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SCOTT TUROW

PERSONAL INJURIES

"Mesmerizing... suspenseful."
—*TIME*

Welcome, thou kind deceiver!

Thou best of thieves; who with an easy key

Dost open life, and unperceived by us,

Even steal us from ourselves.

JOHN DRYDEN, All for Love

THE BEGINNING

CHAPTER 1

HE KNEW IT WAS WRONG, AND THAT HE was going to get caught. He said he knew this day was coming.

He knew they had been stupid, he told me-worse, greedy. He said he knew he should have stopped. But somehow, each time he thought they'd quit, he'd ask himself how once more could make it any worse. Now he knew he was in trouble.

I recognized the tune. Over twenty-some years, the folks sitting in that leather club chair in front of my desk have found only a few old standards in the jukebox. I Didn't Do It. The Other One Did It. Why Are They Picking on Me. His selection, I'm Sorry, made the easiest listening. But they all wanted to hear the same song from me: Maybe I Can Get You Out of This. I said it usually, although I knew it would often prove untrue. But it's a complicated business being somebody's only hope.

This is a lawyer's story, the kind attorneys like to hear and tell. About a case. About a client. His name was Robert Feaver. Everyone knew him as Robbie, although he was getting old for that kind of thing, forty-three, he'd said, when I asked his age. The time was 1992, the second week in September. The pundits had finally stopped predicting that Ross Perot was going to be the next President of the United States, and the terms "dot" and "com" had not yet been introduced to one another. I recall the period precisely because the week before I had returned to Virginia to lay my father to rest. His passing, which over the years I'd assumed I would take as being in the natural order of things, had instead imbued all my waking moments with the remote quality of dreams, so that even my hand, when I considered it, seemed disconnected from my body.

Robbie Feaver's troubles were more immediate. Last night, three Special Agents of the Internal Revenue Service's Criminal Intelligence Division had visited him at home—one to talk and two to listen. They were, as you would expect, rumpled men in inexpensive sport coats, grave but polite. They had

handed him a grand jury subpoena for all of his law partnership's financial records and tried to ask Robbie questions about his income tax returns. Wisely, he had refused to reply.

He could suit himself, responded the one agent who spoke. But they wanted to tell him a couple things. Good news and bad. Bad first.

They knew. They knew what Robbie and his law partner, Morton Dinnerstein, had been up to. They knew that for several years the two had occasionally deposited a check they received when they won or settled one of their personal injury cases in a secret account at River National Bank, where the firm transacted no other business. They knew that out of the River National account Dinnerstein and Robbie had paid the usual shares of what they'd earned—two thirds to the clients, one ninth to the referring attorneys, odd amounts to experts or court reporters. Everyone had received his due. Except the IRS. They knew that for years now, Feaver and his partner had been writing checks to cash to draw down the balance of the account, never paying a dime in tax.

You guys are cold-cocked, the agent added. Robbie laughed now, very briefly, repeating the words.

I didn't ask how Robbie and his partner could have ever believed a scheme so simpleminded would work. I was long accustomed to the dumb ways people get themselves in trouble. Besides, the fact was that their scam had operated smoothly for years. A checking account that paid no interest was unlikely to come to the Service's attention. It was, frankly, noteworthy that it had, a development that would inevitably be traced to freak coincidence, or, if things were spicier, betrayal.

Feaver had heard out the agents in his living room. He was perched on a camelback sofa smartly upholstered in bleached silk, trying to contain himself. To smile. Stay slick. He opened his mouth to speak but was interrupted by the unexpected sensation of a single cold rill of his own sweat tracking the length of his side until it was absorbed in the elastic waistband of his boxers.

And the good news? he asked on second effort.

They were getting to that, the agent said. The good news was that Robbie had an opportunity. Maybe there was something he could do for himself. Something that a person with his family situation ought to consider.

The agent then walked across the marble foyer and opened the front door. The United States Attorney, Stan Sennett, was standing on Robbie's doorstep. Feaver recognized him from TV, a short man, slender, kempt with a compulsive orderliness. A few gnats zagged madly under the light above the careful part in Sennett's head. He greeted Feaver with his in-court expression, humorless as a hatchet blade.

Robbie had never practiced a day of criminal law, but he knew what it meant that the United States Attorney was standing in person on his front stoop late at night. It meant the biggest gun was pointed straight at him. It meant they wanted to make him an example. It meant he'd never get away.

In his terror, Robbie Feaver found a single useful thought.

I want a lawyer, he said.

He was entitled, Sennett finally responded. But perhaps Robbie should listen to him first. As soon as Sennett set a polished brogan across the threshold, Robbie repeated himself.

I can't promise the deal will be the same tomorrow, Sennett told him.

Lawyer, Feaver said again.

The agents took over then, offering advice. If he was going to an attorney, find a good one, someone who'd been around. Talk to that lawyer—and no one else. Not Mom. Not the wife. And certainly not his law partner, Dinnerstein. The U.S. Attorney passed one agent his card, and the agent handed it to Feaver. Sennett would be waiting for Feaver's lawyer's call. About to step down into the darkness, the prosecutor asked over his shoulder whether Robbie had anyone in mind.

Interesting choice, Sennett told Feaver with a shallow smile when he heard my name.

"I'm not a rat," Robbie Feaver said now. "That's the play, right, George? They want me to dime somebody out."

I asked if he had any idea who.

"Well, it better not be Mort. My partner? Never. There's nothing to say about Mort."

Feaver and Dinnerstein were lifelong friends, he told me, next-door neighbors as boys growing up in the Jewish enclave of Warren Park, here in DuSable, roommates through college and law school. But their secret account was joint, both men had made deposits and written the checks to cash, and neither had reported the income. There was enough damaging paper that it seemed unlikely the IRS was going to need anyone's assistance to install either one of them in the trophy case.

I asked if there might be something else the government wanted Robbie to tell them about Mort, or any other person, but Feaver hitched a shoulder limply, looking lost.

I did not know Robbie Feaver well. When he'd called this morning, he'd reminded me that we'd met several times in the lobby of the LeSueur Building where we each had our law offices, and of the committee work he'd done for the Kindle County Bar Association a couple of years ago during my term as president. My memories of him were vague and not necessarily pleasant. Measured according to the remaining reflexes of a proper Southern upbringing, he was the kind of fellow who'd be described simply as 'too much.' Too good-looking in the sense that he was too well aware of it. Too much stiff, dark hair that reflected too much fussing. He was tanned in every season and spent too much money on his clothes—high-styled Italian suits and snazzy foulards accompanied by too much jewelry. He spoke too loudly, and too eagerly to strangers in the elevator. In fact, in any setting, he talked too much—one of those people who went one up on Descartes: I speak, therefore I am. But I now saw one apparent virtue: he could have told you all of that. Diminished by fear, he maintained an air of candor, at least about himself. As clients went, therefore, he seemed, on first impression, better than average.

When I asked what the agent had meant about his family, he sagged a bit.

"Sick wife," he said, "sick mother." Waging a running war against the medical establishment, Feaver, like many personal injury attorneys, had absorbed the lexicon of physicians. His mother was in a nursing home. "CVA," he said, meaning a stroke. His wife, Lorraine, was worse. She had been diagnosed nearly two years ago with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis—ALS, or more commonly Lou Gehrig's disease—and was on a certain downward course toward total paralysis and, eventually, death.

"She's got a year maybe before things get really hairy, no one knows for sure." He was stoical but his black eyes did not rise from the carpet. "I mean, I can't leave her. Not practically. There's nobody else to take care of her."

That was the agent's point. Feaver would talk or be in the penitentiary when his wife reached the point of total helplessness or passed. The dark shroud of that prospect fell over us both.

In the resulting silence, I picked up Sennett's card, which Feaver had laid on my desk. Without it, I might have questioned whether Robbie had identified the right man on his doorstep. The United States Attorney, with ninety-two assistants and several hundred cases to supervise, would ordinarily have no direct role in a straightforward tax case, even one against a successful personal injury lawyer. Whatever Stan Sennett had come to Robbie's house to say last night must have been a mouthful.

"What did it mean," Feaver asked, "when Sennett said that George Mason would be an interesting choice? Does he hate your guts or think you're a pushover?"

It was complicated, I responded. I believed in some moods Stan would say I was a close friend.

"Well, that's good, then, isn't it?" Feaver asked.

When it came to Stan Sennett, I never knew the answer.

Sometimes friends, I told Feaver. Always rivals.

CHAPTER 2

IN THE FASHION OF MOST HIGH-RANKING bureaucrats, the United States Attorney's personal office was vast. The shag carpeting was tattered at places into little raveled strands, and the drapes of greenish raw silk had covered the wall of windows on the north since sometime in the fifties. But the space could be measured by the acre. There was a bathroom, with a shower, and a hideaway study. In the corners of the principal space, a sturdy government-issue conference table stood on one side, while across the room various endangered species, seized by Fish and Wildlife inspectors from a rogue taxidermist, were displayed in a long row of mahogany cases. A bald eagle and a spotted snake adjoined something that looked like a marmoset. Behind a desk the size of a tomb, Stan Sennett, one of those dark, driven little men who turn up so often in the law, rose to greet me.

"Hey there, Georgie," he said. I attributed this rare mood of impressive good cheer to Stan's eagerness to talk about Feaver.

"Blue stuff," I told his secretary when she offered coffee. We loitered a minute over personal details. Stan showed off the photos of his only child, Asha, a three-year-old girl, dark and gorgeous, whom Stan and his second wife, Nora Flinn, had adopted after years of futile fertility treatments and in vitro. I recounted the leisurely progress of my two sons through their higher educations, and bragged for a second about my wife, Patrice, an architect who had just won an international design competition to build a spectacular art museum in Bangkok. Stan, who'd been stationed in Thailand in 1966, told me a few funny stories about the country.

In his most relaxed moments, Stan Sennett could be a delight, a stylish wit, an amusing collector of arcane facts, and a canny observer of the fur-licking and hissing in local political circles. The rest of the time, you had to deal with a more complicated package—a thousand-megahertz mind, and a potful of seething emotions liable to scald anybody nearby before Stan managed to slam down the lid.