**29.**

***Donna, Steve, and Mr. President***

*“****P****aul, you want me to do what?”*

**D**espite the expected response from his wife, the tone of it startled Paul as he sat across from her in her office at the bank. Donna’s reaction amused Bobby Ray, and it made him laugh as he had also expected a similar response from her.

“I told you, Paul, I knew she’d react this way,” Bobby Ray said as he continued to chuckle over Donna’s reaction to their request.

Donna quickly turned in her chair to face the laughter which now greeted her. “Bobby Ray, this isn’t funny! I can’t believe what you two are asking me to do. What if Mr. Melkin catches me going through his desk, or what if someone else sees me, I could get fired for doing that! What am I saying - I would get fired for doing that! You guys are supposed to arrest people for doing what you want me to do; you’re not supposed to be encouraging people to do things like this!”

As Paul tried to calm his wife down so everyone in the bank was not hearing what they were discussing, Bobby Ray spoke to her.

“Donna, you’re absolutely right, but if it means solving a series of brutal murders, and hopefully preventing a few others from occurring as well, then I’ll get the Pope to commit a burglary for me if it will help!”

Bobby Ray’s comment caused Donna to see the fix they were in. She also began to realize what they wanted her to do might actually prevent someone else from being murdered. The thought of helping to prevent another life from being lost quickly got her attention.

“OK, tell me what you want me to do. I sure hope there’s some kind of amnesty program that goes with this, because I don’t have a good feeling about what you’re asking me to do!”

Donna had been only half-kidding with her last remark as she had no desire to have her name and photo splashed across the local papers if she was caught red-handed doing what she was now being asked to do. The embarrassing thought of seeing her arrest photo in one of the local papers nearly caused her to say no to what needed to be done.

Over the next twenty minutes, Paul and Bobby Ray explained the plan they had concocted. It was a plan to get the evidence they needed so they could hopefully convince a sympathetic judge to see the case they had built against Richard Melkin. With Donna’s help, they hoped to meet the minimum threshold necessary to establish enough probable cause for a multiple count murder indictment to be issued for their suspect.

Donna quietly listened as Bobby Ray, for the most part, explained to her what they needed her to do for them. As he finished speaking, she could not keep quiet any longer as both the excitement of what she was being asked to do, and her own nervousness, now caused her to be on edge.

“That’s all you want me to do?” She asked sarcastically. “Why not ask me to leave the front door open to my branch so people can help themselves to whatever they want in my vault after I go home. I might be able to explain that screw-up to someone out there, but I’m not so sure I can explain my way out of being caught rifling through the bank president’s desk. Heck, I’m not even sure if I’m allowed to be in there by myself, yet alone committing a crime in there! *Lord, this is crazy!*”

Paul and Bobby Ray allowed Donna to vent for a few minutes as a means of allowing her to calm down.

Looking back at her husband, Donna let him know her feelings about what they were asking her to do. “I’m not so sure I can handle this secret agent stuff you want me to do for you. I’m real happy just being a boring bank manager! Can’t you get Tom Cruise, or Harrison Ford, or somebody else to do this for you?”

Paul knew his wife was just blowing off steam from the shock of learning what they needed her to do. He was still very confident that when push came to shove Donna could pull off what they needed her to do. It was just getting her to that moment which now caused him some concern.

“Hon, you’ll be great! We both know you can do this. Just think of a reason to be there in the event someone sees you in his office. I’m sure they will believe any excuse you tell them.”

Not currently blessed with a great deal of confidence at the moment, Donna forced a sarcastic response to Paul’s last statement. “Yeah, sure! My problem is that I’m not as good at bullshitting people as you two are!”

Her comment drew a quick laugh, and an equally quick response from Bobby Ray. “Paul, you don’t think of me as a bullshitter, do you? I can’t believe your wife thinks of me like that!” As he finished, Bobby Ray feigned a sense of being hurt from Donna’s comment.

“You’re not really a bullshitter as much as you are a great liar! I’ve always liked that quality in you, Bobby Ray!”

Paul’s comment caused the three of them to laugh, and for a few moments it helped to make his wife forget how nervous she still was. After a few more moments of laughter, Donna remembered that she had an appointment to get ready for. Standing up, she began to walk Bobby Ray and her husband out to the lobby of the branch. Finished saying good-by to them, it was her turn to make a request of them.

“Boys, I’ll be out of here by five-fifteen tonight. Both of you are then going to buy me copious amounts of wine, followed by an expensive dinner, at the Grumpy Sailor. After hearing what you want me to do, I’m going to need several glasses to help me calm down!”

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Standing in the bank’s parking lot after leaving Donna, Bobby Ray and Paul spent the next several minutes on their cell phones making the calls they each needed to make. While Bobby Ray made his to follow up on the leads that were being run down, one of Paul’s calls was to set up an important meeting later that evening. Finishing with his calls first, Bobby Ray waited patiently for his friend to finish with his.

“Well? What’d he say?” Bobby Ray anxiously asked as Paul finished with his last call.

“It’s all good. He’s going to meet us at the Grumpy Sailor in about two hours. I told him we were going to meet Donna there after she gets out of work, and that we will likely stay there and have dinner as well. You know how much he likes her, so don’t worry, he’ll be there! I’ll talk things over with him before you get there, and then we’ll go on from there, OK?”

Paul’s comments brought a quick smile to Bobby Ray’s face. “He helps us out like you think he will, and I’ll give that old boy whatever he wants. Please, tell me this is gonna work out!”

“I’m not making any rash promises, but you know how he feels about the entire area. Reading about these murders, ones taking place so close to where he’s lived for his entire life, is likely bothering him tremendously. He’s fiercely proud of this section of South Carolina, and rightfully so. With the folks he knows who live and work in the area around here; he’ll know someone who can help us out. For now, let’s just hope it works. Enough talk, I’ve got to go. I’ll see you there by five-thirty or so.” As Paul started walking to his car, he turned and jokingly yelled over his shoulder to Bobby Ray. “Don’t be late! I might need some back-up on this!”

“I’ll be there, Partner! Don’t you worry about that!”

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“Hey, Paul! Over here!”

The unmistakable voice of Steve Alcott was easily heard over the rest of the voices that were engaged in several different conversations at the Grumpy Sailor’s long wooden bar. Paul was surprised how fast he heard it after just walking in through the front door. He wondered if his friend had been keeping a sharp eye out for him or had he just looked up and saw him at the right moment when he had come into the bar. Either way, Steve’s voice was one of those few voices in life that always brought a quick smile to Paul’s face. It had made him smile the very first time they met, and the effect had been the same every other time they had gotten together as well. His elderly friend was one of the few people in life that he had taken an immediate liking to.

“Good friends make you smile when you get together.” Paul thought as he made his way across the bar area to the corner booth where his friend was already seated. As he did, he gave a friendly wave to Ethel Comer, one of the two bartenders who were busy at work filling Happy Hour drink orders. He had also come to be friendly with her through his friendship with Steve. His wave only received a quick wink from her as she was busy taking drink orders from four sweaty guys dressed in flashy bright colored golf attire. It was obvious they had just gotten done playing golf at one of the local courses nearby and were now seeking refuge in the air conditioning from a still warm afternoon. They were obviously there to cool down and to have a couple of drinks.

Wearing a warm smile on his face as he sat in his private booth with his back to one of the walls, Steve extended his right hand to his friend as he approached. “Paul, as always, it’s good to see you!”

“I assure you the pleasure is all mine, Steve. You feeling OK?” Paul noticed his friend had not stood up to shake his hand as he normally did every time they met. As he asked about Steve’s health, he also noticed a black wooden cane leaning against the back wall of the booth.

“Please forgive my lack of manners for not standing up to shake your hand like I should, but this bad back of mine has been hurting me for the past couple of days. Getting in and out of this booth, just like getting in and out of my car, seems to be when it bothers me the most. I should be fine in a day or two, but it’s got my attention right now!”

“You hardly have to apologize, Steve. I’ve had a few bouts over the years with my back as well. I know what you’re going through. You have my sympathy!”

Paul’s comments brought another smile to Steve’s face. “Thanks, buddy! Your pretty wife still coming?”

“Yep! In fact, I’m somewhat here on her orders. It all depends on how things are going, but Bobby Ray’s also probably going to join us later as well.”

“Good! Good! I like that young man! He’s a character, that’s for sure!”

As Paul and Steve continued with their small talk, Ethel came over to the booth carrying their drink orders. They were ones they had yet to order. For Steve, it was his second of the day.

“I took a guess, and brought you both what you normally drink. If you want something else,” Ethel said playfully to them, “then go make it yourselves! I’m shorthanded this afternoon, and the tips are better from my paying customers than they are from you two!”

Paul had come to expect such a comment from her as he knew she had a special fondness for his friend sitting across the booth from him. Steve had kept her on in the past as a bartender when others might not have tolerated some of her antics. Now calmed down in life, she realized how kind her boss had been to her over the past several years.

“Paul, I’m going to have to do something about her someday, aren’t I?” Steve liked the way Ethel teased him occasionally; enjoying it almost as much as the teasing he gave her every time he saw her.

Turning to look at her boss as she walked back to her other customers, Ethel hollered one last comment in Steve’s direction. “Please, I beg you! Please fire me! Maybe then I can find a job that at least pays me a decent wage!” The target of her good-natured barb, as did Paul, chuckled over the comment she had made.

After taking a couple of hits of their drinks, and after finishing up with their small talk, Steve then asked Paul about the call he had made to him earlier in the day. “You sounded a little excited, perhaps nervous, when you called me this afternoon. Everything OK?”

“Yep, everything’s great. Well, for the most part it is. I called you because Bobby Ray and I need a huge favor.”

Over the next forty minutes, Paul outlined to Steve parts of the murder investigations that had taken place. Without explaining every little detail, each of the four murders was discussed. The discussion included the manner of death for each victim, and the locations where each of the bodies had been dumped. A quick report on the status of each of the investigations was briefly explained as well. As he described parts of them to his friend, Paul advised him that some of the information he had just shared had not been released to the public as yet. Perhaps the most important aspect which Steve learned was that the investigators now considered the murders to be the work of a serial killer.

Without interrupting, Steve listened quietly until Paul took a moment to take a hit on his mug of Coors Light. “Sounds pretty gruesome, even more so than what the papers have been saying. Got any suspects?”

“Yeah, we have. In fact, we just developed a local guy as our prime suspect. It’s looking pretty good for us right now.”

“You folks close to nailing this bastard?”

“Pretty close. Donna is going to put one of the last nails in his coffin for us pretty soon.”

Nearly choking on his scotch and water, Steve looked incredulously across the booth’s table at Paul. His brown eyes flashed a look of concern. “Donna’s going to do what? What’s she got to do with this trouble of yours?”

Paul took another hit on his beer before answering his friend’s question. “Steve, do you remember when we had lunch with Donna at Hannah Bananas a few weeks ago?”

“Of course I do! I enjoyed myself a great deal that day. I always enjoy my time when I’m with you two.”

Paul briefly smiled at Steve’s compliment as he tried to figure out how to explain the rest of what he had to say to his friend. As he struggled with his thoughts, Steve noticed Paul’s discomfort.

“Paul, you OK?”

“Yeah, I’m fine, thanks.” Pausing a couple of moments as he made sure no one was sitting too close to themtobe able tolisten in on their conversation, Paul then told his friend the news he had called him about. “Steve, what I’m going to tell you cannot, and I repeat, cannot, be discussed with anyone else. I need to know you understand that, OK?”

Not sure of what to say, or what to expect, Steve hesitated for a moment before answering. “Yeah, sure, I understand. Is it as serious as it sounds?”

“As serious as a heart attack. Maybe even more so!” Paul regretted his words as soon as he uttered them. Steve had recently experienced a few minor scares with his heart, and each occasion had frightened him significantly. Paul’s analogy, while meant to be just that, had been insensitive and in poor taste considering what his friend had just been through. “Steve, I apologize, I . . . . I phrased that all wrong. I’m sorry if . . . .”

Dismissing his friend’s attempt of apologizing with a wave of his hand, Steve stopped Paul from being able to finish. He knew what Paul’s words were intended to mean. Quickly he got the conversation back on track. “That serious, huh?”

Paul nodded his head in the affirmative as one way of answering Steve’s last question. “Yep, I’m afraid so. Let me ask you, do you remember who Donna pointed out to us that day when we had lunch together?”

Taking a moment to think back to the day they had met for lunch, Steve tried to recall who Paul was now referring to, but he could not.

“It was Richard Melkin. Remember?”

“Oh, yeah, sure I do. He was sitting there having lunch by himself. I remember explaining to both of you about the tough life he had growing up. I also told you how he had seen his father gunned down in front of him during a bank robbery that occurred in Georgetown so many years ago. What’s he got to do with this? Is he OK?”

“Steve, let’s just say he’s involved.” Pausing again to look around the bar to make sure no one was listening, Paul then asked. “Are you getting what I’m saying to you?”

It took a few moments, but Steve finally made the connection to what Paul had been trying to infer to him. “You’re telling me that . . . .”

Somewhat forcefully, Paul cut his friend off from saying another word. *“Don’t mention his name!”*

Already stunned by what he had just learned, Steve continued to listen as Paul filled him in with some of the other details which now linked Melkin to the murders.

As they continued to talk, Paul explained the role Donna was about to take part in to try and help them obtain the evidence they needed. Hearing how this evidence would help to remove any lingering doubts about who was responsible for the murders, Steve then learned the additional news about the red handkerchiefs being left at each of the scenes. Learning about the taunting notes that had also come with each of the four murders was especially troublesome for him.

Realizing the need to keep his voice from being heard by others, Steve spoke in a more hushed tone. “I can’t tell you how shocked I am to hear this! Richie has always been a loner, but I’ve always known him to be a quiet loner. He’s certainly not someone I would have ever associated with these terrible murders. Nor would I have ever associated him with any act of violence. Why is he doing this to these people? Has he just snapped or something?”

Paul sat quiet for a moment without offering any additional comments to the questions Steve had quizzically asked. He chose to remain quiet as it was time for his friend to absorb what he had been told. It was not the time for him to be hearing any more bad news.

After hearing the unsettling news that Paul explained to him about someone he had known for most of his life, Steve tried composing himself. As he did, and out of concern for Donna, he stared at Paul.

“Are you sure she’s going to be able to do this without getting caught?” Steve’s concern for Donna’s safety was real. In the few short months he had known her, he had come to think of her almost as if she was his daughter.

“Hope so. We will know soon enough, won’t we?”

“Guess so. I guess we . . . .” Still upset over what he just learned, and now concerned over Donna’s safety, Steve could not finish his thought. Blindly he reached for his drink. It was one which had sat untouched for several minutes.

After giving Steve a few moments, Paul then explained to his friend the favor he needed. He had just finished explaining it all to him when Donna walked into the bar.

Seeing Donna approach the booth they sat in, Steve painfully stood up and warmly greeted her. Then, just like he always did, he insisted that she sit down next to him. Catching Ethel’s attention behind the bar, he ordered a glass of Chardonnay for his favorite guest. Then he looked back across the booth’s table at Paul.

“We’ll talk more on what we’ve been discussing later, but I’ll take care of what needs to be done. Don’t worry, I know someone who will help us. I’ll call him after we have our meal.” Then wagging a finger at Paul to reinforce what he was about to say, Steve sternly spoke to his friend. “Promise me that you’ll take good care of this pretty wife of yours. Hear me!”

Smiling, Paul gently nodded his head at first before speaking. “Yes, sir, I hear you. I promise that I’ll take good care of her for both of us.”

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After successfully recruiting his good friend to help them move closer to capturing the serial killer who had been dumping bodies in Georgetown, Paul enjoyed a nice dinner with Steve and Donna. After hearing from Bobby Ray while they were having drinks with Steve, and learning he was busy putting needs of the investigation into motion, the three of them enjoyed their first meal together in several weeks. They had talked with each other on the phone several times, but work issues, and Steve’s minor health scares had prevented them from getting together before now.

Soon finished with their favorite dinner, a Low Country Boil, which consisted of shrimp, scallops, potatoes, ears of corn, and crab legs which they shared together, they were soon into their second after-dinner drink when Paul’s cell phone chirped. The Caller ID announced an incoming call from Bobby Ray.

Excusing himself from the table, Paul moved off to a more quiet section of the sparsely populated dining room. Also moving far enough away from the noisy bar so no one could hear him, he cautiously answered the call. The news that Bobby Ray was likely going to share with him was not anything he cared for others to accidently overhear.

“What’s up, Bobby Ray? Where are you?”

“Hope you’re enjoying a nice dinner, bro,” was the sarcastic response his friend greeted him with. “My ass has been working hard since I left you earlier! To tell you the truth, I don’t remember when I ate last or what it was that I had. You go ahead though, have a good time with Donna and Steve; don’t worry about me!”

Paul quickly saw through the guilt trip his friend was trying to lay on him. Like Bobby Ray was experiencing now, he had also missed out on several dinners when he had been forced to deal with several significant cases while working back in Connecticut. Jokingly he now added to his friend’s misery over missing out on dinner with them.

“It was a fine meal, Bobby Ray, sorry you missed it. I even thought of you as I was polishing off the last few pieces of seafood. Let me know when you’re ready to meet later and I’ll bring you a nice cold sandwich of some kind.”

“What a pal you are!”

“OK, Bobby Ray, enough of this nonsense. What’s up?”

“Well, did he go for it or what? Is Steve going to hook us up or not?”

“He’s in. I told him some of the pieces of the investigation, enough to get him to help us, but I didn’t tell him everything. He’s ready to make the call when you are. Just say the word!”

Bobby Ray was quiet for several moments before he spoke again. “Tell him to make the call as soon as you finish the drink you’re working on. I’ve got some of the boys still watching our other guy up in Myrtle Beach, and I’ve moved Audrey, Big Ed from the highway patrol, and a couple of the others to Georgetown so they could start sitting on our newest target. They should be in place around his home within the next fifteen minutes. Our newest guy appears to be in for the night as all of his vehicles are parked either in his driveway or inside his opened garage.”

Realizing his friend had not mentioned Melkin by name as he had spoken to him, likely out of concern that someone might be listening in on their conversation, Paul acknowledged what he was told. “Sounds good, Bobby Ray. Sounds like you have it all covered.”

“Paul, listen to me. I want this to happen tonight, so after he makes the call, you call me with the address and then I’ll meet you both there. Sound good?”

“Yep, sounds great! I’ll get back to you shortly. Hey, what about our other boy, you know, Ricky?”

“MBPD has done a great job with him, and he’s been very cooperative as he wants the drug charges he’s facing to go away. No worries, bro, they still have him on ice at their place. He’s not in the position to call Eddie or anyone else right now.”

“You and your friends up in Myrtle Beach going to remember him when this is all over with, or are you going to have them press the cocaine charges against him?” Paul curiously asked.

“Not quite sure about that yet. We likely will let him walk so there aren’t any problems raised by his or Eddie’s attorney related to when he was stopped by our friends up in MB. The last thing we need is some bullshit legal technicality mucking up the great case we have finally made against our killer. We’ve got bigger fish to fry than him, that’s for sure, but we’ll figure it all out in due time. Hey, don’t forget!”

“Don’t forget what?” Paul was at a loss as to what his friend meant.

“Bring me that cold sandwich! I’m afraid it’s gonna be another long night for all of us.”

Placing his cell back in the clip on his belt, Paul moved back to where Donna and Steve were waiting for him at the table. Sitting down, he could tell from the looks on their faces that they both were anxious to hear what the phone call had been all about. Still running a couple of thoughts through his head, he took a small hit on his third Jack and Coke of the night before placing it back down on the table. He knew it had been his last sip of the evening. It was a thought which did not please him.

“Bobby Ray wants to start moving forward tonight, Steve. Can you make the call to your friend for us? Tell him it’s important that we see him tonight, and please, tell him not to make any calls asking questions to others about why we’re coming to see him. We will explain everything to him when we get there.”

“I’ll make it right now. Anything else you want me to tell him?”

“Yes. Please let him know you are coming with us, and that we will likely need about an hour of his time. Please . . . . make sure he knows that it’s important we see him tonight!”

Taking his drink with him, Steve walked to his small office in the rear of the bar. It was the only place in the building which afforded him the privacy he needed for such an important call.

As this was being done, Paul explained to Donna what he hoped would happen over the next several hours. He also explained to her, as his friend had just predicted to him, that the evening was likely going to prove to be another long one.

“Think it will work out OK, Paul? I just don’t mean about tonight, but with everything. You know . . . . including what you want me to do as well.” Donna nervously asked.

Paul now could tell his wife had become even more nervous over what they were asking her to do for them. Softly speaking to her, he tried his best to allay her fears. “Yeah, it’s all going to work out fine. I promise that you have nothing to worry about. Bobby Ray, nor I, would ever put you in harm’s way over this.”

Donna smiled at what Paul said, but realized what he had told her was his way of trying to comfort her. Deep down, she knew the risk involved in pulling off what needed to be done.

“Our guy really has only made two mistakes up to this point, and one of them is not directly related to any of the murders. Tonight we are going to take out an insurance policy so we benefit from it in the event he doesn’t make any additional mistakes. We’re going to have him start helping us without him even having the faintest idea of what he’s doing to help us. Who knows, maybe we can force him into making another mistake or two for us.”

As he finished speaking, Paul spied Steve walking back to the booth. He couldn’t help but notice the small smile that crossed his friend’s face.

“I’m hoping that smile I see means you have some good news to tell us!”

Steve chuckled at Paul’s observation, and at his own thoughts since ending the call he had made.

“He’s not too happy about having to wait up for us! He’s someone who generally goes to bed early most nights and then gets up with the chickens, but he knows we are coming. He was somewhat disturbed that I wouldn’t tell him too much over the phone, but he’ll be fine. He kept asking me if you folks had contacted the Solicitor’s Office about this, so I told him that you needed to speak with him about a legal matter first. I just played stupid when he asked me if you didn’t trust them; that’s something you both know I’m good at doing!”

Paul smiled at the good news his friend had told him, and at the smile Steve continued to display on his face.

“Steve, just who is it that we are going to see? Who did you call?”

“I called one of my very dear friends on the bench. He’s one of the more senior members of our esteemed South Carolina judiciary. My friend’s name is one which still draws a smile in these parts. His name is Jefferson Davis Douglas, the Honorable Jefferson Davis Douglas, that is. Many of his close Southern born friends like to call him Mr. President; he’s a good man! One thing about him, he’s a real law and order guy. The Public Defenders hate his ass, but the cops all love him. I’m quite sure he’ll be on your side with all of this.”

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Forty minutes after making sure that Donna had gotten home safely, Paul and Steve met Bobby Ray at the Heritage Plantation Security Booth in Pawleys Island. As Steve signed them in with the guard, Bobby Ray, between bites of a cold turkey sandwich, quickly filled in his friend with the most recent details of the two stakeouts that were underway. Soon they were driving into the large circular driveway of the Douglas residence. It was the largest, and most expensive, estate within the exclusive private community.

Parking their vehicles at the far end of the long gravel driveway after dropping Steve off by the elaborate brick sidewalk which led up to the home, Paul and Bobby Ray began walking back towards the main entrance. Steve had waited for them by the wide granite steps that led up to the front sidewalk of the judge’s residence.

The four front steps leading up to the small patio outside the residence’s front doors were also made of red bricks that had been crafted to give them an aged look. Even from the small amount of light the moon and two exterior patio lights provided, Paul and Bobby Ray could tell the long decorative front sidewalk had likely cost a pretty penny to construct. The double front doors sitting at the top of the steps were equally as impressive. Both oak doors were wide and tall, and both were adorned with large matching brass door knockers. It was neither a residence, nor a neighborhood that cops resided in.

Pushing a lighted doorbell which had been intentionally hidden from view so it did not spoil one’s walk up the magnificent sidewalk to the Douglas residence, Bobby Ray could not help but state the obvious.

“Looks like the good judge has done well for himself, huh?”

“Certainly looks that way, Bobby Ray. I know Donna and I couldn’t afford a shack like this. Nice digs!”

Waiting for the door to be opened, Steve chuckled at the comments Bobby Ray and Paul made regarding the Douglas home. He especially liked the reference Paul had used in calling the large expensive home a shack.

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Several minutes later, Paul and Bobby Ray were warmly introduced to Judge Douglas by Steve. After a few moments of small talk in the lavishly decorated front foyer of the residence, and also after declining the judge’s offer of a bourbon, Paul and Bobby Ray were escorted into the large library of the residence. The ground floor library sat in the right rear of the spacious residence. It also served as the judge’s home office.

Settling down into a large burgundy colored chair, Judge Douglas looked over at his good friend. A frequent visitor to the home, Steve had been the only one of the judge’s three guests who felt comfortable enough to have taken a seat without being invited to do so. Separated by only a small wooden table, he now sat in a chair which matched the one their host sat in. Soon looking back at his two other guests, the judge saw they were still standing several feet from where he now sat.

“Gentlemen, please, have a seat! Excuse my manners, sit, please! I’m a casual man, and this is a casual meeting, so please relax. I appreciate the respect you are showing me, but please have a seat. We’re all on the same team here, OK? Listen, I know you’re working, but the offer of a bourbon still stands if you boys change your mind. Help yourselves whenever you’re ready!”

Lifting his glass for a moment, Judge Douglas looked back at Steve. “I like a taste of bourbon before I go to bed each night; it helps me have a sound night’s sleep!” After taking another healthy swig of his eight year old *Ezra Brooks* 100 proof Kentucky bourbon, Judge Douglas then spoke to Steve again. “You called for this meeting, my friend. Let’s hear what y’all have to say!”

“Mr. President, I’m going to let Bobby Ray and Paul explain all of this to you. They’ve worked hard on this here problem that I have already talked to you about on the phone. I’m confident you will soon understand why they have come to see you.”

With no words, and with no facial reaction to Steve’s words, Judge Davis swiveled slightly in his chair so he could look directly at Bobby Ray. While not personal friends, they had crossed paths professionally several times in the judge’s courtroom over the years.

“Yes, sir. Evening again, Your Honor. We do appreciate you taking the time to see us tonight, and to listen to what we have to tell you.”

Bobby Ray’s comments caused the judge to again raise his glass. It was done this time to acknowledge the greeting he heard from the now somewhat nervous cop. Then taking another sip of his drink, he waited for the conversation to continue. Bobby Ray, like Paul, had taken a seat on an oversized burgundy colored couch. It sat close to the two chairs now occupied by their host and Steve.

“Your Honor, I’m likely going to have to excuse myself a couple of times here tonight to take a couple of phone calls from my detectives who are conducting two important surveillances. I apologize ahead of time for having to do so, but I have to take those calls as they are directly related to why we are here.” Pointing his finger briefly in Paul’s direction, Bobby Ray continued to fill the judge in with what they were asking of him. “Just so we aren’t changing horses in mid-stream, I’m going to let my good friend here explain why we have come to see you tonight. That OK with you, sir?”

Bobby Ray had barely finished speaking when his cell phone vibrated to announce an incoming call. Quickly, but politely, he excused himself and walked back to the residence’s main foyer to take his call in private. He left without giving the judge time to respond to his previous question.

Now staring at Paul for a few seconds as Bobby Ray walked out of the library, Judge Douglas then turned to look at his friend. “Steve, your friend here, I know his name for some reason, and it certainly is not from my courtroom. Why do I know his name?”

“Mr. President, this young man is the person you’ve read about in the papers over the past many months. He’s the one who found the long lost treasury of the Confederacy.”

“That’s it! You’re right, of course! I’m embarrassed I couldn’t put his name with that fantastic discovery! I followed that wonderful story very closely from start to finish. Well done, Mr. Waring!”

“Thank you, Your Honor! I’d be happy to tell you all about it, but with your permission I’d like to stay focused on the real reason we are here tonight. It’s for a very pressing concern we have.”

“Sounds fine, Mr. Waring, but we are going to have to make time some evening over dinner so I can hear all about that exciting discovery you’ve made. Steve and your wife are certainly invited to join us whenever our schedules will allow for such an evening. I’m already looking forward to it!”

For the next hour plus, Paul, with occasional inputs from Bobby Ray when he was not on the phone, explained in detail to Judge Douglas each of the four murders, and the attempted murder of RJ, that had occurred. As this was done, they also showed him several different photos of each of the crime scenes, and let him read four witness statements. With great care, they laid out certain details of each murder, of Ricky Frazier’s arrest, and the overwhelming degree of evidence which had begun to pile up against Richard Melkin. As they presented this evidence and information, Judge Douglas listened intently, interrupting Paul’s presentation only briefly on three occasions. He did so to have matters related to seized evidence further explained to him.

Bobby Ray was out on the front porch of the Douglas residence taking another call from one of his detectives who had Melkin’s vehicles under surveillance when the presentation came to an end. It now left Paul alone to answer the judge’s questions.

“If you boys are sitting here in my library this late at night, I guess it’s a fair assumption on my part that you both believe Mr. Melkin is your killer. It would be foolish for me to ask you if you believed that to be the case, wouldn’t it, Mr. Waring?”

Paul simply nodded his head at what he interpreted to be a rhetorical question the judge had asked.

“Still, I cannot picture Mr. Melkin being a suspect in these brutal murders. I’ve known him forever, probably as long as Steve has, so it’s hard to fathomhim as a murder suspect. However, from my career I guess I should not be surprised by anything that happens, especially these days, but I have to say you sure shocked me tonight with this news. I know I would never have suspected him. He’s done some remarkable work for several Georgetown based charities, and I know he supports several scholarship programs at the local high school as well. In fact, I’ve even been involved with him for several years in selecting some of the scholarship winners.” The judge sat quietly for several moments before bringing up an issue from the past. He did so by way of asking his second rhetorical question of the evening. “The man has always been . . . . odd. I guess that’s the best way to describe it, but seeing your own father gunned down in the street in front of you when you are a young boy has to have some kind of negative impact on you, doesn’t it?”

No one present in the judge’s library had the right words to express how horrible it must have been for young Richie Melkin to see his father gunned down in front of him so many years ago. Silence existed for several seconds as each of the men present reflected on how they likely would also have been affectedby such a terrible event. The silence was soon broken by another question the judge asked of Paul.

“Tell me, Mr. Waring, what’s the concern in letting the Solicitor’s Office know about all of this? I’m sure you folks have reached out to them already for legal advice, and that you have kept them acquainted on the status of this complex investigation of yours, so why are you folks keeping them out of the loop now? Do you, and by that I mean the sheriff’s office and not you specifically, not trust the Solicitor and his staff? Joseph Pascento is one of the finest lawyers, if not one of the finest individuals that I know. I trust him, so why don’t you boys?”

“Judge, this has nothing to do at all with any negative thoughts about Mr. Pascento, or with any members of his staff. I’m not speaking for Sheriff Renda or for Bobby Ray, but I know they both hold Mr. Pascento in the highest regard. Nor should our being here be conceived as any type of concern on our part regarding the abilities or confidence or trust we have in any member of his staff. It’s just that we need to keep this investigation as quiet as we can until we get what we need to arrest Mr. Melkin. Then we can put an arrest warrant affidavit together to bring to Mr. Pascento.”

Paul’s comments drew little support from Judge Douglas.

“Mr. Waring, sensitive and active cases are Mr. Pascento’s bread and butter, that’s what he makes his living off of. He and his staff are there to prosecute cases like this one to protect the public, and sometimes those cases involve prosecuting individuals they know from living in the area. So I still do not see the need to exclude them from knowing about this matter tonight, especially since they will ultimately have the responsibility of prosecuting this case for you. Do you understand what I am saying to you, sir?”

Wanting to play the role of a peaceful negotiator for the sheriff’s department in the rest of this conversation, and not wanting to upset his host, Paul was quiet for a moment before answering the judge’s question.

“Yes, sir, I do understand what you have said, but I’m not sure if that can happen or not, Judge. Seems I need to tell you a bit more about our case. Please know that I was not trying to keep this from you, but I didn’t feel you needed to know every little detail about what we have learned.”

Judge Douglas looked confused as he quickly shot a brief stare at Steve before focusing his attention back at Paul.

“What other details are those, Mr. Waring?”

“Judge, our investigation has just shown us late this afternoon that our suspect has several longstanding friendships and associations with both Mr. Pascento and with a couple of members of his staff. These are not illegal or inappropriate relationships, but rather are ones which exist because they all go to the same church here in Pawleys Island. They are also relationships which simply exist because Mr. Pascento and Mr. Melkin are both involved in charitable work with the American Red Cross. They also have that relationship because they both belong to two local civic groups in the area; so do members of Mr. Pascento’s staff. None of this is meant to imply any improper conduct on the part of anyone. It’s just that we’ve worked hard on this case, and we do not want to give anyone the opportunity to challenge Mr. Pascento’s integrity, or that of any member of his staff. Based on this new information which came to our attention today, we thought it best if we came to someone who was removed from the Solicitor’s Office to help us tonight.” Then pausing for a moment to give Judge Douglas time to take in what he had just told him, Paul pointed at Steve. “To the best of Steve’s knowledge, he did not believe you knew Mr. Melkin well enough to exclude you from being able to meet with us tonight.”

“Our mutual friend is correct in that regard, Mr. Waring. I know many people from here to Georgetown, and I do admit that I know Mr. Melkin, but we don’t socialize together in any manner. Outside of a drink with friends once or twice, I don’t believe we have ever socialized together. Whatever so-called relationship anyone might think I’ve had with him, it’s certainly not enough for me to even think of recusing myself from this matter. I’ve seen his picture in the paper occasionally for the good work he’s done with the Red Cross, and, like I have already mentioned, I volunteer my time to help with the same scholarship program that he’s active with, but I wouldn’t even care to take a guess when it was that I last socialized with him. It’s been a fair amount of time though. I understand your position now, Mr. Waring. You folks were correct in coming to see me and not Mr. Pascento. We’ll cross this bridge when we have to, but it sounds like Mr. Pascento may have to defer prosecuting this case to someone else.”

“Your Honor, we have an immediate need for a Search Warrant to be approved tonight to help us proceed with our investigation. That’s why we came to see you. We’re hoping you can help us with what we want to accomplish before this Melkin guy kills again.”

Judge Douglas sat quiet for a couple of moments as he again sipped his bourbon. As he did so, his mind was weighing the various legal options he had available to him. “It’s somewhat unusual for me to be reviewing a search warrant application for a case of this kind, and perhaps I should be making a call to someone else to handle this sensitive matter for you tonight, but let me see what you are asking for in your application. I’ll make my mind up after I read what you fellas have put together for me. Let’s have a look!”

Glancing at Steve as he picked up the file folder which contained the search warrant application, Paul smiled at his friend. It was a smile of relief as they had finally moved onto what they had come there for.

As he took the manila colored folder from Paul, Judge Douglas offered up a concern of his. “I can tell you for a fact, there’s no case law which precludes me from reviewing this application, but I will also tell you that I’m pretty confident Mr. Pascento won’t like hearing I reviewed the warrant before he did. If I were in his shoes, I probably wouldn’t like it either, but I’ll calm him down when the time comes. I’ll make him understand that you were just looking out for his best interests. I’ll also instruct him not to speak about this investigation to anyone, not even to his staff, until you approach him. He knows not to violate an order I give him, so you’ll be fine.”

“Judge, this is a very non-intrusive search warrant we are seeking. At this time, we are simply asking the court’s permission to covertly attach a GPS tracking device to each of Mr. Melkin’s two vehicles. We want the surveillance teams we have in place to have the ability to track his movements from a distance in the event he is out to commit another murder. At this stage of the investigation, we cannot afford to lose him for a moment. The warrant, as you know, would have a shelf life of two weeks, but we expect to be able to move in on him in less time than that. If we get lucky, we expect to arrest him in just a few days.”

Paul’s comments drew nothing more than a couple of brief nods from Judge Douglas. He was now focused on what he was reading. It only took him a brief few minutes to read the entire application. After reading it, he set it down on the table sitting next to his chair.

Reclining back in his chair for a minute as he absent-mindedly played with his reading glasses, the judge thought about what he had just read. “Hmmn . . . . I obviously understand what it is you folks are looking for, and I also understand why you are seeking the court’s permission, Mr. Waring. I’ll approve the warrant as it’s written, but you’re aware, aren’t you, that the United States 7th Circuit Court of Appeals has ruled police departments do not need a search warrant to attach such devices as you are planning to use on vehicles owned by private citizens. The court has ruled this is not considered to be an unreasonable search.”

“Yes, sir, we are aware of the court’s ruling. We are seeking the search warrant as we want to be extra careful regarding our searches. Having the court’s permission to do so will hopefully make our actions less attackable when we finally prosecute our suspect.”

“I see your point, Mr. Waring. Very well, the probable cause has clearly been articulated quite enough. Besides approving your request, I will also check the appropriate boxes on the application’s last page that seals it from both the media and the public for fourteen days. If your investigation is not completed by then, come see me and I will consider extending the non-disclosure of the application’s contents if you can convince me that it’s in the best interest of the public to do so.”

“Thank you, Your Honor!”

“Tell me, Mr. Waring, when are you planning on placing these devices on Mr. Melkin’s vehicles?”

“Immediately after I see you sign your name approving the warrant, Your Honor. We want to get this done tonight. His two vehicles have been parked at his home since early this evening. As soon as we can confirm the neighborhood is void of anyone who might see us, we will get to work. It will only take a few minutes to attach the devices. When we’re done, he won’t even know we were there.”

Judge Douglas then asked his good friend a question. “Steve, got a pen on you? Mine’s all the way over there on my desk.”

Smiling, as he knew the warrant that Bobby Ray and Paul had sought was about to be signed, Steve reached inside his blue sport coat for a pen. Handing it to the judge, he offered a comment for the moment.

“Kind of hard to believe he’s involved in all of this, isn’t it, Mr. President?”

After quickly signing his name in the appropriate locations on the warrant application, and after checking off the boxes which kept it sealed so the contents of the application could not be divulged to anyone for fourteen days, Judge Douglas leaned back in his chair again.

“Steve, it’s all of that and more, I’m afraid.”

Then looking back at Paul, Judge Douglas asked a question about something which had been bugging him since he first learned about it.

“Mr. Waring, the red handkerchiefs, or whatever they are, why does he leave them with the victims’ bodies? Do you have an opinion on what this is all about?”

Placing the signed warrant back inside the folder as Bobby Ray returned into the room, Paul answered the question that had been posed to him.

“Judge, let’s just say we have all speculated on that same point for some time now. Driving over here tonight, I have come up with a new thought as to why he’s been doing so, but I’m going to have to do some work on that before I can say if I’m right in my thought or not. It may take me a couple of days, but I’ll get back to you with the right answer when we figure it out. Sound, OK?”

Leaning forward in his chair, Judge Douglas looked directly at Paul for a moment before speaking. “That sounds fine with me. Excuse me for taking a guess at this, Mr. Waring, but does your new thought include the belief that maybe Mr. Melkin is leaving these handkerchiefs behind as a result of what happened when he saw his father murdered so many years ago?”

Paul smiled as he stood up to leave. “You’re a smart man, Judge!”

Walking his guests to the door, Judge Douglas first said a warm good night to his friend, Steve. Then as he opened the door, he spoke to Bobby Ray and Paul. “Like all justices, I am supposed to remain neutral and detached on matters like the one you two are investigating, but I also have feelings and interests just like other people. As they do, I also want you fellas to catch whoever it is, be it Melkin or whomever, that is causing all of us to live in fear these days. Call me here or call me at the courthouse, but keep me posted on this investigation. Good luck to both of you!”

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Bobby Ray and Paul walked down the front sidewalk of the residence to where their two vehicles were parked as Steve lingered on the front patio for a couple of moments to speak with Judge Douglas on another matter. As they did, Bobby Ray questioned his friend as to how it had gone inside. He had missed a good part of the conversation that had taken place due to taking calls from the surveillance teams. Each of the calls had reported some form of new information to him.

Carrying his sport coat that he now had hanging over his left arm, Paul paused briefly to locate his keys within one of the coat pockets. “Well, he obviously signed our application for the warrant, so I guess it went fine. He’s a nice guy, and I firmly believe he’s on our side. He just asked a few questions about us not going directly through the Solicitor’s Office with our request, and he asked a few questions about evidence you had seized from each of the scenes, but he was fine with each of my explanations. In the end, I think he appreciated us looking out for Pascento’s reputation.” Finished answering his friend’s question, Paul then asked a question of his own. “You ready to give the order to install the two devices?”

“Already done, Partner, already done!”

Relieved by what he had heard, Bobby Ray then patted his friend on the back for a job well done in getting the application signed. “Sorry I had to leave you alone with the judge, but the boys kept calling me with news regarding each of the surveillances. You done good though, I appreciate your help!”

Hearing that Bobby Ray had already given the order to install the tracking devices, Paul was somewhat taken back.

“What? They are already being installed? What would you have done if he refused to sign off on our application for the warrant?”

Pulling his own car keys out from his pants pocket, Bobby Ray shot Paul a wry smile. “Never gave it a thought! I knew you wouldn’t let me down. You’re too good of a bullshitter to not have gotten it signed. Not as good as me, mind you, but you’re pretty good too! Even your wife thinks so!”

Bobby Ray’s comment caused Paul to chuckle in agreement over how Donna had previously described them. He knew it had been a fair assessment of his communication skills at times.