

Chapter Seven

My home is in the southern part of Dallas County, in the quiet burg of Westville. Our major products are high school football and hanging out. Friday nights in the fall, half the town can be found in Cougar Stadium, cheering some years and groaning others. Murder is a very rare commodity there, though some have vowed to kill the football coach at the end of a losing season.

My wife and I bought our house new in 1987. It has tripled in price. The saplings everyone planted in their yards back then have, for the most part, matured. It has become a very attractive area. The neighborhood, once pristinely white, has slowly integrated as middle class blacks found it. A few people bailed when the first African-Americans moved in. Too bad for them. Because there are more upscale blacks than there are nice homes in Westville, the law of supply and demand has increased property values considerably. Hooray for integration.

A little before ten the morning after my conversation with the Fed, his car pulled up and parked in front of the house. I watched as he and another man got out and walked up to the front door. Grant was carrying a briefcase. I waited for their knock and then opened the door.

Grant handed me a small box marked Dunkin Donuts and said, "Good morning, Judge. Okay to come in?"

"Certainly. Who's your pal?"

"This is Joe Waldrip." No explanation as to who the guy was. He was about sixty and looked older. His lined, craggy face had the gray pallor of impending death. His suit

was three sizes too big. As we shook I noticed his hands were waxy, as if he had been prematurely embalmed.

I led them into the kitchen and gestured for them to have a seat at the dinette table. I set out three mugs and took the coffee pot off the stove and set it on a trivet. After getting cream from the refrigerator, I sat down. Waldrip picked up the pot and poured for all of us. When he picked up his mug, he cupped it with both hands, as if to warm his palms.

Grant put his case on an empty chair and snapped it open. He pulled a manila folder from it and handed it to me. Inside were a hundred or so pages, interspersed with many familiar photos. Held in place by an Acco fastener, they appeared to be in chronological order. I flipped the sheets slowly. Before I had gone through a dozen of the pages it became abundantly clear that my ass had been nailed. I continued through the folder for about ten minutes and then closed it. There were sixteen cases in it, eleven of them for which I could take credit, though I was not about to begin bragging about them. I slid the folder across the table to the FBI agent.

I smiled and said, "Very interesting, Don. I assume you believe I may have some knowledge of these cases. If so, why am I not in an interrogation room downtown instead of here?"

He didn't answer immediately. Both he and Waldrip stared at me, as if examining a specimen, an interesting beetle stuck with a pin to a board. I could hear the cicadas whirring outside the window. The grandfather clock in the adjacent living room ticked, ticked, ticked loudly, like Poe's *Telltale Heart*. They were waiting for my confession. I was not ready to cooperate.

Finally, Agent Grant said, “We have you solidly on seven of them. We have strong leads being developed on the rest. You know us, Judge. The FBI never loses. We always get our man.” If this was a bluff, it was a good one.

Trying not to bluster, I said as casually as I could, “Well, you are off the mark on these. I know law enforcement doesn’t believe in coincidences, but that is what is evident here. For instance, I visit Idaho fairly frequently. My cousins are ranchers near Glens Ferry and it is a great place in which to vacation. And my daughter and her husband live in Brooklyn, New York, so I am in and out of New Jersey a lot. As for the drug dealer that was dispatched in Corpus Christi, I have friends there. Old high school pals that still keep in touch.” (That part is true. However I didn’t visit with any friends when I shot a double dose of heroin into Senor Alfredo Montemayor’s arm.)

Grant said, “Your thumbprint on the duct tape is not a coincidence. It’s evidence.”

I didn’t believe for a minute that they really had that piece of tape. I had not been that careless. Again, I had never handled tape without latex gloves.

I said, “There is no print. What else, Don?”

Again, the cicadas and the clock took over. Then Waldrip finally started to speak up, but was gripped instead by a paroxysm of coughing. It finally subsided and he pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped small flecks of phlegm from his lips. Leaning forward he said, “Sorry about that. Anyway, Judge, this might not be as bad as you probably think it is. There is a way out of this mess.”

Grant looked at Waldrip and held up a cautionary hand. Waldrip moved back in his seat.

I said, "Mess? I don't think there is any sort of trouble. If there were, we wouldn't be here drinking coffee. Just what is all this about?"

Don Grant said, "Well, maybe I was mistaken about the tape. But don't get me wrong. If we're right, you have provided a real public service. Perhaps you were merely exorcising your demons."

I laughed. "So, if that's true, then where's the gratitude? And Don, my demons might also be yours."

Agent Grant paused as he looked around, visually changing the subject. He said, "Nice house. Been here long, Judge?"

I answered, "You know how long, Don. You also know my social security number, the citations I earned in the army, my anniversary date and every other bit of minutiae in my life. So, what do you want?"

He said, "You're right, of course. I even know your high school nickname. They called you Rattlesnake because you dated girls prolifically and indiscriminately. As the saying goes, a rattlesnake will strike at anything and so, apparently, did you. But back to the main subject. Assuming for the moment that you really are guilty of having assassinated a segment of the scum of the earth, I have to say that you did a pretty good job. The people who were eliminated were not pussies. They were, for the most part, mean as hell. That makes you either very smart or very lucky. Moreover, it credits you with the capability to be a valuable asset...to some."

I frowned. *Asset? What did that mean?*

A thrust, a parry, we danced about.

“Assuming also, and hypothetically, that I have even an inkling of what you are talking about, how does that make me an ‘asset’? And for whom?”

Grant said, taking off on another tangent, “Judge, you were in the army. From a soldier’s perspective, how should a war be fought?”

I answered, “An enlisted man does not view the big picture that a general sees. The grunt is in the meat grinder, and he knows that if he doesn’t kill some son of a bitch, then that SOB will probably kill him. It’s not rocket science. Individuals doing what they are supposed to do win battles. If enough battles are won, a theater engagement is won, and inevitably, the war is won.”

“You’re right, of course. But what would that soldier do if he knew who an enemy combatant was, he could see him, and his superior officers told him not to shoot? Suppose courtrooms were to be set up in tents all along the front line and suppose further that our soldiers were ordered to arrest the enemy and turn him over for trial?”

“We could not win a war like that. What’s your point?”

“The fact is that the so-called war on terror is, for the most part, being fought that way, at least here at home. I can name dozens of terrorists right now, operating clandestinely here in the U.S., whom we can’t touch. The reasons are many, but most often it is because they haven’t actually killed as yet. If we can prove them guilty of conspiracy, or if we catch them with bomb-making materials, we can bring them in. When we do, they clam up and the rats we missed scurry down a different rat hole. And the Imams who preach Jihad in the mosques, who say it is the duty of all Muslims to murder us...well, those bastards are getting off Scot free. The powers that be are too politically correct to stop them.”

Waldrip interjected, “The really bad guys are acting with impunity. They don’t think they can be arrested and they are usually correct in that assumption. They’re also arrogant as hell.”

Grant said, “I have come to the conclusion that there is really only one way to throw a monkey wrench into their terrorist machinery. It’s simply to kill them. Skip the warrants and the fucking trials.”

He paused, studying me carefully for a reaction to that statement. A slight smile on my face must have been the feedback he was looking for. “Does that suggestion tickle your funny bone, Judge?”

“I’m a good listener. I’ll laugh at almost anything. But as for your statement, well, I’m shocked...shocked, I say, that you would suggest such a thing, Don.”

Now he laughed. “Sure you are. Why, you wouldn’t hurt a fly, would you?”

I said, “Not unless it was resting on a child molester’s nose.”

He nodded. “Of course.”

I was tiring of the waltz. I asked, “This is leading where?”

He said, “Okay. Here it is. There are some people who are fed up with the namby-pamby non-war on terror that the administration is waging here at home. The Supreme Court has dealt us bad cards and we don’t want to play them. Our small organization has plans to correct that. I would like to tell you more but can’t until we get something straight between us.”

I thought I could see where this was going. By now, It was clear that these guys knew exactly what I had been up to, and I was about to become a draftee once again in a new army and a different war.

“The truth is, we’ve got enough to indict you tomorrow, if we wish to. It would pain me to do so. I have admiration for what you have done, that you had the balls to do it. But we simply can’t look the other way, unless...”

Hang on, folks. Here it comes.

I said, “Unless...”

“Unless you would like to join us. “

“Uncle Sam wants me?”

“Not exactly, Judge. But I’m sure he will appreciate your service.”

“Aside from your admiration of my alleged talents, what else makes me a candidate for membership?”

“Good question. One of your desirable attributes is your knowledge of Farsi. I know that your in-laws are Iranian-American and that you learned the language to get along with your wife’s folks, who were from the old country. Many of the people we are going to deal with are also fluent in that tongue. Another thing you have going for you is your almost uncanny ability to gain people’s trust. In your case, perhaps too much. And we also like your style. You have a flair for dispensing real justice.”

I thought for a moment, then asked, “The FBI is not aware of what you are doing, is it?”

Don said, “That’s classified, Judge. However, I’m FBI and I know about it, don’t I?”

“You referred to a ‘small’ organization. I wouldn’t call the FBI undersized. Just who, or what, is your group? And will I meet any of them?”

“You will meet only those whom it is necessary to for you to know. I’ll decide that.”

“What happens if I turn you down?”

Joe Waldrip said, “Then you’re fucked.”

I said, “A trial might be fun. The trial of the century.”

Waldrip said wryly, “You’ll get the same trial your victims got. Don will read the eulogy at your funeral. It will be a wonderful affair. You would be proud.”

I softly drummed the fingers of my left hand on the table. “I have several questions, of course, and more will occur in the next day or so. Why don’t we recess this kangaroo court until tomorrow. We can iron out the details then.”

Grant said, “Okay. We’ll meet you inside the Galleria Mall. There’s a bench outside the entrance to Nordstrom’s on the lower level. Ten o’clock in the a.m.”

Before the arrival of my guests, I had taped a holster under the kitchen table. The Glock was there. I did not plan to shoot anyone, but rather, to illustrate that I was not an easy mark. “Fine. I’ll see you then.” I slid the pistol from the holster and lifted it above the table, then laid it next my coffee cup. “You fellows are a bit rusty. I hope you are more cautious when you are dealing with real crooks, and not with amateurs like me.”

They both were transfixed on the gun like a priest on a golden crucifix. Finally Waldrip guffawed, “Damn, Judge, I knew you were the man for the job.”

Don said, somewhat red-faced, “Yeah, you got us for sure. Ha, ha. We’ll see you tomorrow.”

We got up and I ushered them out the door. I watched as they got in their unmarked Buick and pulled away. It occurred to me that if I went along with them, and I

probably would (I'm not nuts, you know), that I might also be on a payroll. That would be nice.

I went back to the kitchen and got a plastic baggie out of a drawer. Carefully, I put Waldrip's cup into the plastic bag and zipped it shut.

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