

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



The Brethren

John Grisham

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About the Book

Trumble is a minimum security federal prison, home to drug dealers, bank robbers, swindlers, embezzlers, tax evaders, and three former judges who call themselves The Brethren. They meet each day in the law library where they spend hours writing letters. They are fine-tuning a mail scam, and it's starting to pay big. The money is pouring in.

But then their little scam goes awry. It ensnares the wrong victim, a powerful man on the outside, a man with dangerous friends, and The Brethren's days of quietly marking time are over.

About the Author

John Grisham is the author of twenty-two novels, one work of non-fiction, a collection of stories, and a novel for young readers. He is on the Board of Directors of the Innocence Project in New York and is the Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Mississippi Innocence Project at the University of Mississippi School of Law. He lives in Virginia and Mississippi.

Also by John Grisham

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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 ValueNow 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 doomsayer, 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