

Chapter Ten

The story broke in the Scranton papers two days later. By the following day, the national media picked it up. The New York *Times* ran a report on the front page below the fold. CNN, MSNBC and Fox all sent reporters to Hesterville.

I don't know how it got out. Perhaps a family member of one of my clients had leaked it. Perhaps the mayor had leaked it in a preemptive attempt to win public support, but I doubted it. The source didn't really matter. The information was correct. The cat was out of the bag.

On Friday, a cavalcade of over one hundred motorcycles roared through the streets of Hesterville in a show of force. The riders all had long hair tied back with bandanas, wraparound sunglasses and black leather jackets with July Fourth Faction emblazoned on their backs. Vandewegh was sending a clear message to the committee. All the news channels ran footage of the invasion. It was frightening.

Governor Ronald Cimarron of Pennsylvania, a rising star in the Republican Party, made a public appeal for calm. "Everyone has to take a step back. There are good people on both sides." I don't think he realized how unfortunate his choice of words was. I know Ron Cimarron. He's a good and decent man. He was just trying to tamp down the tension.

Frederick Farragut, chairman of the American Identity Party, was not as conciliatory. "It's an outrage," he declared to a reporter from Fox News. "Why do these people have to hang foreign flags on the Fourth of July, the most patriotic day of the year? Real Americans wouldn't do that. The committee did the right thing. Whoever doesn't like it can go back where they came from. This is America!" The reporter was visibly uncomfortable, but he did his job.

Darby and Vandewegh also spoke to reporters, although they received less coverage than Farragut. Dr. Johns maintained a low profile; he was an ideologue, not a warrior.

My phone also rang numerous times, both in the office and at home, but I only took calls from people I knew well, including a few journalists to whom I spoke on background. I did not want the case to be tried in the media. What was happening already fulfilled my prediction to the mayor of Hesterville. It was more than enough. I was not about to add fuel to the fire.

The motorcyclists cruised the streets of Hesterville and visited its bars for several hours. Then they left, and peace returned to the town.

The next few days were uneventful. On Saturday, a week later, I received a call from the mayor of Hesterville.

“How are you doing, Congressman?” he said. “Things got a little hot there, but it’s all calmed down.”

“I’m glad to hear it.”

“The full township committee met last night. We discussed our problem from all sides, and we’ve come to the conclusion that we don’t want a lawsuit that will be on the news every day. You’re right. The summer season is coming up, and all those Jewish families from Brooklyn and Lakewood will stop coming. Same for the African Americans and the Hispanics. We may get some whites and Asians, but it will be a disaster. So we voted to withdraw the ordinance. Ackerman and Cortez can display their damn flags.”

“You’re doing the right thing. You’re standing up for the Constitution.”

“Yeah. That too. If we’re going to do this, we might as well put on the white hats of the good guys. Anyway, you can withdraw your lawsuit.”

“I didn’t file it yet.”

“Yeah.” He sounded dejected. “Look, Congressman, no hard feelings. As you said, our interests collided without malice on either side.”

“You’re very gracious, Mr. Meadows. It’s much appreciated. I wish you lots of luck in your political career. You have to know when to hold ’em

and when to fold 'em. You did the right thing. Be well.”

I breathed a sigh of relief. I didn't want to try that lawsuit. It was bound to get ugly. I didn't know what the future would bring, but I hoped for the best. Vandewegh had tried to intimidate the committee, and he had failed. It didn't matter if the committee had acted from principle or from economic self-interest. The result was the same. They had faced down the white supremacists, and that was a good thing. It would give encouragement to others who faced similar challenges.

My optimism was short-lived. The news that the ordinance had been withdrawn and the lawsuit dropped triggered a storm of angry protest from the American Identity Party and its confederates.

“The foreigners are taking over our country,” declared Farragut at a news conference. “Who can forget Iwo Jima where American boys gave their lives for the American flag? Our flag is the banner of our national pride. It's the symbol of our America. How can we let it be contaminated by other flags flying beside it? The township committee of Hesterville has caved to pressure from Jews, blacks and Hispanics. Let them go wave their flags in their own countries. This is America!” He raised his fist. “Our America for our Americans!”

The talking heads came down on the side of free speech, even on Fox News, but they voiced reservations. Tensions were running high. There was a great outcry in the country against illegal immigration. Why fan the flames at such a combustible time?

Dr. Sanford Johns also weighed in on the discussion with a press conference. “The American Identity Party is fully justified by natural law,” he declared, “in protesting against the actions of the township committee of Hesterville. The white race, which is the dominant group in America, has the right to protect its territory from the invasion of peoples of different colors, races and nationalities. It's true that this America is a nation of immigrants, but the white race was the first group of immigrants. We established America as white territory, and we have to defend it as such.

Everyone has to respect the American flag. We cannot allow other flags in our America. It is only natural law.”

“What about the blacks?” asked a reporter. “Weren’t they here from the beginning? And what about the Native Americans? Weren’t they here before everyone else? Isn’t this their territory?”

“You mean the Indians? It was once their territory, but it isn’t any more. They were defeated, and now they’re insignificant. A relic of history. As for the blacks, they didn’t come as immigrants. They came as slaves. This was never their territory, and it isn’t now. The white race laid claim to it first, and we will not allow other races to take the territory from us. We will defend it. It is natural law.”

It was very disturbing. These racists and supremacist ideas were seeping into the mainstream consciousness. I was convinced that most white people of good will and good character would not buy into the American Identity Party platform and the creed of the Church of Natural Humanism. But maybe on some level, they would become uneasy with the presence of other races. Maybe on some level, they would feel a little threatened. No good could come of it.

Things calmed down for a while, because the media lost interest. But ominous rumblings continued on the more extremist-minded stations and websites. The American Identity Party was increasingly militant and vocal. Nothing was happening, but it felt like the calm before the storm.

The storm was not long in coming. Farragut called a news conference at his headquarters. He promised an important newsworthy announcement. The media attended in force, as they were supposed to do. It was not up to them to decide which news to report and which to suppress. The people had a right to be informed, and it was the responsibility of the media to report with a minimum of bias. I watched the press conference live on television, as I was sure thousands of others were doing as well.

Farragut stood on the podium, flanked by Johns. Darby, Vandewegh, Montague, Hatwick and three others I did not recognize were lined up

across the stage behind him. Who were these new players? They looked like clones of the others. Had more groups joined the American Identity Party? Was that the important announcement? I was about to find out.

“Thank you for coming,” Farragut began. “We need the media to accomplish the goals of the American Identity Party, and we welcome your presence. All we ask is that you report with fairness. Leave the opinions for commentators and op-ed pages. Journalists should stick to journalism.”

He paused for a moment, then he squared his shoulders.

“I called you here to announce that the American Identity Party will be holding a peaceful demonstration in the parking lot in front of the Hesterville Municipal Building on Sunday, the Fourth of July. We have already obtained permits. We also have the right to exercise our freedom of speech. We will be joined by three more patriotic groups that have associated themselves with the Party in the last few days, and we also invite all other patriotic Americans to join us in expressing our ... displeasure. We demand that the committee reinstate the flag protection rule and enforce it to the fullest extent of the law. We invite the media to report on the demonstration, as I’m sure you will, and we ask you to be impartial, to listen to the voices on both sides.”

He adjusted his tie.

“We will not be taking questions at this time,” he said. “You can ask your questions at the demonstration.”

It was a double bombshell. He had shown the public that he was gathering strength with each passing day. If three more groups had already joined the American Identity Party, how many more would follow suit? And he had organized a demonstration that promised to be anything but peaceful. A tame rally would not hold the media’s attention for long. There was also bound to be a large turnout of angry counter-demonstrators. Clashes were almost inevitable. The Fourth of July fireworks would dominate the news for days. If not weeks.