

Retaliate (A Working title)

By John Wendell Adams – 2012

PROLOGUE

“Will the defendant please rise.” The bailiff said.

Jack watched from the back of the courtroom. Catherine and her attorney both stood. Catherine was dressed in a dark blue suit, a white blouse and gold earrings. She stood still and looked in the judge’s direction.

“Has the jury reached a verdict?” Judge Thompson asked as he turned and looked at the ten men and two women.

“Yes, your honor, we have,” replied the foreman.

“What say you in the case of the United States Government versus Catherine Frazier?”

“We find the defendant, Catherine Frazier, guilty on all counts.” The foreman read.

Jack watched as Catherine’s husband slowly lowered his head and didn’t look up for several minutes. He kept shaking his head. Those close to him could hear him saying over and over,

“This can’t be happening...this can’t be happening.”

Having met Catherine’s parents years ago, Jack realized that they had flown in for the trial. He was told that they had come to court every day for two weeks. Her father held her mother while she cried softly. Jack was close enough that he saw the tears in his eyes and he made no effort to conceal them. Jack started to focused on the lead prosecutor, Harry Wright, as he sat watching and listening to the judge and jury

The foreman was still standing; not exactly sure what to do. Jack noticed him alternate holding both hands in front of himself and then putting them behind his back. The judge then said,

“Thank you foreman...thank you jury”.

Jack had never been to a jury trial before. So he tried to focus on all the little details. He turned his attention to the jurors. Two or three of them nodded their heads and squinted their eyes, as if to say, “She got what she deserved.” One of the older jurors looked down at the floor and she didn’t look up. Another woman juror sat there with her arms folded and just stared at Catherine with a harsh look on her face. The press hurriedly left the courtroom so they could tell the rest of the world what had happened. There was such a big commotion going on that Judge Thompson pounded his gavel three or four times while almost screaming, “Order, order in my courtroom”. Initially, almost no one obeyed his directive. Finally, people sat down and looked in the judge’s direction.

Judge Thompson turned his attention back to the jury and said,

“I’m going to ask each of you if the final verdict the foreman read is *your* verdict.”

One by one, Judge Thompson asked the question of each juror. The verdict was unanimous.

Then the judge said, “Catherine Frazier, you have been found guilty of knowingly executing schemes with the intent to defraud the U.S. Federal Government. Based on the severity of your crime, you will be sentenced two weeks from today.”

All of a sudden, Catherine almost yelled, “Your honor, this isn’t right. I shouldn’t be guilty of anything. I was simply following orders. This isn’t right!”

The judge used his gavel again. He said to Catherine’s attorney, “Mr. Harris, you will instruct your client to refrain from any further outbursts.” The attorney whispered something in Catherine’s ear and she nodded slowly. The judge continued, “Since you’re on bail, I will expect to see you here in my courtroom on April 22nd for sentencing. Is that understood?”

Her attorney looked at Catherine. He turned in the direction of the judge and replied, “Yes your honor.”

With that the judge turned to the jury and said, “Thank you again jury. This court is adjourned.” The bailiff said, “All rise”, and with that, the judge disappeared from the courtroom.

Jack Alexander sat in the back of the court. Other than during his testimony, this was the first time he had been able to be there. The defense had filed a Motion for Sequestration before the trial began. So, Jack couldn’t be in the courtroom since he was a witness for the prosecution. Also, the defense didn’t want Jack influenced by other testimony during the trial. Now he sat riveted to his seat. He just kept looking at all the people, the jury as they started to file out of the courtroom, the court reporter as she got up and started to pack away her device, and the defense attorney talking to his client. Jack especially focused on Catherine’s mother and father who had walked over to Catherine’s husband. The three of them hugged each other in the row just behind the defense attorney’s table. Nonetheless, Catherine’s husband still had his head down.

Jack felt truly sorry for Catherine’s family. He could only imagine the pain and suffering they were now going through, and all the more that they would be face in the future. He did feel some remorse for being the “whistleblower”. He was the one responsible for getting Catherine and others arrested.

As he stood up to leave, Catherine saw him out of the corner of her eye. She turned, looked at him and pointed her finger in his direction,

“This is all your fault! I’m going to get you. I don’t care how long it takes. You just wait and see. Count on it”!

END

CHAPTER ONE

JACK

Before Catherine Frazier's trial

Gloria and Jack got home early in the morning from their Friday date night. They had a great time. They went to dinner and then Latin dancing at a brand new club that had recently opened in Chicago's West Loop. By the time they got home, it was after 2:00am. They were still feeling the pulsating beat. Before they turned off the lights, Gloria made Jack promise that Saturday would be a lazy, hazy day; no cell phones, no computers, and no nothing.

About 10:00am the next morning, Jack dragged himself out of bed. He looked over at Gloria and she was still fast asleep. He tiptoed out of the bedroom, closed the door, and headed to one of the bathrooms down the hall. He looked at his bleary eyes and smiled. He thought, *we did have a terrific time but I'm just not built for 2:00am partying anymore*. When he came out, he decided to head for the kitchen and make Gloria her morning drink. It basically amounted to a concoction of natural juices, Aloe Vera, honey, and flaxseed, UGH! She claimed that it kept her healthy and youthful looking. He certainly couldn't disagree with the results. She was an amazingly beautiful woman. After all their years together, she looked like she hadn't aged a day. He pattered back up to their bedroom; put her drink on the nightstand. She was still fast asleep. Jack quietly retreated to his home office, turned on his cell phone, and hit the "enter" key on his computer. As soon as the screen refreshed, the very first image he saw was a picture of Catherine Frazier. The caption below it read "An unconfirmed report indicates that Catherine Frazier, Senior Vice President of DTA, who was arrested a few weeks ago in conjunction with the defrauding scheme of the Department of Defense, will be prosecuted as the mastermind of the scheme. As Jack clicked on the link that said "read more", his cell phone started buzzing. The incoming call was from his boss, Lenard Shapiro.

"Hey, Len, how are you?"

"Great, did you hear in the news about Catherine Frazier? I've been trying to reach you all morning."

"Yeah, I was just reading about it when you called. Gloria and I had a late night out and decided to sleep in."

“Oh, sorry my friend, I just thought you’d want to know.”

“Hey, no worries, I’m up now. What else have you heard?”

“Just what you read, I did get a call from a lawyer friend of mine who told me that one of the firms where she worked is deciding whether to press charges against her for similar stuff she did.”

“Sounds like a real hot mess. I feel sorry for her family”

“Jack, I’m just thankful that you blew the whistle on that whole thing before we acquired DTA. Their problems would have become ours.

“Yeah, well, I was just doing my job, as they say.”

“Oh, that reminds me...it looks like you and Harvey Johnston are going to be called to testify at Catherine’s trial. Our General Counsel told me late Friday. At any case, I’ll let you get back to enjoying your weekend. See you on Monday.”

“Yeah...thanks for the call. See you soon.”

As Jack hung up the phone, he thought, Catherine’s trial...I’m surely not looking forward to that. I wish there was some other way I could get out of the whole thing. Looking back, if Len had assigned someone else to the DTA acquisition, I won’t have been a part of any of this and it would have been someone else’s headache. . Why couldn’t Harvey Johnson have called somebody else? Boy, I remember it all like it was just yesterday.

Flashback

Chapter Two

Jack the Whistle Blower

When the phone rang, Jack was just finishing the last paragraph. He glanced to see if Beth, his assistant would pick it up. She wasn't at her desk.

"This is Jack Alexander, how can I help you?" Jack could hear someone on the other end of the phone muttering. He could just barely make out a voice. But Jack couldn't figure out what was being said.

"Hello, this is Jack Alexander, who am I speaking to?" The muttering continued. Only now it was a bit louder.

"I knew something didn't look right. I'd seen it before but not like this. They tried to tell me things were fine. But I knew different."

"Who is this? Who's calling?" Then he spoke up, almost like he finally realized that he was on the phone.

"Oh, is this Jack Alexander? I was told to call you and show you this. It's a real mess and I know some heads are going to roll over this. I just want to make sure my head isn't one of them. This isn't pretty. In fact, it's downright ugly." This guy was on a roll. He hadn't stopped talking. Jack still didn't know who he was or what he was talking about.

"Hold on. Just stop for a second. Who is this?" It seemed to Jack that this guy wasn't used to normal conversations. But he stopped ever so briefly and then started up again.

"My name's Harvey Johnston. I'm one of the team leaders on the Finance Discovery Transition Team. I was instructed to call you and tell you about this mess I uncovered."

"Wait, wait. Hold on. What did you uncover?" But he never stopped.

“I found a similar mess twelve years ago but this one is even worse. It’s the worst I’ve ever seen. Somebody’s got to do something. I was told to call you and tell you about it.”

The guy was starting to repeat himself and he was picking up speed. Jack had to slow him down or he could do some serious damage to himself. Plus, Jack still had no idea what he was talking about.

“Ok,” Jack said. “Let’s just slow way down. What seems to be the problem here? And whose head is going to roll?” It seemed that now he was getting really paranoid.

“I can’t talk about this over the phone. I was instructed to talk to you. But I can’t discuss this on the phone.” He was starting up again. Jack looked at his electronic calendar.

“Look, Harv. Can I call you Harv? Let’s determine a time to meet. How about 7:30 tomorrow morning? Can this keep until then?” Jack could sense he was thinking about the question. Jack could hear him muttering something about times and schedules. Finally, He spoke up.

“7:30, 7:30, ok. But I can’t come to your office. I don’t want anyone to know that I’ve talked to you about this.” Jack thought about the comment for a moment, *why all the secrecy?*

“No problem,” Jack said. “I’ll reserve the Lion conference room on the 9th floor. See the receptionist and she’ll direct you to the room. I’ll already be there so there should be no issue for you. Ok?” Harvey said nothing as if he was again calculating everything twice over in his mind.

“Ok, Mr. Alexander. I’ll be there at 7:30 tomorrow morning in the Lion conference room. I’ll have the 9th floor receptionist show me to the room. And, yes, you can call me ‘Harv’, everyone else here calls me by that name” This guy was like a computer. He repeated everything Jack said.

“Great, Harv, see you then.” As Jack hung up he kept thinking... *Weird guy!*

Jack's afternoon and evening was jam packed. He went from one meeting to the next, with no breaks.

“So, Jack, tell me, is this merger going to be the blockbuster deal that everyone is saying it will be?” You couldn't tell large institutional investment firms to go pound sand when they tried to get morsels of information regarding merger and acquisition activities. To Jack these discussions were just a lot of talking while saying nothing. Len had schooled Jack well. He told him,

“Make sure you only say what you know has already been communicated to the press. If you get asked a question that is out of bounds, simply say, ‘I'd love to answer that but you know I can't.’ Or, ‘Great question, but you know as well as I do that I'd be shot at dawn if I responded to that’.” It seemed to Jack that this was all worthless dialogue. But I had to go through this dance so investors could feel more comfortable with their position regarding this new merger. Jack thought; *I would have loved to have told this guy, and the rest of the world, “Yes, we're buying DTA and their brand will be nonexistent in less than a year.”* But of course he couldn't say that. So, Jack spent the rest of the evening doing small talk with this guy.

“Hey, Marty, thanks for the dinner discussion. I hope it was helpful. Call me if there's anything else I can do for you.” Translation: *“You thought you might be successful at getting a scoop from me. But, sorry Charlie, you'll have to go with what you've already gotten.”*

As Jack drove home, he went through the laundry list of items he still had to complete associated with the merger. The Chicago skyline was clear and sharp as Jack drove home down Lake Shore Drive. The sky was painted with a deep red-orange sunset. The sun was giving way to the evening, but not before it sent streaks through the clouds like a pronouncement that God

was about to speak. Jack stared at the sun's laser-like bursts minutes before it fell below the horizon. It was a momentary diversion from his many thoughts after a full day. Jack forced himself to organize the list of things that needed to be addressed before his head hit the pillow. It would be a long night.

Chapter Three

Jack had two things to attend to before his meeting with Harvey. Jack determined that he was going to be a real handful, especially with his endless muttering. But Jack sensed that there was something ominous about it all. There was something eating away in the back of Jack's mind. Jack got to the conference room at 7:15. Harvey hadn't arrived yet. Jack got the sense from their conversation that Harvey was one for following instructions. Jack thought, "If he was told, ***Be here at 7:30 am,***" he'd be here right on schedule." Jack called Beth and verified his morning meeting following the Harvey discussion. Jack checked his watch as he hung up. It was 7:28. The receptionist stuck her head in.

"I've got Harvey Johnston here for your 7:30." Jack thought, *Wow, he was two minutes early! I'd have to speak to him about following instructions,* he mused.

"Yes, Helen, thank you." Jack got up from the conference table.

"You must be Harvey Johnston." The guy who stood in front of Jack was an odd-looking man. Five foot eight and probably one hundred and sixty-five pounds soaking wet. He wore eyeglasses that must have been four inches thick. He had on a blue short-sleeve shirt with four pens in a breast pocket protector. This guy looked like an accountant right out of the 1960s.

"Yes, yes...I'm Harvey Johnston."

"Did you have any problem finding the room? Would you like something to drink?"

It was clear that he was uncomfortable. Jack got the distinct impression that he'd never been in the executive conference area.

"No, no sir, I'm fine, just fine. I'm ready to get right to work."

"Ok, Harv. Have a seat right here." Jack pointed him to a seat. As he moved to the

table, Jack couldn't help but notice both his laptop and an armful of papers. After they sat down, Jack asked,

“So, what was so important that you wanted to show me?” He went right to work, turning on his computer and lining up the various reports he'd brought.

“Well, sir,” he started, “I needed to talk to you because I've checked these spreadsheets over a dozen times, maybe more. I was told that there was no problem and that I should just ignore it. But there are definitely irregularities.”

“Ok, what are they, Harv?” Jack asked.

“Well, Mr. Alexander, I've been with Universal for fourteen years. I've been in the finance area for the last nine. Over the last five and a half years, whenever there has been any M&A activity, I've been put on the Finance Discovery Transition team.” Jack stopped him before he got wound up and started another full locomotive engine train ride.

“Thanks, Harv, for your employment history. But what are the irregularities?” Harvey looked at Jack as if he was trying to decide if he should continue.

“Sir, here's the situation. I was given the responsibility to look at DTA's revenue streams from their existing customers over the last three years. My task was to determine if there had been any significant spikes by customers in the current year as compared to prior years. Once the list was created, I was expected to ask the DTA finance people to explain the reasons for any variances.”

“Ok, that makes sense.” So far, based on his explanation, Jack didn't see the reason for his hints of a four-alarm fire. What he described was one of the standard operating procedures in M&A discovery. It was typical to explain significant year over year sales variances, especially in the year of acquisition. No one wanted to take over a company only to discover that the revenues

were grossly overstated. If it was determined that this was the case, the instances would be recorded and a settlement would be made to reconcile the overstatement.

“Harv, nothing you’ve told me thus far is as earth-shattering as you portrayed it over the phone. What you were asked to do was pretty standard.” Harv shifted uncomfortably in his chair before he spoke.

“Yes, Mr. Alexander, but look at this list. This is the list of customer revenue variances. What do you notice from the list?”

Jack took the report from him and reviewed it. It listed the variances high to low and gave a percentage difference year over year. The very first customer account was the U.S. Department of Defense, D.O.D. as it’s referred to. Jack was aware that this was a large account for DTA. It was well-known throughout the industry that they did several million in business with the D.O.D. In fact, they had a staggering number of contractors on assignment to the D.O.D. This account alone represented more than 25% of DTA’s revenues. Then it hit Jack and he thought, *how is it that in the current year, there would be a difference of eight, almost nine times the revenues of the prior year and almost twelve times higher than two years prior. The explanation that followed simply indicated “New Business Development.” This was very strange, there was no other increase like it on the page and every other variance had a fairly detailed explanation.*

As Jack looked up from the report, Harvey said,

“See, this is what I have been trying to say. This doesn’t make sense and it’s a huge irregularity. In my five and a half years on the team, I have only ever seen this once before. But never this large.” Jack looked back at the report and reviewed the other entries. There were no other customer entries even remotely close to the D.O.D. financials.

Chapter Four

“What did the finance people in DTA say to you about this? How did they explain it?”

Jack asked. Harvey shifted uncomfortably in his chair a second time.

“When I asked their finance guy, he told me that it was due to more consulting services sold at a much higher price.”

“Ok. Did you check to determine what was sold and did you compare it to the prior years?”

“That’s just the thing. When I looked, the consulting services resources sold were essentially the same, just at a much higher rate. For example, in the prior years a contractor was sold at a billing rate of about \$150/hr. But in the current year, the same type of resource was sold at almost \$1,250/hr.”

“Did you ask why the big difference?” Harvey started to answer. Then he hesitated and looked down at his notes. When he spoke next, Jack almost couldn’t hear him.

“I don’t want to get anyone in trouble. I’m just here to do my job. There may be a logical explanation for these irregularities, but I couldn’t find any.” Jack looked Harvey straight in the eye and repeated his question.

“Did you ask why the big differences? If you did, what were you told?” Harv could tell from Jack’s voice and tone that Jack meant business. Harv answered,

“Yes, I asked. I was told that the variance was due to a huge cost of sales.” Harvey looked down at his reports and waited for Jack’s next question.

“Harv, did you check to determine if what you’d been told was correct?” His reply was almost a whisper.

“Yes.”

“What did you find, Harv?” Jack asked him. The air conditioner kicked on and that was all you could hear in the conference room. Jack decided that he won’t say anything for a while and let Harv squirm around until he answered. After what seemed like forever, Jack lost his patience.

“Harvey, I need answers and I need them now!” Jack’s voice boomed and Harvey jumped. He was startled. Jack realized that Harv was trying to help. He’d been the one to bring this to management’s attention. Jack decided to back off.

“Harv, I’m sorry I yelled at you. I shouldn’t have. You’re simply trying to help here. Forgive me. Let’s start over.” Jack stopped and took a deep breath.

“Ok, Harv, when you checked out the story you got from DTA’s finance guy, what did you find out?” Now Harvey found his voice and spoke up.

“I found out that the cost of sales was essentially the same for the current year as it had been in previous years. Essentially the D.O.D was being gouged by DTA.”

“I see...who gave the approvals for this?” Jack asked.

“Sir, there were only four people involved: the finance guy, the salesperson, his manager, and one of the vice-presidents.” Jack thought for a moment about this newly conveyed information.

“Who approved these irregularities?” Jack asked.

“The vice-president signed off on this report every quarter,” Harvey said.

“Harv, who was the Vice President that approved these irregularities?”

“Her name is Catherine Frazier.”

Chapter Five

The rest of the weekend turned out to be great. Jack spent a few minutes explaining to Gloria the conversation with Len and the things he had read online about Catherine Frazier. They talked about it but decided not to allow it to get in the way of the rest of their time together. After they finally got up and started their day, they decided to go to the local farmer's market. Each Saturday, farmers from Illinois, Michigan, and Wisconsin would find their way to Chicago's North Shore to sell their wares. All kinds of fruits, vegetables, flowers, and cheeses would be on display. Gloria loved to wander through the aisles, talk to the farmers, pick up tips, and buy fresh goods. While Jack wasn't a big fan of the excursion, he was just glad to be spending time with her, doing something she enjoyed.

Once they had loaded all their newly-acquired purchases in the car, they decided to take a drive along the lake. They headed north on Sheridan road. They didn't have a specific destination. They simply wanted to just drive and appreciate the day. It was a warm summer day, so they opened the sunroof and let the windows down. The warm breeze moved through the car and whisked past their faces. As they rode through the communities along the North Shore, Kenilworth, Glencoe, and Winnetka, we caught glimpses of the lake in between the homes and the trees. The afternoon sun reflected on the waters. There were lighter blue waters close to the shore and then three other shades, each slightly darker moving east toward the middle of Lake Michigan. It was beautiful to see the sky meet the waters at the horizon. The drive was both pleasant and enjoyable.

While they didn't say much, it was clear that their hearts and minds were aligned as they held hands. It was as if they could read each other's thoughts. They'd brought a picnic basket filled with food Gloria had selected. So, after more than an hour and a half of driving, they found a quiet, secluded spot on the beach, took a blanket from the car, and started walking south along the shoreline for a while. Gloria took off her shoes and Jack followed suit. The sand was hot so they walked allowing the lake water to rush over their feet. As they held hands, they absorbed the radiance of the sun, the sounds of the water, as well as the majestic Chicago skyline off in the distance. They'd had some great moments together during their marriage. Jack felt that this was certainly one of them.

Finally they found an ideal spot to spread out their blanket and have a quiet picnic. They hadn't said much to each other as they walked. But as they reclined on the oversized blanket, Gloria was the first to speak.

"Jack, this is great. Thanks for suggesting that we come out today, take the long ride, and have a picnic."

"Yeah Babe...this is terrific."

"This is a perfect capstone to our Latin dance night. We should do this every weekend."

"Hey...sign me up!"

"Will you be able to find this spot again?" She asked without looking at me.

"Babe, of course, I could find it in my sleep." She rolled over on her side, took out her salad specialty, hummus, pita, a bit of cooked salmon, and fruits. She filled two bowls, ate some from hers, and passed one to Jack. She looked at Jack for what seemed like a long time. Then she spoke.

"Honey, I don't want to break the mood but I need to talk to you about a couple of things." Sensing that they were about to have a somewhat serious conversation, Jack sat up, put his bowl down, and turned toward her.

"Ok, what's up?"

Chapter Six

Before she said anything, she intently studied his face. Then she spoke,

“There has been so much drama with Catherine and all that FBI stuff. I’m hoping that’s all behind us and our lives will go back to normal. My question is when will that nightmare be over?”

Jack had to think about her comments, *yes, things had been horrific. I, too, want things to settle down but there’re still some obstacles that need to be dealt with.*

“Babe, I know that all this has been hard on you. You’ve been extremely supportive, but you need to know that we’ll be living in the ‘New Normal’ for a while longer. The difficulty is I can’t tell you how long it will be”

“What do you mean, the ‘New Normal’?”

“The truth is that there are a few things that I haven’t told you.”

“A few things... like what?”

Jack hesitated, not wanting to overwhelm her, “In addition to the stuff I told you this morning, Len said that I would have to testify at Catherine Frazier’s upcoming trial.”

“Really...why do you have to? I think you’ve done enough already.” Gloria put down her bowl and stared off at the lake.

Jack couldn’t tell if she was upset with him or just disappointed with the entire set of circumstances. He put down his plate and moved closer to her on the blanket. He didn’t say anything for a while. Then he softly said,

“Look, I know you want this to be done with. I do too...and it soon will be. But remember, I was the whistleblower. I was the one who took the whole thing to the FBI.”

She turned and looked at Jack. There was harshness to her voice as she spoke. “I know, I know...I just want all this to be over...done...finished! Courtrooms and testifying...I don’t want you to go through any of that.”

“I don’t either but it has got to be done.” She stood up and walked out to the edge of the water. Jack’s initial feeling was to let her go and be alone with her thoughts. He just watched her. He knew she was in his corner and just wanted what was best for him. She wanted him to be protected and not have to deal with a bunch of unnecessary issues.

Jack got up and went to her. He hugged her from behind and whispered, “I love you Mrs. Alexander. You are a marvelous lady. You’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me.”

She turned to face him and said, “I love you too. I just want this all to be finished.”

“And it soon will be.”

“My question is when?” She said almost pleading with him.

“The simple answer is...right after I testify. I just don’t know when that will be.”

“Ok, what happens in the meantime?”

Jack stopped short of giving her a glib answer. He could tell, like the tire commercial, there was a lot riding on his next answer.

“Honey, I’ve already talked extensively to Len. He wants to turn the page and move on just as much as we do.”

“So?”

“So, he wants me to get significantly involved in the next acquisition that Universal is planning.”

“What is it?”

“I don’t know all the details since we’re still in the initial stages but it will be an important one.”

Gloria typically left Jack to his business, unless he asked. Yet with all that was swirling around them, she decided to press in and ask him, “So how do you feel about it thus far?”

“Great...I feel great about it. I don’t know much right now but it has some elements that I’ve already found intriguing.”

She decided to push a little further with her questions. “Like what?”

“Well, first of all it’s the acquisition of an international company. In addition, the company is a consulting firm. Those two factors alone really get my juices flowing.”

“Honey, that’s great. At least you would be returning to business as usual. You wouldn’t be coming home every night freaked out about fraud, government issues, and the FBI.”

“You’ve got that right. But what I want is for us to get back to our perfect Saturday afternoon picnic, deal?”

“Deal!”

Chapter Seven

Catherine's Interrogation

"I want to call my lawyer."

"Catherine, we already gave you one phone call. You should have called your attorney."

"I didn't reach him. Please, I need to make another call."

"Are you sure you don't want to give us your statement?" Clarence Harper, the FBI agent in charge was intent on pressing the issue. "All of your cohorts have already told us that you approved the inflated billing of consulting services to the Department of Defense."

Catherine sat back in her chair. She took a minute to observe her surroundings. She was in a 10x12 room. There was a table in the middle of the room with five chairs. Three chairs were at the table and two were against the wall on opposite sides of her. Three of the walls were painted an off white and the wall right in front of her was made of glass. She determined that there were other agents looking into the room and observing her. In front of her was one of the arresting agents that had taken her from Jack Alexander's office. Agent Clarence Harper was a big, imposing guy that spoke in a very matter-of-fact fashion.

"So, what do you want to do?" Agent Harper asked. "Are you going to give us a statement?"

"What kind of statement?"

"We want to know everything."

"Everything...what does that mean?"

"Everything...when it all started, who was involved, what you did, how much you overcharged the D.O.D...everything."

"If I tell you all that then what happens to me?"

“I can’t answer that until you give us your complete statement. Now if there’s someone else involved who was ultimately responsible for all this, the government would likely show you some leniency. But I can’t promise you anything at this point.”

Catherine surveyed her surroundings which gave her more time to ponder his offer. She thought; *if I decide to talk, things could go better for me. I could tell him what he wants to know, just how high in DTA this crime against the government goes. If I answer all of his questions, I would have to implicate Priscilla. There would be no getting around that reality. Plus, she literally threw me under the bus when I called to tell her that I’d been arrested. I need to spill my guts. What do I have to lose?*

She took a deep breath. “Ok, I’m prepared to give you my statement. What do you want to know?” Catherine could tell that Agent Harper didn’t react. He simply took his pen and started writing something on his notepad. Catherine couldn’t see what it was so she just waited.

Finally, she waited for him to speak as his piercing brown eyes watched her every move. He didn’t miss anything. He spoke, “Fine, are you agreeable to us recording your statement?”

Catherine thought about his question for a minute. Then she said, “What the heck, it doesn’t matter at this point.”

She saw Agent Harper produce a small recorder from a drawer under the table where they were sitting. He gave a brief preamble as he looked down at the recorder.

“This is FBI special agent Clarence Harper. Catherine Frazier, Vice President of DTA has agreed of her own free will to give a statement regarding her involvement with the alleged scheme to defraud the D.O.D. She has waived her right for an attorney to be present and her statement has not been coerced. She knew what his next words would be.

“Now it’s your turn. Please state your name for the record.”

“My name is Catherine Frazier.”

“And you are providing the FBI with your statement of your own free will?”

“Yes I am.”

“Ok, from the beginning, tell us how this whole thing started.”

Catherine thought she would only spend a few minutes answering a few questions. Several hours later she was still responding to questions. She described in detail how the elaborate scheme was created to bilk the D.O.D. for DTA’s consulting services. She explained how one of the procurement managers of the D.O.D. was recruited to join the scheme. Catherine told them just how her team was able to overcharge the government eight to ten times the correct amount for consulting services. She detailed how they started small and how the operation continued to grow. She laid out how all of the accomplices received their payoff, either in cash or in a paid bonus. Hour after hour, question after endless question, Catherine gave answers. Finally, it seemed that the end was in sight. She had answered every question and told the FBI exactly what they wanted to know. Then agent Harper asked her the question she had been waiting for.

“So whose original idea was this whole scheme and from whom did you take your directions?”

Catherine knew the question was coming but it still surprised her. She didn’t say anything for a long time. She realized that if she implicated Priscilla Edwards, DTA’s corporate CEO, Catherine would have to somehow prove it. Catherine thought, *it might be her word against mine but I’m not going to go down for this by myself. Plus, she rejected me when I called her for help. She was my first and only phone call. It was crystal clear that she had no intentions of throwing me a lifeline.* She took a deep breath and answered,

“Priscilla Edwards”

Chapter Eight

Catherine watched the surprised look on Agent Harper's face. He raised one eyebrow over the other and said, "Priscilla Edwards the CEO of DTA?"

"Yes, the same,"

She felt Agent Harper's stare. "And you can prove that she was involved?"

"Well, I don't have any documents or emails from her, if that's what you mean."

Still staring at her, he asked, "Did she ever talk to anyone else or give directions on this whole scheme to someone else other than you?"

"I don't know."

"Did she ever tell you that she had spoken to anyone else at any time?"

"No."

"So, other than your word that she was the brains behind all this, you have no proof?"

"No, I don't."

Catherine noticed that Agent Harper never took his eyes off her. It seemed that he was processing what she'd just told him, trying to figure an angle other than the obvious one. Then he spoke, "Why should I believe you? You could be simply trying to drag somebody else down with you so you don't take the fall by yourself."

"Is there a question in there?" Catherine asked.

The smirk on his face told her that he hadn't missed the humor in her question. His next remark frightened Catherine. She simply wasn't ready for it. "I have to be frank with you. If you can't link the CEO to this, you'll take the fall all by yourself."

Catherine felt like someone had just opened up a blast furnace on her. She could feel the heat and the sting of his words..."You will take the fall all by yourself." She racked her brain. She had to think of something that would lessen the blow.

"I've told you everything. You now know all the details. If you arrested her or simply brought her in for questioning, with all you know, I'm sure she'll crack and confess."

"What if she doesn't?" Catherine hadn't thought through it all but she was too far down the road to turn back now.

"You've got to try. I've told you the truth. This whole thing was orchestrated by Priscilla."

She appreciated it when Agent Harper took his eyes off her for just the second time in what felt like hours. She sensed that he was weighing everything, trying to make a decision. Decidedly, he spoke. “Alright, we’ll try bringing her in for questioning. But if we can’t find a way to get her to corroborate your story, we’ll have to cut her loose.”

Breathing a deep sigh of relief, she offered,

“If you ask the right questions, I’m sure she’ll crack and confess.”

“I hope, for your sake, you’re right.”

BREAK

“Jack, I’m not at liberty to tell you a lot since this is an active investigation. But we have Catherine and the others in custody.”

“Really, have you found out about what had been going on? Did you get Catherine to confess?”

“Again Jack, you know that I can’t comment on any of the details except to say that we are progressing with our investigation.”

Clarence was a good friend. Jack had known him and his wife since college. He also knew that, given Clarence’s elevated position in the FBI, he took seriously his role and responsibilities. Jack had reached out to him when he found out that Catherine and others were defrauding the D.O.D. out of millions of dollars in erroneous consulting fees. Catherine had approved the billings each quarter. Since this was brought to Jack’s attention, he had no choice but to contact the federal authorities immediately. That initial call was to Clarence. So much had happened since that call. .

“Ok, Clarence, if you can’t tell me anymore about your investigation, how can I help you? Looking down at his notes, he asked, “Did you ever hear anything about Priscilla Edwards being involved with all this?”

Jack was taken completely by surprise.

“No, I haven’t. Why do you ask?”

“So, no one has ever said anything or even hinted about her and in D.O.O scheme?” Jack sat back and thought about his question for a minute. *While no one had implicated Priscilla, we had uncovered the amazing similarities in financial irregularities that had occurred in the three previous firms where she had been CEO. Clarence needs to know what we know.*

“Well, Clarence, there is something that you should know.”

“Really...what is it?”

“As a part of our due diligence during any acquisition, we conduct a thorough investigation of all the senior management team at the firm we are acquiring.”

“Ok, that’s pretty standard. What does that have to do with Priscilla and this investigation? Was she involved with this D.O.D. scheme?”

“I don’t know...I only know that our investigators determined that there had been financial irregularities in three of the past firms where she had been CEO.”

Jack had known Clarence a long time. When he cocked his head he knew that it was a sign of renewed interest.

“Really, what did you do with the information you found?”

“Our CEO and I presented it to the Board of Directors at DTA.” There was a ‘gentleman’s agreement’ not to disclose the information we found.”

Jack noticed that Clarence started taking copious notes. Clarence stopped and asked, “Did any of the irregularities involve the federal government?”

“No”

“What else did you do with the information?”

“Nothing...since she never worked for our firm, there wasn’t anything further for us to do.”

Jack observed Clarence sit back in his chair, look over his notes as he pondered the information he’d just received. Finally he said, “Interesting, why didn’t you decide to tell me about this before today?”

“Clarence, as I said, we agreed to not disclose what we found. I felt that if there was some action to be taken, it should be done by DTA.”

“Come on man, don’t you think that this information would have some bearing on this investigation? Don’t you think that you owed it to tell me about this?”

Jack thought about it for a minute. He stared at his desk and then looked at his friend and said,

“Clarence, you’re right. Regardless of what I agreed to, I should have found a way to tell you. I’m sorry.” There was an uncomfortable silence in the room. Neither of them said anything as they both looked at each other.

Finally, Clarence broke the silence.

“Jack, for all that it is worth, I understand the dilemma you were in. You gave your word and you felt an obligation to it. But why did you decide to tell me know?”

Jack thought over the question and then said,

“Well, you asked some pretty direct questions. If I didn’t give you honest answers, I would have been lying to you. I wasn’t going to lie to you. Aside from our friendship, I came to you with this whole thing. I needed to be honest.”

Jack saw the frown on Clarence’s face relaxed a bit.

“Thanks man, I appreciate it.” Jack saw that Clarence’s manner abruptly changed.

“So, how’s the family? What’s Gloria doing with herself since she left the marketplace?”

Realizing that Clarence wanted to move to a new topic, Jack just went with it.

“Hey man, the family’s fine. Everything is going well. Gloria’s never been happier. It was absolutely the best decision we’ve ever made, well except for getting married.”

“That’s great. We still need to figure out a time for the four of us to get together. The little woman has been asking me about that every time I mention your name.

“Ok, let’s make it happen. I can tell you that Gloria will make herself available for almost any time.”

Clarence gave Jack his big smile and replied,

“Terrific, I’ll get back to you. Oh wow, the time sure has flown.” Clarence abruptly got up from his chair. “I’ve got to go!”

Jack stood up as well.

“Clarence please keep me posted with whatever you can tell me about the case.” Jack looked away in order to collect his thoughts. Then he said, “Clarence, again, I’m sorry, my friend.”

“No worries; don’t spend any more time thinking about it. You told me now and that’s more than enough. I’ll share with you what I can.” He gave Jack a hug and then he was gone.

Jack sat back down and looked out of his office window at Lake Michigan. Summer was in full bloom. The sun was bright and high in the sky. He could see lots of boats moving across the water. In spite of the fact that his office was on a high floor, he could still see people smiling and enjoying the warm weather. He saw people riding bikes, walking around, and just sitting on

park benches. Jack thought about Catherine who was probably sitting in a cell or some other confined space. He thought, *she likely doesn't have a window to look out of. She essentially has no access to the outside world.* He felt bad for her, her husband, and family. He realized that while she brought it down on herself, he had compassion for her. Jack was also struck by Clarence's questions about Priscilla. He thought that if anyone could uncover the ring leader of this scheme, Clarence could.

Chapter Nine

“Mr. Harper...Ms. Edwards will see you now.” The executive assistant led him back to the CEO’s office. “Mr. Harper, you can have a seat here. Can I get you anything to drink?”

“No, I’m fine.”

“Ok, Ms. Edwards will see you shortly.”

The windows in Priscilla’s office were ceiling to floor. They offered both an eastern and a southern exposure. It was a clear, sunny day and you could almost see Michigan on the other side of the lake. Looking south, the Shedd Aquarium, Soldier Field, and the Field Museum were highly visible. Clarence’s first thought was *what a terrific view*. He looked around her office. It was massive. At the FBI, he could fit almost twenty people into the same space. She had some interesting art on the walls. As he walked up to a couple of them, he realized they weren’t prints but originals. He could also see that she had some authentic artifacts that looked like they came from someplace in South America. Clarence strolled over to her desk and among the photographs she had on her credenza, there were photos of her taken with the current and past presidents of the United States.

“That one was taken on the White House lawn. I wanted the first lady to be in the photo but he just wanted the two of us.”

Clarence turned as Priscilla was coming in through a side door. She extended her hand to Clarence. He realized the firm grip she had. She was five foot four but seemed taller. He’d read that she was in her early fifties which seemed about right. She had a bit of a hawk nose, with dyed jet black hair, deep set eyes, and the sunken cheeks of a seasoned executive. It was clear to Clarence that she was trying to be relational.

“Agent Harper, I’m so sorry to keep you waiting. Did my assistant ask you if you wanted something to drink?”

‘Yes she did. No problem, I haven’t been waiting long.’

“Well, do sit down.” Clarence watched as Priscilla made a point of sitting next to him instead of behind her huge desk. He saw the big smile appear but there was definitely a strong business side to her. He waited and then she asked, “Agent Harper, how can I help you? On the phone, you said that it had something to do with the case against Catherine and the others.”

Harper started slowly, not wanting to rush into this interview.

“Yes, tell me what you know about what’s happened Ms. Edwards.”

“Oh, please call me Priscilla. And I don’t know much more than what you told our General Counsel and me shortly before all the arrests were made.”

“I see...nothing else?”

“No, not really, there have been things written in the papers and on the news but that’s all I know.”

Harper decided to try a slightly different approach.

“Priscilla did you have any idea about any aspect of the crime that was going on against the D.O.D.?”

“Why, no...did someone tell you that I did?”

“Right now I’m asking the questions. If you had known anything about it going on, who would you have told?”

“Agent Harper, again, I knew nothing about it. But if anything had come to my attention, I would have gotten our General Counsel and HR involved.”

Harper decided that he would get right to the point.

“Priscilla, I would like you to come down to our offices for questioning.” He watched Priscilla’s body language as she reacted with surprise.

“Really...am I under arrest?”

“No...not at this point. We only want to ask you a few questions and we’d like to do that in our offices.” Clarence studied her as she said nothing, looked away, and obviously thought about what was being asked of her. Then she said,

“How long will it take? I have a company to run.”

“Oh...it won’t take very long.”

“If it’s okay with you, I’d like to have my attorney present.”

“You can if you like but it won’t be necessary.”

“Right, but if you’re asking me to come down to the FBI offices, I feel like I need to have my lawyer present during any questions you might have.”

Harper remained casual and his tone was even.

“That’s fine. We’d like you to be there at 9:00am tomorrow morning.”

“I actually have a very urgent meeting tomorrow morning.” Harper looked at the calendar on his smartphone.

“Ok, then come at 9:00am the day after tomorrow.”

“Fine, I’m happy to accommodate your request. But I would like to know what’s driving this.”

“Priscilla, it’s pretty simple, we have an ongoing investigation, you are the CEO of DTA, and we need you to answer some questions.

“Am I being charged with something? I just need to know.”

Again, Harper was casual in his comments.

“Nope...you’re not being charged of anything at this time.”

“Not at this time...what does that mean?” Agent Harper stood up and extended his hand to her.

“Priscilla, it means exactly that. You are not being charged with anything at this time. Thank you for meeting and talking with me. I look forward to seeing you as we agreed. Have a good day.”

He turned and walked out leaving Priscilla still sitting in her chair. She just sat there reflecting on all of the elements of their conversation. She thought *what does he know and is not telling me? If he did know something, who would have told him? While I concocted the whole setup, I never sent an electronic document, a text, or anything written. I never had a phone conversation or left a voice message. I think I covered all of my tracks well. Since I’ve done this before, it has allowed me to perfect every detail. This scheme has been successful every other time. But I hadn’t every tried it with the federal government. Looking back, maybe this was a tactical error. Also, the other complication was that blasted acquisition. Without it, I would have had smooth sailing. That Jack Alexander had to go and stick his nose in it. Now I’ve got to get in touch with my attorney. I’m not going to see the FBI along.*