

Chapter 6

Abe Weinstein loved his offices in the Skinner Building. The historic landmark housed the world-famous Fifth Avenue Theater and had underground concourses to both Union Square and Rainer Square. He could walk to shops and restaurants without ever having to get wet.

He loved the classic feel of the building, built in 1926, but enjoyed the modern remodels and updates that made it class A office space.

“Mr. Weinstein, Mr. Randall is here to see you,” his receptionist said over the intercom.

“Very well, Rachel. Show him to my office.”

Weinstein felt like he needed to hide behind his massive oak desk today. He did not have good news for his client.

The door opened and Rachel, a good looking woman approaching sixty, ushered Dick Randall into the office.

“Dick, good to see you.” Weinstein rose and extended his hand. “Come in, sit down. Would you like coffee?”

“I’m not in the mood for coffee,” Randall said.

Weinstein waved his receptionist away. “That will be all, Rachel.”

He took a moment to compose himself. He looked around his office. Everything neat and in its place. He loved organization. He just couldn’t do it himself. He didn’t know how he would get on without Rachel and his legal secretary, Joshua, to keep his life in order.

The dark paneled walls with classic brass lights gave the office a sense of decorum. The office felt substantial. He wanted his clients to believe in him.

“Well, what’s the news?” Randall asked.

Weinstein took a breath. "I'm afraid it isn't good, Dick." He took a sip of cold coffee from his cup, just to buy another second. "I talked to the judge and the prosecuting attorney. They're going to throw the book at you."

"What?" Randall's face showed genuine surprise. This wasn't what he had expected.

"It's a political thing. The church people in Everett want all the bikini barista joints shut down, but the city won't do it. You're not breaking any laws. So, the judge figures that he'll make an example out of you. He wants to put you away for ten years and issue a fine of twenty thousand dollars."

Randall sat in stunned silence. He shook his head. He opened his mouth, but no words came out.

"I think you can get out in five years for good behavior."

That didn't seem to comfort his client. It was time to drop the other foot.

"I heard from the US Attorney too."

"Oh God."

"He's going to prosecute you on money laundering charges. He says he has enough evidence to put you away for twenty years."

Dick Randall just hung his head.

"I do have good news though."

Randall looked up.

"The US Attorney offered you a deal. If you'll turn state's evidence and testify against the Caglione family, he can get you a reduced charge. You can serve it concurrently with your exploitation time. You could be out in five years."

"Are you nuts?" Randall's face was suddenly animate. "Even if I lasted five years in prison, which I highly doubt, I'd be a dead man the day I walked out of the joint. The Cagliones play for keeps. They don't take kindly to stool pigeons."

“That’s the beauty of the deal. The US Attorney will put you in the witness protection program. They’ll relocate you; give you a new identity. . . .”

“You’re shittin’ me, right? Witless protection? Do you know what that means? They’d put me in some Podunk little town in Idaho and get me a job as greeter at Wal-Mart. I think I’d rather be dead.”

Weinstein got up from behind his desk and walked around to his client. “Dick, you’ve got to think about this. Take it seriously. You’re talking about the rest of your adult life here. What are you, fifty or so? By the time you got out of the joint, you’d be an old man. Do you really want that?”

“Abe, I’m not stupid. I always knew that there were risks. Let me think about this for a few days. When do they have to hear back?”

“Take the weekend. I can get back to them on Monday.”

The juvenile court room didn’t have the stuffy feel of superior court. For one thing, there was no jury box. For another, the room was trimmed in lightly stained Douglass Fir. The soft yellow color was much more relaxing than the heavy stained wood in adult court.

In fact, the court room had been specifically designed to be more inviting and less threatening. The purpose of juvenile court was not to punish, but to rehabilitate. To help the young offenders get back on the right path to a productive adulthood.

The drive to Coupeville, the county seat of Island County, took Chris more than two hours, including a ferry ride from Mukilteo to Clinton on Whidbey Island. Once on the other side, Chris turned his Porsche Boxster loose on Highway 20 up the long Island. This was the kind of road the low-slung sports car had been built for. The pleasant drive gave Chris a chance to gather his thoughts.

He took a deep breath before walking up the aisle between the spectator benches and entering the exalted realm of the attorneys. This was his first “real” case. Okay, it was just a juvie hearing, but this was the first time he would stand before a judge on his own, the first time that someone’s fate would be in his hands.

He walked through the swinging gate and turned to his right to the defendant’s table. He placed his brown leather brief case on the table and pulled out the chair. He stopped for a moment and looked around the room. He wanted to remember this moment.

Years from now, when he was old and jaded, he wanted to remember how he had started out, how the butterflies attacked his stomach. He didn’t want success to go to his head.

“Mr. Hardwick, you’re here.” Natalie White was dressed in a nice blue blouse and white slacks. Her light blue wind breaker was draped over her arm.

“Please call me Chris.” Chris stepped back through the swinging gate to talk with his client’s mother. He felt silly having a woman old enough to be his mother call him “Mister.”

“Where’s Clay?”

“He needed to use the little boy’s room.” Natalie sat in the first row of benches, behind the defense table. “He’ll be here in a second.”

There was a stirring at the front of the room. A court clerk, the bailiff and the prosecutor all entered the room from the side door. The clerk’s arms were filled with a stack of file folders.

The prosecutor walked over to Chris.

“Judy Wong,” she said and extended her hand. “I’m surprised that HB&J would be involved in a case like this.”

Judy was a fortyish Chinese-American woman. She had a plain face and a straight up and down body with no hint of a curve anywhere. Her dark black hair was cut in a short style that pointed towards her chin. The top of her head just barely reached Chris’s chest.

"Hi, Judy," Chris took her hand. "Chris Hardwick."

"Hardwick? Wow! HB&J sent their first team."

"Hardly," Chris laughed. "Our client is a nephew of one of the partners. He wanted me to watch out for his rights."

"This is just a preliminary hearing," Judy said. "The judge will want to know the facts of the case and decide if there's enough evidence to continue to trial. I'm hoping that we can find a way to eliminate that possibility. I don't think a trial is in anyone's best interest."

"What did you have in mind?" Chris's radar switched on. Anytime someone offered him an easy way out, it was usually not in his own best interest.

"Your boy is quite a thorn in the Island County Sherriff's side. He's got more complaints against him than Carter has pills. I don't see this being swept under the carpet."

"Have you talked to Clayton?" Chris looked around the court room to see if his client had arrived yet. "Do you have any idea of what his home life is like?"

"I've heard all of the sob stories before. The bottom line is that he has become a nuisance to the community. We need to get him off the streets."

"That's a little harsh, don't you think?"

"Well, we also need to get the boy on the right track. I know how smart he is. We need to get him back in school, get him an education. He has the potential to really contribute to society. I hate to see it wasted."

Chris ran his hands through his long, blond locks. He noticed the look that Judy gave him.

Hmmm . . . do I have an advantage here? Chris knew how he looked. His crisp black suit hung well from his broad shoulders. He towered over the diminutive Asian attorney. *Should I use my looks to my client's advantage?*

“Maybe we could meet after court?” he heard himself saying. “For a cup of coffee. To discuss the case. I’m sure we could work out a satisfactory resolution.”

“That would be nice. . .”

At that moment, the back doors to the courtroom swung open and Clayton Johnson-White stood surveying his surroundings.

He looked like some Norse god, walking into the room. He was almost as tall as Chris and put together like a bodybuilder. He wore blue slacks, a white shirt with a red and gray tie and a gray jacket. He almost looked like a contributing member of society; Natalie had dressed him well for the occasion.

He walked up the aisle. As he passed his mother, she stood and reached for him.

“Back off Ma’am!” the bailiff shouted.

“What???” Natalie shrunk back in horror.

“Don’t touch the defendant.” The bailiff flew across the courtroom in three steps. He opened the swinging gate and reached for Clayton. “It’s against court room rules.”

“Keep your hands off me!” Clayton pulled away.

The bailiff put his hand on the Billy club on his belt. “Settle down son, and step to the defense table.”

Chris inserted himself between his client and the bailiff. “Easy, Clay. It’s okay. Just court room procedure. Com’on in and sit down.”

Clayton eyed his attorney, then shot a hateful stare at the bailiff. He shrugged and slowly sauntered to the defense table.

With order restored, the bailiff returned to his post by the side door.

“All rise,” the bailiff said. “Court is now in session.”

The judge, an elderly woman with short gray hair and an irrepressible smile, entered the court room from the side door. She walked to her bench and picked up the gavel. Smacking it once on the desk, she said, "You may be seated."

The court clerk handed her a folder. "The first case, your honor, is Clayton Johnson-White."

The judge pulled the set of reading glasses that dangled around her neck to her nose. She studied the file folder.

"Are both attorneys present?" she asked.

"Judy Wong, for the state."

"Christopher Hardwick for the defense."

"Very well, Ms. Wong, you may proceed."

"Your honor, the state will prove that the defendant, a juvenile residing on Camano Island in Island County, is a menace to society."

That's a little harsh, Chris thought.

"He has repeatedly broken into vacation homes. He has used the facilities, stolen food, blankets and clothing. He is virtually unsupervised and not in school."

The hearing didn't last long. The judge quickly set a trial date and called for the next case.

Karen Randall pulled into the passenger pickup area at McCarran International Airport just outside of Las Vegas in her steel blue Lexus GS300. Why Dick wanted her to pick him up was a mystery to her. Couldn't he just grab a cab?

After all, the trip to the airport was a major inconvenience. Not that she had anything planned. She would have spent the afternoon lounging by the pool, maybe spending a little time on the tread mill or elliptical trainer, just enough to keep her in shape.

But keeping in shape was becoming harder and harder for the former Las Vegas show girl. Now in her late fifties, she feared aging and dreaded the day when she would have to change her hair from golden blonde to silver gray.

Her cell phone buzzed and she pushed the button on the steering wheel. "Dick? Are you here?" She spoke to the mic built into the dash.

"Yeah. I've got my bag. Pick me up at the Alaska gate."

"Okay. I'll be right there."

Karen didn't get out of the car. She just pulled to the curb and let Dick put his roll-on bag and carry-on in the trunk, then pulled out of the pickup area, headed back towards the city.

"How was the flight?"

"Same as usual," Dick said. "Fortunately, it's only a couple of hours. I can stand being cooped up in a plane for that long."

She had to admit that Dick looked pretty good. He wore tan slacks and a blue jacket over an open collared pull over. His hair was more gray than brown these days, but he still had that devilish twinkle in his eyes.

"How long are you going to be in Vegas?" she asked her husband.

"Just today. I need to pick up an espresso machine I have at the rental house. I'll load it in the truck and get going right away. I need to be back in Seattle on Monday for court."

It was a short drive from the airport to their Spring Valley home just outside of the downtown area. Karen pulled into the circular driveway of their four thousand square foot home.

"Here we are, home sweet home."

The rambling one-story was as tall as a two-story house. The great room had a high arched ceiling that made it feel like a cathedral. It was Dick's idea, to build such a grand house. He wanted to show off his money and power. Not that Karen minded a little bling. She just wouldn't have thought of investing all their money in a house.

"Thanks, Babe." Dick got out and opened the trunk.

Karen stood by the hood of the car and waited to see what her estranged husband would do next. "What's the deal with court on Monday?" she asked.

"Bull shit. I've got a sentencing hearing. Some trumped up charges. I'm here without the prosecution's permission. You need to keep quiet about this. I could get in a lot of trouble for jumping bail if they found out I left they state."

"Bail? Sentencing? Dick, what have you gotten into?"

He walked up the sidewalk and opened the front door. "Like I said, it's bull shit. One of my girl's was under age. I didn't know it. She had fake ID. They pulled me up on exploiting a minor charges."

Karen followed Dick inside. The coolness of the air-conditioning felt good on her skin. "But you can make it go away, right?"

If Dick went to jail, how would he continue to support her life-style? It took some real money to keep the house, the car and her stuff. She didn't mind that Dick was living in Seattle, in fact, she preferred it. That way, he was rarely around to criticize her choices, to make her do the kind of boring stuff that he used to do.

And she didn't have to see him messing around with the other women. Oh yes, she knew about them. The bastard couldn't keep his pants zipped. But at least, when he was a thousand miles away, he didn't flaunt it in her face.

She thought about filing for divorce again. That's why she divorced him the first time. But it was too draining. Besides, she had the benefits of his money without the drag of having him around all the time.

"I don't know about this one," Dick was saying. "It might not go away. My lawyer is trying to work out a deal with the prosecutor, but he doesn't want to budge. I may have to do something about it myself."

"What can you do?"

"I don't know yet. I'm thinking about it."

"Well don't think too long. How will you make the house payments if you're in jail?"

"Shit, Karen, don't you ever think about anything but yourself?" He slammed his carry-on bag down on the hallway table. "I'm facing jail time and you're worried about your prissy life-style?"

"Dick, honey, you know I'm worried about you. But your investment, you know, how will you take care of your investments here?"

"Worried about me my ass." He stomped into the kitchen and threw open the refrigerator door. "You're worried about your meal ticket. Well, honey, that ship has sailed." He pulled a beer from the fridge.

"Dick Randall, you don't have to be mean." She followed him out to the patio.

"Take a good look around you." He swept the view with the beer bottle in his hand. "You won't be seeing this for long. The bank sent me a notice of foreclosure."

"What? Foreclosure? How? Why?"

Dick plopped himself down on a padded pool-side chaise lounge. "I'm kinda behind on the payments. Things have been a little tough. I had a cash-flow problem."

Karen stared at her husband for a moment. "Behind on the payments? Dick! How could you? This is our home. What about all those other investments? The rental house, the house in Seattle. Are you behind on them too? Or did you just stop making the payment on *my* house?"

Dick sipped his beer and hung his head. "All of them. I'm behind on all of them. The bank says it will foreclose on all of them if I don't bring the payments current in thirty days."

"So what are you going to do about it? You're supposed to be the big wheeler-dealer. How are you going to fix this?"

"Not my biggest problem." Dick stood. "I've got bigger fish to fry. I need to take care of this jail thing before I can handle anything else." He started towards the door.

"Richard Randall, don't you dare walk out on me. I want to know what you're going to do."

He kept on walking through the house.

"Come back here . . ." she shouted to his back. "You . . . you . . . bastard."

Randall took his bag with him to the garage. He tossed the roll-on and the carry-on into the back seat of his 2003 Toyota Pre-Runner pickup. The keys were hanging on the wall where he had left them.

The truck started on the first try. Good old Toyotas. They always started, no matter how long you let them sit.

His rental unit was across town. Early afternoon traffic wasn't too bad and he backed into the driveway before sunset.

His tenants never complained that his stuff took up one of the stalls in the two-car garage. Rusty Olsen was home and helped him load the expensive brass espresso machine into the back of the truck.

“Thanks, Rusty. I can tie her down.” Randall took a coil of rope from behind the back seat and carefully secured his prize possession.

“Where you takin’ this Mr. Randall?” Rusty asked.

“Back to Seattle. I’m opening a new barista stand and I need this machine for it. This one’s going to be something special. Really up-scale. Seattle’s a crazy market for coffee. Seems like everyone’s addicted and they don’t care what they pay. I’m gonna clean up with this bad boy.”

He tied the last knots, said goodbye to his tenant and took off down the road.

He had hours ahead of him. Starting out at the end of the day wasn’t such a bad idea. He could cover most of the desert in the cool of the night.