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OPM

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TO MY READING COMMITTEE: Renée, my wife and unofficial editor; my sisters, Beth Bryant and Wendy Grisham; my mother-in-law, Lib Jones; and my friend and co-conspirator, Bill Ballard

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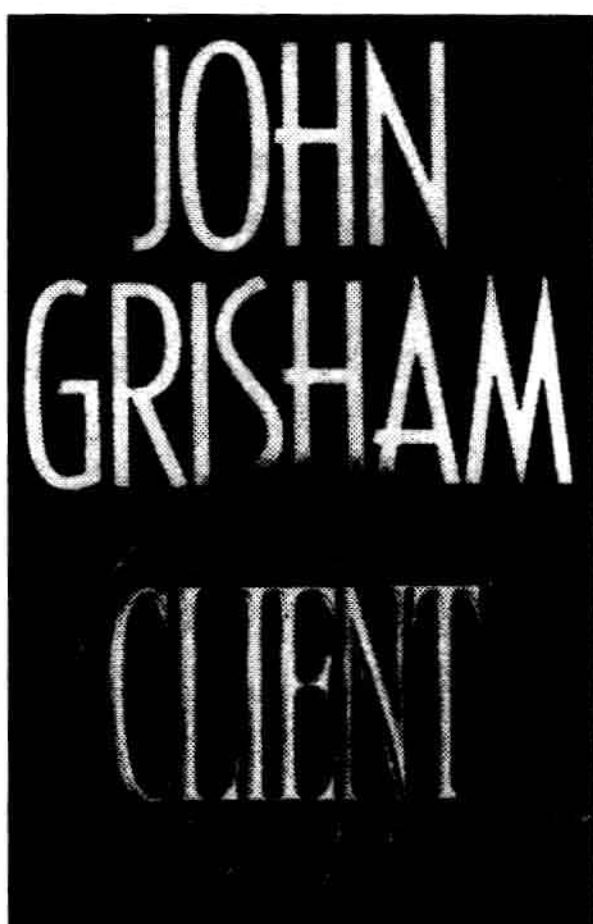
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DOUBLEDAY

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HE SEEMED INCAPABLE of creating such chaos, but much of what he saw below could be blamed on him. And that was fine. He was ninety-one, paralyzed, strapped in a wheelchair and hooked to oxygen. His second stroke seven years ago had almost finished him off, but Abraham Rosenberg was still alive and even with tubes in his nose his legal stick was bigger than the other eight. He was the only legend remaining on the Court, and the fact that he was still breathing irritated most of the mob below.

He sat in a small wheelchair in an office on the main floor of the Supreme Court Building. His feet touched the edge of the window, and he strained forward as the noise increased. He hated cops, but the sight of them standing in thick, neat lines was somewhat comforting. They stood straight and held ground as the mob of at least fifty thousand screamed for blood.

“Biggest crowd ever!” Rosenberg yelled at the window. He was almost deaf. Jason Kline, his senior law clerk, stood behind him. It was the first Monday in October, the opening day of the new term, and this had become a traditional celebration of the First Amendment. A glorious celebration. Rosenberg was thrilled. To him, freedom of speech meant freedom to riot.

“Are the Indians out there?” he asked loudly.

Jason Kline leaned closer to his right ear. "Yes!"

"With war paint?"

"Yes! In full battle dress."

"Are they dancing?"

"Yes!"

The Indians, the blacks, whites, browns, women, gays, tree lovers, Christians, abortion activists, Aryans, Nazis, atheists, hunters, animal lovers, white supremacists, black supremacists, tax protestors, loggers, farmers—it was a massive sea of protest. And the riot police gripped their black sticks.

"The Indians should love me!"

"I'm sure they do." Kline nodded and smiled at the frail little man with clenched fists. His ideology was simple; government over business, the individual over government, the environment over everything. And the Indians, give them whatever they want.

The heckling, praying, singing, chanting, and screaming grew louder, and the riot police inched closer together. The crowd was larger and rowdier than in recent years. Things were more tense. Violence had become common. Abortion clinics had been bombed. Doctors had been attacked and beaten. One was killed in Pensacola, gagged and bound into the fetal position and burned with acid. Street fights were weekly events. Churches and priests had been abused by militant gays. White supremacists operated from a dozen known, shadowy, paramilitary organizations, and had become bolder in their attacks on blacks, Hispanics, and Asians. Hatred was now America's favorite pastime.

And the Court, of course, was an easy target. Threats, serious ones, against the justices had increased tenfold since 1990. The Supreme Court police had tripled in size.

At least two FBI agents were assigned to guard each justice, and another fifty were kept busy investigating threats.

"They hate me, don't they?" he said loudly, staring out the window.

"Yes, some of them do," Kline answered with amusement.

Rosenberg liked to hear that. He smiled and inhaled deeply. Eighty percent of the death threats were aimed at him.

"See any of those signs?" he asked. He was nearly blind.

"Quite a few."

"What do they say?"

"The usual. Death to Rosenberg. Retire Rosenberg. Cut Off the Oxygen."

"They've been waving those same damned signs for years. Why don't they get some new ones?"

The clerk did not answer. Abe should've retired years ago, but they would carry him out one day on a stretcher. His three law clerks did most of the research, but Rosenberg insisted on writing his own opinions. He did so with a heavy felt-tip marker and his words were scrawled across a white legal pad, much like a first-grader learning to write. Slow work, but with a lifetime appointment, who cared about time? The clerks proofed his opinions, and rarely found mistakes.

Rosenberg chuckled. "We oughta feed Runyan to the Indians." The Chief Justice was John Runyan, a tough conservative appointed by a Republican and hated by the Indians and most other minorities. Seven of the nine had been appointed by Republican Presidents. For fifteen years Rosenberg had been waiting for a Democrat in the White House. He wanted to quit, needed to quit, but he

could not stomach the idea of a right-wing Runyan type taking his beloved seat.

He could wait. He could sit here in his wheelchair and breathe oxygen and protect the Indians, the blacks, the women, the poor, the handicapped, and the environment until he was a hundred and five. And not a single person in the world could do a damned thing about it, unless they killed him. And that wouldn't be such a bad idea either.

The great man's head nodded, then wobbled and rested on his shoulder. He was asleep again. Kline quietly stepped away, and returned to his research in the library. He would return in half an hour to check the oxygen and give Abe his pills.

THE OFFICE of the Chief Justice is on the main floor, and is larger and more ornate than the other eight. The outer office is used for small receptions and formal gatherings, and the inner office is where the Chief works.

The door to the inner office was closed, and the room was filled with the Chief, his three law clerks, the captain of the Supreme Court police, three FBI agents, and K. O. Lewis, deputy director, FBI. The mood was serious, and a serious effort was under way to ignore the noise from the streets below. It was difficult. The Chief and Lewis discussed the latest series of death threats, and everyone else just listened. The clerks took notes.

In the past sixty days, the Bureau had logged over two hundred threats, a new record. There was the usual assortment of "Bomb the Court!" threats, but many came with specifics—like names, cases, and issues.

Runyan made no effort to hide his anxiety. Working from a confidential FBI summary, he read the names of individuals and groups suspected of threats. The Klan, the

Aryans, the Nazis, the Palestinians, the black separatists, the pro-lifers, the homophobics. Even the IRA. Everyone, it seemed, but the Rotarians and the Boy Scouts. A Middle East group backed by the Iranians had threatened blood on American soil in retaliation for the deaths of two justice ministers in Tehran. There was absolutely no evidence the murders were linked to the U.S. A new domestic terrorist unit of recent fame known as the Underground Army had killed a federal trial judge in Texas with a car bomb. No arrests had been made, but the UA claimed responsibility. It was also the prime suspect in a dozen bombings of ACLU offices, but its work was very clean.

“What about these Puerto Rican terrorists?” Runyan asked without looking up.

“Lightweights. We’re not worried,” K. O. Lewis answered casually. “They’ve been threatening for twenty years.”

“Well, maybe it’s time they did something. The climate is right, don’t you think?”

“Forget the Puerto Ricans, Chief.” Runyan liked to be called Chief. Not Chief Justice, nor Mr. Chief Justice. Just Chief. “They’re just threatening because everyone else is.”

“Very funny,” the Chief said without smiling. “Very funny. I’d hate for some group to be left out.” Runyan threw the summary on his desk and rubbed his temples. “Let’s talk about security.” He closed his eyes.

K. O. Lewis laid his copy of the summary on the Chief’s desk. “Well, the Director thinks we should place four agents with each Justice, at least for the next ninety days. We’ll use limousines with escorts to and from work, and the Supreme Court police will provide backup and secure this building.”