

JOHN
GRISHAM



THE
JUDGE'S
LIST



DOUBLEDAY

New York

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1

The call came through the office landline, through a system that was at least twenty years old and had fought off all technological advances. It was taken by a tattooed receptionist named Felicity, a new girl who would be gone before she fully understood the phones. They were all leaving, it seemed, especially the clerical help. Turnover was ridiculous. Morale was low. The Board on Judicial Conduct had just seen its budget chopped for the fourth straight year by a legislature that hardly knew it existed.

Felicity managed to route the call down the hall to the cluttered desk of Lacy Stoltz. “There’s a call on line three,” she announced.

“Who is it?” Lacy asked.

“She wouldn’t say.”

There were so many ways to respond. At that moment, though, Lacy was bored, and she did not wish to waste the emotional energy necessary to properly chastise the kid and set her straight. Routines and protocols were crumbling. Office discipline was waning as BJC spiraled into a leaderless mess.

As a veteran, *the* veteran, it was important to set an exam-

ple. “Thanks,” she said and punched the blinking light. “Lacy Stoltz.”

“Good afternoon, Ms. Stoltz. Do you have a moment?”

Female, educated, no hint of an accent, mid-forties, give or take three years. Lacy always played the voice game. “And to whom do I have the pleasure?”

“My name is Margie for now, but I use other ones.”

Lacy was amused and almost chuckled. “Well, at least you’re up front about it. It normally takes me some time to work through the aliases.”

Anonymous callers were routine. People with gripes about judges were always cautious and hesitant to come forward and take on the system. Almost all feared retaliation from the powers on high.

Margie said, “I’d like to talk to you, somewhere private.”

“My office is private, if you’d like.”

“Oh no,” she snapped, apparently frightened at the thought. “That won’t work. You know the Siler Building, next door?”

“Of course,” Lacy said as she stood and looked out her window at the Siler Building, one of several nondescript government addresses in downtown Tallahassee.

Margie said, “There’s a coffee bar on the ground floor. Can we meet there?”

“I suppose. When?”

“Now. I’m on my second latte.”

“Slow down. Give me a few minutes. And you’ll recognize me?”

“Yes. You’re on the website. I’m in the rear, left side.”

Lacy’s office was indeed private. The one to her left was empty, vacated by an ex-colleague who’d moved on to a bigger agency. Across the hall an office had been converted into a make-shift storage closet. She walked toward Felicity and ducked into

the office of Darren Trope, a two-year man already prowling for another job.

“You busy?” she asked as she interrupted whatever he was doing.

“Not really.” It didn’t matter what he was or was not doing. If Lacy needed anything, Darren belonged to her.

“Need a favor. I’m stepping over to Siler to meet a stranger who just admitted that she is using a fake name.”

“Oh, I love the cloak-and-dagger. Sure beats sitting here reading about some judge who made lewd comments to a witness.”

“How lewd?”

“Pretty graphic.”

“Any photos, videos?”

“Not yet.”

“Let me know if you get them. So, mind stepping over in fifteen minutes and taking a picture?”

“Sure. No problem. No idea who she is?”

“None whatsoever.”

Lacy left the building, took her time walking around the block, enjoyed a moment of cool air, and strolled into the lobby of the Siler Building. It was almost 4:00 p.m. and there were no other customers drinking coffee at that hour. Margie was at a small table in the rear, to the left. She waved quickly as though someone might notice and she didn’t want to get caught. Lacy smiled and walked toward her.

African American, mid-forties, professional, attractive, educated, slacks and heels and dressed nicer than Lacy, though around BJC these days any and all attire was allowed. The old boss wanted coats and ties and hated jeans, but he had retired two years ago and took most of the rules with him.

Lacy passed the counter where the barista was loafing with both elbows stuck on the Formica, hands cradling her pink phone

that had her thoroughly fascinated. She did not look up, never thought about greeting a customer, and Lacy decided to pass on more caffeine anyway.

Without standing, Margie stuck out a hand and said, “Nice to meet you. Would you like some coffee?”

Lacy smiled, shook her hand, and sat across the square table. “No thanks. And it’s Margie, right?”

“For now.”

“Okay, we’re off to a bad start. Why are you using an alias?”

“My story will take hours to tell and I’m not sure you want to hear it.”

“Then why bother?”

“Please, Ms. Stoltz.”

“Lacy.”

“Please, Lacy. You have no idea the emotional trauma I’ve been through trying to get to this point in my life. I’m a wreck right now, okay?”

She seemed fine, though a bit on edge. Perhaps it was the second latte. Her eyes darted right and left. They were pretty and surrounded by large purple frames. The lenses were probably not needed. The glasses were part of the outfit, a subtle disguise.

Lacy said, “I’m not sure what to say. Why don’t you start talking and maybe we’ll get somewhere?”

“I’ve read about you.” She reached down into a backpack and deftly pulled out a file. “The Indian casino case, not long ago. You caught a judge skimming and put her away. One reporter described it as the largest bribery scandal in the history of American jurisprudence.” The file was two inches thick and gave every impression of being immaculately organized.

Lacy noted the use of the word “jurisprudence.” Odd for a layperson.

“It was a big case,” she said, feigning modesty.

Margie smiled and said, "Big? You broke up a crime syndicate, nailed the judge, and sent a bunch of people to prison. All are still there, I believe."

"True, but it was far from a one-girl takedown. The FBI was heavily involved. It was a complicated case and some people were killed."

"Including your colleague, Mr. Hugo Hatch."

"Yes, including Hugo. Curious. Why all of this research about me?"

Margie folded her hands and rested them on top of the file, which she had not opened. Her index fingers were shaking slightly. She looked at the entrance and glanced around again, though no one had entered, no one had left, no one had moved, not even the barista who was lost in the clouds. She took a sip from her straw. If it really was her second latte, it had barely been touched. She had used the word "trauma." Admitted to being a "wreck." Lacy realized the woman was frightened.

Margie said, "Oh, I'm not sure it's research. Just some stuff off the Internet. Everything's out there, you know."

Lacy smiled and tried to be patient. "I'm not sure we're getting anywhere."

"Your job is to investigate judges who are accused of wrongdoing, right?"

"That's correct."

"And you've been doing it for how long?"

"I'm sorry. Why is this relevant?"

"Please."

"Twelve years." Giving that number was like admitting defeat. It sounded so long.

"How do you get involved in a case?" Margie asked, bouncing around.

Lacy took a deep breath and reminded herself to be patient.

People with complaints who got this far were often rattled. She smiled and said, “Well, typically a person with a complaint against a judge will contact us and we’ll have a meeting. If the gripe appears to have some merit, then the person will file a formal complaint, which we keep locked up for forty-five days while we take a look. We call it an assessment. Nine times out of ten that’s as far as it gets and the complaint is dismissed. If we find possible wrongdoing, then we notify the judge and he or she has thirty days to respond. Usually, everybody lawyers up. We investigate, have hearings, bring in witnesses, the works.”

As she spoke, Darren strolled in alone, disturbed the barista by ordering decaf, waited on it while ignoring the two women, then took it to a table on the other side of the room where he opened a laptop and began what appeared to be some serious work. Without giving the slightest hint, he aimed the laptop’s camera at Lacy’s back and Margie’s face, zoomed in for a close shot, and began filming. He took a video and some still shots.

If Margie noticed him it was not apparent.

She listened intently to Lacy and asked, “How often is a judge removed from office?”

Again, why is this relevant? “Not very often, fortunately. We have jurisdiction over one thousand judges and the vast majority are honest, hardworking professionals. Most of the complaints we see are just not that serious. Disgruntled litigants who didn’t get what they wanted. A lot of divorce cases. A lot of lawyers mad because they lost. We stay busy, but for the most part the conflicts are resolved.”

She made the job sound boring, and, after twelve years, it rather felt that way.

Margie listened carefully, her fingertips tapping the file. She took a deep breath and asked, “The person who files the complaint, is he or she always identified?”

Lacy thought for a second and said, "Eventually, yes. It's quite rare for the complaining party to remain anonymous."

"Why?"

"Because the complainant usually knows the facts of the case and needs to testify against the judge. It's hard to nail a judge when the people he ticked off are afraid to come forward. Are you afraid?"

The very word seemed to frighten her. "Yes, you could say that," she admitted.

Lacy frowned and appeared bored. "Look, let's cut to the chase here. How serious is the behavior that you're talking about?"

Margie closed her eyes and managed to say, "Murder."

She immediately opened them and glanced around to see if anyone had overheard. There was no one close enough to hear anything except Lacy, who absorbed this with the hard-boiled skepticism she had developed after so many years on the job. She reminded herself again to be patient. When she looked at Margie's eyes again they were wet.

Lacy leaned in a bit closer and softly asked, "Are you suggesting that one of our sitting judges has committed a murder?"

Margie bit her lip and shook her head. "I know he has."

"May I ask how you know this?"

"My father was one of his victims."

Lacy inhaled this and glanced around herself. "Victims? As in more than one?"

"Yes. I believe my father was his second victim. I'm not sure which number, but I'm certain of his guilt."

"Interesting."

"That's an understatement. How many complaints have you had about judges killing people?"

"Well, none."

“Exactly. In the history of America, how many judges have been convicted of murder while on the bench?”

“I’ve never heard of one.”

“Exactly. Zero. So don’t dismiss this as something ‘interesting.’”

“Didn’t mean to offend.”

Across the way, Darren finished his important business and left. Neither woman acknowledged his departure.

Margie said, “No offense taken. I’m not going any further in this coffee bar. I have a lot of information that I would like to share with you and no one else, but not here.”

Lacy had encountered her share of nuts and unbalanced souls with boxes and paper sacks filled with documents that clearly proved that some sleazeball up on the bench was thoroughly corrupt. Almost always, after a few minutes of face-to-face interaction, she could reach her verdict and began making plans to route the complaint to the dismissal drawer. Over the years she had learned to read people, though with many of the wackos that came her way a quick evaluation wasn’t much of a challenge.

Margie, or whoever, was neither a nut nor a wacko, nor an unbalanced soul. She was onto something and she was frightened.

Lacy said, “Okay. Where do we go next?”

“What is next?”

“Look, you contacted me. Do you want to talk or not? I don’t play games and I don’t have time to pry information out of you or any other person who wants to complain about a judge. I waste a lot of time cajoling information out of people who call me in the first place. I go down a dead-end trail once a month. Are you talking or not?”

Margie was crying again and wiping her cheeks. Lacy studied her with as much compassion as possible, but she was also willing to leave the table and never come back.

However, she was intrigued by the idea of murder. Part of her daily grind around BJC was suffering through the mundane and frivolous gripes of unhappy people with small problems and little to lose. A murder by a sitting judge seemed too sensational to believe.

Finally, Margie said, "I have a room at the Ramada on East Gaines. We could meet there after hours. But you have to come alone."

Lacy nodded as if she'd anticipated this. "With precautions. We have a rule that prohibits me from conducting an initial meeting with a complaining party off premises and alone. I would have to bring another investigator, one of my colleagues."

"Like Mr. Trope over there?" Margie asked, nodding at Darren's empty chair.

Lacy slowly turned around to see what in the world she was talking about as she tried desperately to think of a response.

Margie continued, "It's your website, okay? Smiling faces of all staff." From her briefcase she removed an 8×10 color photo of herself and slid it across the table. "Here, with best wishes, a current color mug of myself that's far better than the ones Mr. Trope just stole."

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm sure he's already run my pic through your facial recognition software and he's found nothing. I'm in nobody's data bank."

"What are you talking about?" Margie was dead-on but Lacy was rattled and not ready to come clean.

"Oh, I think you know. You come alone or you'll never see me again. You're the most experienced investigator in your office and at this moment your boss is only a temp. You can probably do whatever you want."

"I wish it were that easy."

“Let’s call it an after-work drink, that’s all. We’ll meet in the bar and if it goes well we can go upstairs to my room and talk with even more privacy.”

“I cannot go to your room. It’s against our procedures. If a complaint is filed and it becomes necessary to meet in private, then I can do so. Someone has to know where I am, at least initially.”

“Fair enough. What time?”

“How about six?”

“I’ll be in the back corner, right-hand side, and I’ll be alone, same as you. No wires, recorders, secret cameras, no colleagues pretending to drink as they film away. And say hello to Darren. Maybe one day I’ll have the pleasure. Deal?”

“Deal.”

“Okay. You can go now.”

As Lacy walked around the block and drifted back to her office, she had to admit that she could not remember ever getting her butt so thoroughly kicked at the first interview.

She slid the color photo across Darren’s desk and said, “Nice work. Busted big-time. She knows our names, ranks, and serial numbers. She gave me this photo and said it was far better than the ones you were taking with your laptop.”

Darren held the photo and said, “Well, she’s right.”

“Any idea who she is?”

“Nope. I’ve run her face through our laundry and got nothing. Which, as you know, means little.”

“Means she has not been arrested in Florida in the past six years. Can you punch it through the FBI?”

“Probably not. They require a reason, and since I know nothing I can’t give them one. Can I ask an obvious question?”

“Please do.”

“BJC is an investigative agency, right?”

“Supposed to be.”

“Then why do we post our photos and bios on a rather stupid website?”

“Ask the boss.”

“We don’t have a boss. We have a career paper-pusher who’ll be gone before we miss her.”

“Probably. Look, Darren, we’ve had this conversation a dozen times. We don’t want our lovely faces on any BJC page. That’s why I haven’t updated mine in five years. I still look thirty-four.”

“I’d say thirty-one, but then I’m biased.”

“Thank you.”

“I guess there’s no real harm. It’s not like we’re going after murderers and drug dealers.”

“Right.”

“So what’s her complaint, whoever she is?”

“Don’t know yet. Thanks for the backup.”

“A lot of good it did.”