

Chapter Nine

Four days later, I was on my way to Hesterville in a Lincoln Town Car from a Manhattan limousine service. Ackerman had decided that to send a car from Hesterville would require two round trips, while a car from New York would only have to make one round trip.

I invited David to join me for the day. It would be good experience if he should ever return to law school, and even if he didn't. Best of all, we would get to spend the day together. I ordered a lot of food from the kosher café on Lexington Avenue. Like it or not, David was making me a kosher eater. I didn't mind. The food was excellent, and for the time being, I could get along without shrimp and lobster.

The trip to Hesterville took about two and a half hours. My staff had done research on the dynamics of the town, and David and I discussed the various approaches we could take with the committee. We also discussed the legal aspects of the case. David had a natural talent for the law.

Ackerman and Cortez met us outside the Municipal Building, an elegant white structure with Corinthian columns and a pitched roof. It was located on Columbus Avenue, ten blocks from Ackerman's garage and Cortez's pharmacy. The building was surrounded by a vast municipal parking lot, which served the municipality as well as the local merchants. My clients wore suits and ties. Ackerman's cuticles were free of black grease.

The entire township committee had not appeared for the meeting. The mayor, who was chairman of the committee, and three members were waiting for us in a conference room on the second floor. The long table was clear of everything except for a decanter of water and a tray of glasses.

The mayor met us at the door. He was a youngish man with red hair and freckles. Ambition glittered in his brown eyes. The others, a Latina, a black

woman and a white man, were standing near the table.

“Congressman, what an honor!” gushed the mayor. “I’m Gordon Meadows, mayor of Hesterville, and these are my colleagues. Eva Ramirez, Jennifer Holt and Bob Flintlock. Come, please sit down.”

“Excellent,” I said. “Let’s get started. I have to inform you that we will be recording this meeting. So please consider your words carefully.”

“Good idea,” said the mayor.

He took a seat at the center of the table, with the two women to his left and Flintlock to his right. Flintlock. What a name. I sat at the center on the other side, facing the mayor, with David to my left and Ackerman and Cortez to my right. David took out his cellphone, pressed the record button and placed it on the table.

“Let me reiterate, Congressman,” said the mayor with a quick glance at his phone, “how pleased I am to meet you. You are my role model.” He chuckled. “Not that I can ever expect to accomplish as much as you have, but I would love to run for Congress someday. I read your books cover to cover. More than once. Brilliant.”

“Thank you.” He was making me uncomfortable. I imagined him holding a stiff drink and chewing my ear off at a party, and I shuddered inwardly.

He was not finished. “I particularly like *The Imperial Quadrant*. It gave me a deep insight into history.”

“Mr. Meadows, perhaps we can talk about this later. The rest of us here probably haven’t read my books, except for my grandson.”

“I mention it for a reason, Congressman. Please give me two minutes to tell the rest of us the thesis of the book.” He didn’t wait to get my consent. He just pushed ahead. “In his book, the Congressman suggested that world history takes place in an area he calls the expanding Imperial Quadrant. Everything that happens within the Quadrant dominates the world at large. Everything that happens outside the Quadrant, although important, is only local history. It does not drive world history as a whole.”

“What do you mean?” asked Jennifer Holt. She was a thin woman with intense features and a Caribbean accent. “And why is this important right now for this meeting? The Congressman has come a long way. Let’s get down to business.”

“Hold your horses, madam,” said the mayor. “You’ll see my point soon enough. The Quadrant began in Egypt, Mesopotamia and Persia. Then it spread west to include the entire Mediterranean basin. Then it spread north to include all of Europe from the Atlantic to the Ural Mountains. Then it spread west to include North America. The Quadrant projects its hard power over the entire world by invasions and colonization and its soft power by cultural influence. Countries outside the Quadrant never invade or colonize the Quadrant. The world idolizes the cultures of the Quadrant, but the Quadrant is ignorant of the cultures outside the Quadrant. Did I present your thesis correctly, Congressman?”

“More or less,” I said. “So what is your point?”

“I’d like to reframe your thesis in racial terms,” he said. “The Quadrant is the home of the white race. In other words, the white race dominates all other races. Didn’t that occur to you?”

“That was not my argument, but you could make such an argument if you include brown people such as Egyptians, Arabs and Persians in the white race. And how is this relevant to this meeting? Are you saying that you are a white supremacist?”

The mayor bridled. “I am not, sir. Perish the thought! However ... however ... we all agree that racial tensions are rising in the United States. The white race has made many glorious contributions to civilization in science and the arts of which we are justifiably proud. White supremacy taps into the worst and darkest sides of the white race, the frustrated losers of society, but it’s a real and growing force. We don’t want racial conflicts spilling over into our beautiful Hesterville.”

“I think I see where you’re going,” I said, “but could you spell it out more clearly?”

“Sure thing, Congressman. Mr. Ackerman and Mr. Cortez are among our finest residents. We all get along very well here in Hesterville, Jews, Hispanics, African-Americans, Asians, Caucasians. We get along just fine. Why should we be a lightning rod for white supremacists?”

“You mean by displaying ethnic flags.”

“Yes, that’s exactly what I mean. This just enrages them. Especially on the Fourth of July.”

“And you know this because Vandewegh told it to you?”

“Yes. We have no quarrel with Mr. Ackerman and Mr. Cortez. We know they’re good patriotic Americans. We just don’t want any trouble.”

“Mr. Meadows, either way there’s trouble,” I said. “If you prevent my clients from exercising their right of free speech, that is a violation of the Constitution. If you do not prevent them, you’re afraid of Vandewegh and his followers. It’s a Sophie’s Choice. So what do you do?”

“What do you suggest we do, Congressman?” said Jennifer Holt.

“What would Martin Luther King do in such a situation? What would Rosa Parks do? They would stand on principle. They would do the right thing. They would not allow themselves to be intimidated. If you give in to bullies, you are just encouraging bad behavior.” Shades of Margaret.

“So, what are you suggesting?” said Eva Ramirez. “You think we should face them down, and they will go away. They have hundreds of thugs with automatic weapons, and we have a small lightly armed police force. I think we shouldn’t make a stand here. Let someone else face them down. There will be plenty of opportunities.”

“I understand what you’re saying, Ms. Ramirez,” I said.

“Mrs. Ramirez,” she corrected. “I’m not into the Ms. Ramirez thing.”

“I understand. It’s just that I didn’t know your marital status, so Ms. Ramirez was the safest. We cannot control what the township committee does. But we can advise you of our plan of action.”

I was waiting for Flintlock to say something, but he just sat there stone-faced.

“I’ve consulted with my clients,” I continued, “and they feel strongly about this. They’ve been displaying their ethnic flags for fifteen years. Why should they have to stop doing so because of the intimidation of white supremacists?”

I turned to Jennifer Holt.

“And what if the African American residents of Hesterville decided to display some kind of tribute to their African heritage? That wouldn’t sit well with Vandewegh and his buddies. Should your people be prevented from displaying pride in their ethnicity? Should they be prevented from honoring their rich history?”

She pursed her lips and stared at me for a moment or two.

“I hear you loud and clear, Congressman,” she said. “But I’m still inclined to err on the side of safety. I’d like to ask your clients to reconsider.”

I looked at Ackerman and Cortez. They both shook their heads.

“My clients insist on their Constitutional rights.”

The mayor held up his hand. “Let’s just all take a deep breath,” he said. “Let me suggest a compromise. I can’t offer this on my own, but I’m confident that I can get the committee to go along with it.”

“We’re listening.”

“What if we withdrew the ordinance? Wipe it off the books. And then Mr. Ackerman and Mr. Cortez would voluntarily refrain from displaying their flags. No one would violate their rights.”

“Let me consult with my clients.”

We stepped into the hall and spoke in low tones. David did not join us.

“What do you say?” I asked.

They both shook their heads again.

“It’s a matter of principle,” said Cortez.

“Do you want to think about it?”

“Nah,” said Ackerman. “Let’s go to court.”

We returned to the conference room and took our seats.

“I’ve consulted with my clients,” I said, “and we’ve decided to go to court.”

The mayor shrugged. “You do what you gotta do,” he said. “We’ll see you in court.” The others mumbled their assent. Even stone-faced Flintlock.

“Well, I guess this meeting is over,” said the mayor. “It was a pleasure meeting you, Congressman.”

“It does seem that we’ve reached an impasse,” I said. “Before we go, however, I’d like to discuss the consequences of a highly publicized lawsuit.”

The mayor raised his eyebrows. “Do you think this will go public? I haven’t spoken to any reporters. Have you?”

“No, we haven’t. But when we file suit, it will be in the public record. It’s bound to be picked up by court reporters, especially if I’m associated with it. I’m sure the lawsuit will get extensive coverage.”

“What can we do? We’ll just have to bite the bullet.”

“Not only a bullet. You’ll also have to bite hefty legal fees. It could run into the millions.”

The mayor gritted his teeth. “We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it. We have some money, and we can raise some more.”

“From like-minded people, of course.”

“People who value safety,” he said.

“No doubt. One final point. According to my staff, Hesterville’s economy is heavily dependent on tourism. Poconorama Amusement Park nearby brings lots of tourists, who also enjoy your charming hotels and restaurants. Imagine what tourists would do if they thought Hesterville was under the control of white supremacists. Do you think all the ethnics in the New York-Pennsylvania area would still come? Or would they go instead to Six Flags in New Jersey or Hershey Park a little farther west? Hesterville competes very nicely, but it’s not the only option.”

“Are you threatening us, Congressman?”

“Heaven forbid. I would never threaten you, even if our conversation

was not being recorded. I'm just pointing out the natural consequences of a lawsuit, something you might not have thought through yourselves. I suggest you reconsider. At least, give it some thought. We will wait ten days before we file suit. I really hope to hear from you before then."

We shook hands all around and left. Both sides understood that there was no malice on either side. It was just a clash of interests, idealism in conflict with pragmatism. Their job was to do what they considered best for the residents their town, and mine was to follow the instructions of my clients. It was their right to sue, and I was the attorney who would help them exercise that right.

Before we left Hesterville, David asked the driver to take us to the Chabad House, which was just three blocks away at the corner of Columbus Avenue and Jamestown Road. It was early afternoon, and the rabbi was out. His wife welcomed us at the door. We chatted for a while. She described their activities in providing services for the local Jewish residents, and for Jewish tourists eight months out of the year. Things were peaceful in Hesterville. It was a good place.