

Topic: Guns. From Chapter Four.

“I’m sure you know about the conflict in Northern Ireland that lasted from the 60s to the late 90s.”

“Of course.”

“Did you know that some people identify the deaths of three children in an incident there as a critical event in ending the conflict? Their deaths produced a mass movement for peace, and two women who started it received the Nobel Peace Prize. Granted, the children died in 1976, and it took years before the fighting stopped. But there seems to have been a sense in some quarters—especially among mothers—that things had gone too far.”

“Right. I recall something about that now.”

“Three children. Thousands of people responded to the deaths of only *three* children.” He took a few more steps. “Have you ever been to western Connecticut, Congressman?”

I suspected this is where he’d go, but I honestly didn’t want to discuss this. “No. It’s out of my district.”

He glowered at me for trying to be glib and evasive. Clearly, this was a more sensitive topic with him than I’d anticipated.

“I lived there for a year. It’s a beautiful part of the country. It’s as bucolic and peaceful as anyone could want. It’s the last place you’d expect 20 children to be gunned down in their elementary school.”

I remembered how stunned—and terrified—I was when I heard about the shooting. I knew it was blind paranoia, but I immediately grabbed my phone and called my kids. I needed to know they were safe.

“Look, there’s no denying this was a terrible tragedy. The shooter had serious mental problems. But the guns belonged to his mother, right?”

Abe grimaced. “Strictly speaking, yes. They were part of an arsenal her son had access to. But you’re splitting hairs. In response to this ‘terrible tragedy,’ what did Congress do? In particular, tell me what action was taken by all of you who believe the right to life is sacred and who have sworn to defend innocent human life.”

“If you just let me ex—”

“Don’t even try to dance your way out of this. You did nothing. *Nothing!* Even though 85% of Americans—members of both parties, including gun owners—agree that background checks should be improved. Even though nearly 80% think that people with mental illness shouldn’t be able to buy guns. You did nothing! *Three* Irish children die, and it’s a huge deal there. *Twenty* American kids get massacred, and the Faux-G.O.P. yawns. Wait! I apologize. You *did* do a few things. The day after terrorists killed 14 people in San Bernadino, you voted down a proposal calling for expanded background checks. Next, you continued to let people on the terrorist watch list get guns. Then you

blocked an attempt to stop people with mental illnesses from doing so. And then, when some madman kills 59 people and wounds 489 in Las Vegas you screw up your courage and once again do *nothing!* Wow! Those are real ‘Profiles in Courage’ moments. You stood up and faced down all those fanatics who wanted to find some way to keep their kids, friends, and neighbors from being massacred. You showed them. Well done, you!”

I groaned at the oversimplification. “I understand where you’re coming from, but it’s more complicated than that.”

He thumped me on the arm—hard. This wasn’t a typical ‘guy love tap.’ He threw that punch with real venom.

“Have you ever noticed how the stuff your crowd *wants* to do is ‘clear, simple, and makes common sense,’ while anything you *don’t* want to do is ‘complicated’? *Complicated?* Tell me what’s so complicated about keeping guns out of the hands of people on the terrorist watch list or those afflicted with mental illness. Let me guess. The bills were too restrictive. Some innocent people may be affected. They may get inconvenienced or have to wait to prove they’re entitled to that AK-47 they need to blow away Bambi. And that’s *so* much more important than preventing a six-year old from being slaughtered.”

He stopped and faced me. “Be straight with me, Congressman. Which is it? Are you a hypocrite or a coward? ‘Protecting innocent lives’ is important to you when you talk about abortion, but it vanishes when we want to protect school kids? Or do you just lack the balls to do what you know in your heart is right?”

He stared into the distance for a while. He stood rock still and silent. Then he took a deep breath and relaxed. “Let me put it as simply as I can, Congressman. When the next mass killing takes place, think of all those proposals you voted down that might have prevented it. Then see how your finger is one of the ones on the trigger of that gun you let get purchased.

“Your wife gave you that watch for a reason. She was right. Your job is to look after everyone’s children. How well are you doing that?” He turned and continued walking.

His last comment rattled me. My position on abortion is all about preventing the end of an innocent life. But I’ve always been able to distance myself from my votes on gun rights and the mass shootings. Something about the passion and intensity of Abe’s harangue made me feel as though he was accusing me of being complicit in the death of a child he knew—a child he was telling me it had been my job to protect. I needed a few minutes to shake the feeling. I struggled with how to respond.

“And then there’s that right-wing militia you’re arming,” he added glibly, “I suppose nothing says ‘America’ to the Faux-G.O.P. like a private army willing to lock and load, eh?”

I’d been sure he was ready to move on to another topic. But he was just winding up for another swing. I wasn’t going to be dragged into a morass.

“Gun rights are protected by the Second Amendment,” I said firmly. “The Supreme Court made

that clear.”

He stopped and looked at me thoughtfully. “When you were CEO, Congressman, you had a reputation for being a ‘details guy.’ You read everything related to whatever decision you were mulling over. And you wouldn’t settle for the summaries your underlings prepared for you. You looked at the original data. And then you made sure you understood the precise consequences of your decisions. You never wanted to be caught from behind by something you didn’t anticipate. Those are terrific traits.”

Abe didn’t do gratuitous flattery. He was teeing me up.

He saw my hesitation for what it was. “And your silence says you’re suspicious. *Not* such a terrific trait.”

I laughed. “Given our exchanges so far, surely you aren’t surprised.”

“Considering the crowd you’ve been hanging out with, not at all. What puzzles me is how you could have changed so much. You’ve traded in facts for propaganda.”

“Propaganda? Didn’t you already ream me out about truth and facts? You can’t go back there. We moved on.”

“Yes, we have. To guns. And I’m not talking about lies—but laziness. If you can say the Supreme Court ratified the NRA’s position, you haven’t read the decision. A *five to four* decision by a court dominated by conservatives. Hardly unanimity. Even then, the decision leaves plenty of room for limiting military-grade hardware like automatic weapons and 100-cartridge ammo clips. If, however, your party is so keen on letting people buy that stuff, the most logical explanation is that you like the idea of vigilante cowboys who will menace your opponents.”

“Private militia? Bands of vigilantes? You have a great imagination. You should write fiction.”

“Fiction? You’re going to dismiss domestic terrorism as a product of my imagination?”

Abe had reverted to exaggerating again. I groaned inside.

“Dismiss terrorism? Hardly. In fact, my concern about terrorism is one of the reasons I back gun rights.”

“The reality of the situation, however, is that fear of terrorists is one of the most important reasons to *tighten* controls on guns.”

“How does that make any sense?”

Once again, his expression conveyed serious disappointment. He took a deep breath.

“Tell me, Congressman, what’s the *second* most deadly terrorist attack in the U.S.?”

“You mean after 9/11?”

“Yes.”

“That would have to be the nightclub in Orlando.”

“No.”

“Are you sure?”

“Positive.”

“Then San Bernadino. But I was positive fewer people died there than in Orlando.”

“And you were right. But the second worst terrorist attack isn’t San Bernadino. Try again. Take your time.”

I closed my eyes and tried to recall terrorist incidents. “Sorry, I can’t remember anything worse.”

“That’s because, like most of your crowd, you’re ignoring good old fashioned, red, white and blue terrorism. It was the Oklahoma City bombing. One hundred sixty-eight people died, including 19 children, and more than 600 people were injured. Domestic terrorism brought to you by ... not Muslims, Iranians, Egyptians, Syrians, Palestinians, or any of the other groups your gang likes to demonize. It was carried out by two *white right-wing Americans* who were upset at how the FBI handled the Waco siege and Ruby Ridge. Their idea was to spark a revolution against the federal government.

“And that’s not the only example of right-wing violence. Since the 1980s, there have been repeated attacks from the right. When you include the abortion violence I mentioned earlier, the body count grows even more. During that same period, the only example of left-wing violence was that terrible ballfield shooting in D.C.

“So, intentionally or not, your defense of ‘gun rights’ helped arm radical right-wing domestic terrorists. Do you honestly think those assault rifles, automatic weapons, body armor, flamethrowers, cannons, ‘mini-guns’ that fire up to 6,000 rounds a minute that *you’ve* made legal are bought by ‘hobbyists’ who would *never* use them against the people they believe are their enemies? There are near—”

“Wait!” I was shocked. “You’re kidding? *Cannons? Flamethrowers?* Everything you mentioned is legal to buy?”

“Yes. Thanks to you and your ‘life protecting’ cronies. Oh, I forgot the grenade launchers, but—”

“Stop! Grenade launchers? Legal?” I sputtered.

“In fairness, there are hoops to jump through, and getting good ammo is tough. However, ...” He smiled wryly. He was going to twist the knife again. “... we can rest comfortably at night knowing that anyone toying with insurrection or terrorism will scrupulously obey the relevant laws. Right?”

I could tell he’d worked up another head of steam. I knew better than interrupt him.

“And I suppose you *also* don’t know that there are nearly 1,000 active anti-government groups. More than 250 are militias. We had a huge increase right after Barack Obama was elected President. Surprise, surprise. You’re not stupid. You’ve heard reference to ‘Second Amendment solutions’—from Bozo the Clown, no less. You’re telling me that crowd wouldn’t seriously consider assassinations?”

The idea that we might see political assassinations in the U.S. again shook me to the core.

He looked at me grimly. “Let me ask you again—when did you stop *reading* the laws you vote on? And when did you stop worrying about the consequences of your decisions? When did you become a toady, just taking orders from a bunch of radicals?”

I was so stunned I was still having a hard time processing this. *Body armor? Flamethrowers? Cannons? Grenade launchers? Legal by my votes?*
Abe studied my face and shook his head in astonishment. “Son of a bitch! You really are surprised.”