

Over My Dead Body

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-Excerpt-

CHAPTER ONE

Thwack! The bullet bit into the side of the wooden doorframe, inches from the man's head, spraying splinters into his face. The initial shock lasted only briefly, as survival instinct took over, compelling the man to action. Diving back into the house, he kicked the door shut and crawled to the kitchen.

"Get in the basement," he shouted to his wife.

Outside, an authoritative and commanding voice blasted orders through a megaphone. The eerie sound echoed through the walls of the house.

"And what are you going to do?" the worried woman asked nervously. "You can't stop them all. Those are cops!"

"Don't worry about what I'm going to do," he replied tersely. "Just take Ashley and go to the basement."

His wife scooped up their three-year-old daughter. Half running, half falling, she stumbled down the stairs. Reaching the bottom, she heard the door above her slam. In a daze, she scrambled to the far corner, crouching under her husband's workbench, huddling with her daughter.

After they were safely out of sight, her husband moved swiftly to the bedroom. In grim determination, he retrieved a key from his desk. His jaw set with a resolute purpose, he strode to the gun cabinet in the den.

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The June day had begun like any other, a typical Monday morning. Jeff Blake left for work at the usual six-thirty a.m. Arriving at the investment brokerage firm of Avian Financial Services downtown Fairfield, where he worked as an investment advisor, he sauntered into the office shortly before eight o'clock. In the distance, a factory whistle blew, proclaiming the beginning of the workweek.

Deeply immersed in paperwork, Jeff hardly noticed as his secretary, twenty-three year old Janet Dempson, came in to announce his nine o'clock appointment with a potential new client, Mr. Clint Parkens. Shuffling through mountainous piles of files, heaped on the desk, he looked up as she ushered the man in. Smiling politely, Jeff invited his visitor to have a seat. With a slight nod, the man sat down.

Pushing the paperwork aside, Jeff asked, "What can we do for you today?"

"I want to make some investments," the well-dressed man answered curtly. "But I don't want to lose any money."

Again, Jeff smiled. The edgy wariness was a quite common attribute among first time investors. In a calm, reassuring and soothing tone, he explained the investment process. Unlike many advisors, he always made it a point to stress the fact there were no guarantees in this business.

“Investing doesn’t have to be a losing proposition,” he began. “There are several safeguards available, but it *is* still a gamble. The greater the risk, the more you stand to gain on the investment. Of course,” he added, “if you’re not willing to take a major risk, we have a number of options which generally provide modest returns. It’s really up to each individual, according to their own comfort level. But unfortunately,” he repeated, “there are no guarantees.”

Across the desk, the man seated in the posh corner office said nothing, staring straight at Jeff; he remained lost in thought, contemplating what he’d been told.

Jeff had seen it before; the uncertain look, the reluctance to commit. With the expertise of a seasoned salesman, he gently prodded the hesitant client.

“We could start small,” he suggested. “That would provide an opportunity to become familiar with the process and a chance to build some confidence as you learn the business of investing. Then when you’re comfortable, you can increase the investment capital as you see fit.”

“I was thinking more along the lines of you providing me with the essential information I need to make a profit,” Clint said bluntly.

“Well, we offer advice,” Jeff patiently explained. “But the decisions of where to place your money and how much to invest, are strictly up to you, the investor.”

The man’s calm demeanor abruptly changed. “Look,” he said, “I’ll cut to the chase. You’re an investment broker, which means you have certain privileged information; valuable information; information I can’t get.”

“Yes,” Jeff acknowledged. “We base our recommendations on information such as past performance, industry trends, and other leading market indicators.”

Clint Parkens shook his head. “I’m talking about what you know regarding stocks and pricing—beforehand.”

“Mr. Parkens, what you are suggesting is known as insider trading,” Jeff said in a sharp tone. “It’s not only highly unethical, but illegal. We, as any reputable firm, simply do not engage in that type of practice.”

“Except for yourself, a few close friends and family, right?” Clint sneered.

“No,” Jeff said slowly, his manner now more subdued. “It’s illegal for me to personally act on, or provide insider information to anyone.”

Clint scowled, glaring at the investment advisor. “You have a three-year-old daughter, don’t you?” he asked with a hostile tone.

Caught off guard, Jeff didn’t know what to say. “Uh, yes,” he stuttered, glancing involuntarily at the picture on his desk. He wondered how this client, who he’d never met, had known about Ashley. And what relevance did it have to their conversation?

As if in answer to Jeff’s unspoken questions, Clint said, “You don’t know me but, I’m the Director of Child Protective Services for Grover County.”

“Okay,” Jeff replied, still not sure where Mr. Parkens was going with all this.

“All I have to do is give the word and your daughter, *Ashley*,” he added with intent, “will be taken into protective custody. And you,” he said, wagging a finger, “will never see her again.”

Blake studied his client. The man was dead serious; his unblinking stare didn’t waver. The look in the man’s eyes sent a chill up Jeff’s spine. “Mr. Parkens,” he said suddenly, “I think it’s time for you to leave. You can’t come into my office and threaten me.” He pushed the button to page Miss Dempson.

"It wasn't a threat." Clint said coldly. "Think of it as just making a deal. You helping me, and me helping you."

"No, I don't think so," answered Jeff.

"Either you provide me the information to secure and protect my investments, or your daughter will be going away," Clint said with a sinister sneer.

"Over my dead body!"

"That can be arranged," Clint replied menacingly.

Jeff Blake was normally a patient man, but he finally lost his professional poise. Springing to his feet, he shouted, "You go ahead and try it! But you'd better bring an army, because one thing I can guarantee is, someone will be dead! No one, not you and not your friggin' agency, will take my daughter! No one!"

Miss Dempson nudged open the door, peering in with a look of minor alarm. Clint Parkens calmly prepared to leave. Lingered at the door, he turned, looking back toward Jeff.

"Just remember, it was your choice," he said. Then the man was gone.

Janet closed the door behind the man and Jeff eased back into his chair, trying to calm his frazzled nerves. He shouldn't have lost his cool, he told himself. Doing so was unprofessional. But the guy, with his belligerent attitude and hostile threats had gotten under his skin.

Taking a deep breath, Jeff noticed he'd been chewing his lip, a habit exhibited when he was tense. Still on edge, abruptly he made the decision to go home. More than likely, it was nothing to worry about, nothing at all, merely idle threats. But he couldn't shake the uneasy feeling he'd had since the man had left. If anything did come of the visit, he wanted to be prepared.

Glancing down, he saw the tape recorder on his desk shelf was still running. Out of habit, he'd hit the record button as Miss Dempson had shown Mr. Parkens into the office.

Stopping the recorder, Jeff ejected the tape and slipped it into his pocket. Passing through the outer office, he instructed Janet to cancel his appointments for the rest of the day.

"Are you okay?" she asked worriedly.

He nodded. "I'm fine. I just have some things I need to take care of."

Heading for the parking garage, he was still seething. Angry at Mr. Parkens, and at himself for reacting the way he had. He should have just kept quiet, but he'd never been able to successfully follow the advice of his brain very well. Instead, he'd compounded the problem by responding with threats of his own. That had been a mistake. A costly mistake. As he would soon discover.

Jeff barely had time to explain to his wife Amy, why he was home so early, before they'd shown up. They, being the police.

She'd laughed when he'd related the threats from the annoying client. "No one can do such a thing," she'd told him. "And even if they tried, the Sheriff's Department isn't going to go along with it. Not without a court order."

Still chewing the side of his lip, he'd nodded to her, and admitted that coming home was perhaps a bit of overreaction, "But I needed a vacation anyway."

Amy had dismissed the incident and begun preparing their lunch, happy to have him home. "You're always so busy, at least now I get to spend the day with you."

Their light conversation had been interrupted by a knock on the door. On his way from the kitchen, Jeff had seen the half dozen cop cars outside. Answering the door, he'd found a female C.P.S. agent. Standing beside her was a Deputy Sheriff.

Unsure what to say or do, Jeff managed a faint, "Hello."

"Are you Jeffery Blake?" asked the Deputy.

"Yes."

"I'm Michael Stolze of the Grover County Sheriff's Department," the officer introduced himself. "I have a court order to remove your child, a daughter, by the name of Ashley Blake, into protective custody. Is your daughter here?"

Jeff was speechless. He glanced at the woman who hadn't spoken; she returned a blank unfeeling stare. Finding his voice, he said, "There must be some kind of mistake. On what grounds was the court order issued? And why were we not allowed the right of a hearing?"

"I'm not sure of the Court's reason," the Deputy stated. From the document in his hand, he began to read. "Whereas there has been substantial and overwhelming evidence produced and presented to me; by the authority of the state, this Court orders an immediate removal of said child, named above, from the home of Jeffery and Amy Blake. Parental rights notwithstanding in this case, the child shall remain in protective custody of the state until such time as a formal hearing can be held."

The deputy's eyes again met Jeff's. This time Jeff returned an icy stare.

"This isn't easy for any of us," said the man with the badge. "You'll get your day in court, but right now we're here to execute this court order. The more cooperative you are the better it will be for us all. If necessary, however, we are prepared to use force."

No air of superiority was projected in his voice or manner. Just an officer of the law, doing his job. The matter of fact way he stated his purpose for being there wasn't even the least bit confrontational.

But Jeff didn't see it that way. "You're not taking my daughter," he said, not at all sure how he was going to prevent it. The outcome appeared inevitable, but as long as he had anything to say about it, Ashley was not going anywhere!

Just then, Amy emerged from the kitchen. Seeing the officer at the door, she started to ask what was going on.

Not wanting her to be involved in whatever mayhem ensued, Jeff abruptly looked the deputy in the eye. For the second time that day he said to an unwanted visitor, "I think it's time for you to leave." Then he added, "You have about two seconds to get off my property."

Surprisingly, the deputy calmly nodded and without a word walked down the drive to the street. The woman followed.

The front door still open, Jeff watched while relaying the gist of the preceding conversation to Amy.

"So they're just going to leave?"

"Guess so."

Reaching the patrol car, Deputy Stolze spoke briefly to another officer, who then in staunch military fashion began barking orders to the dozen or so deputies.

The officers, who'd been standing by relaxed, quickly swarmed into action. Moving as a single unit, they took up positions behind the patrol cars. Mr. Parkens, Jeff noticed,

was nowhere to be seen. Either the man hadn't come along or he was safely secreted inside one of the patrol cars.

Stolze waited for a signal from his fellow officer, then again turned to face the house. "Mr. Blake, keep your hands where I can see them and step out of the house," he demanded.

Jeff couldn't believe this was happening. The nervous chewing of the lip ceased, now that the uncertainty had been replaced by a known danger. His jaw, though, was set in determination. Did they really expect him to just give up that easily? He stood still, defying the deputy's order.

He couldn't be sure who but at that instant, someone got trigger-happy. From inside Stolze's car, he thought it was, came the bullet which had imbedded itself in the doorjamb by his head. As the gun was fired, the car window exploded into a shower of glass.

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In a daze now, standing in front of his gun cabinet, Jeff took out a rifle, the 30-30. Methodically, he loaded it, pushing the bullets in with his thumb. Consciously aware, but his mind numb, he was no longer thinking, but relying on instinct to guide him, reacting to the now very real threat. As a father, and as a husband, he operated with a single purpose; to protect his family.

Cautiously peeking out through the window blinds at the four, no, make it five cop cars parked on the street; he now realized just how costly his mistake of losing his temper at the office had been. By voicing the threats, he'd communicated his intentions and willingness to use force to prevent his daughter from being taken. Being so warned, Parkens had converged on the house with the whole Sheriff's Department.

As he watched the scurrying scene outside on the street, Jeff frowned. He still didn't understand. What had happened to the rule of law, court proceedings, and fair hearings? How could this guy, Parkens, just show up with the deputies and take Ashley? Muttering to himself, he shook his head. Something wasn't right. Though that fact was of little help now.

His watchful eyes narrowing in firm resolve, he turned back to the window. Outside, the megaphone blasted through the cool morning air as the amplified voice reverberated through the walls of the house.

Crouching beside the window, Jeff could see the head of Deputy Stolze outlined above the car. Leveling the rifle, he took a long deep breath as he aimed the firearm. Was he ready for this? No, he wasn't, he allowed, but he was determined to not back down. He had done nothing to warrant this kind of treatment, he told himself. The man responsible for all of it remained unseen, cowardly withdrawing from the very hint of danger.

His hesitation was costly. Outside, one of the deputies caught sight of the barrel of the 30-30 and shouted, "He's got a gun!"

"Fire!" came the order from Deputy Stolze.

Jeff watched as in slow motion the entire group of officers raised their heads to peer down the sights of their rifles and fired. The living room erupted in a frenzied crescendo, as the six foot picture window exploded, sending tiny shards of glass, hundreds of them,

flying through the air. The shiny slivers tore at the skin on his face and arms, cutting a faint bloody design on his exposed flesh. Leaning against the window frame, he took careful aim at one of the deputies, held his breath and firmly pulled the trigger.

Seeing the man fall, he knew there was no turning back. Rolling quickly to the other side of the now paneless window, cocking the rifle as he went, he raised the weapon again and cast a cautious glance outside.

“Officer down! Officer down!” came the frantic shouts. Keeping behind the vehicles, two of the deputies made their way to the one who had been shot.

Wasting no time, Jeff aimed and fired in rapid succession. Focused intently on the group as a whole, he targeted any movement. Reloading, he moved to the bedroom. Pulling the curtain aside, he saw the fresh blood on his arm. He’d been hit! But due to the adrenalin rush and the intensity of the moment, he wasn’t sure exactly where he was wounded.

With renewed vigor, feeling no pain, Jeff emptied the rifle again, not even knowing if the bullets reached their intended mark. Reaching for more ammunition, he suddenly felt a burning sensation in his right shoulder. Then a sharp sting in the middle of his forehead, as a barrage of gunfire was discharged on the street.

“They got me!” he said, only mildly surprised.

His strength ebbing slowly, yet steadily away, Jeff gritted his teeth, determined to will his fingers to load fresh rounds into the rifle. Barely able to move, he realized it was over. He had lost.

The rifle lay beside him, covered in warm red blood. His blood. His clothes were soaked, and everywhere he looked was more of the same, a sea of red. The red soon faded to black, as consciousness was replaced by delirium.

As the last bit of awareness slipped gradually from his mind, he thought of Amy and Ashley. He’d failed them. “But...” he suddenly thought.

Unable to complete the idea, he painstakingly, through sheer grit, forced his left hand to his pocket. It was still there! When they found his body, whoever *they* might be; he hoped someone would listen to the tape.