

## Chapter Thirty-four

As a matter of courtesy as well as curiosity, I called Joe Waldrip at the hospital in Dallas. A nurse answered the phone.

“This is George Lampson. May I speak to Joe, please?”

“I’m sorry, but Mr. Waldrip can’t speak with you right now.”

I could hear Joe grumbling in the background, “Who in the hell is it, Janie Baby?”

Janie Baby said with a bit of exasperation showing, “It’s a George Lampson.”

“Give me the Goddamn phone. I need to talk to him.”

“Well, all right, but just for a couple of minutes.”

I could hear Waldrip ripping out his lungs in a whooping series of coughs.

Finally, he was able to rasp out a sentence. “Judge, glad you called. I can’t talk long.”

I said, “Yeah, I know. How are you doing, Joe?”

“How in the hell does it sound like I’m doing? Lousy.”

“I’m sorry. “

“Don’t be. I’m getting no worse than I deserve. Look, Judge, there’s some things about me that you don’t know.”

I said, “Maybe I know more than you think I do, Constantine.”

He was silent for ten or fifteen seconds before he said, “That name. How do you know that name?”

“When you had coffee at my house, I tucked your cup in a baggy after you left. A friend ran your prints. I’ve seen your rap sheet.”

“I told Grant you were too smart for us, that we needed a dumbass mechanic...like me. But he wouldn't listen. Anyway, who is taking my place? Is it Kane?”

“Yes.”

“You're lucky. He's a stand up guy. He's in the organization for the same reason you and I are. Grant has the goods on him, too.”

“I thought as much. What's his story?”

“He's a thief and a con man. We got him from a contact in the NYPD bunko squad. He would rather lie even when the truth would sound better. He'll talk you out of your socks if you let him. But he'll also watch your back as though you're married to him. And Judge, he doesn't see things the way I do, I mean, the way I did.”

Another short spell of wheezing coughs.

I said, “Maybe you better rest, Constantine.”

He said, while gasping for enough breath to finish the conversation, “Judge, listen, there aren't five targets. Only three. You...oh, damn. The pain.” He coughed a panting, rattling agonizing long moment. He gasped, “One more thing. Only Grant and I know about what you did. He says, his secret. That's it. I'm through.” He hung up the phone.

I snapped my cell phone shut and stared silently at the floor. Bitsy, next to me on the lounge, said, “So the cat's out of the bag. He knows we know. How did he take that?”

I recounted the conversation I had just finished. “He wasn't through telling me whatever it was he wanted to get off his chest before he hung up. He's in some really great physical distress.”

Bitsy said, “Why would they tell you there were five people you needed to...deal with, instead of three, if that is really the right number?”

“Worse case? They subscribe to the dictum that dead men...and their wives...tell no tales. They wouldn’t ever want us to tell what we know, or more specifically, what we will have done. So when I dispatch *numero tres*, I was probably going to become Joe’s number one.”

“Those bastards. They don’t plan to ever let us off the hook. Our little hideaway in Brazil, or wherever, isn’t going to materialize if they have their way.” She took my hand. ”Duncan, this is scary.”

It was scary, all right, but not overwhelming. Joe/Constantine only validated what I had suspected. And he had hinted that I really shouldn’t fear Kane. Well, maybe yes, maybe no.

“Bitsy, the only way they’ll win is if we let them. I’m not going to let them.”

She did not sound terribly confident as she said, “I hope so. Oh, Lord, I really do”

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