

Chapter 17

“Mrs. Randall?” the short auburn haired man in the gray suit said, “I’m Agent Mortensen.” He held up an FBI badge for Karen to see. “This is Agent Michaels, from the IRS. Could we come in?”

Karen was stupefied. What did the FBI and IRS want with her? “Yes.” She pulled her bathrobe a little tighter around her neck. “By all means.” She stood aside to allow the two G-men to enter her living room.

Nine o’clock in the morning was a little early for Karen Randall. She was a child of the night. Her entire professional career had started at seven in the evening. After show parties often lasted until dawn. She didn’t understand how people functioned at this ungodly hour of the day.

The buzzing of the door bell had been a rude awakening for her. She threw on her bathrobe and ran for the door. It must be something important to wake her in the middle of her night.

The shock of seeing two such handsome gentlemen at her door almost made up for interrupting her beauty sleep. But she wasn’t prepared for gentleman callers. She didn’t have a drop of makeup on. And a frumpy terrycloth robe was not what she would have chosen, had she known who was at her door. Her blue silk kimono would have displayed her blue eyes to much more advantage.

Lesson learned. She should just get rid of the terrycloth robe and only have flattering clothes in her closet.

“Mrs. Randall, we need to ask you a few questions about your husband,” Agent Mortensen was saying. “When was the last time you heard from him?”

Karen tried to focus on the topic at hand. “Would you gentlemen like a cup of coffee? I haven’t even had coffee yet.” She led her visitors into the living room and motioned for them to seat themselves. “Good heavens, I haven’t even brushed my teeth. Are you sure you wouldn’t rather come back when I’m prepared to receive visitors?”

“Ma’am, this is important. We need your cooperation now.”

Ma’am? That made Karen feel positively ancient. What were these men, in their early thirties?

Crap. They were young enough to be her sons. If she ever had sons.

“We can skip the coffee,” Agent Michaels, the good looking blond said. “When was the last time you heard from your husband?” He sat forward, notebook in hand, in the big green recliner.

Karen took a minute to look around the room and compose herself. This house was all Dick’s. She would never have gone for the faux-Mediterranean villa motif. *And the wicker furniture? Come on, Dick. This isn’t the Bahamas.*

“It’s been about three weeks now,” she said. “He came to Vegas the day he disappeared. He just flew in, got his truck and left. That’s the last time I saw or heard from him.”

“You sure you haven’t heard from him since then?” Mortensen had a ridiculous looking pencil-thin mustache. “He hasn’t called, texted, emailed?”

“No. He just dropped off the face of the earth. Why? Why is the FBI interested in him?”

“Did he ever talk to you about any off-shore accounts?” Michaels asked.

“Off-shore accounts. You mean like Switzerland or something? No. You have to realize that we didn’t live together. I was in my house in Vegas; he lived in this house in Seattle. We didn’t talk much.”

Off-shore accounts? Had Dick been stashing away money somewhere? That made sense. If he really did fake his death, then he’d need cash to get by on. And she knew Dick; he wouldn’t be satisfied with scraping by. He had to have stashed a bundle. Enough that he could buy a villa on some Caribbean island somewhere.

How could she get her hands on that cash? She had to call her detective. Maybe that Flaherty woman could find it for her.

“Your husband was behind on his taxes,” Michaels said. “We have reason to believe that he was laundering money for the mob. Drug, gambling and prostitution money.”

“No. Dick may not have been a model citizen, but he wasn’t mixed up with the mob.”

“Ma’am,” Mortensen said. “We have enough evidence to start proceedings to confiscate this house, all of his real property, his cars, shut down his businesses. If you don’t want that to happen, you better come clean with us.”

“Are you threatening me?” Karen felt the heat in her face. “Are you really threatening me? Well you get out. GET OUT!” She hated her squeaky voice and it was never worse than when she yelled. She could have been a movie star if not for that voice. “You go back to your bosses and tell them who they’re dealing with. I spend a lifetime in Vegas, working for every kind of shady character you can imagine, and I came out on top. You tell your bosses that if they’re going to threaten me, I’m a pro. They’re going to have to drop their amateur standings.”

Karen stood and pointed to the door.

The two G-men looked at each other.

“Get out. NOW” Karen shouted.

The men slowly rose and headed for the door.

“Mrs. Randall.” Mortensen turned at the doorway to face her. “You’re making a big mistake. We’re not your enemy. We want to find out what happened to your husband as much as you do.”

“GET OUT!” she stomped her foot.

“If you can think of anything that can help us, help you, give me a call. Here’s my card.”

Mortensen held out a business card.

Karen wrapped her hands around her midsection and just stared at him.

Agent Mortensen placed the card on a side table and left.

“Mr. Hardwick, I have a Mr. James Winston to see you.”

“Jennifer,” Chris said into the phone. “When are you going to stop calling me Mr. Hardwick? Every time you say that, I look around for my father.”

“I’m sorry . . . Chris . . . I know Mr. Winston isn’t on your schedule, but this might be important. Do you have time for a drop in?”

Chris rocked back in his black leather swivel chair. “Did he say what it was about?”

“He says it concerns Clayton Johnson-White.”

“Shit. I guess you better show him in.”

Chris looked around his office. It wasn’t too out of order. The chairs were free from papers, but stacks of manila file folders were piled on his desk. What the hell. It gave him the appearance of a busy attorney.

He took a quick glance at the LeRoy Neiman painting he had liberated from his dad’s house that now hung on his wall. Dad’s old boat, the *Defiant*, was clawing to windward, with her crew, all dressed in red foul weather gear, draped over the high side, white water everywhere. He loved that picture. The famous artist had painted it when Dad won the South Sound Series back in the Eighties.

What could this Winston joker want with Clayton? He wasn’t a Hollywood producer was he? Chris had fielded three calls from producers wanting to buy the rights to Clayton’s story this week.

“Mr. James Winston,” Jennifer said as she opened the door. She handed Chris Winston’s business card.

Chris appreciated the tall brunette’s long legs as she stepped aside to allow the mystery man to enter.

Chris sized him up. A small man, he looked extremely fit and wiry for his age. He looked to Chris like someone’s grandpa. His had an infectious, uneven toothed smile, walked with an air of self-

confidence and had thinning gray hair and blue eyes. Winston wore chinos, a short sleeve sport shirt and carried a tan jacket draped over his arm.

Chris looked at the business card. It said "James Winston, Fugitive Recovery Agent."

"Mr. Hardwick. I'm glad to meet you." Winston extended his hand. The small man's voice was so deep and round, it sounded like it was coming from a three hundred and fifty pound lineman.

"Come in, Mr. Winston. Sit down." Chris shook the proffered hand and waved towards one of the chairs in front of his desk. Chris didn't know what the meeting was about, so he retreated to safety behind his desk. "And please, call me Chris. When people say 'Mr. Hardwick' around here, they're talking about my father."

Winston chuckled. "You can call me Jim."

"I can see why," Chris said. "When I heard your name, I expected the Alabama quarterback."

"I had the name before he did. Besides, I'm the wrong color," Winston chuckled again. "But I sure wouldn't mind having his bank account."

A jet on final for Sea-Tac International Airport caught Chris's eye as it flew past the window. There were advantages to having an office on the sixty-fourth floor.

"What can I do for you Mr. . . Ah, Jim?"

The small man shot Chris a winning smile. "I'm looking for Clayton Johnson-White."

"Aren't we all?" Chris asked. He couldn't help but like this man.

"I'm a bail bond recovery agent, Chris."

"I can see," Chris said, waving Winston's business card in the air. "A bounty hunter."

"Yes. I suppose you could say that. I make my living catching people who have skipped bail. On rare occasions I'm hired to find fugitives with warrants out for their arrest. Mr. Johnson-White is one of those occasions."

"I see." Chris did not see. Who would hire a bounty hunter to catch Clayton? He hadn't jumped bail. "Just who hired you?"

"The good people of Island County," Winston said. "They're sick and tired of Mr. Johnson-White breaking and entering their homes, stealing their belongings and making a mockery of law enforcement."

No need to give anything away to this guy, Chris thought. "Why hire a bounty hunter? Can't the local police handle the job?"

"Winston leaned back in his chair and crossed his right leg over his left knee. "Apparently not. Mr. Johnson-White is not their top priority. They only respond when they get a call, besides, he's out of their jurisdiction now."

"If he's out of their jurisdiction, why is anyone worrying about it? He's someone else's problem now."

"The Camano Island residents take this personally. They want him caught. Apprehending Mr. Johnson-White is now my mission in life. I will do nothing else until I capture him."

Chris stacked the papers he was working on and set them to the side. "I see. This is all very interesting Mr . . . Jim. But why are you telling me this?"

"You're his attorney. You can contact him. When you talk to him, tell him I'm coming after him. He can make this a lot easier. It will be much more pleasant for him if he turns himself in. He doesn't want me to have to drag him into the court house kicking and screaming."

Chris took another look at the bounty hunter. "You're what, five-six? Weight about one sixty? Clayton's got to be at least six-one. He must weight over two hundred pounds. I think you might have a little problem dragging him anywhere."

Winston laughed out loud. "Don't let appearances fool you, Chris. I've been doing this job for a long time. I've brought Hell's Angels back in to court. I know what I'm doing."

“You know, you can’t use deadly force.” Chris said.

“Not my intention. First of all, I have the same constraints on me a peace officer has. I can only use deadly force if my life or the life of another is in danger. But I have no intention of hurting Mr. Johnson-White. I just want to bring him back for trial.”

Somehow, Chris believed that this little man would have no problem bringing Clayton back, if he could find him.

“Do you know where your client is, Chris?” Winston leaned forward as if he were sharing some great secret.

“*Jim*, you know I can’t tell you that. Even if I did know where Clayton is, it would be covered by attorney/client privilege.”

“But you can contact him?”

“I told you, I can’t answer that.”

“Well, if you do communicate with him, send him my message. It would be better for all concerned if he turned himself in peacefully.”

Federal Way, Washington reminded Karen of Vegas. Actually, it might be a little more like Southern California. The Beach Hut Coffee Shack was on Pacific Highway South, one huge strip mall just south of Sea-Tac airport.

Since she took over running Dick’s business, Karen was a constant presence in all of her coffee stands. Her girls were learning that Mama was watching. No more skimming the profits. No more making sales without ringing them up.

“Shannon, how come you’re dairy is so high?” Karen asked her lead barista.

Shannon Worth, a thirtyish woman with drug store blonde hair and silicone implants was nonetheless one of the smartest women Karen had encountered in Dick's little tittie empire.

"Dick always insisted we do business with Northwest Farms. I kept telling him that they were overcharging us."

"Well, get on the phone today. Call Darigold and get their price list. Then call Northwest and tell them that if they don't match Darigold's prices, we're switching vendors."

"Yes, ma'am." Shannon beamed.

Karen knew that her prize employee was interested in more than running a barista stand. Karen had plans. She was going to legitimize Dick's business. Be a good neighbor. No more lewd shows or Tassel Tuesdays. Sure, the girls could still strut their stuff, but it would be rated strictly PG-17. No nudity, no special shows.

She liked the idea that Judy up in Everett came up with. She had three interviews set up for this afternoon. Chippendales. It would be a revolution in the sexpresso business. She would have as many women lining up at her stands as men.

With her brother, Danny's, help, she was slowly turning the business around. They had better controls now. She knew what kind of revenue her stands were producing. Thanks to Danny, she could see which were profitable and which were not.

The Kent stand had been a mess. After she fired half the crew, it suddenly turned around. Danny sniffed out the cheats. He somehow knew who was stealing from her.

Satisfied with her visit, she picked up her purse and headed for the door.

"You guys are doing a great job. Keep it up." She smiled at her baristas. "And Shannon, that boob job looks great. I'd never know those double D's were fakes if I didn't know."

Shannon smiled and waved. "Thanks."

Karen walked the few paces to Dick's Ford Excursion SUV. The big blue vehicle was a beast. More truck than car. Why he wanted such a monstrosity, she didn't know. As soon as she could arrange to fly back to Vegas, she would drive her Lexus back to Seattle. It suited her much better. She could also sell the Excursion for big bucks. Every little bit helps.

Little by little, she was becoming accustomed to the idea that Dick was gone. Whether he was dead or had just skipped town, he wasn't coming back. That left her free reign to fix all of his mistakes and make his little business a profitable money maker.

Her mind was a thousand miles away. She was listening to 80's rock on an FM station and reliving her days on stage. She didn't notice the black Lincoln Town Car following her.

As she came opposite the acres of parking lots around Boeing Field, the Town Car accelerated and pulled next to her. It honked its horn. The driver inched into her lane.

"Watch out!" Karen shouted, hit her horn and swerved to the right.

The Town Car crowded her even more.

Karen pulled onto the road's shoulder.

The Town car continued to force her off the road.

A telephone pole loomed in front of her. She hit the brakes.

The Town Car slid in behind her, blocking her in.

She reached for her purse. She didn't carry a gun, but she had a can of pepper spray and a cell phone.

A dark man in jeans and a leather jacket pulled open her door.

"Stay back," she yelled, holding out the can of pepper spray.

The man laughed, took two steps back and pulled the biggest gun Karen had ever seen from under his jacket.

“Mrs. Randall, Tony Lamont wants to talk with you. Would you be so kind as to exit your vehicle?”

“Tony Lamont?” Karen’s resolve wavered. The man’s gun certainly trumped her pepper spray.

“Get out please,” the man said.

Karen grabbed her purse and climbed down from the big SUV.

“Right this way.” The man led Karen to the passenger side of the Town Car and opened the back door. “Get in.” He waved the gun at her.

Karen couldn’t breathe, couldn’t think.

“Mrs. Randall?” The man said.

Karen looked in the back seat. A large swarthy man in an expensive suit sat there. She hesitated a moment.

The man with the gun gave her a gentle push.

She slowly climbed into the car.

“Mrs. Randall, pleased to meet you.” The swarthy man extended his hand. “I’m Tony Lamont. You have my apology for this unorthodox method of introduction. I needed to speak with you in private.”

Karen stared at his hand for a moment. He didn’t seem to present any threat. She had handled dozens of gumbas just like him. She took his hand.

“Mr. Lamont.”

“I suppose you want to know why I wanted to meet you.”

“The thought had crossed my mind.”

Lamont leaned back in the luxurious leather seats. “I work for the Caglione family. I’m kinda running things for Mr. Caglione while his is, uh, indisposed.”

Caglione family? Who the hell were the Caglione family?

"I see from the look on your face that you're not familiar with the Cagliones."

"I'm not from around here. I'm from Vegas."

"Yes, I know that." Lamont leaned close to Karen. "You see, Mrs. Randall, the Cagliones run Seattle. We have, ah, representatives everywhere. We own the City Council. We have lots of legitimate businesses."

"Okay." Karen was nobody's fool. This guy was Mafia all the way.

"Your husband, Richard Randall, he was doing a little work for us."

Karen stared at the Mafioso for a moment. "Uh-huh."

"He had some of our money. Not a great amount, mind you, but enough for us to be concerned."

"Okay."

"Seven million dollars. Your husband owes us seven million dollars."

"That's not a lot?" Karen gasped. How had Dick gotten his hands on that much Mafia money?

"We need it back, Mrs. Randall. We're not stupid. Your husband's little drama isn't fooling anyone. You know where he is. You know where he stashed the money. Don't you?"

"NO!" Karen slunk back in her seat. "I didn't know about this. I don't know anything."

"When you talk to him, you let him know that we had this little chat." Lamont smiled benevolently. "You tell him that we want our money back. It will be bad for him, for you, for everyone, if we have to go looking for him, if we have to find the money ourselves."

"I . . . I don't talk to him. I haven't heard from him. We never talked anyway. He was here in Seattle, I was in Vegas. I don't know anything about his business."

"Well, Mrs. Randall, that is very unfortunate for you, because what I said still goes. If he doesn't return our money, it will go very bad for you."