length and, with his permission, used variations of his experiences and mind-set as the basis for my book's antagonist. Kamal is one of the most intense and committed persons I've ever met. You should read his story and, if you get the chance, hear his testimony.

Joel C. Rosenberg's book *Inside the Revolution* also helped form one of my main characters—a reform-minded Muslim cleric on trial for murder. The imam is patterned after the Islamic moderates portrayed in Joel's book—an eye-opening study of the political and spiritual dynamics in the Middle East.

Research is just the beginning. There are many other “bondholders” whom I'll never be able to repay. They include:

- The hall-of-fame team at Tyndale House Publishers who believe in these stories and make it fun to be an author. Karen Watson, Jeremy Taylor, Stephanie Broene, Ron Beers, and many others have shown me more patience, grace, and encouragement than any author deserves.
- My agent, Lee Hough, whose vision and skill keep me on track. Lee is not just an excellent agent but also a great story doctor and friend.
- Mary Hartman and Michael Garnier, two other friends who review my manuscripts and have way too much fun identifying the inconsistencies and inaccuracies that I manage to sprinkle throughout my drafts. I can't imagine writing a book without their help.

- The folks at Trinity Church, where I serve as teaching pastor. They are a constant source of encouragement about my books and never cease to amaze me with their passion for Christ.
- Rhonda, Rosalyn, and Joshua, the best family on the face of the planet. I might be a lawyer, but you can trust me on that one.

Before I get to the final prop, a word about separating fact from fiction might be in order. When a lawyer/pastor writes a story about a lawyer/pastor, readers probably assume that many aspects of the story track the author's life. That assumption would be incorrect. Other than the occupations, Alex and I have little in common. The Virginia Beach churches where I've had the honor of preaching—Trinity Church and First Baptist, Virginia Beach—are amazing churches with none of the pettiness that Alex faces in the book. Moreover, unlike the book characters, my legal assistants (including Tracy Garcia, who helped on this book) have been top-notch, and the judges in Virginia Beach are some of the best anywhere. The bottom line: I don't pastor a church or practice law the way Alex does, and I certainly don't solicit clients like he does. I'd prefer to keep my law license.

And finally, though it seems trite to put the Savior of the world in an acknowledgments page—how could I leave him out? This book is the story of an advocate who stands up for a client when, from all appearances, the man should be condemned. Come to think of it, that's also the story of my life.

But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate who pleads our case before the Father. He is Jesus Christ, the one who is truly righteous. He himself is the sacrifice that atones for our sins—and not only our sins but the sins of all the world. 1 JOHN 2:1-2