

Chapter Twenty-three

Friday was devastating. A dozen coordinated acts of domestic terrorist acts shook the country to its very foundations. Black businesses, Hispanic churches, synagogues and mosques were attacked with grenades and automatic weapons. In Grand Central Station in Manhattan, five masked attackers with assault rifles cut down the security guards first and then sprayed the commuter crowds with a relentless hail of bullets. Casualties were high. Eighty-three people were murdered and over two hundred injured. The attackers escaped.

June and I sat up late Friday night watching the reports from Atlanta, Tulsa, Spokane, Baltimore and New York City. The horrific scenes were almost identical. Yellow crime scene tape. Police cars and ambulances. Body bags and stretchers. Weeping people. A sea of pain and horror.

Saturday morning, Frederick Farragut of the American Identity Party issued a statement that the party was not responsible for the carnage. He condemned the attacks and offered his deepest sympathies to the victims and their families; as always, his thoughts and prayers were with them. Methought he didst protest too much. I could almost hear the taunts between the lines. He also took the opportunity of his statement, which was bound to get wide circulation in the media, to announce an American Identity Party rally in Central Park at the end of the summer and invite sympathizers from near and far to attend.

I was sick to my stomach all day. Was I witnessing the disintegration of my beloved America? How could all this end well if angry mobs were better armed than the police? Is this what the founding fathers had in mind when they wrote the Second Amendment into the Constitution? Did they foresee that it would lead to chaos and mayhem?

I could understand that people need handguns to protect their homes and families. Even shotguns. I could understand that people need hunting rifles to provide food for their families or sport for themselves. But does the Constitution state that there should be no limits? Should people be allowed to own military grade weapons? Should they be allowed to own grenade launchers? Tanks? Fighter jets? There had to be a limit. And why couldn't gun ownership be regulated? Why couldn't every gun's provenance and ballistic signature be registered and stored in a national data base like fingerprints are? Something had to be done to stop depressed teenagers from shooting up schools and domestic terrorists from killing innocents like my poor grandson. What would it take to bring about a change?

Rabbi Gutmacher called me Saturday night. Mrs. Williams was expecting us in her home at noon. I told him I'd pick him up and we would arrive together. We'd compare notes in the car.

Sunday was overcast with occasional drizzle. Pedro drove me to Crown Heights via the Brooklyn Battery Tunnel and the Gowan Expressway. It was not as interesting as the Williamsburg route, but it got us there more quickly. Rabbi Gutmacher was waiting in front of 770. He was holding an unopened umbrella. I guess a little drizzle doesn't scare a Lubavitcher.

Marvin Williams greeted us at the door and led us to a long room divided by furniture into sitting and dining areas. The sitting area featured a comfortable leather sofa and two upholstered armchairs arranged around a low coffee table. An upright piano stood against the wall. The dining area featured a mahogany table and eight chairs under a modest crystal chandelier. There was also a china closet and a sideboard covered with family photographs. There was a plate of pastries on the coffee table.

Lavender Williams greeted us with a gracious smile. She invited us to sit in the armchairs, while she and her husband sat on the sofa. They were a striking couple, tall, dignified, dark-skinned with chiseled features. They reminded me of Michael Jordan and Michelle Obama.

"I'm so pleased to meet you, Congressman," said Lavender. "I have to

tell you that I was disappointed when you retired from the House. I had high hopes for you.”

“Well, I’m sorry to have disappointed you, Mrs. Williams. I guess I wasn’t cut out to be a politician.”

She flashed me a brilliant smile. “You didn’t disappoint me, Congressman. Not at all. I respected your decision. A man of your talents shouldn’t waste his time in Congress. It really was unrealistic to expect a Congress of altruistic, high-minded civil servants.”

“You have a lovely home, Mrs. Williams,” I said.

“Thank you so much. You can call me Lavender.”

“That’s very kind of you, but I prefer to keep my attorney-client relationships on a formal basis. I’ve found that it works better that way. But I would ask you to call me Mr. Taylor instead of Congressman. It brings back bad memories.”

She chuckled. “I hear you loud and clear,” she said. “So shall we get down to business? Do you think we have a case?”

I liked that she moved the conversation along without being aggressive. I also liked that Marvin was not inserting himself into the conversation. He knew his turn would come, since we had asked him to be at the meeting.

“We may,” I said. “But it’s a long shot at best.”

“But if you’re ready to do it, you must think there’s a chance.”

“Did Rabbi Gutmacher explain my motivation to you?”

“Actually, he did. Marvin and I are really sorry for your loss. He said you wanted to strike a blow against the AIP. I’m on board with that.”

“I’m pleased to hear it.” I looked at Marvin. “And you, Major Williams? Are you also on board?”

“Yes, sir!” he said. I thought for a moment that he would stand up and salute. “I fully support my wife’s decision, sir.”

“As I said, the case would be a real long shot. I’m motivated to do it despite the long odds. It’s the only meaningful thing I can do for my grandson. If we fail, at least I’ll know that I tried. Are you ready to get into

this on that basis? It will be a long, difficult and grueling process, and the chances for success are exceedingly slim.”

“I am,” said Lavender.

“Why?” I asked. “Is it because you want your job back?”

“That would be nice, but it’s a matter of principle.”

“Are you really convinced that the Bible is historical?”

“I am.”

“Are you a Christian?”

“Yes.”

“Does your faith have anything to do with it?”

“Maybe a little. It gives me a bias, but those who deny the truth of the Bible also have a bias. Wellhausen was a known anti-Semite.”

“And you disagree with him?”

“I accept the wisdom of the ages. The Bible was always accepted as the truth, at least in the core story if not in every detail. I accept it as the truth.”

“Were you told to desist?”

“I was.”

“But you continued to use the Bible in history class?”

“Yes.”

“Wouldn’t it have been easier to just let it go?”

Lavender exchanged a look with her husband before responding. “Look, Mr. Taylor, religion is the bedrock of the black community, especially in neighborhoods like this one. Most of our leaders are pastors. Our young people need Jesus. If you undermine the Old Testament, you discredit Jesus, because Jesus certainly believed in the Old Testament.”

“I understand,” I said, and I did. “But your position will not win the case for us. Anyway, let me ask you this. How’s your financial situation? Have you taken another job?”

“It’s still summer vacation. I’ll find something. In the meantime, I’m doing some tutoring. Between that and my husband’s army salary, we’ll manage.” She grinned and shrugged. “If we win, I’ll be able to retire and

send my kids to college without student loans. We're counting on you to do your magic, Mr. Taylor."

"I'll do my best, but I have a serious concern. There's a scenario in which our interests will not coincide. We're going to sue the principal of the Cushman School, the Board of Education, the City of New York and whoever else we can add to the list. It's possible that at some point the defendants will offer a settlement."

"All right," she said, drawing out the words into a question without a question mark.

"Let's say we sue for fifty million, and let's say they offer a settlement of three million just to save themselves the cost, the bother and the risk of a lengthy lawsuit. What would you say? Would you accept the settlement?"

She looked at her husband, and he looked at her.

"Let me address the question to you first, Major Williams," I said.

He pursed his lips before he answered. "I suppose I'd be inclined to accept. You know, a bird in hand and all that. Three million dollars is a lot of money. Of course, one million goes to you, but two million is also a lot of money. It would be completely up to my wife, but if she wanted to ask for my advice, I'd say yes."

"Thank you for an honest answer, Major Williams. And now you, Mrs. Williams. What would you do?"

"I know what you want me to say. You don't want a settlement, because that would defeat your purpose. I get it. I don't want a settlement either. But to be perfectly honest, if there was an offer of three million dollars on the table, would I turn it down? I can't say for sure."

I nodded. "You've both been honest with me, and I appreciate it. But I can't risk going down this road and ending with a settlement."

Lavender's face fell. "So you're turning down the case. It was too good to be true, but I understand. What if I gave you my word that I wouldn't accept a settlement? What if I gave it to you in writing?"

I shook my head. "It wouldn't work. If you chose to settle, I couldn't

stop you. There's only one way I can prevent you from settling."

She moved to the edge of her seat. "And how's that?"

"By making sure the award does not go to you but to someone else. I need you to sell your potential award, and any other financial benefit you may derive from the trial, to someone else before we even go to trial. Once it's out of your hands, you no longer have the power to settle the case. The one who purchases your rights will replace you regarding anything you may earn from the trial."

"But who would buy it?" she protested. "And how much is it worth?"

"I have a buyer for you. He will pay you two million dollars up front to be held in escrow until the end of the trial. The money is yours win or lose, as long as you carry through till the end. It's entirely yours. None of it goes to me. You can send your children to college and put away the rest for your retirement. It's a lot of money."

"Who is this buyer?"

"It's Rabbi Gutmacher's yeshivah. An anonymous donor has given him two million dollars for the purpose of buying your rights. If we win, the yeshivah will receive a large windfall. If we lose," I shrugged, "we lose. The donor is willing to take the chance. Isn't that so, rabbi?"

"Yes, it is, Mrs. Williams," said the rabbi. "I cannot reveal the donor's identity. All I can say is that he has deep pockets and that he believes strongly in what we are about to do."

"And he believes we will win?" asked Lavender.

"He believes we should try our best."

She turned to her husband. "Marvin, what do you say?"

"As I said before, a bird in hand. Two million is a lot of money. I say yes."

"So do I," she said. "I agree."

"In all fairness," I said, "I have to tell you that you have one more option. You can find a different attorney to represent you. You may make more money that way."

She shook her head. “No one in his right mind would take this case unless he was on a crusade. Mr. Taylor, you are our only option.”

This was my last chance to walk away. I didn’t.