

# The Tube

By

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## Prologue

### **NEWS BULLETIN TRUCK HITS SCHOOL BUS KILLS 37 FIRST-GRADERS MASSIVE PILE-UP CLOSES I-75 DEATH TOLL RISING**

A school bus returning to Leesburg's George Washington Elementary School from Tampa via I-75 was slammed into by a tractor-trailer truck. All persons on board the school bus and the tractor-trailer truck are believed dead. The accident occurred on the Panasoffkee Bridge. Witnesses stated that chain reactions both in front of the school bus and behind the tractor-trailer resulted in numerous other vehicles being involved in the accident. It is believed that at least 8 victims in other vehicles were killed. At last count, 47 injured victims were removed and brought to local hospitals for treatment. The extent of injuries is not known, but many are believed to be life threatening. Florida Highway Patrol Captain Jimmy Johnson stated that no other details are known at this time, and the cause of the accident is under investigation. The stretch of I-75 between Exit 321 and Exit 329 is closed and motorists are advised to use other routes. Stay tuned for further developments.

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## EDITORIAL

### **Congress Must Act to End Highway Carnage**

Investigators from the Department of Transportation have released a scathing report which blames long-haul tractor-trailer driver Mack McCall and his employer, Trayne Trucking Lines for last month's massive I-75 wreck. The report traces the route McCall took, which started at his home in St. Louis, Missouri and ended in his death and the death of 62 others, including 47 children under the age of 12, at the Panasoffkee Bridge. It has been conclusively demonstrated that McCall had fallen asleep at the wheel. Federal regulations require that drivers take an eight hour rest break for every ten hours they are behind the wheel. McCall had already driven 17 hours straight without a break before arriving in Clearwater, where he off-loaded a trailer full of computers and was then given a "Rush" load of optical lenses to deliver to Dallas. Investigators found that McCall's employer routinely pressured its drivers to continue driving beyond legal limits and took punitive action against those employees who refused to "go along".

Eight out of every ten fatal accidents on our highways involve tractor-trailer rigs. While it is true that federal regulations have been tightened and enforcement has improved, the present system is inadequate to protect the motoring public. The profit-driven trucking industry has shown a flagrant disregard for safety and has a vested interest in flaunting existing regulations.

Only Congress has the power to correct this situation. Band-Aid solutions are not the answer. We have seen that enacting more regulations and increasing enforcement do not work. With all our technological advances, we should be able to come up with a way of hauling goods without endangering the lives of innocents. This is one of the ways that our huge and ever-growing national surplus can be put to good use. The time to act is NOW.

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### **News Brief**

Congress has awarded a contract to the University of Texas to study highway safety problems caused by the long-haul trucking system and to propose changes to the current system to eliminate these problems.

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## University of Texas Proposes “Tube”

The long-awaited results of the University of Texas Highway Safety study are finally here. Rumors have been flying for the past several months indicating that the proposal UT intends to submit to Congress for consideration is both radical and revolutionary. In summary, UT proposes:

1. Tractor-trailers be banned from the open road

2. An alternative transportation system be developed, based on two systems which have worked well for transportation in the US in the past - the Interstate Highway System and the oil and gas pipelines

The proposed new system, dubbed the Tube, would be built by digging huge ditches in a planned network (web) across the US. A pneumatic tube system would be laid in this ditch. The system would carry capsule-shaped cars with the approximate capacity of a railroad boxcar. The cars would be propelled through the tube by compressed air provided by fans located a maximum of every thirty miles. The power for the fans would be whatever source is cheapest, most available and most environmentally sound at each site.

The system calls for a 300% backup of power and equipment at each fan station. Unlike railroads, there will have to be tubes going in both directions to all points, as pneumatic tubes would only propel cars in one direction.

The layout of the web will consist of a main hub in the approximate geographic center of the US. Three regional hubs would be placed in the West, three in the East, one in the North Central US and one in the South Central US. Drop-off terminals, known as shunts, would be placed all along the web to serve local areas.

Every hub will have a traffic-controlling computer and human dispatchers. The computer will not allow any two cars to occupy the same space at the same time and will be able to project this likelihood far in advance. The dispatchers will verify the proper loading of the cars and schedule them into and out of the shunts safely.

The one unalterable rule for the operation of the Tube is that no breathing human will be allowed to ride in the system.

Once the computer system is in place and operating, it is expected that individual sections of the web can begin to carry goods as each tube run is completed and certified.

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## **TRUCKERS MARCH ON WASHINGTON**

An estimated crowd of 375,000 marched on our nation's Capitol today to protest the University of Texas' proposal to replace over-the-road hauling with the Tube. Fighting broke out among truckers and groups who support construction of the Tube. Riot police were called out. At the end of the day, 31 people were arrested and 83 people were treated for minor injuries.

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## **CONGRESS PASSES BUSH-JACKSON BILL**

Security was tight today as Congress passed the Bush-Jackson Bill. The bill mandates that the Department of Transportation be responsible for oversight of the construction, maintenance and operation of the Tube. The timetable for construction and implementation is short because the technical and operational specifications have been worked out over the past several years in anticipation of the bill's passage. Ultimately, the project will result in a total elimination of long-haul trucks from the nation's highways. Various segments of the trucking industry bitterly fought passage of the bill, but in the end, the Congress responded to pressure from the American Automobile Association, AARP, the travel industry associations and the general public.

Many individuals and organizations supporting the bill have received threats and indications are that resistance to construction and implementation of the Tube by members of the trucking industry will be ongoing.

Portions of the bill provide for re-training and employment of workers displaced by the Tube but many members of the trucking industry consider the provisions inadequate and object to what they consider the total annihilation of their unique culture and lifestyle by the U.S. Government.

Because of threats to the security of the Tube, the bill also provides for the establishment of a special police force that will ensure the safety of the people working on the Tube and the Tube itself.

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## Chapter One

There was an overcast sky and it was drizzling rain when a black limo pulled up in front of the DOTS (Division of Tube Security) Building. Before it stopped rolling, Joe Dietz, Chief of the Intelligence and Investigations Bureau, opened the back passenger door to disembark. His western-booted foot hit the ground at the same time the limo rocked to a stop. At his heels was Leon Campbell, Chief of the Patrol Bureau.

"Thanks for the ride, Leon," Joe said as he quickly closed the limo door and it sped off.

"No sweat, Joe, anytime," Leon replied as they both ascended the steps of the building, their lanky legs taking two steps at a time.

Joe's plane had arrived at Andrews AFB, Maryland at the same time as Leon's and Joe had hitched a ride into D.C. with him.

Joe scanned the lobby through the glass doors. He had the feeling that he was being watched, but he didn't spot anything suspicious.

"Something wrong, Joe?" Leon hesitated just a step behind.

"No, Leon, guess I'm just tired. See you later."

Joe backed into the elevator taking one last glance at the lobby. The floors assigned to his Bureau were the most Spartan in the building. Joe wanted his people to have plenty of room to spread out maps, charts and any other materials they needed to work with wherever and whenever they chose. There was also plenty of room available for staff not yet on board.

"Good morning, Kathie," Joe greeted his staff assistant. "Anything come unglued while I was gone?"

"Not really, Boss. The Team has been in the conference room for about

15 minutes, drinking Bob's newest special-blend coffee. They should be really wired by now."

"That's what I need and that's where I'm headed. Put my calls through to my voice mail until we're done. Thanks."

Walking into his office, he took his jacket off on the move. Tossing it onto the brass coat rack, he opened the other door of the inner office, which led directly into the conference room.

Buck Arnold, Joe's closest friend and Deputy Chief; Joan Stanley, Analysis Unit Supervisor; Bill Rawlings, Intelligence Unit Supervisor; and Bob Donohue, Investigations Unit Supervisor were seated around a heavy oak conference table. Although they were officially referred to as the Intelligence and Investigations Bureau, they called themselves the "Tube Team".

"Morning, everybody. Did you leave any coffee for me?" his eyes inspected the full cups before each person.

Bob turned around in his seat and poured a cup of coffee from an elaborate machine that stood on a table against the wall behind him. Bob handed the steaming cup to Joe.

Joe accepted it gratefully, "Thanks, Bob. I sure have missed your coffee over the past few days."

Bob Donohue smiled slightly and nodded, accepting the compliment.

\* \* \*

Joe grimaced inwardly. Bob was a hard guy to get to know. He appeared to be constantly on guard. Buck had asked Joe to hire Bob. He had worked with Bob in Chicago and had assured Joe that Bob was savvy and street smart and could be trusted, especially when things got rough. Joe had assigned Bob to head the Investigations Unit, which operated in the same way a detective unit in a municipal police department operates. Any incident needing further investigation was referred to Bob's unit. Joe had hoped he would get to know Bob better as they worked together. So far, the only thing Joe could say of Bob with certainty was that he made a mean cup of coffee.

\* \* \*

"Anybody have anything earth-shaking, sub-earth-shaking or even interesting to impart to the team today?" Joe asked.

Joan pushed a few strands of blonde hair behind her left ear and said, "I've been checking up on a guy named Dave Antonio down in Florida. Bill received some information indicating that Antonio might be involved in something having to do with the Tube."

"Dave Antonio? The old 'He-gator' himself?"

"You know him?" Joan asked.

"From way back, and he's bad news. What's he got to do with us?"

"I'm not sure yet. The word is that he's been meeting with various independent truckers and owners of some transport companies. He owns

a large car dealership in Tampa that appears to be on the up and up. I'm in there as an IRS auditor. So far, I've met with two of his top people, and I've even had a few friendly chats with him. He's given me an office to use and is acting like a real Southern Gentleman."

"Didn't know he's selling cars now. Figures, though. Better than selling swamp land. Just don't be fooled by his down-home ways. He'll steal your skivvies and make you think you wanted him to have them."

"Skivvies, Joe? What the heck are skivvies? And do I have any? And are they worth stealing? And would I care?"

Everyone in the room cracked up, including Joe.

Bob surprised everyone by speaking up. "Skivvies are men's underwear, Joan. Why Joe would be worried about any skivvies you might own, I don't know. None of my business or anybody else's, as I see it."

Everybody in the room roared, including Joe. When the laughter died down, Joe said, "Okay, guys, enough already. I swear I'll never use that word again."

Joe cleared his throat. "All kidding aside, Joan, Dave Antonio is a much more dangerous character than he appears."

"Joe's right, Joan," said Bob. You need to be very, very wary of that dude. And, by the way, Joe, the Hillsborough County Sheriff is an old friend of mine and owes me a lot of favors. So let me know if you need me to get in touch with him."

"Thanks, Bob. Just make damn sure you can totally trust anyone outside the Team that you involve in this," Joe cautioned.

"Absolutely," Bob assured Joe.

"And Joan, please, just be on your guard," Joe said in a somewhat pleading manner.

"Now, Joe. You know I can take care of myself," Joan replied.

\* \* \*

Joe did indeed know that Joan could take care of herself.

Joan had been with the Secret Service for a few years at the time Joe had joined that elite group. She had been assigned to guard the First Lady and other female members of the President's family. It wasn't a discriminatory practice, just a practical measure to have at least one female on that detail, so that she could follow her assignment into rest rooms and other places where a male would be out of place.

On one hot August afternoon, the First Lady had been coming out of the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel, waving to the crowd and smiling her patented smile.

Joan had been watching the crowd like a hawk. Her trained eyes spotted a blue steel automatic about six feet away. It was pointed at the First Lady's head. The index finger of the hand holding the gun was tightening on the trigger.

"Gun!" Joan shouted.

Then she did the only thing she could do. She pushed the First

Lady hard. The First Lady rocketed forward, just as the pop of the pistol was heard.

No person was hit by the pistol shot, but the push had propelled the First Lady into the sharp corner of the open limo door. She received a gash in the hairline just above the temple, which required several stitches.

The gunman was caught and prosecuted with as little fanfare as possible.

The First Lady had nothing but praise for Joan, but it didn't save her. The decision was made that while Joan was responsible for saving the life of the First Lady, she did have other alternatives. She was assigned to a desk.

Joe knew that Joan was devastated, but she had handled the situation with grace and had done an outstanding job at her new assignment.

Joe never forgot that. When he found himself recruiting for the Tube Team, Joan was on his short list.

Having a desk job with regular hours had allowed Joan to attend school at night, and she had obtained an MBA and then became licensed as a CPA. She was a multi-faceted addition to the Team.

There was one other thing that made Joan a special part of Joe's Tube Team.

Before Joan was placed on desk duty, Joe and Joan had worked a number of assignments together. Joe and Joan had been at MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa, Florida with the First Lady, who was on a goodwill mission, meeting the troops and their families, bringing greetings and thanks from the President and the nation.

As the First Lady and her retinue, guarded by Joe and Joan, were leaving a hangar, heading out on the airfield to admire some of the aircraft, the group crossed paths with some big eyed children, all wearing name tags that said 'Mrs. Ramirez' 1<sup>st</sup> Grade Class, George Washington Elementary School, Leesburg'.

The First Lady, a former schoolteacher, stopped and greeted Mrs. Ramirez and her class.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Ramirez. Good afternoon, class. I'm Emily Lauer. I hope you're all learning a lot about the Air Force and how they are defending our country."

Mrs. Ramirez looked at the children and said quietly, "What do you say, class?"

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Lauer," the class said politely, as their teacher looked on proudly.

"Does anyone know who I am?" asked the First Lady.

"I do, I do," shouted one little girl excitedly.

"You do? So tell me, who am I?"

"I've seen your picture in the newspaper lots. My daddy and I read it together every Sunday. You're the President's Mommy."

The adults in the group began to laugh, but the First Lady turned around and gave them her stern schoolteacher look, and they immediately composed themselves.

"Well, Chloe, I'm really impressed that you read the newspaper with

your daddy. And thank you for recognizing me. I do live in the White House with the President, but I'm married to the President, just like your Mommy is married to your Daddy. And the President and I are Mommy and Daddy to two boys who are in high school, although they attended elementary school not so long ago, just like you are now."

"Who's he?" asked a little boy named Johnny Jenkins. The "he" Johnny was pointing at was Joe.

"This is Mr. Dietz. He's an officer with the Secret Service."

"Ohhhh," the children exclaimed in chorus.

"What's that mean?" asked Johnny, tugging at Joe's trouser leg.

Much to Joe's chagrin, the First Lady turned to him and said, "Why don't you tell the children about your job? They might like to be in the Secret Service someday."

Joe cleared his throat and said, "I guard the President, the Vice President and their families."

"Why do you do that?" a little girl named Amy Shultz asked.

"To make sure they don't get hurt, to make sure no bad people hurt them."

"Do you have a gun?" Johnny asked, tugging again at Joe's trouser leg.

"Yes, I do. So does Ms. Stanley," Joe said, pointing at Joan. "She's a Secret Service Agent, too."

Joan smiled at the children and said, "Hi, kids." She then turned her head so only Joe could see her face as she glared at him.

"I'm afraid we're running behind schedule, Ma'am," John Donnelly, the First Lady's executive assistant said so that everyone could hear. "We really do need to be moving along."

Mrs. Lauer turned to the class and said, "I'm sorry I have to go now, but I want you to know it's been a real pleasure to meet all of you. Before I go, could I ask you to do me a favor? One of my most important jobs is to encourage children to read. Please promise me that you will read something every day. You can read newspapers, magazines, books, comic books, even cereal boxes on your breakfast table. Just read something extra, something that you don't have to read for school. If you do this, you'll not only be helping me, you'll be helping yourselves. Will you do that?"

"Yes, Ma'am," the children promised.

On the return plane trip to Washington, the First Lady sent for Joe and Joan. They knocked on the door of the First Lady's cabin and announced themselves.

"Come in," she answered.

When Joe and Joan entered the cabin, they were shocked to see the First Lady seated, red-eyed, with a crumpled handkerchief in her hand and tears streaming down her face.

"Ma'am, can we help you?" asked Joan, rushing to the First Lady's side.

"Please sit down, I have something I need to tell you."

Joe and Joan seated themselves and looked at the First Lady expectantly.

"I've just received word that there was a horrible wreck on the

Interstate near Tampa a few hours ago. One of the many vehicles involved was a school bus. It's believed that everyone on the school bus was killed. The bus was carrying Mrs. Ramirez' first grade class back to the George Washington Elementary School in Leesburg," she had to pause to gain her composure. "John Donnelly will be handing out an announcement to everyone else on the plane. Since you both spoke to the children, I thought it might be better if you heard the news first from me."

For a moment, there was not a sound. Then Joe, doing his best to hold in his emotions, said, "Thank you, Ma'am. We really appreciate your letting us know. Is there anything we can do for you, Ma'am?"

"No, thank you both. I know you both feel as terrible as I do. I'm going to get in touch with the families of all the victims and express my sympathy and the President's. I'm sorry to be the bearer of such awful news."

Joe and Joan backed out of the cabin and found chairs in an empty conference room. Tears were streaming down Joan's face and Joe was having a rough time maintaining his composure. He patted Joan's shoulder awkwardly.

"Sometimes life really stinks, you know, Joe?" Joan spoke through her tears.

"Yeah. It really stinks," Joe agreed.

They both sat there for a few minutes until Joan wiped her face, blew her nose and stood up.

"Time to get back to work, Joe."

"Yeah."

A week later they accompanied the First Lady to Leesburg, Florida, where a memorial service was held for all 63 people killed in the Lake Panasofkee Bridge crash.

Although Joe and Joan never again mentioned Mrs. Ramirez' and her class, they did discuss the media coverage relating to the accident and the dangers big rigs posed on the nation's highways. They both became something akin to experts on highway traffic accident statistics and, when the Tube was proposed, they both supported it.

\* \* \*

"So, Joan, when are you going back to Florida?" Joe asked.

"Tomorrow."

"Okay. More of the Team may need to go down to Florida and straighten old Dave out. Call me on Thursday. You should have more information by then. Whatever he's up to, we can't let him get too far along with it. Thanks, Joan."

Joe looked around the table. "Who's next? Bill? Great. What do you have for us?"

Bill Rawlings, the Team's computer expert, began reporting in his soft voice. "We're continuing to monitor every trucking company. We're still working our way through trucker files. We also continue to run information in federal, state, county and local law enforcement data banks

through our system looking for 'hits'. All law enforcement agencies have been asked to inform us if they come across any information that may bear on the security of the Tube, and we've been entering the stuff we receive into our system. I have two people doing nothing but checking websites and chat rooms, and checking out any other links they come across that may be of interest to us. The Dave Antonio information came to us by way of a Tampa cop who is an old friend of my man Ned's. The trucker websites and chatrooms aren't showing us anything new so far - we're continuing to see a lot of venting but it doesn't seem to be going anywhere."

"What is new is what we're seeing on various militia groups' websites. Jim came across a trucking reference on the Ohio Freeman's Militia website, so he decided to check out some other militia websites. There is beginning to be a lot of talk about the plight of the truckers on various militias' websites. Here's a list of the websites we've checked so far that have referenced the trucking and Tube situation. I'll leave it up to you to do what needs to be done with the information, and we'll continue checking and I'll keep you posted."

"Thanks, Bill. Keep up the good work. While Joan's in Florida, I need you to be digging around and finding out anything you can about what Dave Antonio may be up to. I don't mind admitting that I'm more than a little concerned about the Dave Antonio lead. So far, we've only had to contend with amateurs. Dave Antonio is a pro, and he plays hardball. Pros getting into this could cause a war, and we really don't want that."

"Will do, Boss. We'll get on it right away."

Bill jumped up and left the room. Joe smiled at Bill's abrupt departure, as did the rest of the Team. "A man with a mission," Joe thought.

\* \* \*

If it had been anyone else leaving a meeting in that fashion, Joe and the rest of the Team might have been annoyed. Bill Rawlings was a different story. Everything about him tended to be a little off-kilter. His basic problem was that while he knew lots about computers, he was clueless when it came to people.

Joe had been with the FBI Major Crimes Unit, and had been placed in charge of a multi-state serial killer case. His team had turned up nothing, they were getting discouraged and the bosses in Washington were leaning on Joe hard. After a few weeks, Joe was called to Washington to report on what progress, if any, his team was making.

As Joe walked down the hall of the FBI Headquarters building, feeling as if he was about to face execution, his thoughts were broken by a timid tug at his coat sleeve.

Surprised, Joe said, "Yes, can I help you?" and turned to see a short man in his 30's, muscular, with short brown hair sticking out in various directions, wearing a T-shirt that had a picture of a fortress on top of a hill, along with the word 'Salzburg'.

All Joe could think was "What is this guy doing in the J. Edgar Hoover FBI Building?"

"Are you Mr. Dietz?"

"Yes," Joe replied.

"I'm Bill Rawlings of Section G, Data Analysis. I'd like to talk to you when you have time, please," he said, and then darted off.

"Sure, when I have time," Joe said to Bill's departing back, because Bill hadn't waited for a reply.

Joe proceeded to his meeting. It turned out to be a "How dumb is Joe Dietz?" meeting. He left feeling that he needed to either make some immediate progress on the case or begin practicing saying "Will you have fries with that?"

He was on his way out of the building when he recalled the strange man who had accosted him in the hallway.

"Why not?" Joe thought. He did an about-face and went in search of "Section G, Data Analysis". He asked a guard behind a computer console in the lobby for directions. After checking a number of screens, the guard printed out a map for Joe to use to find Bill's office. He finally found a door with a sign on it indicating he was in the right place. It was located in the basement in an out-of-the-way corner. The door was locked but there was a button and he pushed it. A tall dark-skinned male wearing a turban opened the door.

"I'm looking for a Bill Rawlings. Is this where he works?" Joe asked.

"You bet. Who are you?" the man asked.

"I'm Joe Dietz. He asked me to come see him."

"You wait here," the man said, closing the door in Joe's face.

Less than a minute later, Bill Rawlings opened the door.

"You're here. Great. Follow me."

Joe followed Bill to a cubicle which was one of many in a large gray room that would have been colorless if it had not been for the posters, signs, stuffed animals, plastic figures and other miscellany covering the walls of the room and the individual cubicles. It didn't look like any other office Joe had ever seen in the FBI building, and the people were - Joe struggled to think of a word he would use to describe them. "Unique" came to mind. So did "Bizarre".

Bill's cubicle had a musical theme. There were posters advertising previously held symphony concert performances covering the walls and torn ticket stubs were tacked on the walls wherever there was space. A bust of - Joe was guessing - Beethoven, and a bust of - again, Joe was guessing - Mozart, were used as bookends for some technical manuals. Musical notes and symbols in various media were perched on piles of paper, hanging from the ceiling as mobiles and tacked to the walls. On a top shelf of the workstation was a handwritten sheet of music that looked very old, beautifully mounted and framed behind glass. The wastebasket was covered in a piano-key pattern and there was a violin case standing in a corner.

Bill asked Joe to sit in a chair that faced, obliquely, a computer monitor. Bill sat in a typist's chair in front of the computer keyboard.

"I've found some information relating to a case that is recorded as being assigned to you," Bill said.

"Like what?" Joe asked.

Bill began to type on the keyboard. The screens on the monitor appeared and changed almost faster than Joe could read them. He did see enough, however, to realize that this little computer analyst had tied together events in three states, seemingly unrelated, to identify one man.

"How did you get onto this?" Joe asked.

"I was compiling statistics for a report. One item appeared to fit... but, then again, it didn't fit. I examined it closer to see if it should be counted. That one item started me down a logical road to this."

Now Joe was impressed. Bill's lead enabled Joe to wrap up the case in short order.

When Joe was putting together his Tube Team, Bill's name automatically went on his list of people to recruit.

\* \* \*

"Bob, what's your unit been up to?"

"We've been following up on cases referred to us by the Patrol Division. So far, all we've come across is what appear to be isolated instances of minor vandalism and theft, some demonstrations by truckers at the entrances to Tube properties and some skirmishes between truckers and Tube workers in various places around the country. We've made 22 arrests of individuals believed to have committed crimes on Tube properties and we've been turning the names of everyone involved in any incidents over to Bill's unit to keep tabs on. Various local law enforcement agencies have reported incidents between truckers and Tube workers off-site and feelings are running high, in some places more than others. Some families are divided over the issue and we're even hearing about fights on school playgrounds - truckers' kids have been giving Tube workers' kids a hard time in lots of places. About what you'd expect," Bob concluded.

"Yeah, I guess so. Still, it's a damn shame the kids have to be involved in this. We might want to think about starting some program to help out those kids. If anybody has any ideas, let me know. Thanks for the report, Bob, and for all the work you and your unit are doing."

Bob nodded and Joe turned to look at Buck. "Buck, anything for the team?"

"Nope." Everybody laughed, including Buck. Although capable of extended discourse, Buck seemed to enjoy playing the stereotypical part of a strong, silent American Indian, a man of few words. It was a running joke in the agency. Those who got to know Buck learned that he had plenty to say and could say it well.

"About aircraft," Joe began, "We have three. The large jet should be reserved when possible for total team efforts. The smaller jet is better

when one or two of you need to go long distances or to get somewhere in a hurry. The prop aircraft should be used for shorter flights. Pilots and crews should be given as much notice as possible so they can have some sort of personal life. They also have to schedule maintenance on the aircraft. If all three aircraft are in use and you need one immediately, we can rent one. I would prefer not to do that often. We have to involve flight crews we don't know and restrict our conversations aboard the aircraft. If you have to rent an aircraft and if you're licensed to fly it, please do that."

"Unless you have something more, that's all for now, folks. Keep me posted. Later."

The meeting broke up and Buck followed Joe into his office.

"So, how are you doing, Kemo Sabe?" Buck asked Joe.

"Fine. What?" Joe looked at Buck.

"You seem edgy, Bud, and you look like hell."

"Yeah, Leon noticed something, too. Truth is, the last couple of days I've had the feeling I'm being watched. My gut and the back of my neck are usually reliable, but I haven't been able to spot anything out of the ordinary. When Leon asked, I told him I was just tired. Maybe I am. I just don't know."

"How long has it been that you've been working at breakneck speed to set up the Team? Six months? You know, you can only pull so many eighteen and twenty-hour days before they begin to catch up with you. And in case you haven't noticed, you're not as young as you used to be. Go home and get some rest. I can mind the store. You need a break or you're not going to be any good to anybody."

"I can't just leave, Buck, I have lots to catch up on," Joe protested.

"Cut the crap, Joe. You know I'm right. Or are you saying you don't trust me to keep an eye on things for you?" Buck was one of the very few people in the world who could push Joe's buttons.

"You know I'm not saying that. I guess you're right. I am feeling pretty beat. Sure you don't mind?"

Buck shook his head and glared at Joe.

"Okay, okay. I'm going. See you tomorrow. Call me if you need me."

\* \* \*

Joe actually felt relieved to be going home, and he realized how lucky he was to have Buck as a friend. Their relationship went back a long way, and Buck was the only person in whom Joe ever confided anything personal.

When Joe graduated from the Air Force Academy, he asked for and was assigned to pilot training. His roommate turned out to be Buck, a Nez Perce Indian from Idaho.

After pilot training, Joe and Buck were assigned to the same squadron. Whenever some country upset the U.S., it seemed that Joe and Buck's unit was always the one sent to straighten things out. And they did. They had

been in some particularly tight situations in the Middle East, and each had come to know that he could depend on the other.

After four years, Buck had saved enough money to return to school and complete post-graduate work in geology, so he left the Air Force. With Buck gone, the Air Force was no longer fun for Joe. Soon after, Joe also resigned from the Air Force.

Joe had then gone on to spend two unsatisfying years as a U.S. Marshall, three years with the FBI, which he liked a little better, and then went on to the Secret Service, where he had met Joan and been reunited with Buck.

In the meantime, Buck had obtained a Ph.D. in geology, had worked in the oil fields for a few years, and, tiring of that, had joined the police force of the City of Chicago as a patrol officer. He had attained the rank of Detective, First Grade, before being accepted into the Secret Service.

When Joe was offered the job as Chief of the Tube I & I Bureau, he accepted only on the condition that he could bring Buck on board as his second-in-command. The Deputy Secretary of Transportation in charge of Tube Operations had agreed to Joe's terms.

Joe and Buck had hired Joan, Bill and Bob to head the three units of the Bureau. Together, the five of them had set up the headquarters office, developed a loose set of rules by which they would operate and had gone to work.

\* \* \*

Joe went down to the basement garage and retrieved his vintage Oldsmobile. The car had belonged to Joe's Dad, who had bought it the last year that GM had produced the line, and had kept it in mint condition from the day he brought it home from the showroom. When Joe's Dad died, the car became Joe's property. Joe cared for it like a baby.

As Joe pulled out into the heavy D.C. traffic and headed home to his condo in Alexandria, he worked on clearing his mind of work. The sky was blue and cloudless, the sun was shining and it was a beautiful day. Soon the cherry trees would be in bloom.

When he arrived home, he checked his phone messages and, finding none, went to his refrigerator and pulled out a bottle of beer, plunked down on the sofa and put his feet up on the coffee table, ready to relax.

A few minutes later he heard a knock at his door. He then heard his door open and the sound of his security system being disarmed.

Joe got up from the sofa.

"Hi, Bud," said the petite and curvaceous redhead who appeared in his living room.

"Meow," said the beautiful Russian Blue cat she was holding.



## Chapter Two

"Hi, Laurie. Hi, Stealth." Joe hugged his sister, then removed the cat from her arms and snuggled it in his.

"I thought I heard you come in. You're home early. Are you okay?"

"Just beat. Thought I'd take a little break and catch some Zzzs. How have you been?"

"Great. I've taken on a new corporate account. It's the best-paying contract I've ever had and it's a perfect fit for me," Laurie beamed.

"So, how'd that all come about?" Joe asked.

"A woman named Karen Christopher called me on Wednesday and told me she'd heard good things about my work from people at Zydata. She came to see me and told me about her company and staff. She has six employees right now and she's giving me a monthly retainer of \$5000 plus \$100 an hour for counseling sessions. Karen said she wants me to be available for her employees and their clients when they need me, and she knew I was willing to work flexible hours to accommodate patients' needs. All the sessions will be audio/video online and I won't need to leave home unless I have to see a patient who ends up hospitalized, which doesn't happen that often, thank goodness. The contract's for one year, but she said that she expects it will be renewed at the end of the year. Can you believe it?" Laurie asked.

"Not bad, Sis. What kind of business is this woman in?" Joe asked.

"She's a career consultant, helps people decide what they want to do with their lives. She and her staff realize that some of their clientele need more than career counseling, and she wants to be able to address other

problems as soon as they surface. She genuinely seems to care about her work and her clients and I really like her. She's stone pretty, too. You'll have to meet her," Laurie said with an impish grin.

"Oh, no you don't, Laurie. You've really got to give up playing matchmaker. You didn't say anything to her about me, did you?" Joe demanded in a tone that was only half-joking.

"No, Bud, I didn't."

"Good. Don't. So what else is new?" Joe asked.

"Nothing really. As you can see, I cleaned and straightened up the place and your mail is sorted and piled up on the counter. Stealth has been acting the way he always does when you're away for more than a day. Even though he gets full-time attention from me, he's been pacing and looking at my front door, waiting for you to rescue him, I'm sure. I do my darndest to spoil him rotten, but he just loves you best.

"Oh, we did have an exterminator come around, seems there have been complaints about roaches in the building, although I haven't seen any. Anyway, he sprayed around the baseboards of both our condos. Other than that, nothing else is new."

"Thanks for taking such good care of everything while I was gone, Laurie. Stealth and I don't know what we'd do without you," Joe said.

"I'll let you get some rest. When you get hungry, look in the freezer. I made up some meals for you – all you have to do is nuke them. There's meatloaf, roast chicken, spaghetti and meatballs and pork chops. I got in the mood to cook, and I made plenty for both of us. Despite what you tell everybody, every once in awhile I do get tired of having pizza and Chinese delivered. Oh, and Stealth has a clean box and fresh food and water. If you need anything else, let me know."

"Thanks again, Sis. See you later," said Joe as Laurie let herself out of his condo.

Joe finished off his beer and went to bed with a paperback suspense novel that Laurie had left for him to read. He awakened to find Stealth sitting on his chest staring at him. Joe looked at the clock and saw that it was 7 a.m., which meant that he had slept for over fifteen hours and which also meant that Stealth wanted his breakfast.

He fed Stealth, shaved, took a leisurely shower, dressed and left his condo. He bought a Washington Post from the machine in front of his building and then walked a couple of blocks to his favorite breakfast place, Sisters.

"Joe, we've missed you. How have you been?" asked Lesla, one of the two "Sisters" who owned the place.

"Just fine, thanks," Joe said.

Vicki, the other "Sister" appeared from behind the rear wall of the main dining room. "We got a great review in the 'Alexandria Rag' and we've never been busier."

"I can see that," said Joe, noting that every table in the room was taken.

"Not to worry, Joe," said Lesla. "We've saved the Arbor Room for the sole use of our 'regulars'. We don't intend to forget our friends. If it hadn't

been for the folks in this neighborhood, we would never have survived. Especially after the fire."

"Hey, you deserve all the success in the world. You do make the best darn breakfasts in the county, you know." Joe said.

"We know," said Vicki with a big grin on her face. "Sir, please follow me to the table we have reserved especially for you in our Arbor Room."

"Hey, this is great," Joe said, as he seated himself at a table with a card on it that said "Reserved for the Tube Team".

"What may we bring you for your breakfast enjoyment today?" Vicki asked.

"Surprise me," replied Joe.

A minute later, a server wearing a name tag reading "Jenny" appeared bearing a steaming pot of coffee, a roll basket and a small dish of butter.

"Lesla asked me to tell you that this is our newest special coffee blend and she'd like to know what you think of it," Jenny said as she poured coffee into Joe's cup.

Joe inhaled deeply. "The aroma is fantastic. And whatever's in that roll basket smells wonderful, too. My mouth is watering already."

"Enjoy," said Jenny. "I'll be back in a few minutes with your first course."

"First course?" Joe asked happily.

Jenny smiled and said, "Yes, sir."

Joe put two sugars and some cream in the coffee and took his first sip. It tasted even better than it smelled; it was strong, rich and smooth, with a hint of something wonderful Joe was unable to identify.

Joe then opened the napkin to explore the contents of the roll basket. The basket contained tiny, steaming hot muffins. He bit into one and tasted a wonderful raspberry flavor. He put some of the butter on the rest of the muffin, and discovered that the butter was also raspberry-flavored. "I've died and gone to heaven," Joe said, looking around the room and feeling slightly embarrassed when he realized he was talking out loud to himself.

Jenny soon appeared carrying a small dish, which she placed in front of Joe. "Fresh blueberries with clotted cream and lemon curd," she announced as she turned on her heel and left.

Joe finished the fruit in record time and was eating another muffin when Jenny reappeared, this time carrying a large plate covered with a dome. She placed the plate in front of Joe and removed the dome with a flourish.

"Voila!" she exclaimed. "Steak and Eggs a la Sisters - a small filet of beef, wrapped in crisp extra-thick country style bacon, surrounded by scrambled eggs and broiled grape tomatoes with a béarnaise sauce garnish and our fresh-baked sour dough toast points."

"Wow! I'm impressed!" Joe exclaimed as he picked up his fork and knife.

"If you need anything else, please let me know," Jenny said demurely.

The food was exquisitely seasoned and prepared and Joe devoured everything but the plate.

Vicki and Lesla appeared at his table. "We're so sorry you didn't like it," Vicki said somberly.

"Oh, right," Joe said. "It was awful. That's why I'll be back and

recommend you to all my friends. Honestly, you two, the fanciest restaurants in the District can't hold a candle to your food. The last time I had food this good was the last time I had breakfast here."

Vicki and Lesla beamed. "Thanks, Joe. Come back and see us."

"You know I will. Gotta get to work," Joe said as he paid his check. He left the restaurant feeling happy and sated, and was about a hundred feet from his building when he felt the hairs rise on his neck. He crossed the street and walked around the block, ducking into the lobby of an apartment building.

"Hi, Mr. Dietz," said Jaime, the doorman. "What's up?"

Joe had dated a woman who had lived in the building, and although the romance didn't last, Jaime had come to consider Joe his good buddy. Joe and Jaime had spent a lot of time together while Joe waited for the woman, who was chronically late.

"Jaime, do me a favor?" Joe asked.

"Sure. What?"

"Is there any way that I can get a look at my building from in here without being seen by anybody on the outside?"

"Hey, sure. No problem." Follow me." Jaime looked around furtively and then led Joe to one of the elevators.

"Here's what you do. Take this elevator up to the 7<sup>th</sup> floor. When you get off on 7, make a left and go down that corridor to the second corridor on the right. There's a window that looks out on your building. It's got curtains and window film. Nobody can see in that window in the daytime."

"Thanks a million, Jaime. I owe you," Joe said, patting Jaime on the shoulder.

"Anything else I can do for you, Amigo?" Jaime asked.

"Well, since you're asking, I'd be interested in knowing if you see any new people in the neighborhood or if you hear of anything out of the ordinary."

"Hey, will do Joe," Jaime replied enthusiastically. Joe knew that Jaime was a mystery buff and loved intrigue.

Joe took the elevator to the 7<sup>th</sup> floor and followed Jaime's directions to the window. He could see the entire front of his building and both sides of the street it faced. The only movement he saw on the street was a woman entering a car and driving off. He didn't recognize the woman or the car, but that didn't mean anything. He couldn't see any movement in the windows of his building, either. Despite this, Joe still felt uneasy. His stomach fluttered. "Too much rich food for breakfast," he thought.

Joe went back down to the lobby.

"Spot anything?" asked Jaime.

"No, but thanks for letting me look. I'd appreciate it if you didn't mention anything to anyone about this, okay?" Joe asked.

"No problem," Jaime replied. "It'll be our secret."

Joe went back to his building, retrieved his car from the garage and headed for the office. He couldn't shake the feeling that he was being watched, but he couldn't spot any kind of tail.

When he arrived at the office, Kathie greeted him happily.

"You look a lot better, Boss. Hope you're planning on spending the day at your desk because there's lots of paperwork we need to catch up on." Kathie grinned. Everybody knew how much Joe hated the administrative part of his job.

Joe groaned. "Can't wait. Bring it on."

Kathie kept Joe busy at his desk until shortly after one p.m., when Buck poked his head into Joe's office.

"Time for a lunch break, Joe. Kathie, undo those handcuffs. I promise to have him back in an hour," Buck said.

"Well, since you promise..." Kathie smiled. "I've got some errands to run so I brought my lunch. I've already eaten most of it. I'll see you back here in an hour," said Kathie, looking sternly at Joe.

"Yes, Ma'am. In an hour," Joe replied.

Joe and Buck walked to the corner, where Avram had his lunch cart. "What'll it be today, guys?"

Joe gestured to Buck to go first.

"I'll have two franks with everything, a large slaw, a large Coke and a big bag of those organic chips with vinegar," Buck said.

"I had a really big breakfast today so I'll just have one frank with everything, and a regular root beer," Joe said.

Buck and Joe took their food to the small park nearby, found a bench in the sun and ate their lunches.

"Looks like a little time off did you good, Joe. Feeling better?" Buck asked.

"Sure am. I must have slept twenty hours," Joe said, exaggerating.

"And you must have eaten at Sisters."

"How'd you know?"

"You just had that look," Buck said.

Joe described his fabulous breakfast to Buck.

"How 'bout I meet you there tomorrow morning at seven?" Buck asked.

Buck lived in an apartment a few miles from Joe's condo and was also a semi-regular at Sisters.

"Great," Joe replied.

"I haven't had a decent breakfast in days and I'll bet 'the girls' have missed me," Buck continued.

"All the girls miss you, Buck. They walk right on by," Joe kidded.

Buck shrugged and smiled.

\* \* \*

One thing women didn't do around Buck was walk past him without noticing.

Buck was six feet six inches, with dark skin, dazzling white teeth and gleaming straight black hair that he now kept, much to Joe's chagrin, long and in a ponytail. He was slim but well muscled, and had the looks of a model or a movie star. It was impossible to be around Buck for very long

without noticing the impact he had on women. Laurie had informed Joe that Buck was "a hunk". He'd heard similar comments from other women, and various women had tried to get to Buck through Joe. Buck was pretty much oblivious. He seemed to know the effect he had on women, but he didn't much seem to care. So far, no woman had been able to make much of an impression on him. Buck got along well with women and he dated occasionally, but he had other interests that he seemed to find more compelling, and he didn't like being tied down in one place for very long. Buck was an adventure junkie.

\* \* \*

"So, any more bad vibes, Joe?" Buck asked, looking at Joe intently.

"Yeah, afraid so." Joe went on to tell Buck about the sleuthing he had done that morning.

"Well, just because you can't see anyone, doesn't mean they aren't there. Even paranoid people are right sometimes, Bud."

"Gee, thanks, Buck." Joe shook his head.

"It's really bugging you, isn't it? Why don't you come stay at my place for a while? Maybe we can find out what's going on."

"Appreciate the offer, but I don't want to get you involved in this. And, if something is going on, I'd like to be able to keep an eye on Laurie. Thanks, anyway. We'd better be getting back or Kathie will have our heads."

Joe and Buck returned to their offices, and Kathie kept Joe busy until five o'clock.

"Don't know about you, Boss, but I've had enough for today. It's our anniversary today, and Jamal's taking me somewhere special. He didn't say where, just told me to wear my slinky red dress and he'd be home by seven to whisk me off to wherever."

"Hey, congratulations. Have a great time. See you tomorrow morning, and if you're late, I'll understand," Joe grinned.

Kathie grinned back. "I just might be, Boss."

Joe remained at his desk and started wondering what was happening with Joan and Dave Antonio. He was itching to call her, but he didn't want to risk breaking Joan's cover. Tomorrow was Wednesday. Maybe Joan would call tomorrow with news.

\* \* \*

When Joe arrived at Sisters the next morning, the place was packed. Vicki and Lesla barely had time to greet him, but they were able to tell him that Buck had already been seated at the 'Tube Team' table.

"Morning, Buck," Joe said.

Buck mumbled something back. His mouth was full of something that he obviously found delightful. Buck slowly finished eating what he had in his mouth, then leaned back with a contented look on his face.

"Morning, Joe. Boy, I forgot how great this place is."

"What're you having?" Joe asked.

"The special of the day. Try some of these rolls, they're great."

The rolls were warm and chewy, with a wonderful crust, and there were black olive pieces throughout.

Jenny arrived to take his order. Joe just told her, "Let me have whatever he's having."

"So, anymore bogeymen last night or this morning?" Buck asked.

"Not that I could see, damn it. But my gut was sending me signals last night and this morning."

"Maybe we should get one of the guys to shadow you for a few days. Discreetly, of course."

"No way," Joe said. "I'm not sure I'm not going nuts."

"If there's one thing I know about you, Joe, you're not nuts and you have good instincts. You can't go on ignoring them."

"Let's give it a couple of days and we'll see," said Joe, ending the discussion.

After a breakfast of freshly squeezed orange juice, Belgian waffles with strawberry sauce and freshly made pork sausage, Joe and Buck headed to the office.

Kathie greeted Joe with a happy look on her face.

"Looks like you had a great anniversary celebration," said Joe.

"We had a great time. And Jamal had two surprises for me - look," she said as she dangled her right hand in front of Joe's nose.

"That's some rock, Kathie."

"Isn't it just? Jamal took me to Lespinasse for dinner and he had them make this fabulous chocolate mousse - and on top of the mousse held up by thin sugar cookie sticks was a sugar cookie platform and the ring box sat on that. It was amazing."

"Lespinasse and a rock like that? What are you doing working here - or have we been paying you too much?" Joe teased.

"Jamal made partner two weeks ago and he swore everyone to secrecy so he could surprise me on our anniversary. And, no, you are not paying me too much, you know darn well I work here because I love it. If I stop loving it, or if we have children, then it's going to be adios, Boss."

"I guess I've just been put on notice," Joe said, smiling.

"No offense. That's just the way it is. I'd miss the Team, and I'd really miss working with you, but I do have a life outside of here. You know, you'd make a great Dad, Joe."

"Enough already. Point taken. Just a couple of days ago, Laurie was trying to set me up with one of her new customers. Are you two in cahoots?"

"Now you're just being paranoid. Honestly, do you think Laurie and I would double-team you?" Kathie asked mockingly.

"I wouldn't put it past either of you. Let's get to work," Joe said, ending a discussion that was making him very uncomfortable.

Joe did his best to concentrate on working with Kathie to get all the paperwork loose ends tied up, but his mind kept drifting - one moment

wondering what Joan was up to and the next wondering if there really was somebody watching him or if he was possibly going crazy. Wednesday finally came to an end. Buck had dropped in on Joe a couple of times to see if he had heard anything from Joan – obviously, Buck was anxious, too. And Joe had not been able to come to any conclusions regarding the state of his own mental health.

To Joe's surprise, Joan walked into his office at 10:30 a.m. that Thursday morning with a big grin on her face.

"What the hell are you doin' here?"

"I cleaned it all up in Florida and left," she said grinning even further.

"Be serious," Joe almost begged, "I don't understand."

"Okay, seriously, I was able to figure out Dave Antonio's entire operation and it was all crooked and criminal but had nothing to do with the Tube. Remembering what you said about the Team sticking strictly to Tube business, I turned it over to the Sheriff of Hillsboro County and left town."

Now Joe was grinning. "I knew that Antonio would be dirty. If he had a choice between making a million dollars honestly or making a half million dishonestly, he'll take the crooked road every time. What did the Sheriff say?"

"He was tickled to death. I think he knew in his heart that Antonio was up to something but he didn't know what," Joan explained. "This CPA that I picked up has been the best tool I could have."

"Yeah, and the IRS letting you go in as their auditor doesn't hurt," Joe thought out loud. "I need to send them a memo thanking them for that."

"Boss, I just flew in commercial and I'm pooped. If you don't have anything for me, I'll go on home and see you tomorrow."

"By all means, go home," he insisted, "and sleep in tomorrow if you want to. I'll brief the rest of the team on your report and we can see where we go next."

Joan left and Joe asked Buck, Bob and Bill to come into his office. He briefed them on Joan's Florida mission. He explained that Antonio was into drugs, Cuban cigars and whatever else he could make an illegal buck on but he had done nothing that endangered the Tube.

After that abbreviated staff meeting, he decided that he had better brief Leon Campbell. He called Leon's office and Leon said to come on up.

"Hey Joe, what's happening," Leon greeted him in his outer office.

"Just wanted to tell you about Joan's mission to Florida."

"Good," Leon replied with a smile. "I have been wondering about the ole 'He Gator.'"

"The 'He Gator' is, without a doubt, as dirty as sin but Joan determined it was all something for the Sheriff. Antonio had no designs on or ill intent toward the Tube. He is mostly into drugs and other contraband, namely Cuban cigars."

"Did Joan bring us any of those cigars," Leon smiled.

"You know, I forgot to ask her. We should have some of the spoils of war, shouldn't we?"

Both men laughed but they both knew that neither of them would have accepted any of those cigars.

The two men, friends from the beginning, talked of many things concerning their work and their private lives. Their mutual respect was obvious.

After they had talked all the talk that was available, Joe returned to his office complex. There was a big stack of papers that had "grown" on his desk. He read and dutifully signed those requiring a signature. Then he went home.

Joe arrived in his office the next morning at six a.m. The place was pretty much deserted, but there was light emanating from Bill Rawling's office.

"What are you doing here so early, Bill?" Joe asked. "You look like you've been here all night."

"I have been. I'm glad you're here, Joe. Things are beginning to heat up and I need to bring you up to date."

At that moment, Buck appeared in the doorway.

"What's up?" Buck asked.

"Bill was just about to fill me in on some new information he's gathered. Better we both hear it first-hand. Go on, Bill."

"Remember that we began to see references to the truckers' situation on militia websites?" Bill looked at Buck and Joe and they nodded.

"Well, every militia website we've been able to find has been making some mention of the poor truckers up against the big U.S. government. And the language being used is beginning to scare me. My whole section has been working on this, and the consensus is that there's big trouble brewing. We're all beginning to get worried. We've also started seeing various references to the date of May 15<sup>th</sup> - there's a lot of mention of that date, but the date is the only thing the references have in common."

"Doesn't sound good," Joe said.

"There's more," Bill continued, "this is kind of freaky," he chuckled. "We came across a website that rang a bell way in the back of my mind - I thought the name sounded familiar, so I did some checking."

"You've got our interest, Bill, so give," Joe said.

"Well, years ago there was a militia group that called themselves 'The Righteous Sons of America'. They went up in smoke, so to speak," Bill said, laughing at his own private joke.

"Well, what about them?" Joe asked, his voice straining to remain in normal range.

Buck looked at Joe as soon as the words "Righteous Sons of America" were out of Bill's mouth. Joe's face was a sickly pale green, he was standing ramrod straight and his fists were clenched. Bill was too interested in his story to notice Joe's reaction, and he continued on.

"Seems these 'Righteous Sons' believed that the federal government was violating the Constitution and was involved in some kind of conspiracy to take over and enslave all white, Christian, American-born citizens. The group supposedly had over 200 members, with quite a bit of support from average citizens in the wake of a bunch of FBI fiascos. Anyway, these nuts

considered themselves true American patriots, and they believed it was their duty to take back America from its corrupt government. Rumor had it that they planned to kill members of the Supreme Court, the President and his cabinet and key members of Congress."

"So, what's this have to do with us?" Joe asked, trying to mask his discomfort and impatience.

"I'm getting to it, I'm getting to it," Bill said.

"Anyway, they had a huge piece of property - close to a thousand acres - in Wyoming. One day, there was a huge explosion on the property. It seems they'd stockpiled all kinds of explosives and weaponry and had a little accident. When the authorities arrived on the scene, there was a huge crater where the explosion had occurred and debris was scattered for miles. The FBI went in and searched the entire property with a fine-toothed comb. They found numerous buildings still intact and loads of weapons and explosives. There were weapons and ammunition buried underground. They found rocket launchers and even a tank. There was a satellite dish on site, but the FBI never found any other electronic equipment on the property. The FBI speculated that the group used only portable equipment. As far as bodies were concerned, they only found bone fragments, some hair and personal items. They were only able to identify five people out of all the remains. There were parts of at least 13 other bodies, but the most they could come up with was sex, approximate age and race. A couple of the body parts belonged to kids believed to be under ten years of age. But the best part of the story is," Bill paused dramatically, "the group was never heard from again,"

Joe stopped Bill's monologue. "Bill, what does that have to do with us?"

"Well, you didn't let me finish," Bill said somewhat petulantly.

"Okay, Bill. Sorry. Go on and finish," Joe said with as much patience as he could muster.

"The group was never heard from again - until now. They're back!" Bill finished triumphantly.

By this time, Joe's face had gone from sickly green to bright red.

"What do you mean?" Buck asked encouragingly, while gently gripping the upper part of Joe's right arm.

"We've found a website for 'The Righteous Sons of America'. It seems they're back in business, or at the very least, somebody has resurrected the name. Anyway, we're trying to figure out where they're located. Look here, their rhetoric is the worst we've come across," Bill said, while handing Joe a printout.

"Bill, you and your unit are really something," Buck said. "Keep at this and let us know as soon as you have anymore information. Joe and I have a conference call we can't get out of and we're running late, so we've got to go."

And with that, Buck pulled Joe out of Bill's office while Bill turned back to his computer.

"Come on, Joe, we're going to your office," Buck said, pulling Joe along.

When they arrived at Joe's office, Buck pushed Joe into a chair and closed both doors.

"Just sit here, Joe. I'll be right back."

Buck left Joe's office and found Kathie at her desk.

"Kathie, something's come up and Joe and I will be going out in a few minutes. If anything comes up, just page me."

"Sure, Buck. Is everything okay?" she asked, looking puzzled.

"Everything's fine. We're just going out to follow up on a lead."

"Okay, Buck. See you tomorrow?"

"We'll see you tomorrow," Buck replied, returning to Joe's office and closing and locking the door.

"Shit," Joe said.

"Yeah," Buck commiserated.



## Chapter Three

"Do you think he knows?" Joe asked.

"Nope. If Bill had made a connection, he would have said so and been proud of his discovery. Let's get out of here for a while."

"I thought this was all behind me. Dammit," Joe said as he pounded his right fist into his left palm.

"I know. We'll get to the bottom of this. There's really nothing for you to worry about. Your life speaks for itself, and so does Laurie's. Let's go for a ride."

Buck drove while Joe stared out the window, not paying attention to where they were headed.

Buck stopped his SUV in a shady spot overlooking a large body of water and turned off the engine. Joe realized they were in Jones Point Park.

"We could both use some fresh air," Buck said.

"Yeah," Joe mumbled.

"Listen, Joe, Steve was your brother, but that's it. If his name comes up, it comes up. If somebody makes the connection, they make the connection. You don't have a damn thing to be ashamed of. What you should be proud of is the way you've lived your life. I know I'm really proud to have you as my friend. You're really going to piss me off if you let this get to you. You can handle this."

"Yeah, Buck, I can handle this, but what about Laurie?" Joe asked.

"Laurie's got you and she's got me. Besides, she still uses her married name. Nobody's likely to connect her with Steve Dietz. Most of her life is spent in her condo in front of her computer screen. And when she isn't in her condo, she's right next door in yours, taking care of you and Stealth.

She doesn't have girlfriends, she doesn't go to the mall – she does all her shopping either online or by phone. The only time she does go out, it's with us dragging her."

"Yeah, yeah, I know, but, still..." Joe said.

"If you're worried about Laurie, tell her about the situation now. That way, if anything comes up, she won't be surprised. And you can give her the same speech I just gave you. What Steve did has nothing to do with her. We don't get to pick our relatives, and anyway, one out of two ain't bad, pardner," Buck lectured.

"Yeah," Joe agreed reluctantly. "You're right, I guess."

"No guessing about it. And if it's Laurie you're worried about, let's go talk to her right now. Come on," Buck ordered, slapping Joe on the back and pushing him in the direction of the SUV.

When they knocked on Laurie's door, she answered almost immediately.

"Hi, guys. I was just getting ready to take a break. Come on in and have coffee and cake with me," Laurie said as she let them into her condo.

"Hey," she said, stopping and turning to look at them, "what brings you here in the middle of the day?"

"We just thought we'd stop by and see our favorite girl," Buck said, chivalrously.

"Okay. Sure," Laurie said, raising an eyebrow.

"Sit." Buck and Joe took seats at the kitchen table, and Laurie put out plates, cups, silverware and napkins. She then placed a luscious-looking chocolate cake in the middle of the table.

"Wow, where'd this come from?" Joe asked.

"Thanks a lot, Joe," Laurie said, managing to smile and glare at the same time. "I baked it myself, you big fink."

"Well, it really looks great," Buck said.

"Here's a knife. You're welcome to help yourself, Buck," Laurie said, pointedly ignoring Joe.

"Hey, what about me," said Joe plaintively.

"Well... I guess you can have some, being my brother and all."

"Thanks, Sis," Joe said, grinning.

When they were all finally seated, drinking their coffee and eating their cake, Laurie said, "Okay, guys, give. What are you really doing here at this time of day?"

"Joe just wants to fill you in on some information we've just come across," Buck said, looking at Joe.

Joe took a deep breath and began, "Remember our brother Steve?"

"Vaguely. The last time I saw him was at my fifth birthday party, as you well know, and he died not long after that. I hardly knew him, and you and Mom and Dad never talked about him," Laurie replied.

"Yeah, well, we were trying to protect you," Joe said, clearing his throat.

"I know."

"You know? You know what?" Joe asked incredulously.

"I know that our big brother was a nut and a terrorist." Laurie said, looking at Joe with an expression that was both sad and amused.

"How did you find out? How long have you known?" Joe demanded.

"I've known since I was in grade school. Some of my classmates' parents were kind enough to share the information with their children, and they couldn't wait to tell me. We were all too young to really understand it at the time and other interesting news came along that replaced it as the topic of the day - like Linda Sue Callahan getting pregnant in the fifth grade. I was always curious about Steve, but I knew that you and Mom and Dad didn't want to talk about him so I didn't talk about him either. It seemed the best thing to do."

"You're kidding," Joe said, astonished.

"Nope. When I was in middle school, I got on the Internet and found out everything I could about Steve and 'The Righteous Sons of America'. I understood why you didn't want to talk about Steve. We all preferred to forget that Steve ever existed as part of our family. I had the best big brother in the world - meaning you, Joe. I knew you were always watching out for me and always would. So what's happened? Why are we finally talking about this after all these years?" Laurie asked.

Joe sat there and shook his head.

"I just can't believe you've known all along."

"Well, I have, and I'm all right with it. It's not my fault or your fault or Mom's or Dad's fault that Steve turned into what he did. I figured that out a long time ago. I'm pretty smart, you know. I don't blame the President for what his idiot kid brother does, do you?"

"No," Joe said sheepishly. "I guess you've handled this a whole lot better than I have. I've spent my whole life worrying that someone would find out Steve Dietz was my brother."

"Oh, Joe, I'm so sorry," Laurie said, taking Joe's hand in hers. "You know, you really can be pretty dumb sometimes," she said affectionately.

"I love you too, kid," Joe said, tugging Laurie's earlobe, something he had been doing to her for years just to get a rise out of her.

Buck sat looking at both of them, beaming, as if he were their proud parent.

"So, Laurie," said Buck, "the thing is, the name 'Righteous Sons of America' popped up on the Internet, after not being heard of for over twenty years. We don't know what it means - we don't know if some of the old group is getting back together or some other group has decided to resurrect the name."

"And you're worried that somebody might dig into the old files and connect Steve with us, is that it?" Laurie asked.

"Yes," Joe said.

"So, what if they do?" asked Laurie.

"Well, it could be embarrassing and you might have to deal with nosy reporters and..." said Joe.

"Joe, so what?" Laurie interrupted.

"Well, I just didn't want you to be surprised," Joe stammered.

"And you're still trying to protect me, and I love you for it. But, Joe, we can both handle this. We're going to be just fine, no matter what they dig up, because we had nothing to do with any of it. So there," Laurie said, with finality.

"I guess you're right," said Joe.

"I know I'm right," said Laurie back at him. "Your little sister is a grown-up, something you've just chosen not to notice," Laurie said, as she got up and went over to Joe, hugged his neck and 'noodled' his head.

"Well, now that's taken care of, what say we play some cutthroat pinochle and order in pizza for dinner? Fifty cents a game, winner takes all?" Buck suggested.

"Great idea, let me get the cards," Laurie said.

At eleven the card game broke up and Buck left for home. Joe stayed a few minutes to help Laurie tidy up.

"I can't get over you, Sis. You really are something. As close as we've been and you've never let on..." Joe said, looking at Laurie with a mixture of wonderment and appreciation.

"Hey, I knew you and I didn't want to cause you any more pain than you were already feeling. I'll finish here. Go home and get a decent night's sleep. You look like you could use it."

Joe went next door to his condo and hit the sack. He slept a dreamless sleep and awakened feeling as if a huge weight had been lifted from his shoulders.

After a light breakfast at Sisters, Joe arrived at his office at 8:30 a.m. The first thing he noticed was a large piece of paper taped on the screen of his computer monitor. It said, "Please call me ASAP, Boss. Things are heating up. Bill"

Joe walked over to Bill's office and found him, as usual, hunched over his computer.

"So, what's happening, Bill?"

"Plenty, Boss. We've found the May 15<sup>th</sup> date referenced in one way or another on every militia website we've checked. The big news is that Ned found a link to another website, one we've never come across before, and that website said - well, see for yourself," Bill said, handing Joe a printout.

Joe read the printout:

"GROUND ZERO ALERT: MAY 15<sup>th</sup> WILL SOON BE UPON US! BEGINNING TODAY, BE PREPARED TO RECEIVE AND PROCESS ANY AND ALL LEGITIMATE REQUESTS FOR ASSISTANCE, INCLUDING INTELLIGENCE, MANPOWER AND MATERIEL. ALL LEGITIMATE REQUESTS WILL BE IN CODE AND WILL ONLY BE TRANSMITTED AT THE DESIGNATED TIMES VIA THE DESIGNATED MEDIA. GROUP LEADERS: CONSULT ALTERNATE CHANNEL FOR DETAILS."

There was a drawing of a mushroom cloud following the message.

"I think it's safe to say we may have a situation," Joe said.

"No kidding, Boss," Bill returned, grimacing.

"Any idea who this is from?" Joe asked.

"Well, Ned accidentally hit on this link when he was checking out the 'Righteous Sons' website. We don't know if it's the same group or another group connected to it somehow."

"Have you found out any more information on the 'Righteous Sons'?" Joe asked.

"Well, we've pretty well pinned down their location to somewhere in Oregon. And they seem to be calling the shots from the tone of their bulletins. Right now, that's about all we've been able to figure out."

"Thanks, Bill. Keep at it and keep me posted. I better get moving."

Joe walked briskly to his office and phoned Leon Campbell.

"Leon, its Joe. How are you today?"

"Fine, Joe. What can I do for you?" Leon asked heartily.

"Don't know yet, Leon, but we've got to talk as soon as possible. I think we may need to bring in the Deputy Secretary."

"May I assume something bad is in the works?" Leon asked.

"That's what I'm assuming. I have a bunch of information to run by you. When can we meet?" Joe asked.

"I don't have anything scheduled until two a.m. There are a few papers I've got to sign to keep things from coming to a halt, but I can be free within a half-hour. My place or yours?" Leon asked.

"How 'bout you come here? I think you're going to want to hear what Bill Rawlings has to report and he may have more information by the time you get here."

"No problem. See you in thirty minutes," Leon said.

Joe buzzed Buck and Buck was in Joe's office in about thirty seconds.

"Hey, Joe, you're looking a lot better. How are you feeling?" Buck asked, looking at Joe intently.

"I was feeling great till I got here and talked to Bill," Joe said, sidestepping what Buck was really asking.

"So, what's up?" Buck asked.

Joe briefed Buck on what Bill had reported that morning.

"Doesn't sound good. What are we gonna do?" Buck asked.

"I've called Leon Campbell and he'll be here in a few minutes. I think the three of us need to do some brainstorming and come up with a plan to work together to handle this. We're going to need the help of Leon's Tube Patrol and his shunt station Agents-in-Charge if it turns out that there really is a plan in place to attack the Tube."

"Well, it sure sounds like there's something being hatched, and, if Bill's right, it's probably going to be something big if the May 15<sup>th</sup> date is being mentioned on every militia website," Buck said.

"My thoughts exactly. Anything we need to talk about before Leon gets here?"

"If you're okay, nope."

"I'm fine, Buck. The best I've been in years. Yesterday really cleared the air. Thanks, friend."

"Hey, what are friends for?" Buck asked, smiling.

"Time to get ready to do battle – just like the old days, Joe, huh?" Buck asked happily.

"God, I hope not, Buck. I really don't relish coming up against any more nuclear warheads and crazy Middle Easterners."

"Yeah, you're right, Joe. But I don't think either of us minds fighting a good fight," Buck said.

"True, but you're an adrenaline junkie, and you know it, Buck. You can only take so much routine before you start to get antsy."

Joe's intercom buzzed and Kathie announced that Leon Campbell had arrived.

Joe got up and went to greet Leon.

"Thanks for coming, Leon. Come on in."

"Hi, Buck. Good to see you," Leon said.

"Same here," Buck replied.

"So, sounds like we may have a problem," Leon said.

"Yes, it does," Joe replied. "Let me tell you what we have so far."

Joe brought Leon up to date and then buzzed Bill.

"Bill, Leon Campbell and Buck are in my office and I've briefed them both on the information you gave me this morning. We're going to work on a plan to deal with the situation. Is there anything new we need to know?" Joe asked.

"Just more and more of the same. We're seeing a lot more activity on all the militia websites. We've located the 'Righteous Sons' headquarters – its right outside of Burns, Oregon. Ned's continuing to monitor that link he came across – whoever they are, it appears they're running the show. I'll send over the latest messages that have been posted."

"Thanks, Bill. Keep on top of this and keep me posted. If anything strikes you as being especially critical information, don't hesitate to contact me day or night. You have all my numbers," Joe said.

"Will do, Boss," Bill said and hung up.

"Well," said Leon, "we've been aware of the existence of the militia groups but we didn't know about them. They can't recruit people in those numbers without word getting around. My AICs have periodically reported the existence of militia groups in the areas around some shunt stations. It's also known that they've been holding meetings at local farms, ranches and, in one case, in an old ghost town that mysteriously came to life. But, until now, we had no information indicating that these groups represented any direct threat to the Tube. All AICs make a weekly report that includes information on shunt station activities and the local area. And it is policy that all AICs maintain regular contact and optimum working relationships with local law enforcement. For the most part, the policy works well."

"Do you have anybody on board who's knowledgeable about militia groups?" Joe asked.

"As a matter of fact, I do. Jack Wilson, and he's in D.C. right now. Why?"

"It just occurred to me that we could use somebody from Patrol to be a liaison between the Team and the Patrol Bureau. How about if I borrowed him for awhile? He stays with us and reports to you. He can report to you about what we know as soon as we know it, and he can also brief us on information coming from your AICs. How's that for a win-win proposition?" Joe asked.

"I think it's what we need to do. How about if we have him work with Buck on a daily basis? That way we'll get a good cross-pollination of ideas between the Patrol and I&I sides of the house."

"Whoa, now!" Buck chimed in for the first time. "I don't intend to be anybody's nursemaid."

Leon laughed. "I guarantee you won't be. Jack was a cop in L.A., an FBI field agent and he's really one of my best people. I think you two will get along just fine. Unless you've got something against Cherokees. Jack's very proud that his great-grandmother was Cherokee."

"You're pulling out all the stops, aren't you? Nah, we Red Men have to stick together against our oppressors. I'll take a shot with him if you'll promise I can back out any time it feels wrong," Buck replied, looking pointedly at Joe.

"Okay. That's settled," Joe said.

"Yes. Now all I have to do is convince Jack Wilson he won't be nursemaiding you," Leon laughed.

"You're starting to piss me off," Buck growled.

"Next thing," said Joe. "I think we need to give the Deputy Secretary a heads-up on what's happening."

"Agreed," said Leon.

"Let me have Kathie call her office and set up an appointment for us to meet with her as soon as possible. I guess we'd better consider this situation urgent," Joe said.

"Agreed. Let me know when and I'll be there. Anything we need to talk about before I go back to my office?" Leon asked.

"I think that about wraps it up for now. Thanks for coming, Leon."

"No problem. Let me get back and enlist Jack Wilson before he leaves town. I'll have him report to you, Buck, as soon as possible. He'll call you first."

"Thanks again, Leon," Joe said as Leon left.

"Hang in a minute, Buck," Joe said as he stuck his head out his office door.

"Kathie, please call Deputy Secretary Ragsdale's office and get an appointment for Leon and me to meet with her as soon as possible on a matter of some urgency," Joe requested.

"Right away. I'll get back to you," Kathie said, turning back to her desk and picking up her phone.

"Didn't mean to spring that on you Buck, the idea just came to me after Leon arrived," Joe said.

"No problem, Boss. I think it's the thing to do. Anything else I need to know?" Buck asked.

"Not that I can think of. Let me know how it goes with Jack Wilson," Joe said.

"Right," Buck said as he left Joe's office.

A few minutes later Kathie knocked on Joe's open door as she entered his office. "You and Leon have an appointment to meet with the Deputy Secretary at 6:30 this evening. Is that okay?" Kathie asked.

"That was fast work. That's great. How'd you do that?" Joe asked.

"Well, I may have used the word emergency rather than urgency," Kathie said, smiling.

"Good thinking. Probably the sooner we bring her up-to-date, the better. Appreciate it. I'd better call Leon right away and let him know," Joe said.

At 6:25, Joe and Leon were seated in Deputy Secretary (in charge of the Tube Division) Yolanda Fredericka Ragsdale's outer office, waiting to be called in to see her. At 6:30 on the dot, the Deputy Secretary herself opened her office door and said, "Good evening, gentlemen. I understand you have some information for me?"

"Yes, Ma'am," Joe and Leon stood up and responded in unison.

"Come on in and give me the skinny," she said.

Yolanda Fredericka "Freddy" Ragsdale was a beautiful middle-aged black woman, who, although overweight, always managed to look extremely elegant, partly due to a marvelous fashion sense and partly due to her stature and carriage. She had a reputation for being tough, yet fair, with a steel-trap mind and a wicked sense of humor. "Freddy" had put herself through college by doing road construction work during summer breaks and by working as a campus security guard during the rest of the year. She knew what hard work was and she had an appreciation for the people who worked under her, but she did not suffer fools gladly. She had earned the respect of her subordinates by throwing herself wholeheartedly into her work and by being an unrelenting and avid supporter of the Tube and the people who made it work. She secretly enjoyed being called "The Poster Girl for the Tube", as a wisecracking reporter had once dubbed her. Joe and Leon were two of her greatest fans.

"Knowing you two, I'd guess you've got something really serious to tell me. You're not in the habit of making social visits," she said with a smile. "So, what is it?"

Joe briefly explained the situation to the Deputy Secretary and outlined what was being done to handle it.

"How big of a threat do you think this is?" she asked.

"We're not sure yet," Joe responded. "We need more information and are working on getting it."

"I've already sent out requests for information to all my AICs and I've asked them to put all shunt stations on yellow alert status. I've done the same thing with the hubs. Either or both may be targets," Leon added.

"Bill Rawling's Unit is working overtime to find out what's going on and Bob Donohue's Unit is doing the same. They're calling in their markers with everybody they can think of, trying to get more definitive information. Leon has loaned the Tube Team one of his people to act as liaison between Patrol and I & I."

Freddy sat silently for a few moments, then said, "Well, it sounds like you're doing all the right things. You need to keep doing what you're doing. I'm going to alert the Secretary."

"And I want a status report at least once every twelve hours. If things heat up, I want to know about it right away. Work it out between the two of you, just make sure I'm kept informed," she said, standing.

"You both have more important things to do than to sit here talking to me," the Deputy Secretary said, smiling. "Thanks for all your hard work and thanks for letting me know about this. If this turns out to be a false alarm, well, then, it will have been a good exercise. If it's the real thing, I want us to be ready for it."

"Thank you, Ma'am," Joe and Leon said in unison as the Deputy Secretary walked them to the door.

"Fellas, when it's just the three of us working together, you're Joe and Leon and I'm Freddy. Okay?"

"Yes, Ma'am," Joe and Leon replied.

"I'm glad that's over," Joe said to Leon.

"It's not over, this is just the beginning."

When Joe arrived home, he found a note taped to the door of his condo.