

Chapter Eight

We didn't talk much after the interview was over. What was there to say? The shock had to wear off before we could have a normal conversation about it. June whispered good-night and went off to bed, and I called a cab to take David back to Crown Heights. Afterward, I sat alone in the den and played parts of the interview over and over in my mind.

My eyes started to close, and I rose to go to bed. Halfway there, I found myself going to the computer and accessing Charles Robinson's website. The interview was posted online, and I opened it. I went through it carefully, stopping and going back many times. It was chilling, especially because Johns made his points in dispassionate academic arguments.

The leaders of the new party had recognized that they could not achieve their goals within the framework of Judeo-Christian values. They had to go back to a kind of enlightened paganism, and this they had accomplished by forming an alliance with the Church of Natural Humanism, which was a more appealing name than the Church of Neo-Paganism, although it was essentially the same. At the Seder, my father had maintained that we were protected by the Constitution. There was one problem, however. The Constitution was indeed ironclad in a Christian society, but not in a pagan world that only recognized the natural law of the wild.

I fell asleep on my folded arms in front of my computer and awoke with cramps in my neck and back. I stumbled to bed and slept fitfully until morning. I had a cup of coffee and went to work. I was not hungry.

Two unfamiliar men were waiting in the easy chairs outside my office. One of them looked like an older Jewish man. He had a receding hairline, and gold-rimmed bifocals sat on his long thin nose. His suit was of a heavy

gray material with slightly frayed cuffs and dust embedded in the collar. His cuticles were black. The other was a middle-aged Latino wearing freshly pressed slacks and a white shirt open at the neck. His hands were soft and manicured. They both looked anxious but did not attempt to speak to me, and I gave them no more than a slight bow of my head.

I went into my office, made myself a strong coffee and took two Advil. The wall between my office and the waiting area was all glass, and I could see my secretary talking to the two men. They had obviously come without appointments and were waiting for me. My secretary gave me a little time to get settled before she came into my office.

“Good morning, Mr. Taylor,” she said; I had long before disabused her of calling me Congressman. “These two gentlemen want to speak with you. They’re here from Pennsylvania. I told them they had to make an appointment, but they said it was urgent. They insisted on waiting until you came and letting you decide.”

I was about to refuse, but then I relented, more out of curiosity than kindness. “Very well,” I said. “Bring them in.”

My secretary showed them to the chairs in front of my desk and offered them coffee. They declined politely.

“Good morning, gentlemen,” I said. “Would you kindly introduce yourselves and state your business.”

The Jewish man turned to his Latino companion. “Can I speak for both of us? You know, just the basics.”

“Sure. Go ahead.”

“My name is Morris Ackerman,” he said to me, speaking with a blue-collar drawl. “This is my friend and next-door neighbor Henry Cortez. Actually, Hernando Cortez, like the Spanish guy who conquered Mexico. We’re from Hesterville, Pennsylvania. That’s a small town not far from Scranton. Henry owns a pharmacy on Columbus Avenue, that’s the main street of Hesterville, and I own the gas station on the corner. I’m Jewish, and my friend is Mexican. We were both born in the United States and are

proud Americans.” He paused.

“I’m sure you are,” I said. “So, what brings you here?”

“You tell him, Henry, okay?”

“Of course, Morris,” said Cortez. “Last Fourth of July, I hung a big American flag outside my pharmacy. Next to it I hung a smaller Mexican flag. My friend Morris also hung a big, beautiful American flag in his gas station and next to it a smaller Israeli flag. After some people complained, the Hesterville township committee passed an ordinance forbidding the display of flags of other countries on the Fourth of July. The ordinance carries heavy fines for the first offense and heavier fines for subsequent offenses. We feel this is a violation of our civil rights. The Fourth of July is in a couple of months, and we want to fly our flags.”

Before they came into the office, I had speculated about what they might want with me, but this was completely unexpected. I steepled my fingers and closed my eyes as I considered the legal aspects of the case. I had to admit that it was quite intriguing.

“We both do well,” said Ackerman when I opened my eyes. “We can pay your fees.”

I smiled. “I’m relieved. I was afraid you might want me to do it pro bono. We’ll talk about fees later. So let me ask you a few background questions. Mr. Ackerman, you were born here, and your parents?”

“My parents were both in Auschwitz. They came over in 1947.”

“You were born in Hesterville?”

He shook his head. “Wilkes-Barre. We moved here when I was six.”

“Tell me about your education.”

“Well, I graduated high school but didn’t go to college like my friend here. I went to vocational school, because I wanted to be a mechanic. I like working with my hands. I was sent to Vietnam in 1972. I was stationed in Danang and served as an aircraft mechanic. When I got back, I got a job at the gas station, and when I came into some money, I bought it.”

“Thank you, Mr. Ackerman. And you, Mr. Cortez, what is your story?”

You were also born here. When did your parents come?”

Cortez smiled. “My parents were also born here, as were my grandparents and great-grandparents. My father’s great-grandparents emigrated right after the Civil War from Taxco, a town in Guerrero, a state in central Mexico. They came with money and did very well here. My grandparents moved to Hesterville. My father went to Yale and became a medical doctor. I graduated from the University of Pennsylvania with a doctorate in pharmacology. I had offers from Squibb and Eli Lilly, but I preferred my own pharmacy.”

“All right. Why did you display the Mexican flag?”

“My family has been here for many generations. They didn’t come over on the *Mayflower*, but we’ve probably been here longer than most other groups. Except for the blacks. I’m as American as they come, but ethnically, I’m Mexican. The people of Mexico are my kinfolk. My family celebrates Cinco de Mayo, when my people defeated the armies of the French Empire. The flag does not show loyalty to the government of Mexico. It’s loyalty to my kinfolk.”

“Same for me,” said Ackerman. “The Israeli flag is a symbol of my Jewishness. It has a big blue Magen David in the middle. The people of Israel are my brothers and sisters, and I love them all. The flag does not show loyalty to the Israeli government. In fact, I have issues with some of their policies. It’s not safe to be at war, even if you think you’re strong.”

“I understand what you’re saying. At first glance, I’m inclined to agree with you, but first glances are notoriously unreliable. Why did you come here without an appointment? And why me? Don’t they have lawyers in Pennsylvania?”

“Oh, come on, Congressman,” said Cortez. I winced but made no comment. “This is going to be a sticky case, and you’re a famous constitutional lawyer, in a class by yourself. We thought it would be hard to get an appointment, so we showed up unannounced. We figured that if we came all the way from Pennsylvania, you’d hear us out.”

“Fair enough. It would be inexcusably rude just to send you away. All right, tell me about Hesterville. What are the demographics?”

“We’re a multiethnic, fairly prosperous community,” said Cortez. “And we generally get along well with each other. We have a large Jewish population. Several hundred families. There’s a big Reform temple and a small Chabad House. No kosher restaurants, but you can get kosher food in Walmart or from the Chabad House. The Latino population is diverse. The largest group is Mexican, but we also have people from Ecuador, Chile, Honduras and Colombia. Most of us are Catholics or Pentecostals.”

“Do you have representation on the township committee?”

Cortez shook his head. “We do, but our people were never interested in getting into local politics. There are three minority members and six whites.”

“How long have you been displaying the Mexican and Israeli flags?”

He shrugged. “I’m not sure. Twelve, fifteen years.”

“Do you know the white members of the committee?”

“We do. They’re nice people. But people were complaining.”

“And no one complained till now?”

“No, not that I know.”

“Do you know what changed?”

“I don’t, but I can take a guess.”

“So take a guess.”

“The Vandewegh family lives in Hesterville. Darron Vandewegh and members of his July Fourth Faction have been coming around the last few months on their motorcycles. They must have been among the complainers. No one wants trouble.”

“Do you want trouble?”

“Absolutely not,” said Ackerman, who had been largely silent. “But where do you draw the line? We have a right to free speech. Hanging the flags is not unpatriotic. Not in the least bit.”

“I understand,” I said. “And what would you like me to do?”

“You know, stop them before the Fourth of July,” said Ackerman. “I don’t know exactly how. Get injunctions, things like that.”

“All right,” I said. “Let me give this some thought. I’ll see what I can do. I may have to go down to Hesterville to speak with the committee.”

“We’ll arrange it,” said Cortez, “We’ll arrange a car for you, and we’ll pay your hourly from the moment you leave your office until you return.”