

John Doe

Chapter 1

Monday, October 27, 1952
Dallas, Texas

I was trying to finish off the last couple of pages of another Erle Stanley Gardner, Perry Mason novel, when the phone intercom buzzed. Reluctantly, I set down the paperback, punched the button, and picked up the receiver. “Yes, Jenny, and this better be *damned* important, I’m down to the last ten pages of *The Case of the One-Eyed Witness*.”

As usual, she ignored my threat. “Harry, you’re not going to believe this, but *Senator Doe* is here to see you,” she reported in a controlled whisper.

“*The Senator Doe?*” I asked. *Probably wants me to see if his beautiful, millionaire wife is boffing the estate grounds keeper.*

“Yes,” she whispered. “He says it’s imperative that he sees you ... he says the future of his political and personal life depends on you seeing him.”

A little over dramatic for my taste. “He’s a Republican in Texas, Jenny. He hasn’t got a future. It’s a proven fact. And why are you whispering?”

“Because, he’s standing *right here*. Why would he want to see *you?*”

“You underestimate me, Jenny, but good question. Why don’t you ask him while I finish the last ten pages of my book?” I figured that’d throw her into a panic.

“No! You ---”

There seemed to be some kind of wrestling match over the phone, then a new voice, much deeper than Jenny’s came on line.

“Mr. Stumbaugh? This is Senator John Doe and it’s very important that I see you *now*.”

“That’s exactly what I’ve been trying to tell my secretary, Senator Doe. Why don’t you come in my office, sir? It’ll be easier to talk that way, don’t you think?”

I hung up, drumming my fingers across the length of the cradled receiver, contemplating how to handle this unannounced windfall that just fell into my lap. I decided to act professional, since I knew he’d be a *paying* client.

The door opened and Jenny ushered in our distinguished visitor. “Your appointment, Mr. Stumbaugh,” she said with a smile and a surprisingly professional tone. She must have been reading my mind.

The Senator removed his hat and politely nodded to my lovely assistant. “Thank you, Miss McClain” he said quietly, bowing his head an inch or two.

Two things surprised me right off the bat. First, I didn’t know Jenny knew a word as long as *appointment*, and second, the man walking through the door had no resemblance to the firebrand campaigner that’d been stumping for fresh, new votes across the state for the past year.

Jenny gestured, getting my attention. “Could I get you gentlemen some coffee, perhaps?” She said, nodding so I’d know the right thing to say.

Who kidnapped my secretary? “That’d be perfect, Jenny,” I said. The Senator and I shook hands, then I motioned to one of the stylish leather, wing-backed chairs in front of the desk. “Have a seat, Senator. If you don’t mind me saying so, I think you need to take a load off. You look a little stressed.” He took the chair on the right, of course, and I took the chair next to him, instead of sitting behind the desk. More

personal. More professional. “What brings you to *Stumbaugh Investigations*, Senator? I don’t usually see many congressmen this time of the day, unless of course it’s in a bar at the Adolphus or the Baker.”

He gave a short laugh, which seemed out of character because of the obvious stress factor thing he had going. “That’s what I like, a man who’s secure in his own skin.” Senator John Doe was a striking figure of a man. He was over six feet tall, a thick head of coal black hair with a smattering of gray at the temples, and built like quarterback. Lean and muscular. His suits were expensive, but not over the top. His facial features were sharp and chiseled with a strong square jaw, reminding me of the main character in the *Buz Sawyer* comic strip in the Sunday papers. I had the feeling he’d be more comfortable behind the controls of a bulldozer tearing something up, than contending with verbal jousts on the floor of Congress.

“I’m comfortable in my own shoes, if that’s what you mean, and I put them on the same way you do, Senator.”

“So you do, Mr. Stumbaugh,” he answered.

“So ... now that we’ve got our chest thumping ceremony out of the way and established dual manhood, maybe you’ll tell me why you’re here,” I said, not wanting to play word games for half an hour before he got to the point. Politicians do that, you know. Doe was a very interesting man. Self-made man with a reputation as someone who bucked the system and went against the grain regardless of the flak he might have taken. And, of course, he had that whole amnesia thing working for him. I’m not sure if he sided with the Republicans early in his political career because he believed in their causes, or that bump on the head he took twenty years ago had something to do with it.

But whatever his reasons, he had made a name for himself at the State Capitol. The fact that he was elected as a Republican State Senator from Dallas, which was the bastion of democratic ideas, said a lot for his charisma. Hell, I voted for him four years ago, and I'd never swayed from the democratic ticket since I was old enough to vote.

Doe leaned forward in the chair, his usual exuberant, confident features were drawn, but his dark brown eyes still maintained that well-known intensity. "Do you know me, Mr. Stumbaugh? What I mean is ... do you know that much about my past?"

I knew as much as anybody else that'd paid attention to the news, but I wanted him to do the talking. I shrugged. "I know as much as the next man, I guess. Is that what this is about? Your past?"

He nodded. "It is, but before I go into that, some things I'd like to discuss first. I'm well aware of your own reputation Mr. Stumbaugh, and ---"

I held up a hand to keep him from gushing my virtues. "And you still came to see me? I'm flattered," I said with a smile. Part of my warming up the client routine.

He returned the smile. "Don't underestimate yourself, because I don't, Mr. Stumbaugh. That's why I came here instead of somewhere else. Your reputation as an investigator precedes you as tough, fair, and somebody that gets results. I understand that you hobnob with the rich and famous on occasions and shoot craps with the underbelly of Dallas on others, and you don't care who knows it."

"Kinda like you, I'd say," I said, "and I see you've done your research, Senator."

He nodded and said, "I'm a cautious man, but as I was saying, I know that you're comfortable on both sides of the tracks. That's why I came to see *you*. I need that

kind of diversity in a man to help me in my ... situation.” Doe shifted back into the recesses of the chair. “You know that I’m a man of means, right?”

I wanted to see how thin-skinned he was. “Yeah, married into it, right?”

He snorted or laughed or something, I wasn’t sure. “Damn straight, I did,” he said.

That impressed me a little bit. “Well, I’m flattered about *why* you chose me, but how about telling me what you want, Senator? Time is money and you’ve wasted about ten minutes of mine so far.” *Brass tacks. To the point, that’s me.*

His eyes shifted down to his feet momentarily, then zeroed back on me again. “Fair enough, but let me just start at the beginning for you. Then you can make your own judgment about taking me on as a client.”

“I’d make my own judgment, anyway, but go ahead.” I grabbed my Lucky Strikes from my shirt pocket, pulled two cigarettes half way out of the pack, offering him one. “Smoke?” I asked.

He looked around the room as if to see if anyone else was with us, then slipped one out. “This, my friend,” he said, pointing to the smoke, “is our first confidential secret. Client or not.”

“Bad for the image, huh? You’ve got to be the only guy in Congress that *doesn’t* smoke,” I joked, but didn’t get a grin out of him. “Consider it a freebie and it puts us on a first name basis as far as I’m concerned.”

“Consider it done, Harry. Well, as you know, along with everybody else in the state, back in ’32 I was walking along Highway 377 on the outskirts of Denton and was run over by a hit-and-run driver. They never found the driver or vehicle. I woke up from

a coma a month later in the hospital, and as a result of a severe head injury ... when I came to ... amnesia. It's a mysterious thing, Harry. Some people don't believe amnesia even exists, but that's because it can't be *absolutely* proven, I guess. Some people say I faked it to get attention or to get out of a bad marriage or something crazy like that, but I can tell you right now, this isn't the kind of thing you can fake and get away with."

"Why's that?" I asked. I didn't want to tell him I was one of those skeptics.

"It's too easy to get tripped up. People try it all the time. It's like telling a lie. You tell one, then you have to tell another to cover-up the first one, and on, and on it goes. After time, you forget what the first lie was even about and eventually, a person will make that fatal slip. Trust me, it's impossible to erase twenty-something years and act like it never happened."

"Yeah, well, what about those cases where somebody claims amnesia, then sits down at a piano and plays Bach's *Fifth Concerto* without missing a beat." *Was there a fifth?* "What do the doctors say about that?"

Doe nodded. "Good question. They call it retrograde amnesia. That's my diagnosis. A person loses their pre-existing memories, but still maintains learned skills, such as playing a piano, or reading and writing, or throwing a ball."

This was already going over my head. "I see," I said, "retro—whatever."

"It's been exactly twenty years ago today, as a matter of fact, when the accident happened, and I'm sure that's no coincidence either.

"Nice anniversary present," I said. "What coincidence?"

He ignored another one of my clever comebacks and the question, too. "Still to this day, Harry, I can't tell you one iota about myself prior to 27th of October in 1932. In

the hospital, I was tagged as a John Doe, identity unknown, and since it was the only name I had at the time, I kept it. I had no idea of who I was or where I'd been. For some reason, I considered it a blessing instead of a curse. Maybe that says something about my past, I don't know. Anyway, I decided to rebuild my life. Went to school, got my degree, then on to law school, had a successful practice as a defense attorney for a few years ---"

"You crammed in a lot of living in twenty short years, plus you married money," I said, reaching over and firing up my lighter for him. "Rude of me," I said, "offering a cigarette without a light." I lit his, then my own. "You've done a lot in a short period of time," I repeated.

"I'm an ambitious man, Harry. And marrying money didn't hurt, either," he added, good naturedly. He took a deep drag from the Lucky Strike like somebody getting their first breath of fresh air after staying underwater too long, then blew out a long stream of smoke to the side. "My wife'll kill me if she smells smoke on my suit. Can't help myself, though."

"I can't help you either, when it comes to the missus," I said. The cigarette looked comfortable between his fingers, so I assumed it wasn't his first in a long time like he acted. *Interesting. You lie about the little things ...*

This might get a little touchy, but I've got to know. Your little finger," I said, pointing to his right hand, "looks like you lost it at the first knuckle. You a nail biter?"

Doe laughed. "You don't sugarcoat do you, Harry?" He held up the hand, showing off the nub of his right-hand pinkie. "Another injury, resulting from the hit and run. Lost my memory and a finger. Does that satisfy you?" Doe added with a little edge.

“Just curious, Senator. I observe, I ask. Anyway ... you were saying before I asked about your anatomy?”

He tapped an ash in my ashtray. “Now where was I? Oh, yes. A new life got interested in politics. Started in local politics, did some fund-raising, then with my wife’s encouragement ... and money, of course, I made a successful run as a state senator four years ago. Now, I’m making a symbolic run against the most popular man in Texas for the United States Senate. Only in America, Harry, can a guy with a blank past get into Congress.”

“Yeah, says a lot about the voting public, doesn’t it? Well, glad you recognize your campaign as symbolic, because you’re going to get your ass kicked, you know.” I took a drag and then pinched away a small tobacco leaf sticking to the end of my tongue. I gave up trying to find out what the hell he wanted. He liked hearing himself talk, I guess. The man could talk about a screw-driver for thirty minutes and never mention the handle.

“You think?” He said, the words dripping with sarcasm. “Well, I believe General Eisenhower’s going to kick Adlai Stevenson’s ass in the election next week. Who’d you rather have running the country with the Soviet Union ramping up their commie rhetoric and the Korean peace talks stalled every other week? A milquetoast intellectual from Illinois or the General of the Armed Forces that kicked Hitler’s ass into a Berlin bunker?”

I smiled. “Good point and you must really believe it. You used the word *ass* twice in one paragraph.”

He returned a knowing grin. “Sometimes I get on my soap box, and it doesn’t take much to get me started, unfortunately. Bad habit, but mark my words, Harry ...

Eisenhower will take eighty percent of the vote next week. You can call your bookie on that,” he said, with a crooked smile, tapping the side of his nose with a forefinger.

“If I had a bookie.” *Which I do.* “And you? You think you’ll get caught up on Ike’s shirrtails and get swept into office over ol’ Price Daniels?”

“No, he’s going to kick *my* ass, but I couldn’t let him run unopposed. Somebody had to stand in for the other side.”

“Very noble,” I said. “You think Daniels has anything to do with this? This ... coincidence you mentioned half an hour ago, or whatever it is you’re here about?”

He shook his head. “No. He’d have nothing to gain and everything to lose if it blew up in his face. He’ll probably take eighty percent of the vote himself. So what’s to gain?”

“Well, you’ve enlightened me on the medical and political front, but so far you haven’t told me anything I didn’t already know about you. I need to know why you’re here, if I’m going to save the election --- as you told Jenny.”

Senator Doe nodded with agreement. “Let’s get down to it, shall we?”

“That would be nice.”

“I had a visitor today,” he said, gravely. “Man by the name of Petrie, Robert Petrie. He got in to see me on the pretense of being an old high school buddy, but he wasn’t of course. Do you know how often I have crackpots coming to me, saying they know who I am or they used to go to school with me or worked with me prior to 1932? Usually with their hands out wanting some kind of reward.” After that first puff, his cigarette had burned down halfway after the amnesia speech, the political lesson, and

now the sob story about hucksters trying to get into his deep pockets. He stubbed it out in the desk ashtray without taking that enjoyable, final drag.

That was a waste of a butt. “A bunch, I imagine. More than ... let’s say, two?”

“The numbers have slackened off with the passing of time, but two or three a month still ... without fail. But in the end, there’s never any proof.”

“Did this Petrie character have proof? He must’ve had something to spook you into coming to see me. I figure coming to me a week before the election had to be the last straw for you, and you’re a senator, after all. There’s got to be a lot of people you can reach out to.” I got up and went behind my desk for a writing pad and a pen. “Mind if I take a few notes?”

“Not at all. Does that mean you’ll help me?”

“Don’t know. You haven’t told me what you want, yet.” I shrugged a shoulder for encouragement. “Leaning that way, though. Sounds intriguing. I think I know where you’re going with this, but I still want to hear it from you. I love paying customers, and you married money, you know.” I took my seat again. “What were you saying about proof?”

He dodged the marriage taunt thing again. “No, he didn’t have anything concrete *with him*, but he assured me he had irrefutable proof of my past life.”

“Irrefutable, you say,” I mumbled, scribbling on the notepad. *How do you spell that?* “So, I’m assuming this *irrefutable* proof was good stuff.”

“Depends on your point of view, I guess. How does a double murder in the act of an armed robbery sound to you?” He asked.

I stopped taking notes. “Sounds like they’ll be firing up Old Sparky in Death Row to me, John,” I said, then took a deep drag off my Lucky Strike.