

ONE

For the weekly docket the court jester wore his standard garb of well-used and deeply faded maroon pajamas and lavender terry-cloth shower shoes with no socks. He wasn't the only inmate who went about his daily business in his pajamas, but no one else dared wear lavender shoes. His name was T. Karl, and he'd once owned banks in Boston.

The pajamas and shoes weren't nearly as troubling as the wig. It parted at the middle and rolled in layers downward, over his ears, with tight curls coiling off into three directions, and fell heavily onto his shoulders. It was a bright gray, almost white, and fashioned after the Old English magistrate's wigs from centuries earlier. A friend on the outside had found it at a secondhand costume store in Manhattan, in the Village.

T. Karl wore it to court with great pride, and, odd as it was, it had, with time, become part of the show. The other inmates kept their distance from T. Karl anyway, wig or not.

He stood behind his flimsy folding table in the prison cafeteria, tapped a plastic mallet that served

as a gavel, cleared his squeaky throat, and announced with great dignity: 'Hear ye, hear ye, hear ye. The Inferior Federal Court of North Florida is now in session. Please rise.'

No one moved, or at least no one made an effort to stand. Thirty inmates lounged in various stages of repose in plastic cafeteria chairs, some looking at the court jester, some chatting away as if he didn't exist.

T. Karl continued: 'Let all ye who search for justice draw nigh and get screwed.'

No laughs. It had been funny months earlier when T. Karl first tried it. Now it was just another part of the show. He sat down carefully, making sure the rows of curls bouncing upon his shoulders were given ample chance to be seen, then he opened a thick red leather book which served as the official record for the court. He took his work very seriously.

Three men entered the room from the kitchen. Two of them wore shoes. One was eating a saltine. The one with no shoes was also bare-legged up to his knees, so that below his robe his spindly legs could be seen. They were smooth and hairless and very brown from the sun. A large tattoo had been applied to his left calf. He was from California.

All three wore old church robes from the same choir, pale green with gold trim. They came from the same store as T. Karl's wig, and had been presented by him as gifts at Christmas. That was how he kept his job as the court's official clerk.

There were a few hisses and jeers from the spectators as the judges ambled across the tile floor, in full regalia, their robes flowing. They took

their places behind a long folding table, near T. Karl but not too near, and faced the weekly gathering. The short round one sat in the middle. Joe Roy Spicer was his name, and by default he acted as the Chief Justice of the tribunal. In his previous life, Judge Spicer had been a Justice of the Peace in Mississippi, duly elected by the people of his little county, and sent away when the feds caught him skimming bingo profits from a Shriners club.

‘Please be seated,’ he said. Not a soul was standing.

The judges adjusted their folding chairs and shook their robes until they fell properly around them. The assistant warden stood to the side, ignored by the inmates. A guard in uniform was with him. The Brethren met once a week with the prison’s approval. They heard cases, mediated disputes, settled little fights among the boys, and had generally proved to be a stabilizing factor amid the population.

Spicer looked at the docket, a neat hand-printed sheet of paper prepared by T. Karl, and said, ‘Court shall come to order.’

To his right was the Californian, the Honorable Finn Yarber, age sixty, in for two years now with five to go for income tax evasion. A vendetta, he still maintained to anyone who would listen. A crusade by a Republican governor who’d managed to rally the voters in a recall drive to remove Chief Justice Yarber from the California Supreme Court. The rallying point had been Yarber’s opposition to the death penalty, and his high-handedness in delaying every execution. Folks wanted blood,

Yarber prevented it, the Republicans whipped up a frenzy, and the recall was a smashing success. They pitched him onto the street, where he floundered for a while until the IRS began asking questions. Educated at Stanford, indicted in Sacramento, sentenced in San Francisco, and now serving his time at a federal prison in Florida.

In for two years and Finn was still struggling with the bitterness. He still believed in his own innocence, still dreamed of conquering his enemies. But the dreams were fading. He spent a lot of time on the jogging track, alone, basking in the sun and dreaming of another life.

'First case is Schneiter versus Magruder,' Spicer announced as if a major antitrust trial was about to start.

'Schneiter's not here,' Beech said.

'Where is he?'

'Infirmary. Gallstones again. I just left there.'

Hatlee Beech was the third member of the tribunal. He spent most of his time in the infirmary because of hemorrhoids, or headaches, or swollen glands. Beech was fifty-six, the youngest of the three, and with nine years to go he was convinced he would die in prison. He'd been a federal judge in East Texas, a hardfisted conservative who knew lots of Scripture and liked to quote it during trials. He'd had political ambitions, a nice family, money from his wife's family's oil trust. He also had a drinking problem which no one knew about until he ran over two hikers in Yellowstone. Both died. The car Beech had been driving was owned by a young lady he was not married to. She was found naked in the front seat, too drunk to walk.

They sent him away for twelve years.

Joe Roy Spicer, Finn Yarber, Hatlee Beech. The Inferior Court of North Florida, better known as the Brethren around Trumble, a minimum security federal prison with no fences, no guard towers, no razor wire. If you had to do time, do it the federal way, and do it in a place like Trumble.

‘Should we default him?’ Spicer asked Beech.

‘No, just continue it until next week.’

‘Okay. I don’t suppose he’s going anywhere.’

‘I object to a continuance,’ Magruder said from the crowd.

‘Too bad,’ said Spicer. ‘It’s continued until next week.’

Magruder was on his feet. ‘That’s the third time it’s been continued. I’m the plaintiff. I sued him. He runs to the infirmary every time we have a docket.’

‘What’re ya’ll fightin over?’ Spicer asked.

‘Seventeen dollars and two magazines,’ T. Karl said helpfully.

‘That much, huh?’ Spicer said. Seventeen dollars would get you sued every time at Trumble.

Finn Yarber was already bored. With one hand he stroked his shaggy gray beard, and with the other he raked his long fingernails across the table. Then he popped his toes, loudly, crunching them into the floor in an efficient little workout that grated on the nerves. In his other life, when he had titles – Mr. Chief Justice of the California Supreme Court – he often presided while wearing leather clogs, no socks, so that he could exercise his toes during the dull oral arguments. ‘Continue it,’ he said.

‘Justice delayed is justice denied,’ Magruder said solemnly.

‘Now that’s original,’ said Beech. ‘One more week, then we’ll default Schneider.’

‘So ordered,’ Spicer said, with great finality. T. Karl made a note in the docket book. Magruder sat down in a huff. He’d filed his complaint in the Inferior Court by handing to T. Karl a one-page summary of his allegations against Schneider. Only one page. The Brethren didn’t tolerate paperwork. One page and you got your day in court. Schneider had replied with six pages of invective, all of which had been summarily stricken by T. Karl.

The rules were kept simple. Short pleadings. No discovery. Quick justice. Decisions on the spot, and all decisions were binding if both parties submitted to the jurisdiction of the court. No appeals; there was nowhere to take one. Witnesses were not given an oath to tell the truth. Lying was completely expected. It was, after all, a prison.

‘What’s next?’ Spicer asked.

T. Karl hesitated for a second, then said, ‘It’s the Whiz case.’

Things were suddenly still for a moment, then the plastic cafeteria chairs rattled forward in one noisy offensive. The inmates scooted and shuffled until T. Karl announced, ‘That’s close enough!’ They were less than twenty feet away from the bench.

‘We shall maintain decorum!’ he proclaimed.

The Whiz matter had been festering for months at Trumble. Whiz was a young Wall Street crook who’d bilked some rich clients. Four million dollars had never been accounted for, and legend

held that Whiz had stashed it offshore and managed it from inside Trumble. He had six years left, and would be almost forty when paroled. It was widely assumed that he was quietly serving his time until one glorious day when he would walk free, still a young man, and fly off in a private jet to a beach where the money was waiting.

Inside, the legend only grew, partly because Whiz kept to himself and spent long hours every day studying financials and technical charts and reading impenetrable economic publications. Even the warden had tried to cajole him into sharing market tips.

An ex-lawyer known as Rook had somehow got next to Whiz, and had somehow convinced him to share a small morsel of advice with an investment club that met once a week in the prison chapel. On behalf of the club, Rook was now suing the Whiz for fraud.

Rook took the witness chair, and began his narrative. The usual rules of procedure and evidence were dispensed with so that the truth could be arrived at quickly, whatever form it might take.

‘So I go to the Whiz and I ask him what he thinks about ValueNow, a new online company I read about in *Forbes*,’ Rook explained. ‘It was about to go public, and I liked the idea behind the company. Whiz said he’d check it out for me. I heard nothing. So I went back to him and said, “Hey, Whiz, what about ValueNow?” And he said he thought it was a solid company and the stock would go through the roof.’

‘I did not say that,’ the Whiz inserted quickly.

He was seated across the room, by himself, his arms folded over the chair in front.

‘Yes you did.’

‘I did not.’

‘Anyway, I go back to the club and tell them that Whiz is high on the deal, so we decide we want to buy some stock in ValueNow. But little guys can’t buy because the offering is closed. I go back to Whiz over there and I say, “Look, Whiz, you think you could pull some strings with your buddies on Wall Street and get us a few shares of ValueNow?” And Whiz said he thought he could do that.’

‘That’s a lie,’ said Whiz.

‘Quiet,’ said Justice Spicer. ‘You’ll get your chance.’

‘He’s lying,’ Whiz said, as if there was a rule against it.

If Whiz had money, you’d never know it, at least not on the inside. His eight-by-twelve cell was bare except for stacks of financial publications. No stereo, fan, books, cigarettes, none of the usual assets acquired by almost everyone else. This only added to the legend. He was considered a miser, a weird little man who saved every penny and was no doubt stashing everything offshore.

‘Anyway,’ Rook continued, ‘we decided to gamble by taking a big position in ValueNow. Our strategy was to liquidate our holdings and consolidate.’

‘Consolidate?’ asked Justice Beech. Rook sounded like a portfolio manager who handled billions.

‘Right, consolidate. We borrowed all we could

from friends and family, and had close to a thousand bucks.'

'A thousand bucks,' repeated Justice Spicer. Not bad for an inside job. 'Then what happened?'

'I told Whiz over there that we were ready to move. Could he get us the stock? This was on a Tuesday. The offering was on a Friday. Whiz said no problem. Said he had a buddy at Goldman Sux or some such place that could take care of us.'

'That's a lie,' Whiz shot from across the room.

'Anyway, on Wednesday I saw Whiz in the east yard, and I asked him about the stock. He said no problem.'

'That's a lie.'

'I got a witness.'

'Who?' asked Justice Spicer.

'Picasso.'

Picasso was sitting behind Rook, as were the other six members of the investment club. Picasso reluctantly waved his hand.

'Is that true?' Spicer asked.

'Yep,' Picasso answered. 'Rook asked about the stock. Whiz said he would get it. No problem.'

Picasso testified in a lot of cases, and had been caught lying more than most inmates.

'Continue,' Spicer said.

'Anyway, Thursday I couldn't find Whiz anywhere. He was hiding from me.'

'I was not.'

'Friday, the stock goes public. It was offered at twenty a share, the price we could've bought it for if Mr. Wall Street over there had done what he promised. It opened at sixty, spent most of the day at eighty, then closed at seventy. Our plans were to

sell it as soon as possible. We could've bought fifty shares at twenty, sold them at eighty, and walked away from the deal with three thousand dollars in profits.'

Violence was very rare at Trumble. Three thousand dollars would not get you killed, but some bones might be broken. Whiz had been lucky so far. There'd been no ambush.

'And you think the Whiz owes you these lost profits?' asked ex-Chief Justice Finn Yarber, now plucking his eyebrows.

'Damned right we do. Look, what makes the deal stink even worse is that Whiz bought Value-Now for himself.'

'That's a damned lie,' Whiz said.

'Language, please,' Justice Beech said. If you wanted to lose a case before the Brethren, just offend Beech with your language.

The rumors that Whiz had bought the stock for himself had been started by Rook and his gang. There was no proof of it, but the story had proved irresistible and had been repeated by most inmates so often that it was now established as fact. It fit so nicely.

'Is that all?' Spicer asked Rook.

Rook had other points he wanted to elaborate on, but the Brethren had no patience with windy litigants. Especially ex-lawyers still reliving their glory days. There were at least five of them at Trumble, and they seemed to be on the docket all the time.

'I guess so,' Rook said.

'What do you have to say?' Spicer asked the Whiz.

Whiz stood and took a few steps toward their table. He glared at his accusers, Rook and his gang of losers. Then he addressed the court. ‘What’s the burden of proof here?’

Justice Spicer immediately lowered his eyes and waited for help. As a Justice of the Peace, he’d had no legal training. He’d never finished high school, then worked for twenty years in his father’s country store. That’s where the votes came from. Spicer relied on common sense, which was often at odds with the law. Any questions dealing with legal theory would be handled by his two colleagues.

‘It’s whatever we say it is,’ Justice Beech said, relishing a debate with a stockbroker on the court’s rules of procedure.

‘Clear and convincing proof?’ asked the Whiz.

‘Could be, but not in this case.’

‘Beyond a reasonable doubt?’

‘Probably not.’

‘Preponderance of the evidence?’

‘Now you’re getting close.’

‘Then, they have no proof,’ the Whiz said, waving his hands like a bad actor in a bad TV drama.

‘Why don’t you just tell us your side of the story?’ said Beech.

‘I’d love to. ValueNow was a typical online offering, lots of hype, lots of red ink on the books. Sure Rook came to me, but by the time I could make my calls, the offering was closed. I called a friend who told me you couldn’t get near the stock. Even the big boys were shut out.’

‘Now, how does that happen?’ asked Justice Yarber.

The room was quiet. The Whiz was talking money, and everyone was listening.

‘Happens all the time in IPOs. That’s initial public offerings.’

‘We know what an IPO is,’ Beech said.

Spicer certainly did not. Didn’t have many of those back in rural Mississippi.

The Whiz relaxed, just a little. He could dazzle them for a moment, win this nuisance of a case, then go back to his cave and ignore them.

‘The ValueNow IPO was handled by the investment banking firm of Bakin-Kline, a small outfit in San Francisco. Five million shares were offered. Bakin-Kline basically presold the stock to its preferred customers and friends, so that most big investment firms never had a shot at the stock. Happens all the time.’

The judges and the inmates, even the court jester, hung on every word.

He continued. ‘It’s silly to think that some disbarred yahoo sitting in prison, reading an old copy of *Forbes*, can somehow buy a thousand dollars’ worth of ValueNow.’

And at that very moment it did indeed seem very silly. Rook fumed while his club members began quietly blaming him.

‘Did you buy any of it?’ asked Beech.

‘Of course not. I couldn’t get near it. And besides, most of the high-tech and online companies are built with funny money. I stay away from them.’

‘What do you prefer?’ Beech asked quickly, his curiosity getting the better of him.

‘Value. The long haul. I’m in no hurry. Look,

this is a bogus case brought by some boys looking for an easy buck.' He waved toward Rook, who was sinking in his chair. The Whiz sounded perfectly believable and legitimate.

Rook's case was built on hearsay, speculation, and the corroboration of Picasso, a notorious liar.

'You got any witnesses?' Spicer asked.

'I don't need any,' the Whiz said and took his seat.

Each of the three justices scribbled something on a slip of paper. Deliberations were quick, verdicts instantaneous. Yarber and Beech slid theirs to Spicer, who announced, 'By a vote of two to one, we find for the defendant. Case dismissed. Who's next?'

The vote was actually unanimous, but every verdict was officially two to one. That allowed each of the three a little wiggle room if later confronted.

But the Brethren were well regarded around Trumble. Their decisions were quick and as fair as they could make them. In fact, they were remarkably accurate in light of the shaky testimony they often heard. Spicer had presided over small cases for years, in the back of his family's country store. He could spot a liar at fifty feet. Beech and Yarber had spent their careers in courtrooms, and had no tolerance for lengthy arguments and delays, the usual tactics.

'That's all today,' T. Karl reported. 'End of docket.'

'Very well. Court is adjourned until next week.'

T. Karl jumped to his feet, his curls again vibrating across his shoulders, and declared, 'Court's adjourned. All rise.'

No one stood, no one moved as the Brethren left the room. Rook and his gang were huddled, no doubt planning their next lawsuit. The Whiz left quickly.

The assistant warden and the guard eased away without being seen. The weekly docket was one of the better shows at Trumble.

TWO

Though he'd served in Congress for fourteen years, Aaron Lake still drove his own car around Washington. He didn't need or want a chauffeur, or an aide, or a bodyguard. Sometimes an intern would ride with him and take notes, but for the most part Lake enjoyed the tranquillity of sitting in D.C. traffic while listening to classical guitar on the stereo. Many of his friends, especially those who'd achieved the status of a Mr. Chairman or a Mr. Vice Chairman, had larger cars with drivers. Some even had limos.

Not Lake. It was a waste of time and money and privacy. If he ever sought higher office, he certainly didn't want the baggage of a chauffeur wrapped around his neck. Besides, he enjoyed being alone. His office was a madhouse. He had fifteen people bouncing off the walls, answering phones, opening files, serving the folks back in Arizona who'd sent him to Washington. Two more did nothing but raise money. Three interns managed to further clog his narrow corridors and take up more time than they deserved.

He was single, a widower, with a quaint little

townhouse in Georgetown that he was very fond of. He lived quietly, occasionally stepping into the social scene that had attracted him and his late wife in the early years.

He followed the Beltway, the traffic slow and cautious because of a light snow. He was quickly cleared through CIA security at Langley, and was very pleased to see a preferred parking space waiting for him, along with two plainclothes security personnel.

‘Mr. Maynard is waiting,’ one of them said gravely, opening his car door while the other took his briefcase. Power did have its perks.

Lake had never met with the CIA director at Langley. They’d conferred twice on the Hill, years earlier, back when the poor guy could get around. Teddy Maynard was in a wheelchair and in constant pain, and even senators got themselves driven out to Langley anytime he needed them. He’d called Lake a half-dozen times in fourteen years, but Maynard was a busy man. His light-lifting was usually handled by associates.

Security barriers collapsed all around the congressman as he and his escorts worked their way into the depths of the CIA headquarters. By the time Lake arrived at Mr. Maynard’s suite, he was walking a bit taller, with just a trace of a swagger. He couldn’t help it. Power was intoxicating.

Teddy Maynard had sent for him.

Inside the room, a large, square, windowless place known unofficially as the bunker, the Director was sitting alone, looking blankly at a large screen upon which the face of Congressman Aaron Lake was

frozen. It was a recent photo, one taken at a black-tie fund-raiser three months earlier where Lake had half a glass of wine, ate baked chicken, no dessert, drove himself home, alone, and went to bed before eleven. The photo was appealing because Lake was so attractive – light red hair with almost no gray, hair that was not colored or tinted, a full hairline, dark blue eyes, square chin, really nice teeth. He was fifty-three years old and aging superbly. He did thirty minutes a day on a rowing machine and his cholesterol was 160. They hadn't found a single bad habit. He enjoyed the company of women, especially when it was important to be seen with one. His steady squeeze was a sixty-year-old widow in Bethesda whose late husband had made a fortune as a lobbyist.

Both his parents were dead. His only child was a schoolteacher in Santa Fe. His wife of twenty-nine years had died in 1996 of ovarian cancer. A year later, his thirteen-year-old spaniel died too, and Congressman Aaron Lake of Arizona truly lived alone. He was Catholic, not that that mattered anymore, and he attended Mass at least once a week. Teddy pushed the button and the face disappeared.

Lake was unknown outside the Beltway, primarily because he'd kept his ego in check. If he had aspirations to higher office, they were closely guarded. His name had been mentioned once as a potential candidate for governor of Arizona, but he enjoyed Washington too much. He loved Georgetown – the crowds, the anonymity, the city life – good restaurants and cramped bookstores and espresso bars. He liked theater and music, and he

and his late wife had never missed an event at the Kennedy Center.

On the Hill, Lake was known as a bright and hardworking congressman who was articulate, fiercely honest, and loyal, conscientious to a fault. Because his district was the home of four large defense contractors, he had become an expert on military hard-ware and readiness. He was Chairman of the House Committee on Armed Services, and it was in that capacity that he had come to know Teddy Maynard.

Teddy pushed the button again, and there was Lake's face. For a fifty-year veteran of intelligence wars, Teddy seldom had a knot in his stomach. He'd dodged bullets, hidden under bridges, frozen in mountains, poisoned two Czech spies, shot a traitor in Bonn, learned seven languages, fought the cold war, tried to prevent the next one, had more adventures than any ten agents combined, yet looking at the innocent face of Congressman Aaron Lake he felt a knot.

He – the CIA – was about to do something the agency had never done before.

They'd started with a hundred senators, fifty governors, four hundred and thirty-five congressmen, all the likely suspects, and now there was only one. Representative Aaron Lake of Arizona.

Teddy flicked a button and the wall went blank. His legs were covered with a quilt. He wore the same thing every day – a V-necked navy sweater, white shirt, subdued bow tie. He rolled his wheelchair to a spot near the door, and prepared to meet his candidate.

★

During the eight minutes Lake was kept waiting, he was served coffee and offered a pastry, which he declined. He was six feet tall, weighed one-seventy, was fastidious about his appearance, and had he taken the pastry Teddy would've been surprised. As far as they could tell, Lake never ate sugar. Never.

His coffee was strong, though, and as he sipped it he reviewed a little research of his own. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss the alarming flow of black market artillery into the Balkans. Lake had two memos, eighty pages of double-spaced data he'd crunched until two in the morning. He wasn't sure why Mr. Maynard wanted him to appear at Langley to discuss such a matter, but he was determined to be prepared.

A soft buzzer sounded, the door opened, and the Director of the CIA rolled out, wrapped in a quilt and looking every day of his seventy-four years. His handshake was firm, though, probably because of the strain of pushing himself around. Lake followed him back into the room, leaving the two college-educated pit bulls to guard the door.

They sat opposite each other, across a very long table that ran to the end of the room where a large white wall served as a screen. After brief preliminaries, Teddy pushed a button and another face appeared. Another button, and the lights grew dim. Lake loved it – push little buttons, high-tech images flash instantly. No doubt the room was wired with enough electronic junk to monitor his pulse from thirty feet.

'Recognize him?' Teddy asked.

'Maybe. I think I've seen the face before.'

‘He’s Natli Chenkov. A former general. Now a member of what’s left of the Russian parliament.’

‘Also known as Natty,’ Lake said proudly.

‘That’s him. Hard-line Communist, close ties to the military, brilliant mind, huge ego, very ambitious, ruthless, and right now the most dangerous man in the world.’

‘Didn’t know that.’

A flick, another face, this one of stone under a gaudy military parade hat. ‘This is Yuri Goltsin, second in command of what’s left of the Russian army. Chenkov and Goltsin have big plans.’ Another flick, a map of a section of Russia north of Moscow. ‘They’re stockpiling arms in this region,’ Teddy said. ‘They’re actually stealing them from themselves, looting the Russian army, but, and more important, they’re buying them on the black market.’

‘Where’s their money coming from?’

‘Everywhere. They’re swapping oil for Israeli radar. They’re trafficking in drugs and buying Chinese tanks through Pakistan. Chenkov has close ties with some mobsters, one of whom recently bought a factory in Malaysia where they make nothing but assault rifles. It’s very elaborate. Chenkov has a brain, a very high IQ. He’s probably a genius.’

Teddy Maynard was a genius, and if he bestowed that title on another, then Congressman Lake certainly believed it. ‘So who gets attacked?’

Teddy dismissed the question because he wasn’t ready to answer it. ‘See the town of Vologda. It’s about five hundred miles east of Moscow. Last

week we tracked sixty Vetrov to a warehouse there. As you know, the Vetrov –'

'Is equivalent to our Tomahawk Cruise, but two feet longer.'

'Exactly. That makes three hundred they've moved in during the last ninety days. See the town of Rybinsk, just southwest of Vologda?'

'Known for its plutonium.'

'Yes, tons of it. Enough to make ten thousand nuclear warheads. Chenkov and Goltsin and their people control the entire area.'

'Control?'

'Yes, through a web of regional mobsters and local army units. Chenkov has his people in place.'

'In place for what?'

Teddy squeezed a button and the wall was blank. But the lights stayed dim, so that when he spoke across the table he did so almost from the shadows. 'The coup is right around the corner, Mr. Lake. Our worst fears are coming true. Every aspect of Russian society and culture is cracking and crumbling. Democracy is a joke. Capitalism is a nightmare. We thought we could McDonaldize the damned place, and it's been a disaster. Workers are not getting paid, and they're the lucky ones because they have jobs. Twenty percent do not. Children are dying because there are no medicines. So are many adults. Ten percent of the population are homeless. Twenty percent are hungry. Each day things get worse. The country has been looted by the mobsters. We think at least five hundred billion dollars has been stolen and taken out of the country. There's no relief in sight. The time is perfect for a new strongman, a new

dictator who'll promise to lead the people back to stability. The country is crying for leadership, and Mr. Chenkov has decided it's up to him.'

'And he has the army.'

'He has the army, and that's all it takes. The coup will be bloodless because the people are ready for it. They'll embrace Chenkov. He'll lead the parade into Red Square and dare us, the United States, to stand in his way. We'll be the bad guys again.'

'So the cold war is back,' Lake said, his words fading at the end.

'There'll be nothing cold about it. Chenkov wants to expand, to recapture the old Soviet Union. He desperately needs cash, so he'll simply take it in the form of land, factories, oil, crops. He'll start little regional wars, which he'll easily win.' Another map appeared. Phase One of the new world order was presented to Lake. Teddy didn't miss a word. 'I suspect he'll roll through the Baltic States, toppling governments in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, etc. Then he'll go to the old Eastern bloc and strike a deal with some of the Communists there.'

The congressman was speechless as he watched Russia expand. Teddy's predictions were so certain, so precise.

'What about the Chinese?' Lake asked.

But Teddy wasn't finished with Eastern Europe. He flicked; the map changed. 'Here's where we get sucked in.'

'Poland?'

'Yep. Happens every time. Poland is now a member of NATO, for some damned reason.'

Imagine that. Poland signing on to help protect us and Europe. Chenkov solidifies Russia's old turf, and casts a longing eye westward. Same as Hitler, except he was looking to the east.'

'Why would he want Poland?'

'Why did Hitler want Poland? It was between him and Russia. He hated the Poles, and he was ready to start a war. Chenkov doesn't give a damn about Poland, he just wants to control it. And he wants to destroy NATO.'

'He's willing to risk a third world war?'

Buttons were pushed; the screen became a wall again; lights came on. The audiovisuals were over and it was time for an even more serious conversation. Pain shot through Teddy's legs, and he couldn't keep from frowning.

'I can't answer that,' he said. 'We know a lot, but we don't know what the man's thinking. He's moving very quietly, putting people in place, setting things up. It's not completely unexpected, you know.'

'Of course not. We've had these scenarios for the last eight years, but there's always been hope that it wouldn't happen.'

'It's happening, Congressman. Chenkov and Goltsin are eliminating their opponents as we speak.'

'What's the timetable?'

Teddy shifted again under the quilt, tried another position to stop the pain. 'It's difficult to say. If he's smart, which he certainly is, he'll wait until there's rioting in the streets. I think that a year from now Natty Chenkov will be the most famous man in the world.'

‘A year,’ Lake said to himself, as if he’d just been given his own death sentence.

There was a long pause as he contemplated the end of the world. Teddy certainly let him. The knot in Teddy’s stomach was significantly smaller now. He liked Lake a lot. He was indeed very handsome, and articulate, and smart. They’d made the right choice.

He was electable.

After a round of coffee and a phone call Teddy had to take – it was the Vice President – they reconvened their little conference and moved forward. The congressman was pleased that Teddy had so much time for him. The Russians were coming, yet Teddy seemed so calm.

‘I don’t have to tell you how unprepared our military is,’ he said gravely.

‘Unprepared for what? For war?’

‘Perhaps. If we are unprepared, then we could well have a war. If we are strong, we avoid war. Right now the Pentagon could not do what it did in the Gulf War in 1991.’

‘We’re at seventy percent,’ Lake said with authority. This was his turf.

‘Seventy percent will get us a war, Mr. Lake. A war we cannot win. Chenkov is spending every dime he can steal on new hardware. We’re cutting budgets and depleting our military. We want to push buttons and launch smart bombs so that no American blood is shed. Chenkov will have two million hungry soldiers, anxious to fight and die if necessary.’

For a brief moment Lake felt proud. He’d had

the guts to vote against the last budget deal because it decreased military spending. The folks back home were upset about it. ‘Can’t you expose Chenkov now?’ he asked.

‘No. Absolutely not. We have excellent intelligence. If we react to him, then he’ll know that we know. It’s the spy game, Mr. Lake. It’s too early to make him a monster.’

‘So what’s your plan?’ Lake asked boldly. It was quite presumptuous to ask Teddy about his plans. The meeting had accomplished its purpose. One more congressman had been sufficiently briefed. At any moment Lake could be asked to leave so that another committee chairman of some variety could be shown in.

But Teddy had big plans, and he was anxious to share them. ‘The New Hampshire primary is two weeks away. We have four Republicans and three Democrats all saying the same thing. Not a single candidate wants to increase defense spending. We have a budget surplus, miracle of all miracles, and everyone has a hundred ideas about how to spend it. A bunch of imbeciles. Just a few years ago we had huge budget deficits, and Congress spent money faster than it could be printed. Now there’s a surplus. They’re gorging themselves on the pork.’

Congressman Lake looked away for a second, then decided to let it pass.

‘Sorry about that,’ Teddy said, catching himself. ‘Congress as a whole is irresponsible, but we have many fine congressmen.’

‘You don’t have to tell me.’

‘Anyway, the field is crowded with a bunch of

clones. Two weeks ago we had different front-runners. They're slinging mud and knifing each other, all for the benefit of the country's forty-fourth largest state. It's silly.' Teddy paused and grimaced and tried to reshift his useless legs. 'We need someone new, Mr. Lake, and we think that someone is you.'

Lake's first reaction was to suppress a laugh, which he did by smiling, then coughing. He tried to compose himself, and said, 'You must be kidding.'

'You know I'm not kidding, Mr. Lake,' Teddy said sternly, and there was no doubt that Aaron Lake had walked into a well-laid trap.

Lake cleared his throat and completed the job of composing himself. 'All right, I'm listening.'

'It's very simple. In fact, its simplicity makes it beautiful. You're too late to file for New Hampshire, and it doesn't matter anyway. Let the rest of the pack slug it out there. Wait until it's over, then startle everyone by announcing your candidacy for President. Many will ask, "Who the hell is Aaron Lake?" And that's fine. That's what we want. They'll find out soon enough.

'Initially, your platform will have only one plank. It's all about military spending. You're a doom-sayer, with all sorts of dire predictions about how weak our military is becoming. You'll get everybody's attention when you call for doubling our military spending.'

'Doubling?'

'It works, doesn't it? It got your attention. Double it during your four-year term.'

‘But why? We need more military spending, but a twofold increase would be excessive.’

‘Not if we’re facing another war, Mr. Lake. A war in which we push buttons and launch Tomahawk missiles by the thousands, at a million bucks a pop. Hell, we almost ran out of them last year in that Balkan mess. We can’t find enough soldiers and sailors and pilots, Mr. Lake. You know this. The military needs tons of cash to recruit young men. We’re low on everything – soldiers, missiles, tanks, planes, carriers. Chenkov is building now. We’re not. We’re still downsizing, and if we keep it up through another Administration, then we’re dead.’

Teddy’s voice rose, almost in anger, and when he stopped with ‘we’re dead,’ Aaron Lake could almost feel the earth shake from the bombing.

‘Where does the money come from?’ he asked.

‘Money for what?’

‘The military.’

Teddy snorted in disgust, then said, ‘Same place it always comes from. Need I remind you, sir, that we have a surplus?’

‘We’re busy spending the surplus.’

‘Of course you are. Listen, Mr. Lake, don’t worry about the money. Shortly after you announce, we’ll scare the hell out of the American people. They’ll think you’re half-crazy at first, some kind of wacko from Arizona who wants to build even more bombs. But we’ll jolt them. We’ll create a crisis on the other side of the world, and suddenly Aaron Lake will be called a visionary. Timing is everything. You make a speech about how weak we are in Asia, few people listen. Then

we'll create a situation over there that stops the world, and suddenly everyone wants to talk to you. It will go on like that, throughout the campaign. We'll build the tension on this end. We'll release reports, create situations, manipulate the media, embarrass your opponents. Frankly, Mr. Lake, I don't expect it to be that difficult.'

'You sound like you've been here before.'

'No. We've done some unusual things, all in an effort to protect this country. But we've never tried to swing a presidential election.' Teddy said this with an air of regret.

Lake slowly pushed his chair back, stood, stretched his arms and legs, and walked along the table to the end of the room. His feet were heavier. His pulse was racing. The trap had been sprung; he'd been caught.

He returned to his seat. 'I don't have enough money,' he offered across the table. He knew it was received by someone who'd already thought about it.

Teddy smiled and nodded and pretended to give this some thought. Lake's Georgetown home was worth \$400,000. He kept about half that much in mutual funds and another \$100,000 in municipal bonds. There were no significant debts. He had \$40,000 in his reelection account.

'A rich candidate would not be attractive,' Teddy said, then reached for yet another button. Images returned to the wall, sharp and in color. 'Money will not be a problem, Mr. Lake,' he said, his voice much lighter. 'We'll get the defense contractors to pay for it. Look at that,' he said, waving with his right hand as if Lake wasn't sure

what to look at. ‘Last year the aerospace and defense industry did almost two hundred billion in business. We’ll take just a fraction of that.’

‘How much of a fraction?’

‘As much as you need. We can realistically collect a hundred million dollars from them.’

‘You also can’t hide a hundred million dollars.’

‘Don’t bet on it, Mr. Lake. And don’t worry about it. We’ll take care of the money. You make the speeches, do the ads, run the campaign. The money will pour in. By the time November gets here, the American voters will be so terrified of Armageddon they won’t care how much you’ve spent. It’ll be a landslide.’

So Teddy Maynard was offering a landslide. Lake sat in a stunned but giddy silence and gawked at all that money up there on the wall – \$194 billion, defense and aerospace. Last year’s military budget was \$270 billion. Double that to \$540 billion in four years, and the contractors would get fat again. And the workers! Wages soaring through the roof! Jobs for everyone!

Candidate Lake would be embraced by executives with the cash and unions with the votes. The initial shock began to fade, and the simplicity of Teddy’s plan became clear. Collect the cash from those who will profit. Scare the voters into racing to the polls. Win in a landslide. And in doing so save the world.

Teddy let him think for a moment, then said, ‘We’ll do most of it through PACs. The unions, engineers, executives, business coalitions – there’s no shortage of political groups already on the books. And we’ll form some others.’

Lake was already forming them. Hundreds of PACs, all flush with more cash than any election had ever seen. The shock was now completely gone, replaced by the sheer excitement of the idea. A thousand questions raced through his mind: Who'll be my Vice President? Who'll run the campaign? Chief of staff? Where to announce? 'It might work,' he said, under control.

'Oh yes. It'll work, Mr. Lake. Trust me. We've been planning this for some time.'

'How many people know about it?'

'Just a few. You've been carefully chosen, Mr. Lake. We examined many potential candidates, and your name kept rising to the top. We've checked your background.'

'Pretty dull, huh?'

'I suppose. Although your relationship with Ms. Valotti concerns me. She's been divorced twice and likes painkillers.'

'Didn't know I had a relationship with Ms. Valotti.'

'You've been seen with her recently.'

'You guys are watching, aren't you?'

'You expect something less?'

'I guess not.'

'You took her to a black-tie cry-a-thon for oppressed women in Afghanistan. Gimme a break.' Teddy's words were suddenly short and dripping with sarcasm.

'I didn't want to go.'

'Then don't. Stay away from that crap. Leave it for Hollywood. Valotti's nothing but trouble.'

'Anybody else?' Lake asked, more than a little defensive. His private life had been pretty dull

since he'd become a widower. He was suddenly proud of it.

'Not really,' Teddy said. 'Ms. Benchly seems to be quite stable and makes a lovely escort.'

'Oh, thank you very much.'

'You'll get hammered on abortion, but you won't be the first.'

'It's a tired issue,' Lake said. And he was tired of grappling with it. He'd been for abortions, against abortions, soft on reproductive rights, tough on reproductive rights, pro-choice, pro-child, anti-women, embraced by the feminists. In his fourteen years on Capitol Hill he'd been chased all over the abortion minefield, getting bloodied with each new strategic move.

Abortion didn't scare him anymore, at least not at the moment. He was much more concerned with the CIA sniffing through his background.

'What about GreenTree?' he asked.

Teddy waved his right hand as if it was nothing. 'Twenty-two years ago. Nobody got convicted. Your partner went bankrupt and got himself indicted, but the jury let him walk. It'll come up; everything will come up. But frankly, Mr. Lake, we'll keep the attention diverted elsewhere. There's an advantage in jumping in at the last minute. The press won't have too much time to dig up dirt.'

'I'm single. We've elected an unmarried president only once.'

'You're a widower, the husband of a very lovely lady who was well respected both here and back home. It won't be an issue. Trust me.'

'So what worries you?'

‘Nothing, Mr. Lake. Not a thing. You’re a solid candidate, very electable. We’ll create the issues and the fear, and we’ll raise the money.’

Lake stood again, walked around the room rubbing his hair, scratching his chin, trying to clear his head. ‘I have a lot of questions,’ he said.

‘Maybe I can answer some of them. Let’s talk again tomorrow, right here, same time. Sleep on it, Mr. Lake. Time is crucial, but I suppose a man should have twenty-four hours before making such a decision.’ Teddy actually smiled when he said this.

‘That’s a wonderful idea. Let me think about it. I’ll have an answer tomorrow.’

‘No one knows we’ve had this little chat.’

‘Of course not.’

THREE

In terms of space, the law library occupied exactly one fourth of the square footage of the entire Trumble library. It was in a corner, partitioned off by a wall of red brick and glass, tastefully done at taxpayer expense. Inside the law library, shelves of well-used books stood packed together with barely enough room for an inmate to squeeze between them. Around the walls were desks covered with typewriters and computers and sufficient research clutter to resemble any big-firm library.

The Brethren ruled the law library. All inmates were allowed to use it, of course, but there was an unwritten policy that one needed permission to stay there for any length of time. Maybe not permission, but at least notice.

Justice Joe Roy Spicer of Mississippi earned forty cents an hour sweeping the floors and straightening the desks and shelves. He also emptied the trash, and was generally considered to be a pig when it came to his menial tasks. Justice Hatlee Beech of Texas was the official law librarian, and at fifty cents an hour was the highest paid. He was fastidious about 'his volumes,' and often bickered

with Spicer about their care. Justice Finn Yarber, once of the California Supreme Court, was paid twenty cents an hour as a computer technician. His pay was at the bottom of the scale because he knew so little about computers.

On a typical day, the three spent between six and eight hours in the law library. If a Trumble inmate had a legal problem, he simply made an appointment with one of the Brethren and visited their little suite. Hatlee Beech was an expert on sentencing and appeals. Finn Yarber did bankruptcies, divorces, and child support cases. Joe Roy Spicer, with no formal legal training, had no real specialty. Nor did he want one. He ran the scams.

Strict rules prohibited the Brethren from charging fees for their legal work, but the strict rules meant little. They were, after all, convicted felons, and if they could quietly pick up some cash on the outside then everyone would be happy. Sentencing was a moneymaker. About a fourth of the inmates who arrived at Trumble had been improperly sentenced. Beech could review the records overnight and find the loopholes. A month earlier, he had knocked four years off the sentence of a young man who'd been given fifteen. The family had agreed to pay, and the Brethren earned \$5,000, their biggest fee to date. Spicer arranged the secret deposit through their lawyer in Neptune Beach.

There was a cramped conference room in the back of the law library, behind the shelves and barely visible from the main room. The door to it had a large glass window, but no one bothered to look in. The Brethren retired there for quiet business. They called it their chamber.

Spicer had just met with their lawyer and he had mail, some really good letters. He closed the door and removed an envelope from a file. He waved it for Beech and Yarber to see. 'It's yellow,' he said. 'Ain't that sweet? It's for Ricky.'

'Who's it from?' Yarber asked.

'Curtis from Dallas.'

'The banker?' Beech asked excitedly.

'No, Curtis owns the jewelry stores. Listen.' Spicer unfolded the letter, also on soft yellow stationery. He smiled and cleared his throat and began to read: "Dear Ricky: Your letter of January eighth made me cry. I read it three times before I put it down. You poor boy. Why are they keeping you there?"'

'Where is he?' asked Yarber.

'Ricky's locked down in a fancy drug rehab unit his rich uncle is paying for. He's been in for a year, is clean and fully rehabbed, but the terrible people who run the place won't release him until April because they've been collecting twenty thousand dollars a month from his rich uncle, who just wants him locked away and won't send any spending money. Do you remember any of this?'

'Now I do.'

'You helped with the fiction. May I proceed?'

'Please do.'

Spicer continued reading: "I'm tempted to fly down there and confront those evil people myself. And your uncle, what a loser! Rich people like him think they can just send money and not get involved. As I told you, my father was quite wealthy, and he was the most miserable person I've ever known. Sure he bought me things – objects

that were temporary and meant nothing when they were gone. But he never had time for me. He was a sick man, just like your uncle. I've enclosed a check for a thousand dollars if you need anything from the commissary.

“Ricky, I can't wait to see you in April. I've already told my wife that there is an international diamond show in Orlando that month, and she has no interest in going with me.”

‘April?’ asked Beech.

‘Yep. Ricky is certain he will be released in April.’

‘Ain't that sweet,’ Yarber said with a smile. ‘And Curtis has a wife and kids?’

‘Curtis is fifty-eight, three adult children, two grandchildren.’

‘Where's the check?’ asked Beech.

Spicer flipped the sheets of stationery and went to page two. “We have to make certain you can meet me in Orlando,” he read. “Are you sure you'll finally be released in April? Please tell me you will. I think about you every hour. I keep your photo hidden in my desk drawer, and when I look into your eyes I know that we should be together.”

‘Sick, sick, sick,’ Beech said, still smiling. ‘And he's from Texas.’

‘I'm sure there are a lot of sweet boys in Texas,’ Yarber said.

‘And none in California?’

‘The rest of it is just mush,’ Spicer said, scanning quickly. There would be plenty of time to read it later. He held up the \$1,000 check for his colleagues to see. In due course, it would be

smuggled out to their attorney and he would deposit it in their hidden account.

‘When are we gonna bust him?’ Yarber asked.

‘Let’s swap a few more letters. Ricky needs to share some more misery.’

‘Maybe one of the guards could beat him up, or something like that,’ Beech said.

‘They don’t have guards,’ replied Spicer. ‘It’s a designer rehab clinic, remember? They have counselors.’

‘But it’s a lockdown facility, right? That means gates and fences, so surely there’s a guard or two around. What if Ricky got attacked in the shower or the locker room by some goon who wanted his body?’

‘It can’t be a sexual attack,’ Yarber said. ‘That might scare Curtis. He might think Ricky caught a disease or something.’

And so the fiction went for a few minutes as they created more misery for poor Ricky. His picture had been lifted from the bulletin board of a fellow inmate, copied at a quick print by their lawyer, and had now been sent to more than a dozen pen pals across North America. The photo was of a smiling college grad, in a navy robe with a cap and gown, holding a diploma, a very handsome young man.

It was decided that Beech would work on the new story for a few days, then write a rough draft of the next letter to Curtis. Beech was Ricky, and at that moment their little tormented fictional boy was writing his tales of misery to eight different caring souls. Justice Yarber was Percy, also a young man locked away for drugs but now clean and nearing release and looking for an older sugar

daddy with whom to spend meaningful time. Percy had five hooks in the water, and was slowly reeling them in.

Joe Roy Spicer didn't write very well. He coordinated the scam, helped with the fiction, kept the stories straight, and met with the lawyer who brought the mail. And he handled the money.

He pulled out another letter and announced, 'This, Your Honors, is from Quince.'

Everything stopped as Beech and Yarber stared at the letter. Quince was a wealthy banker in a small town in Iowa, according to the six letters he and Ricky had swapped. Like the rest, they'd found him through the personals of a gay magazine now hidden in the law library. He'd been their second catch, the first having become suspicious and disappearing. Quince's photo of himself was a snapshot taken at a lake, with the shirt off, the potbelly, the skinny arms, the receding hairline of a fifty-one-year-old – his family all around him. It was a bad photo, no doubt selected by Quince because it might be difficult to identify him, if anyone ever tried.

'Would you like to read it, Ricky boy?' Spicer asked, handing the letter to Beech, who took it and looked at the envelope. Plain white, no return address, typed lettering.

'Have you read it?' Beech asked.

'No. Go ahead.'

Beech slowly removed the letter, a plain sheet of white paper with tight single-spaced paragraphs produced by an old typewriter. He cleared his voice, and read: '“Dear Ricky: It's done. I can't believe I did it, but I pulled it off. I used a pay