

Section 29

Dennis Cole walked carefully through the darkened house and dropped, exhausted, into a chair beside the kitchen table. It was 3:30 AM, but he knew that it would be hours before he could sleep. The guys in Section 29 had been busy tonight.

He screwed the top off of a bottle of Jack Daniel's and poured into a tumbler. He had begun to use the "Kentucky Sedative" more and more lately, to soothe the nerves and settle an uneasy conscience. Another bad one.

The butt of his .40 semi-automatic handgun pressed against his ribs, and he drew it out and stared at it for a moment before resting it on the table before him. It seemed to represent all that troubled him tonight. Dennis Cole was a member of the Special Enforcement Task Force authorized by Section 29 of the Omnibus Crime Control Act of 1999. Section 29 they called themselves. It was Section 29 of the Act that had banned the private possession of firearms, and authorized special "extra-Constitutional" powers for the enforcement agency whose job would be to collect them. Guns. It hadn't been that long ago that he had given his mother a handgun with which to protect herself after Dad had died. He wondered what had happened to the little snub nosed .38 after her accident. But that didn't matter, did it? What mattered was another bad one tonight ... the third this month.

He closed his eyes and sipped the whiskey, reliving the night's work as the alcohol burned its way down. The briefing, the tension, the guys laughing and joking in the locker room as they donned their vests and drew their weapons. He could almost feel the HK submachinegun pressed against his chest as they crowded into the van. The nervous chatter as they rode to their assignment.

A Bad One. That's what they called it when something went wrong. It wasn't supposed to happen that way when they made a "collection." You quietly surround the house in the dead of night, the entry team moves in, blows the door, and in twenty or thirty seconds everyone inside is on the floor and cuffed. Then you move out and find the guns. Well, most of the time you find guns. When you don't, you reluctantly remove the cuffs and warn them to keep their mouths shut. They almost always do, but even when they don't no one listens. But that isn't a bad one, when the guns aren't there. A bad one is when they are. Like tonight.

He gulped whiskey, remembering the boy. Ten years old, the same age as his son Kevin, asleep there at the other end of the house. His hands were shaking as he set the glass on the table to keep from dropping it.

Someone was calling the targets, warning them. There was no other explanation. Three in one month? They had surrounded the house, but then the lights had come on around them. The Agent In Charge had shouted a demand that they come out, but it didn't work that way. What was it the man had said? "I made up my mind a long time ago to die a free man." What stupidity.

He didn't remember which of the guys had actually started the shooting; it didn't really matter, did it? The quiet neighborhood had echoed with gunfire for five minutes and then, when all was quiet, he and the other members of the entry team had blasted the door off of what was left of the hinges and poured into the house. The man was there by the door, his bullet-ridden body lying under an old M1 Garand rifle. The woman was in the bedroom, lying alone beside the bed, her face pressed into a pillow. She'd been hit at least fifty times. But it was the boy that had gotten to him. Maybe it was his resemblance to Cole's own son? He was lying beside his

mother, clutching the little bolt-action .22 to his chest. As far as Cole could tell, neither the boy nor the man had fired a single shot.

Cole had shined his light into his team leader's face as they stood over the bodies. Jack Tatum's eyes had shown with excitement, his mouth was split in a grin of ... what? Triumph? Success? Joy? Cole remembered the way his brother had looked twenty years ago after bringing down his first deer. But all that was over now. No more hunting ... animals, anyway.

How could this be worth it? How could that fool stand in the door of his house and die rather than give up an old M1 rifle and a Sears and Roebuck .22? Is it worth dying for?

It echoed in his mind like a nasty voice behind his back: is it worth killing for? But it's the law. The law. He stood and walked shakily to the cabinet over the refrigerator. He had to stand on a chair to reach the small, flat box that was pushed back into the dusty recesses against the unpainted sheetrock. Wiping away the cobwebs, he returned to the table and pulled out the old Army .45 his Granddad had brought back from Korea. Only his status with Section 29 would protect him if they knew he possessed this unregistered weapon. He held it in his right hand and studied the dusty gray surface, flecked with small spots of rust. It didn't matter if he kept it. He was a law enforcement officer, carrying a weapon everywhere he went. He wasn't going to do anything with the gun.

His justifications rang hollow even in his own mind. What crime had that man committed tonight? What violent deed had he and his son planned? They just wanted to keep their guns. It wasn't right, he decided, to keep the old pistol. He would turn it in ... no, better to dispose of it, maybe off the bridge over Lake Jackson. But there was a curious reluctance in his mind. It was, he suddenly found, more than just a piece of steel. It represented something. The stories his Granddad had told him came back to him now. The bitter cold of the Korean winter. The long retreat back toward Seoul. What was it Granddad had said? "God, guts, and guns made America." Well, now all three were gone.

Well, no. That fellow tonight, and his son. They'd had guts, anyway. Cole found himself hoping that they'd had God, too. God, guts, and guns.

Dennis Cole had always wanted to be a cop. He remembered how he'd always played the good guy when the neighborhood kids played cops and robbers. But, sitting at his kitchen table this night, Dennis Cole suddenly realized that he was now the bad guy. That man and his son who died tonight had been killed by their government but that didn't make it right. No, he decided, they hadn't been killed by their government. They'd been killed by a man named Dennis Cole and fourteen other bastards who were just following orders. He screwed the cap onto the whiskey, sickened. Just following orders. He could almost hear the Nazi prison guards, the gas chamber attendants, the incinerator operators. Now he was echoing their excuse. Just following orders.

He stared into the amber fluid, seeing the bodies, the blood, the grinning face of Jack Tatum, and most of all, seeing himself. His son's school notebook was lying on the table. Cole reached over and tore a couple of sheets from the spiral binder.

"This is wrong - all wrong," he wrote. "We're not the good guys anymore. We kill people who haven't done anything wrong. The hoods, the gangbangers, the dope dealers, we leave them alone. We give them their rights. But the government wants these people dead. Why are they so dangerous? Why is the government so afraid of them?"

"I won't be a part of it anymore," he wrote at last, suddenly awakening to the decision he had already made. He carefully folded the note and placed it in his jacket pocket. Janet was asleep in the next room, Kevin at the end of the house. He would not be cruel to them. He

slipped his automatic into its holster, tucked the .45 into his waistband, and then quietly slipped out the door, making sure the deadbolt was in place. This was a good neighborhood but no place was safe anymore. There was a small park down the block, a nice quiet place to die.

His steps were heavy on the cracked concrete sidewalk. At the park entrance two gang toughs sauntered up towards him, grinning. He pulled his jacket aside and they backed off at the sight of the .45 tucked into his belt. Isn't this what people want? he thought. To have some defense against the thugs, a way to fight back? And then he remembered his night's work. It was him and the government who were the thugs. Who would defend the people from him? Well, he would.

He sat on a battered park bench underneath the shattered globe of a lamp. A faint light came from the street, and he examined the rounds in the .45's magazine. It seemed appropriate, somehow, to use the old gun. The bullets were tarnished and caked with green. He racked the slide and placed the cold barrel into his mouth, wondering if the sixty year old cartridge would fire.

It did.

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Slain Law Enforcement Agent Honored Today

ATLANTA - Federal and City officials today presided over a memorial service at the State Capital honoring slain Federal Agent Dennis Cole. "I am proud to have served with this man," said Enforcement Bureau Chief Hubert Doss as he presented a golden shield inscribed with Cole's name to the City. "There is no higher sacrifice that can be made to one's nation than to lay down one's life in the cause of justice."

Agent Cole was a highly decorated member of the Special Enforcement Branch of the Treasury Department charged with executing the directives of Section 29 of the Crime Control Act of 1999. Investigators believe the agent was murdered by members of the underground terrorist organization NRA in reprisal for the deaths of three of that group's members in a raid earlier in the evening. According to Agent Cole's Team Leader, the Section 29 Task Force encountered stiff resistance as it attempted to arrest the three heavily armed terrorist. "Dennis was right there in the thick of it," said deeply affected Special Agent Jack Tatum. "He was always the first in the door, trying to safeguard the other members of the team." Chief Doss promised swift action in response to the murder. "We know who these people are and they're not going to get away with this," said Doss.

Agent Cole was survived by Janet Cole, his wife of fifteen years and his only child, Kevin, age ten. For security reasons, both were unable to attend the ceremony.