

Plane Truth

What Happened On 9/11



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This is a work of fiction except for the parts that aren't.

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Dedication

This story is especially dedicated to those brave souls called 'whistle blowers' who put their heads above the trenches to seek truth and justice.

The characters and events in this story are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead is purely coincidental and not intended by the author.

Preface

Mike Bertram had overslept. He only had an hour to make it to his flight. Mike didn't trust his beaten up old Ford van to get him there. Frantically grabbing his cell phone, he pressed Marty's name. "Hey Man, can you help me out?"

Marty French groaned, "Jesus man, you woke me up."

"Sorry, but I overslept and have to be at the airport in just under an hour."

"Okay man, I'll be over in ten."

"Thank's my man, you're a lifesaver,"

Marty French drove madly from Manhattan to Newark in just 35 minutes. They screeched to a halt outside Terminal A at 7:40 am. Bertram leapt from the car, lugging the old, red-and-gold canvas bag he'd used as a rugby player at the University of California at Berkeley a decade earlier. Despite his best efforts, he was sure he'd missed his plane. Much to his surprise, they were still waiting for him. The door opened, and he got on board. It was lucky for him that Flight 93 was running 41 minutes late or he would have missed it.

Businessman Tom Clayton was the quiet, observant type and he noticed something he wasn't supposed to see. While alighting from his Piper PA34 Seneca charter on September 11, 2001, he saw something that struck him as rather odd. An airliner, which turned out to be Flight 93, was being boarded by the second group of passengers on the same apron as his charter plane. Tom, had seen the group boarding at the terminal at Newark. Then, much to his surprise, he saw the second batch of passengers boarding the same plane, via a jetbridge. Being the curious type he wondered who was this second lot of travellers being boarded? He didn't treat it as more than a curiosity at the time. But as events unfolded on that fateful day what he had observed became more than mere curiosity.

Maria Martinelli, a frequent flier passenger, found it strange that her Flight 11 and Flight 175 had merged into one flight. Not a woman given to questioning authority she didn't voice her concerns. In all her years of flying with Delta Airlines, she had never experienced this. The situation became even odder for her when she and the other passengers were told that their flight number had been changed to Delta Flight 1989. This interruption to the regular programme confused her further. But like all the other passengers she meekly accepted the changes without raising any questions. After all the airlines knew what they were doing, didn't they? Maria boarded the plane, settled down and enjoyed the uneventful flight, totally oblivious to the events unfolding in New York until they had to make an emergency landing at Cleveland's Hopkins Airport. Maria got caught up in the rumour that the unscheduled landing was to take place because of a bomb on board. She thanked God once they got shepherded into the safety of the terminal. Maria watched from a window as sniffer dogs and their handlers boarded the plane. This experience was exciting so she took some photos. Later they were confiscated by the FBI, but she wasn't to know that at the time. It turned out to be a false alarm. The plane – Delta Flight 1989 – had not been hijacked, and there was no bomb.

As Maria saw the dogs emerge from the aircraft, her attention got drawn to another drama unfolding before her. It seemed as though another plane was engaged in an emergency landing. The new aircraft screeched to a halt away from the terminal. Maria couldn't make out the airline from that distance, but military personnel soon surrounded the plane. Shortly afterwards the airport was evacuated. An announcement over the tannoy system ordered all staff to leave the airport without taking their cars or catching airport transit buses.

Maria and all her fellow passengers were told to assemble outside the terminal, where they were given further instructions. They did so without going through security or collecting their baggage. Once outside the airport terminal Maria and her fellow passengers were gathered together by security guards who carried out a role call. Once all the passengers were accounted for, they were marched to the west end of the airport, where they entered the NASA Glenn Research Centre.

Maria, puzzled and concerned, wondered why, when she should have been greeted by her darling grandchildren, she was being questioned at a NASA facility, particularly since no FAA presence was evident. She felt troubled and confused as she and the others entered the now evacuated NASA research facility. Her mind said, Why are we being taken here if it was considered unsafe for the NASA personnel.

(The official report from the control tower was that screaming was heard from inside the plane as it made an emergency landing. In a later report the screams were not mentioned.)

Bart Green, from the Akron Beacon Journal, confidently took statements from eyewitnesses. He knew one of the planes was Delta 1989. The other one was a mystery. About one hour later Flight 93 also landed at Hopkins Airport. Bart Green found himself surrounded by the FBI. Normally his charisma got him out of sticky situations, but not this time. He was taken to an office where he was questioned and had his interview material confiscated. He protested but to no avail.

As Maria Martinelli was being questioned by the FBI at the NASA facility, she became deeply concerned for her future. Unbeknown to her she wasn't to have one. She'd already died, when Flight 11 ploughed into the World Trade Centre. Maria wasn't alone in this bizarre 'Schrodinger cat' like scenario. All the passengers on the original four flights on 9/11 disappeared while in held in custody by the FBI, not knowing they were already officially dead.

Chapter 1

Joab Rackham's first impression of Washington DC wasn't at all what he expected. The city, known for its high murder rate, hadn't appealed to Joab one bit. But, much to his surprise, It turned out to be a beautiful city with cherry blossoms in full bloom. Locally DC was known as the city of trees, and Joab could tell why. But he was there to follow up an assignment and had little time to enjoy the visual and historical delights of the city.

It had taken a lot of planning, trying to correspond with the people with whom he had organised interviews, concerning places, dates and times. Finally, everything was arranged, and a hotel was booked by High Light, the Swiss-based magazine for whom he was currently freelancing. Doubletree Hilton, with its revolving rooftop bar, proved to be upscale in downtown DC. It was just five blocks from the White House but, more important to Joab, it was only a 12-minute walk from the Metro at Dupont Circle.

Having booked in, Joab relaxed in the stylish bistro, where he sampled his first taste of contemporary American cuisine. Looking at the list of amenities the hotel offered Joab underlined the fitness centre as his main choice. After all, this was DC so it was probably safer jogging indoors. The waitress, Paula, a friendly girl with a fresh open face, told Joab about the massive snow storm they'd had just two weeks before. A week later and the cherry blossoms would not have been blooming.

Back in his suite Joab scrolled through his phone contacts until he came to Camilla. Her phone rang a few times, but she eventually picked up. "Hi love, it's Joab here."

"Where's here,"

"DC. Karl got me a plush hotel this time. It even has its gym."

"So, what's Washington like?"

"Give me a chance. I've only just arrived. But the place is full of cherry blossoms."

"Oh, that's surprising."

Joab, remembering the passionate night they'd spent together before his flight, said, "I wish you were here."

"Think I've seen that written on a postcard sometime ago."

“Come to think of it if you were here I'd probably get too distracted.”

“As long as you don't get distracted by those hot American woman.”

“Not going to happen, Cami.”

“I should hope not.” She paused then said, “So where are you going to start your investigation?”

“Shush, phones have ears.”

“It's all hush, hush then.”

“By love. Have got to go. I'll phone again soon.”

Patricia Hamilton's too good to be true personality concealed a darker side to her character. She was a cheat and was very good at conning people to get what she wanted. She was raised in a strict Baptist community, which stifled her adventurous spirit. Using her sweetness as a weapon, Patricia, learned conniving ways to help her break out of her religious prison. Leaving the oppressive dogma behind, Patricia came across a recruitment ad for the FBI. She thought Why not? And Patricia headed to Virginia.

Now, fresh from her Quantico training she was on her first case. Her target had been red-flagged as soon as he landed at Dulles. Her job was to observe, gather intel and report to Special Agent Danvers. Joe Danvers, known as 'Sol' to most of his colleagues, was seen as a bit of an oracle around the FBI. Sol, short for Solomon, the Biblical wise guy, was a walking encyclopaedia when it came to the Attorney General's rules and regulations. With his vast knowledge and wisdom, he was well placed to take on the role of recruit training.

Patricia had heard he'd spent some 30 years in the field before taking on the role of recruit training. He was quite the legend in FBI circles, especially to young, impressionable rookies like her. But, if the truth is known, Danvers was burned out and was working his last two years before retirement in a softer role.

Patricia had sat two tables away from Joab in the bistro. She already knew his name, nationality and birth date. His file said he was a subversive journalist who wrote anti-American articles. As such he needed to be monitored. Her assignment was to gain his trust and find out why he'd come to Washington. With her conniving skill, she was well suited to the task.

Chapter 2

Paul Rivell, a self-conscious but brilliant scientist, had worked for NASA for 25 years as a photo analyst. He led a very private, sedentary lifestyle, owing in part to his ravaged face, the result of a childhood accident, in which he'd been severely burned on the left side of his face. At school, he'd been called Al, after the famous gangster. The stares he got when out in public was bad enough. But the averted gazes were even worse. He was still angry and frustrated about what had happened to him, but he learned to channel this energy into his work.

In his job, he used 2D imagery to build 3D products for extraction of depth data. Ten Years back he'd been acclaimed for his extensive study of Apollo imagery but The Face On Mars project brought him ridicule. His job had been to prove it was a hoax. His investigation into the phenomena proved otherwise, and the award-winning Stereoscopic imager fell foul of his contemporaries.

Paul was working on another project, one he'd kept secret from even his NASA colleagues. His investigation concerned the planes that hit the towers on 9/11. He never told a soul about his private investigation, until he met Joab Rackham, at the The National Air and Space Museum of the Smithsonian Institution, which held the largest collection of historic aircraft and spacecraft in the world.

Wearing a baseball cap bearing the NASA logo, Paul was easy to spot among the throng of visitors to the museum. Joab held a copy of Highlight Magazine, the agreed upon method of recognition.

After introductions, Paul started talking about his Mars imagery. “When NASA went to Mars in 1975 to look for life, what do you think we discovered?”

Joab shrugged, “I don't know. A lot of sand?”

Joab, we discovered that the Cydonia region of Mars is accurately replicated at Avebury and Stonehenge in England, as well as in the layout of the passages and chambers of The Great Pyramid in Egypt.”

The journalist said, “That's new to me.”

“It's unknown to most folks. Joab, I know it's true because I was in charge of the photography.

“No shit!”

“Joab, I'm telling you all this because it shocked me that the FBI came and confiscated all our records and data about our extraordinary discoveries. This information should be in the public domain, as should the information about the enhanced, close up images of the planes that hit the towers.”

The stuff about Mars was intriguing to the journalist, but the 9/11 info was what interested Joab, it being the reason for his visit to DC. Switching on his phone note taker, he said, “That's what I need to know about.”

“Let's go somewhere less crowded, Joab. I may be becoming paranoid, but just lately I get a strong sense that I'm being tailed.”

The Martian climate and geology section, not the biggest tourist crowd puller, was almost empty making it easier for the pair to talk. “How did you get these pictures?” Joab asked looking at the close ups of the aircraft just before it hit the north tower.”

“I got them on CBN News on YouTube. I just slowed down the footage till I could see the plane frame by frame.”

Joab stared at the images, unbelieving. They clearly showed the aircraft that hit the north tower was grey with no airline markings. It also had a strange looking pod under the fuselage. He looked at Paul. “This is incredible. Can I use these images in my story?”

“Yes, but you mustn't use my name.”

“Agreed. Can you eMail the pictures to me?”

“Sure, but keep me out of it.”

“Paul, you have my word.”

The scientist looked around, checking for eavesdroppers before continuing. “Joab, I'm sick and tired of the way the government cherry picks what it will allow the people to know. But this 9/11 business goes beyond the pale. These images clearly show it wasn't a commercial aircraft that hit the tower. Unfortunately, CBN didn't get any footage of the plane that hit the south tower, but I can only assume it would have been some military drone as well.”

Joab knew full well that investigating what happened on that fateful day planted him squarely in conspiracy theory territory. But if what Paul had shown him was kosher it was difficult to deny that the official account of events just didn't hold up to scrutiny. He responded, “It would seem logical. But what happened to all the passengers who were booked on those planes?”

Paul shrugged. “All I'm telling you is what I know to be true. The rest you have to work out for yourself. And I must say, good luck with that.”

“Do you have any theories about the plane that hit the Pentagon?”

“Do you mean like was it a plane?”

“Some people claim it was a missile?”

“Yes, but why would we purposely damage the Pentagon?”

“A very good question. But the official story has so many holes a Swiss cheese would be jealous.”

Paul said, “Yes, well you'll have to ask someone else about that.”

“Anyone you know?”

“Not really.” Paul looked at his watch. “Look, I've got to go. Best of luck with the article.”

“One more thing. Why did you respond to the blog I set up to get to the truth of 9/11.”

“You asked for witnesses to come forward and state what they'd experienced. You didn't seem like a nut job so I thought it'd be interesting to fill you in on what I knew.”

“And you believed the airliners were swapped for military drones?”

“It's the only logical way it could have happened.”

Joab smiled, “From what you have shown me it certainly seems that way.”

Paul turned to Joab. “I'm a loyal American citizen. I'm not out to make the American Government the bad guys. But Al Qaeda couldn't have swapped United Airlines planes for drones and flew them into the towers. Someone else had to be responsible for that.”

Joab nodded, saying “And I intend to find out who was behind it?”

Patricia, fresh from being brainwashed by the Quantico Rhetoric, still had stars and stripes in her innocent eyes. The romantic notion of white hats and black hats with a clear demarcation between the two was something she still believed in and supported. She watched as the man wearing the NASA baseball cap left the exhibition. Using social media Patricia downloaded his profile onto her phone. She'd been too far away to hear the conversation but a NASA scientist meeting with a controversial journalist was enough to alert her. She contacted Agent Danvers.

Although Danvers had a poor formal schooling, he'd made sure it hadn't spoiled his education. Apart from the knowledge he'd gained through experience he had developed a keen instinct that had stood him in good stead over the years. His honed gut feeling told him Patricia Hamilton was somebody to watch. “Yes, Agent Hamilton.”

“Sir, I would like to have the target's room bugged.”

“Has he committed an offence or been charged with such.”

“Not as yet, but...”

“Then your request is denied. Besides, I want you to get close to the target. Find out what the journalist's up to.”

“Yes, sir.”

“One other thing. There's a hell of a lot involved when spying on targets so we don't do it lightly. This operation is not some spook TV programme, Agent Hamilton. Welcome to the real FBI world.”

Joab, determined to keep an open mind, used the official version of events concerning 9/11 as the framework of his investigation. Presently, he didn't know what to believe. The terrible saga had more blind alleys and dead ends than downtown Shanghai. There seemed to be more theories floating around the Internet than there were conspiracy theorists. His article had to cut through all the hype to find an agreeable truth. The blog was merely a starting point to stir up interest but 14 years had gone by, and the populace found it much easier to either accept the official version of events or live with quiet indignation about the whole thing. Joab's quest was to discover what happened to those passengers? Did they perish in the explosive inferno or did they end up somewhere else?

Chapter 3

It was a pleasant spring morning in DC with the scent of cherry blossoms in the air. Joab sat in the park, waiting for his source to arrive. It was a small park located on both sides of the Washington DC side approach to the Key Bridge. During the day it was busy and noisy but as it was only 7 am Francis Scott Key Memorial Park was nearly deserted. Joab sat in the shade of the mature and fully foliated trees as he watched out for Jerry Mander, the man he was there to meet. The agreed to rendezvous point, the Ukrainian Embassy, next to the park, was easy for Joab to find.

When Jerry Mander had an idea about anything, it became his reality. Once convinced that it was true, nothing would persuade him differently. He was convinced that his extreme premature hair loss had been caused by watching Internet porn and nobody, even his doctor, could convince him differently. This unquestioned conviction caused him to become upset when his view got challenged. Like most zealots, he was only too willing to share his truth. This opportunity was why the emergency dispatcher from Pennsylvania had agreed to meet with the journalist to fill him in about what he knew to be true concerning Flight 93.

Joab stood to greet the bald man. Hi, I'm Joab. Thanks for coming.”

“Good to meet you,” the man said, shaking Joab's proffered hand.

Getting straight to the point, Joab said, “So tell me about Flight 93.”

Jerry sat down on the seat beside the journalist as the Englishman set up his voice recorder.

Mander explained, “I was on duty in the control tower when we received a phone call from a passenger on Flight 93.”

“What was it about?”

He'd locked himself in a toilet. He kept repeating “We're being hijacked!” Then he said, “We're going down. I heard something that could have been an explosion. Then the caller said, “There's white smoke. Then the line went dead.”

Joab looked straight at the man. “And that call came from Flight 93?”

“Correct.”

“Could there have been more than one Flight 93 that day?”

“No, definitely not.”

“Then how come reports show that Flight 93 carried out an emergency landing in Cleveland that morning?”

Jerry felt challenged. “Impossible! It had to be a different flight.”

“Then how do you explain many eye witness accounts that put Flight 93 on the tarmac at Hopkins Airport in Cleveland?”

Jerry shrugged. “I only know what I know. And that plane crashed. I'd stake my life on it.”

“Did you see it hit?”

Mander rubbed his bald pate, “I wasn't precisely an eyewitness, but the wreckage was there for everyone to see.”

“Yes, but did anybody come forward and say they saw Flight 93 crash?”

Jerry hesitated, then admitted, “Look, I know of two people – I won't mention names – that heard a missile,”

“A rocket! I thought you received a call saying the plane had been hijacked.”

“That's what happened, yes. The fighter pilot fired a missile to kill the terrorists.”

“And everyone else on board it would seem.”

Jerry looked around. “The two people I mentioned both live within a couple of hundred yards, of the plane, going down. One guy served in Vietnam, and he told me he recognised the noise they make. Also, F-16s were flying close by, so the chances are that the missile was fired by one of them.”

Joab, queried, “You said Flight 93 crashed, Are you now suggesting it was shot down?”

Mander snapped, “Are you calling me a liar?”

“No, it's just that you've told me two conflicting stories. Did it crash or was it shot down.”

“Of course it fucking crashed, after the missile hit it. That's why the debris was scattered over such a vast area.”

“Was the plane identified as being Flight 93?”

Mander chuckled nervously. “Shit man, there was hardly enough of it left to recognise it as a plane.” Mander scratched his head. “That's what I know.”

“Why won't you give me the name of this Viet Vet?”

“His sick and I don't want him disturbed.”

Joab nodded slowly.

“In any case, I told you what happened, so you don't need to trouble him.”

As Jerry got up and left, Joab realised the enormous task he had in front of him. Each person, like Jerry, was a piece of the jigsaw, each knowing their little bit of the real 9/11 story. But this was a puzzle made of many pictures, not just one. Ten people could have witnessed the same thing, each with their interpretation. Then there was all the disinformation out there, designed to throw serious journalists off the scent.

While doing liberal studies at Columbia, Patricia, an advocate of law and order, became supportive of Goodluck Jonathon's nationalist policies. She was equally vehement about the terrorist bombings perpetrated by Boko Haram revolutionaries. Those were exciting days that stirred her blood.

Now she felt mind-numbingly bored just following Joab around. She felt ready for the next phase and decided it was time to meet her target. It would have to seem like a chance encounter, a brief connection. The FBI dossier had Joab down as being polite and courteous, especially where women were concerned. But then the English middle classes were famous for it. So it was time for her to go into 'damsel in distress mode'.

Julie Stopp, the name she used for the assignment, waited patiently in the bistro, for Joab to show.

The short psychology course she attended during her Quantico FBI training revealed that most people are creatures of habit and that 'pleasurable' patterns can form very quickly. Sure enough, as she finished her second cappuccino, Joab strode into the restaurant. She rose from her seat and hurried towards him, making sure they collided. Dropping her purse as she bumped into him, Patricia went into helpless woman mode.

Joab, falling for her ploy, taken aback, said “Oh, I'm sorry,” as he stooped to retrieve her bag. She had more than a passing resemblance to his favourite female movie star. Drew Barrymore.

“That's very kind of you,” she said, displaying a dazzling smile.

“You're welcome,” he said, as she exited the bistro.

Recognising Paula, as she delivered his burger and fries, Joab said, “Hi,”

“Hi, yourself. How are you enjoying our city?”

“Haven't seen much yet. Maybe you could show me around,” Joab winked.

Paula giggled, "I get off in an hour."

"I'll wait for you outside."

Joab and Paula met as arranged. Paula's knowledge of the city, as well as the historical context of its monuments and major buildings, made her an excellent guide. Together they saw many of the embassies, monuments, Georgetown, Arlington, and Chinatown all in 4 hours. Joab, feeling tired by then, hugged Paula goodbye and headed back to his hotel, and bed. As he approached the Doubletree, he did a double take. The woman Joab had collided with earlier in the day was walking towards him. Pretty confident it was her he grinned as she passed, "Twice in one day in a city this size. I guess that must mean something."

Turning towards the voice, she said, "Oh, it's Sir Galahad. So, what do you think it means?"

"Don't know, but maybe we can figure it out over coffee."

"It's a bit late for coffee, and this girl needs her beauty sleep. We could meet in the bistro tomorrow morning. I'll need a caffeine fix by then."

"How about 7.30?"

"Bit early but I can make it."

Agent Danvers had six new recruits to train in the field, including Patricia Hamilton. He had to find each of them assignments on which they could cut their teeth. The assignments had to be real but of little importance. For Danvers, Joab Rackham came in that category. After a couple of days, he'd pull the rookies in and see what they had learned. But Hamilton seemed to be ahead of the game. Her report, which he received around 11 pm, said she'd made contact with the target, and they were going to meet at the bistro in the morning.

Chapter 4

Joab considered himself open minded. As a journalist, it was important not to judge things hastily. He always tried to keep his articles well balanced, but some assignments made it tough. This job was turning out to be one such project. How could he write an even sided report when the official line on 9/11 had so many holes its foundation was untrustworthy.

Being an early riser Joab was at the breakfast buffet bar at 7 am, After spending 30 minutes on the treadmill in the gym. Now, having burned off a few calories he was about to load up on them again. Faced with scrambled eggs, sausage links, bacon, potato fritters and French toast, Joab loaded his plate with a little portion of each. As he got back to his table, he saw the mystery woman enter the bistro.

She beamed the Barrymore-like chubby cheeked smile. "Julie Stopp."

He rose. "Joab Rackham."

Indicating his plate, The Fed Rookie said, "I hope that's not for me."

"No chance, but there's coffee on the go."

"That'll do nicely – two sugars."

During their conversation, she asked, "So, Joab, what are you doing in Washington?"

He quipped "As a famous member of the Goons once said, 'Everybody's got to be somewhere'."

"Smart ass. Seriously though what brings you here?"

It was a common enough question to ask when two strangers are finding out about each other. Joab answered between bites, "I'm a writer following up a story."

Her training said it was best to keep questions to generalities. "What do you write about?"

“Mostly articles about popular topics.” he said, giving little away.

“Are you writing a story about DC?”

He sipped his second coffee. “No.”

“What's it about then?” Damn, she was pressing too hard. “Forgive me; I shouldn't be prying into your business.”

“You're right, Julie. You shouldn't.”

She smiled sweetly, “Sorry, it's just that I'm a sucker for intrigue.” Changing the topic, she ventured, “So what do you want to talk about?”

“About you. Where you grew up? That sort of thing.” Before she could respond, his phone rang. He looked at her. “Sorry, I have to take this.” He walked away from their table to a private space. “Hi, Joab here. Who's speaking?”

“Bill Crow.”

“Hi Bill, how are you?” Joab said making the connection.

“The thing is, I can't meet you in DC. You'll have to come here if you want to hear what I have to say.”

“Here being?”

“Indian Lake. It's a borough in Somerset County.”

Damn! This arrangement wasn't in the plan. He paused a moment, then said, “Okay, I'll ring when I get to Shanksville.”

“Hey look, I know it's a pain in the ass, but I think you'll find it worth the trouble.”

Back with Julie Stopp, Joab said, “I'll have to cut breakfast short. Something's come up.”

Before she could stop herself, Julie blurted, “Something to do with your assignment?”

“You could say that.”

“Look, Joab, it's driving me nuts. Can't you just tell me what it's about?”

“You ask a lot of questions, Julie.” He added, “We've only just met and don't know each other from a bar of soap.”

“Well, that's true,” she laughed. But I think there's more to it than that.”

Relenting, he said, “Okay, I'm freelancing for a magazine. They want a four page spread on 9/11. In particular what happened to the passengers on those flights - Satisfied?”

“Four pages! With all the stuff on the Net, you could write four books.”

“Writing it isn't the problem. Wading all through the bullshit is.”

She smiled, “You need a research assistant, Joab.”

“I'm here on a shoestring budget. I can't afford to pay anyone else.” Then he said, “I have to be going.”

She smiled sweetly again. “Thanks for the coffee.”

“It'll be your turn to get them next time.”

“Oh, is there going to be the next time?”

He grinned. Who knows if we are fated to cross paths again?” Then he handed her a card with his details.

Joab hired a car from Classic Rentals, through the hotel. They delivered his 75 AMC Pacer within the hour. He set the GPS on his phone, which estimated it would take 2 hours and 55 minutes driving time for him to get to Shanksville. Route 30 took him over the Appalachian mountains, where he stopped for a break in Bedford, the last town before Shanksville.

Shanksville, being a town with a population finding it hard to top the 300 mark, hardly qualified as such. But villages didn't feature much in America. So a town it was. Joab parked in the street and phoned the Shanksville police chief, wondering why the grand title? "Chief Crow, it's Joab Rackham. I've just arrived in town. So where are you?"

"I'll meet you out where the plane went down."

"Whereabouts? That's a wide area."

"Let me see now. Well, I guess near the Flight 93 memorial would be a good place."

Joab discovered that the Flight 93 Memorial was located just off a tiny country road lined with old wooden farmhouses, which could fit right in a Norman Rockwell painting. Although shielded by trees, much of the park remained surprisingly open. Bill later explained it was partly because of the site's prior history as a coal strip mine.

The Park Service had carried out extensive landscaping work, with more planned; two huge mining cranes were on site the day of the crash. Joab spotted the dusty police cruiser parked in the shade. Bill Crow was leaning against it smoking a cigarette as Joab drove up and parked alongside.

Bill grinned as Joab approached him. "Done wonders for tourism. Had hardly anybody coming here before the crash. Hell, now we're flooded with visitors."

Joan looked out at the fenced off perimeter with a bunch of tiny American flags fluttering in the breeze. "So this is where it happened?"

Bill Crow, a bit of a kingpin in the tiny community, carried a fair amount of weight both status wise and physically. Many years of Ida Brown's steak pies with fries had seen to that. He liked to think the best of folks and would rather send young offenders off with a flea in their ear than put them through the judicial system. He also knew when to turn a blind eye to folks who committed minor, harmless misdemeanours. Bill hitched up his uniform pants till they were held in place by his large stomach. Stubbing out his cigarette, he said, "So you're one of them reporter fellows."

"Yes and I need to know what happened here," Joab said, indicating the large empty field.

"Let's take a walk."

Joab followed the amiable cop through a circular park. They walked along a dark concrete path with a surface resembling bark; past the woods where the plane crashed, until they reach the Wall of Names, which consisted of vertical slabs of white stone featuring names of each of the 40 victims inscribed on a separate plate.

Bill turned to the journalist, "It was a terrible sight. "Never seen anything like it. Hell, the plane was strewn over 8 miles of countryside."

"Do you think it crashed or got shot down?"

"Don't rightly know. But folks around Indian Lake said it was flying real low, then started falling apart on their homes. Hell them folks set up there for a quiet retirement. They certainly didn't think anything like that was going to happen. Well none of us did."

"Did anyone say if it was on fire?"

"Some folks said they saw smoke trailing but whether that was a fault with the aeroplane or whether it was a missile that caused the damage is anyone's guess."

"So what do you reckon?"

“Well, we can't rule out the possibility that the air force had orders to shoot down the hijacked plane. Many folks said there was a second, smaller aircraft in the area. Could have been an F16, I guess.”

“So you reckon a US fighter jet may have fired on the hijacked Boeing 757?”

“Like I said on CBS that day we hadn't ruled out the possibility.”

Joab became pensive. To think of a hijacked Boeing be fired on by the USAF made him shudder. What he couldn't figure out was why there was such a fast response to deal with that threat compared to the complete lack of reaction of NORAD in dealing with the planes before they hit the Twin Towers. He turned to the police chief. “You said that as the aircraft crashed pieces of it fell on homes around here. Was there much damage done to the properties that got hit?”

“Well, that was the oddest thing. None of the pieces seemed big enough to do any harm.”

“Thanks, chief, that's useful information. Do you know anyone else around here who witnessed the crash?”

“Our coroner was out at the site. Come to think of it he got there before me. He might be able to tell you something.”

“What's his name?”

“Walt Masterton.”

“How can I contact him?”

Bill pulled out his notebook, scribbled down a name and phone number, ripped out the page and gave it to Joab. He grinned, “Well young fellow I'd best be getting back on duty.”

Joab eyeballed him. “To tell the truth I was surprised that you agreed to meet with me.”

“Why's that?”

“Most people run a mile when a journalist wants to ask them questions.”

Bill laughed. “Most times that'd be the truth. But this,” he said, pointing at the crash site, “still leaves too many questions unanswered.”

Joab couldn't agree more.

The coroner wasn't free until the next day so Joab found himself lodgings for the night at Ida's General Store, a local gathering place since the 1940s. He was eating a tasty home-made egg salad sandwich, an unbelievable deal at \$1.99, when his phone rang. It was Julie Stopp. “Hi Julie, what's up?”

“I have a proposition to put to you.”

“This isn't leaving it to the fates.”

“You gave me your number. Look, I'm free for a couple of days if you want a research assistant.”

“What makes you think I need one?”

“I can do the background research for you, while you're out in the field.”

Joab thought it over. He was feeling lonely, and she did seem to be good company. “I can't pay you.”

“I'm sure we can work something out” Then she added, “So, where are you?”

“I'm in Shanksville.”

“Makes sense. It's near the Flight 93 crash site. Look I can catch an overnight flight and be there by seven tomorrow morning.”

This development wasn't what he'd envisaged. Joab thought about it. An assistant could be useful, but it all seemed too good to be true. "Okay, I'll pick you up."

Following Julie's call, Joab contacted Karl Hass the new owner of Highlight Magazine.

"Ja Joab, what are you calling about?"

"I need an assistant to help me wade through all this research."

"Ja, so why phone me?"

"I was wondering if you could pay for one."

"Joab, you provide your assistant as part of your fee."

"I didn't factor it in. Another \$5000 will do."

"Joab, the fee you asked for was bigger than expected. You'll have to make do."

Well, it was worth a try, he thought, finishing the call.

Chapter 5

Somerset County Airport appeared closed to Joab as he pulled up at the terminal. The nearby Texaco gas station was open, and the very reasonable fuel prices inspired him to gas up. The cab rank was empty that time of day so temporary parking was easy.

Seeing his bright orange 75 AMC pacer Julie, said, "You are on a small budget."

"Hey girl, don't knock it. This car is a classic."

"I didn't know museums did car hire," she grinned, showing her endearing cheeky smile. Chucking her case and bag in the rear hatch, she jibed, "Will this thing get us back to Shanksville?"

"It'll get me back but any more of your insults to the old girl and you'll be walking."

Having arrived back at Ida's, they chatted over breakfast. "You know you're doing this without pay, don't you?" Joab clarified as the pair drank coffee, brewed by Nick King, the new owner of Ida's General Store. He added, "I will pay for your room, though."

"That's mighty big of you, sir," she said, with a tinge of cynicism.

"Yes, well two of us won't fit into these small rooms."

Julie looked Joab in the eye. "I've been checking you out, Mr Rackham. You've got a string of books under your belt so you must be raking in the royalties."

"Most of them are in remainder bins at two bucks a pop."

"Oh, come on Joab, I come pretty cheaply."

Leaning forward so Nick didn't hear, he said, "Do you think I'd be staying here if I had money to spare."

"Oh yeah, Shanksville is positively bursting with motels." she scoffed.

"You've got a point," he grinned.

"So what are you doing today?" Julie asked, finishing her coffee.

"Seeing a coroner about a plane crash."

"What do you want me to then?"

He thought about it, rubbing his unshaven chin. "Okay, you can find out who the officer was who scrambled the military jets and ordered them to shoot down the hijacked commercial aircraft headed for Washington."

“Flight 93?”

“If it was the flight.”

The Somerset County Medical Examiner & Coroner's office, which was almost 10 miles from Shanksville, was based in Somerset. Famous for the 'Whiskey Rebellion' of 1794, the town became the focal point for the first major test of the federal authority under the newly adopted US Constitution under President George Washington. Joab parked his car near 555 Tayman Avenue and entered the building. Just to the left was a sign reading 'Somerset County Medical Examiner & Coroner's office'. It seemed to be empty. Then a woman appeared at the desk.

The receptionist, seeing the stranger, said, “Yes, can I help you?”

“Yes, I'm here to see Walt Masterton.”

Eyeing him with suspicion, she asked, “Do you have an appointment?”

“Yes, a verbal one over the phone. Is he in?”

“What do you want to see him about?”

Joab, becoming annoyed, said, “That's between him and me; no one else.”

Betty Smallwood, Joab soon discovered, was not one to be crossed. When it came to defending her territory, she was a mixture of a mother hen and Attila the Hun. “Don't you come in here with that attitude, young man. If I don't know what you want, I don't know who to refer you to.”

“I've already told you who I've come to see,”

Just then Joab saw a bespectacled middle-aged man with thinning dark hair enter reception.

“What on Earth is going on, Betty?” Walt asked.

Joab said, “I've come here to see a Doctor Masterton.”

Betty jumped in, “I was just trying to find out why he's here, doctor.”

“You must be the man Bill was talking with about the crash.”

“Yes.”

The coroner turned to his receptionist. “It's okay Betty.” Then to Joab. “Come on through to my office.”

Betty glared at Joab, as he followed the doctor.

Walt Masterton tended to be suspicious by nature. He also made irritating clicking noises with his teeth, making him sound a bit like a Kalahari bushman. “So what do you want to know about the crash, Mr Rackham?” Walt Masterson asked, as they sat in his office.

“I'm interested in the whole thing to do with Flight 93.”

Walt handed Joab a document. “This is this official report.”

Joab flicked through the stapled pages. Stopping at a particular section, he read:

On 9/11/2001 the pilot taxied United Airlines Flight 93 Boeing 757- 200 at Newark International Airport, ready for its 8:01 AM departure but heavy runway traffic, delayed departure until 8:42 AM. Besides the two pilots, there were 5 flight attendants and 37 passengers aboard.

He came to another pertinent section:

The Armed Forces Institute of Pathology DNA Lab in Rockville, Maryland, were later to identify the human remains, from the crash site in Shanksville.”

Joab looked up at the coroner. “Were you involved in identifying the remains, Dr Masterton?”

“Why do you ask?”

“I was just wondering how they obtained DNA when there were hardly any human remains to test.”

“To answer your question no I wasn't. I'm not a pathologist. You'll have to talk to Jon Patricks. He's with the Freedom of Information/Privacy Act Office, U.S. Army Medical Command.”

“I'm wondering just how free he'll be with his information.”

Walt shrugged. “No idea. Pretty slim I'd guess.” Then he said, “They obtained DNA from the remains of the passengers and crew; they never found the remains of the four alleged hijackers.”

“Why was that?”

“I was told that to make a DNA identification we need something from the victims or their family members – personal effects, or blood samples – to match. We didn't have that kind of information about the terrorists.”

“That makes sense I guess,” Joab said, thinking, that's if there were any terrorists to identify.

Trying to ignore the clicks, Joab said, “Bill Crow told me you got to scene of the crash before him. So what was it like?”

“Nothing I'd ever seen before and I've been present at a few air crashes over the last 35 years as coroner, but this one was very odd indeed.”

“In what way?”

“Well, it seemed like the plane didn't so much crash as disintegrating above the ground. Quite honestly I looked around the site and didn't see anything I could identify as human remains at all.”

“So how did the military pathologists come up with the DNA?”

“Search me.” He looked at Joab trying to decide how much to divulge. “I'll tell you something else. There didn't appear to be any pieces of the debris big enough to show it was a plane.”

“Surely even in the worst air disasters human remains and aircraft parts are recognisable.”

“Well with this one it was as if the plane had stopped and let the passengers off before it crashed.”

Joab looked at Walt, smiling, “That possibility may not be as stupid as you may think. In fact, several theories go along with that line of thinking.”

Walt shook his head, “Well, I don't know. But Tom Spillone, one of the crash site state troopers from Greensburg, told me the impact of the accident was so severe that the biggest piece of debris he had seen, there was no larger than 2 feet square.”

“So what do you reckon caused the crash?”

“Oh, there's some talk of a missile hitting it, but I don't know.”

“Wouldn't that explain the tiny pieces of debris spread over such a vast area?”

“Well, there's this young guy, Eric Peterson, from Lambertsville. He told me he was working in his shop in the morning when he heard a plane. He said there was a crater in the ground that was burning. Strewn about were pieces of clothing hanging from trees and parts of the Boeing 757, but nothing bigger than a couple of feet long, he said. Many of the items were burning.”

“Did he happen to see any military planes in the vicinity?”

Walt shook his head. “He never mentioned it. But he also saw no bodies and no sign of any life.”

Joab shook the coroner's hand. “Thanks, Walt, you've been a great help.”

Back from Somerset Joab sat at a small desk in his room, bringing his notes up to date on his laptop, when Julie entered. “Hi Julie, how did it go?”

“Huh, They're admitting nothing.”

“Yeah, I thought as much. Never mind I've got a new angle.”

She stared at him speechless. Then she said, "I spend all day trying to speak to somebody in the USAF who can shed some light on what happened, and all you have to say is 'never mind'."

Joab grinned, "Welcome to the wonderful world of journalism. Now I want you to find out about this guy," he said, handing her a print copy of Dr Jon Patricks. He explained, "He's with the Freedom of Information/Privacy Act Office, U.S. Army Medical Command. Now, this is the thing. Only military pathologists were at the plane crash site, and I want to know why?"

"Why do you think only the Army Medical Command were involved, Joab?"

"Possibly because the plane was shot down by a missile."

"Even if Flight 93 got shot down I seriously doubt you'd get anyone to admit it."

"I know that Julie, but the first rule of journalism is 'assume nothing'."

"What are you going to do now?"

"I'm going to see a guy called Ted Bolling."

She looked at him. "Why was this one shot down but not the other three?"

"If someone did shoot it down?"

"But I thought you said..."

"The official line says it developed engine trouble and had to crash land but the evidence doesn't suggest any crash landing. It's almost as though it got sprayed over the area."

Changing the subject, she said, "Who's this Ted Bolling?"

"Never mind about that. Try to get some answers from Dr Patricks."

After Joab had left, Julie dialled agent Danvers' number.

"Patricia, how are you going with your case."

"I am now the target's official researcher, currently in Shanksville."

Danvers chuckled. "Well done. So what have you learnt so far?"

"He wants me to contact a Dr Patricks. He heads up the Freedom of Information/Privacy Act Office, US Army Medical Command."

"Then you'd better organise it, agent Hamilton."

"As me or as Julie Stopp."

"As you of course."

"But what if he tells our target I'm an FBI agent."

Danvers laughed. "Just say you made out you were a Fed to get him his interview."

Driving back to the Flight 93 Memorial, Joab had twin sensations of peacefulness and sadness. It was hard to remain unemotional by the tragic loss of life on that fateful day. But Joab wasn't at all convinced the memorial was where it ought to be. The memorial to those who allegedly died on Flight 93 was unique in that it was in an empty field near an insignificant little town, instead of bustling New York City or next to a military facility just outside of Washington, DC.

Having reached the memorial area Joab encountered groups of visitors standing around reading signs giving information about the site's significance and the names of those on board the ill-fated plane. He passed a small building where park rangers (the site had become a national park) offered fantastic detailed sanitised accounts of the events of 9/11. Joab saw Ted Bolling waiting outside.

Ted, a flight dispatcher for UA, middle-aged, smartly dressed, noticed the highlight magazine the journalist carried. He approached the man. "Hi, are you Joab Rackham?"

“In the flesh,” Joab grinned. “You must be Ted.”

“I must be.” Ted's expression betrayed nothing. He said, “Do you mind if we talk and walk?”

“Not at all.”

As they walked, Ted became pensive, trying to find the words. Then he began. “We'd just heard about the attacks on the World Trade Centre. I warned the Captain on Flight 93 at 9:19 am, to be alert. Captain Duval responded at 9:26 am to request clarification...”

Joab felt himself being mesmerised by Ted's flat monotone voice.

Ted continued, “...The next thing we hear is that terrorists had successfully infiltrated the plane's cockpit. We received two mayday calls amid sounds of a struggle. At 9:32 am a hijacker, later identified as Ziad Jarrah, was heard over the flight data recorder, directing the passengers to sit down and stating that there was a bomb aboard the plane. The flight data recorder also showed that Jarrah resets the autopilot, turning the plane around to head back east.”

“Towards Washington.”

“Yes. The course would take the plane over the Capitol Building Dome.”

Joab stopped to let a group of tourists overtake them. Once they'd passed he said, “What happened then?”

“Some of the passengers made phone calls to loved ones telling them about the hijacking. Maybe they were informed about the other three planes, but some guys decided to go down fighting.”

“What do you mean?”

“As far as we could make out at 9:57 am passengers and crew aboard Flight 93 began their counter-attack. We retrieved this info from a cockpit voice recorder. Apparently, the hijacker piloting the plane started to roll the aircraft, pitching it up and down to throw the charging passengers off balance. We heard voices chanting 'Allah is Great' The plane then turned on its back and ploughed into this field,” he said, indicating the area.

Joab nodded. “Thanks, Ted. Now, I need to be clear about a few points. First, are you certain that it was Flight 93?”

“Sure. Why?”

“Another version of events states Flight 93 landed at Cleveland and was grounded there, an hour or so after it was supposed to have crashed here.”

Ted stared at Joab. “Seeing as it crashed here that couldn't have been possible.”

“Well, witnesses said that there was a Boeing 767 kept in a secure area of Hopkins International Airport. The initial reports were that this plane was hijacked and that there was a bomb on board. The control tower reported screams heard from the aircraft as it made its emergency landing in Cleveland.”

“Well now, How the hell could it have crashed here and been in Cleveland?”

“A very good question. Oh, on another point, are you sure the plane crashed or could it have been shot down with an air to air missile?”

Ted Stared at the journalist. “Of course it crashed.”

“Did you know that the Shanksville police chief has eyewitness reports that a military aircraft seen in the area at the time of the accident.”

“No.”

“Why do you think the hijackers crashed the plane in an empty field when they could easily have gone down over Shanksville, or even Washington?”

Ted shrugged. "Maybe a crew member got to the controls."

"It's possible I guess. But it's unlikely anyone could break in and take over the controls with the terrorists on the flight deck."

"I guess we'll never know the answer to that."

Joab turned and shook the air dispatcher's hand, "Thanks, Ted, you've been a great help."

Ted said, "My pleasure Joab." Still, poker-faced, he added, "I don't envy you trying to make sense out of all this."

"I don't mind telling you that getting to grips with the 9/11 disaster is like trying to kill a hydra. Every time I think I have a handle on the story, another theory, just as plausible or implausible jumps out in its place."

"I guess that's because of all them crazy conspiracy nuts."

"Many people who witnessed the site where United Airlines Flight 93 is supposed to have gone down on September 11, 2001, have said how little it resembled what they expected the scene of a plane crash to look like."

Ted said, "you can take it from me, Flight 93, the fourth plane to be hijacked on September 11, crashed in this field, killing everyone on board after its courageous passengers and crew members attempted to retake control of their plane."

"We still have the problem of numerous eye witnesses who spent time at the crash site saying they couldn't see anything there resembling wreckage from a plane. Some witnesses said there were little or no human remains at the site. And although Flight 93 was reported "heavily laden with jet fuel" when it crashed, investigators found no contamination from jet fuel in the soil and groundwater around the site."

Ted stared at Joab. Then he droned on, "If you doubt my word what this is this memorial all about? Everyone who died on the plane is listed here. To suggest that their plane didn't crash here is an insult to the loved ones they left behind."

"Ted, I'm not suggesting anything. There is a lot of suspicious evidence relating to the crash of Flight 93, which casts serious doubt on the official account of what happened."

"Such as?"

"Evidence suggests that witnesses saw may have been the result of an attempt to fake the scene of a plane crash in an appalling act of deception, rather than the site of a genuine accident."

"If that's so, where are the people list on this memorial. You answer me that."

"An excellent question, Ted."

"Which you can't answer."

"True, but the relatively small amount of debris that some witnesses noticed could have been planted. If this is what happened, it would mean the fate of Flight 93 is still unknown."

Back at the general store, it seemed to Joab and Julie that piecing together the witness statements to see the big picture was like trying to reassemble the crashed plane. Fortified by a few beers, the pair worked into the early hours collating the information. "Many of the people who attended the site where United Airlines Flight 93 is supposed to have gone down, said how little it resembled what they expected the scene of a plane crash to look like," Joab commented. He added, "Some witnesses of the supposed incident go as far as to suggest there was no plane crash and that the site was rigged to look like an air disaster."

Julie looked up at Joab, a worried frown on her face, "Do you seriously think the FBI or whoever would go to such lengths?"

"I don't know, but one detail suggesting debris was planted at the alleged crash site is the locations where Flight 93's 'black boxes' were found."

"What do you mean?" Julie asked, shifting her legs into a more comfortable position on the sofa, "They were found in the crater at the alleged crash site but at different depths in the ground. FBI agent Wells Morrison stated it was strange because the black boxes are right next to each other on the aircraft, yet one was found 13 feet deeper into the crater than the other. He said it seemed as though they were placed at different depths in the soil. He was also surprised they weren't found sooner."

Julie stretched, saying, "I'm feeling bushed." getting up, she added, "I'll see you sometime tomorrow."

"I hope you mean today," Joab grinned, lightening the mood.

Chapter 6

Joab woke around 10 am. By the time he'd staggered downstairs for one of Rick's famous burgers and black coffee, Julie plopped down beside him. "I forgot to tell you that I contacted Dr Patricks and he has agreed to meet with you."

"You must have a silver tongue," Joab grinned. "So when and where?"

"He's coming to Shanksville today and said he'd give you a few minutes by the Glessner covered bridge at 10:30 am."

Joab checked the time, "Shit, it 20 past now!" You might have given me more notice."

"Sorry, Joab. It slipped my mind."

Putting the old Pacer through its paces, Joab reached the Stonycreek River, next to the iconic bridge, just two minutes after ten. Dr Patricks was waiting.

Joab, apologetic, said, "Sorry I'm late. I only got your message a few minutes ago."

Dr Patricks carried the horrors of the Gulf War in his psyche. The pills helped, but his experiences in the Gulf had left him bitter and vindictive. The innocent look on his face belied his inner turmoil. "So why do you want to see me?" he snapped.

"I'm interested in why military pathologists, not private doctors, dealt with collecting evidence at the Flight 93 crash site."

"And you're interested because?"

"I'm an investigative journalist writing an article about that flight."

"I see. Well, under the Freedom of Information Act you'll need to apply to get access to any and all information, under United States Code 552, about the crash."

"I'm sure you can do better than that, Dr Patricks. You could have told my researcher that over the phone."

"Agent Hamilton told me you needed to see me. That's why I'm here."

Agent Hamilton! Who the hell was that? Joab pressed, "All I want to know is why civilian only military pathologists were involved?"

"Simple. It was an emergency connected with terrorist activity. That made it our concern. Plus the fact we are the only medical organisation with the means and the manpower to deal with such a disaster."

"Is it true that you were able to find enough of the human remains to get DNA samples for matching with live relatives?"

“Yes.”

“Excepting the DNA of the alleged terrorists.”

“Yes, we had nothing to match with the Terrorists DNA.”

“If there were any terrorists.”

“Of course there were terrorists. They caused the crash.”

Joab changed tack. “There is evidence that Flight 93 got hit by a missile fired from an F16. That would account for the tiny pieces of aircraft scattered over a large area, would it not?”

Patricks remained outwardly calm. “It's one of many crackpot theories.” He turned to leave, then said, “There's nothing sinister about the army medical corps involvement. You have to go through the FOIA to access the information you're looking for.”

“Thank you, doctor.”

“Now, I have important things to do.”

“Of course,” Joab smiled.

“One thing, though. It beats me why the FBI are asking questions about this.”

Joab was just as puzzled.

At first, Patricia Hamilton thought Joab would turn out to be just another gung-ho sensationalist reporter looking for an easy story to titillate his readers. Now she knew different. He was a thoroughly fastidious journalist searching for truth based on rigorous research. The more she looked at eyewitness statements, the less sure she was that Uncle Sam was a straight up guy. Perhaps there was something to some of the conspiracy theories after all? Feeling herself becoming aligned with the thinking of her target she mentally pinched herself. She had a job to do, her first assignment with the Bureau. Being successful had to be her only objective. She phoned her trainer's number.

“Hi, Agent Hamilton. Is it safe for you to talk?”

“Yes, the target isn't here at present.”

“Does he trust you yet?”

“I believe so.”

“Good, because it's time to engage in the next phase.”

“The next step?”

“Once your target trusts you and sees you as an ally you can start passing him bits of disinformation.”

“I think my target is too smart for that.”

“Just little tidbits. Things that agree with the way he is thinking.”

“Oh, I don't know...”

“You're his researcher. He wants to listen to you.”

“Okay, I'll give it a go.”

“So who's Agent Hamilton?” Joab asked upon entering Julie's room.

The words caught her off balance. “Shouldn't you knock before going into a lady's boudoir?” she responded, trying to make light of his question.

Joab grinned, “I thought this was the research office.” Then he added, “Well done, Julie. It was a stroke of genius. He thought he was talking to a FED.”

Relieved, she said, “Wouldn't have gotten him otherwise.”

“That's probably true. Now I need you to find out about FOIA access.”

She looked up at him. “I learned something fascinating while you were away.”

“Oh!”

“Vice-President Dick Cheney confirmed that seek-and-destroy orders were issued. So it's entirely conceivable that fighter jocks encountered Flight 93.”

“Or what passed for it?” Joab said, cynically.

“Apparently F 16s tailed the aircraft once it pulled an 180-degree turn and flew straight towards Washington.”

He added, “There are witness statements that say one, two or even three F-16s followed the aircraft. The question is, did they fire on it? That's what we need to know.”

She shrugged. “I don't know, but I came across something intriguing. A white, unmarked business jet is said to have been tailing the doomed flight. With all non- military flights grounded, why was a civilian still aloft?”

“Good question. Maybe it wasn't a private plane. I found out that Customs teams use white business jets to bring down drug runners, with top-secret jamming equipment. Mind you officials deny such material even exists.”

She added, “And if it did, why would they use it when Sidewinder missiles were available on those F-16s outside Washington?”

Joab sighed, “The Hydra grows even more fucking heads.” Grabbing a beer from the small bar fridge, he said, “From what I can gather we have some possible scenarios for UAL 93:

- (1) It never existed in the real world, only on a government press release.
- (2) The real flight 93 got swapped with another flight number, and the passengers (some who were Government employees) were 'encouraged' to secrecy.
- (3) The plane was shot down by a USAF fighter pilot who disregarded stand down orders, and the Shanksville crash site is where the largest pieces fell.
- (4) 93 was a remote control drone that malfunctioned and had to be destroyed (self-destructed) intentionally before it could crash leaving extensive evidence.
- (5) The plane did crash dive into the field buried itself into the ground and totally disintegrated from the intense heat which didn't burn the nearby grass.”

“Which way do you swing, Joab?”

“That's a personal question. What, are you my tailor now?”

Julie burst out laughing. Joab joined in. Soon they were both busting their sides. It was good. It broke the tension.”

Becoming serious again, Julie said, “It's not easy pursuing the truth.”

He shook his head, perplexed. “I don't know if we'll ever get to the truth.” Then changing the tone, he said, “Anyhow, I'm hungry. Let's get some lunch.”

During their hamburger lunch, Julie surprised Joab with an outburst, born of America's shared frustration over 9/11. She gushed, “Bush, Rove, Cheney and Rumsfeld all knew that 9/11 would happen way before time. They're the ones feeding us all this bull crap. They're fucking criminals and should be arrested for their crimes.”

Joab said, “If your claims are right they should be paying for their crimes against American citizens. They're free, living high off the hog, still peddling this charade even after all these years.”

“It doesn't stop there. Politicians not directly involved just look the other way allowing sociopath murderers to keep running America, the greatest show on Earth. Christ, Joab, the American people know this, yet they choose to look the other way as well.”

Joab took a bite of his burger, wiped his mouth and sipped his juice. “Politics is a dirty business.”

On her tangent, Julie said, “And now, because of Bush's unnecessary, unholy war the entire Economic System of our Western Way of Life has crumbled before our eyes.”

Swallowing a mouth full of burger, Joab looked at her. “Wow, that's quite a statement. Although I think is a bit of an oversimplification.”

“Surely you don't swallow that hog shit about Al Qaeda being behind it.”

“Julie, I'm only interested in available factual evidence.”

“Joab, sitting on the fence is going to drive you insane. You either believe the official line, or you don't.”

“As a journalist, I don't have that luxury.”

She wondered if she'd overdone the outrageous act. But was it all an act. She found herself believing what she was saying as she said it. Joab had indeed bought it, hook, line and sinker.

She sighed, “Sometimes I honestly don't know why we bother. The fact is that what we believe is what we deserve. We have had all these years to do the right thing and put Bush and Cheney behind bars, but chose to look the other way like everybody else. Right?”

“Cheney, Rumsfeld and Bush are bullet proof. You'd have to find some pretty damning evidence to change that. And even if you did who are you going to get to arrest them?”

Silently congratulating herself for a job well done, she said, “I guess you're right, but it's intolerable.”

“Gnashing teeth doesn't help.”

She sighed, “So where do we go from here?”

He said, “According to a source of mine in the Air Force, Armed fighters fly on picket duty outside Washington. So they were already patrolling and would have been alerted about a hijacked plane in their backyard. That would account for their presence.”

“True.”

“So why did that air controller tell me nothing showed up on the radar? Why the unnecessary cover up? It doesn't make sense.”

“Are you going to talk to the controller again?”

He smiled. “I'd love to talk with the pilot of the F-16.”

“Good luck on that.”

Joab, not one to look at the teeth of a gift horse, couldn't believe his luck at finding Julie. She was a great help and a comfort. Investigative journalism could be a very lonely occupation at times.

As he drove off to follow up another lead, his mind went over aspects of evidence. The official story removed all evidence of a shoot down, citing specifically the phone call reporting an explosion and smoke on board the aircraft while it was in flight. The same media that carried early allegations of evidence of a shoot down now parroted the official version without question. It seemed that Uncle Sam had whispered in the media boss' ear. However, for Joab, the important point wasn't the shoot down. Most people would agree that under the circumstances, it would have been the best course of action. However, amid the smoke and mirrors he saw clear evidence of the manipulation of information fed to the public regarding 9/11. Joab stopped his car to answer a phone call. The caller,

giving no name, said he'd heard the reporter asking for statements concerning the four planes and their passengers on 9/11.

Joab immediately became suspicious. "Yes. What have you got for me?"

"A Mp3 copy of the recording of the air traffic controller during the moments leading up to the crash of United's Flight 93. It lasts 3 minutes and 58 seconds."

Joab's heart missed a beat. Could it be genuine? "I might be interested."

"If you want a copy it's gonna cost you big bucks."

"How big?"

"Oh, let me see. Let's say ten grand."

"That's a lot of money. I'll have to hear it first."

"Once I've been paid."

"We meet. I listen. If it's useful, you get paid. That's the only way that'll work. Now what's your name."

"Andrew."

"Seeing that the Journalist wasn't backing down, the caller organised a meet at Stonycreek River.

Joab waited by the river for Andrew to show. He wasn't happy about the venue. It was far too open with few people around. He knew his research could be ruffling feathers and, that after his brush with the CIA in Iraq, they could well be onto him.

A man approached, the early thirties, clean shaven and with a spring in his step. He walked up to Joab tentatively. "You the journalist I phoned?"

"Are you Andrew?"

The man nodded and handed Joab his iPod.

Joab listened. There was a very noticeable tone overlaying the supposed communication from United's Flight 93. This tone Joab estimated to be around 400 Hz, the frequency of aircraft alternating power. Joab, listening very carefully, thought he heard the same sound at a much lower level, as though from another plane's communication. The journalist made a mental note to get an audio expert onto it. Then he heard what sounded like a list of demands, spoken in a Middle Eastern accent. The speaker spoke reasonable English, but the poor audio made it difficult to hear what was said. Joab realised that if the transmission did come from Flight 93, then the hijackers were planning to land the plane at some point and trade hostages for whatever those demands were. Joab couldn't hear the details, but it seemed, from what he could make out, they weren't planning to crash the plane into a Washington building. That seemed odd, considering the other three, allegedly, hijacked planes had buildings as targets.

Then he came to the most important part. From the list of demands to the first report of a puff of smoke in the air was a mere 45 seconds. From this, it was evident to Joab that the hijacker pilot was untroubled by any unruly passengers. Joab knew the plane was flying at 35,000 feet altitude because the Flight 93 pilot confirmed this to the air traffic controller as the tape recording began. He mused, the only way that United Airlines Flight 93 could have crashed in the 45 seconds after the second transmission regarding the list of demands would have been to point nose directly down and power down the whole way without any interruption.

Joab took out his earphones. He looked straight at Andrew, a puzzled expression on his face. "There was no time for the passengers to burst through the door or the hijacker pilot to react. Any struggle over the controls would have sent the plane spiralling across the sky, pointed up as much as down."

Andrew grinned, "Yeah, that's right. So where's my money?"

“How do I know the radio transmissions are genuine?”

He stared at the journalist. “Look, Joab, from this we know two facts. The hijackers were talking about a list of demands, not suicide. And the story of the passengers crashing the plane during a fight with the terrorists simply could not have happened that way.”

“They're minor details, not worth lying about.”

“Whoever made the recording thought it was.”

“Whoever! So you don't think it came from Flight 93?”

“Look, man, I work in the tower, and I know it's not genuine.” Seeing uncertainty on the journalist's face, he pressed, “Think about it, Joab. Why is it that the transmission from the alleged Flight 93 has such a clear tone. When it's compared to the other aircraft from other incidents, it's clear that something is very unusual about this radio transmission. It's easy to suspect that we are not hearing from Flight 93 at all but instead from an unshielded aircraft radio somewhere on the ground, quickly wired to a plane's power supply to 'spoo' the controllers.”

Joab hesitated, then said, “Why would somebody go to all that trouble to falsify the record, particularly since the recording refers to a hostage hijack situation, not a suicide mission.”

Andrew grinned. “What if this record already existed before 9/11 and was the best they had to suit the Flight 93 scenario?”

“It's possible but...”

Anticipating the journalist, Andrew said, “The demand and hostage scenario is the most common hijack experience. Nothing like 9/11 has happened before. They had to go with what they had.”

“But why?”

“To make it seem as though the passengers and crew were on board.”

Joab stood open-mouthed.

“Cat got your tongue, Joab?”

“Joab uttered, “But 34 of the 44 people alleged to have been on Flight 93 had been DNA identified.”

“How is that possible when no human remains were found at the crash site?”

“Andrew, all I've heard is that the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology collected samples of human DNA and took them to a lab in Rockville.”

“Do you believe it?”

Joab answered, “If the passengers and crew were on board, why the bullshit on the recording?”

Andrew put his hand out. “Give me back the iPod.”

Joab hesitated. “Will you negotiate on the price?”

“Just give me the fucking iPod. I'll sell it to someone else.”

“I didn't say I wasn't interested.”

“Yeah, but you don't have the money, do you?”

Joab, grabbing his phone, said, “Look, don't be hasty. Let me make a call to my editor right now.” handing Andrew his recording, he pressed Karl's contact on his phone.

Karl, picking up the ringing phone, said, “Joab, what do you want?”

“I have a recording of what went on in one of the planes just before it crashed.”

“Goot, it could be useful.”

“There's more to it than that, but I have to pay a man to get the recording.”

“Pay for it if you think it's worth it.”

“Ten Grand.”

“Ten thousand American dollars for a recording!”

“I know it sounds a bit steep but Karl, this is fucking dynamite. I need your go ahead right now, or we lose it.”

“That decision has to be made by the financial department. I will put it to them, but I don't hold out a lot of hope.”

“Karl, I haven't got time to fuck about with this. I need that recording.”

Karl, exasperated, said, “Vy is this record so important?”

“Because it seems to be a fraud, most likely recorded before the plane took off.”

“I don't understand, Joab.”

“Just trust me on this, Karl.”

“All right I fast track money. You get it in the morning.”

“Great! You won't regret it.”

“I already do.”

Joab turned to Andrew. “I'll have it for you tomorrow morning.” Andrew smiled, “Then you get the recording tomorrow morning.” “But I need to transcribe it tonight.”

Andrew shook his head. “No way man.”

Chapter 7

“Why can't I come with you?” Julie complained as Joab headed for the old AMC.

“I need you to find out what you can about a General Algernon Stubbleington. I'll be back in an hour or so.”

“Who are you going to see?”

“Does it matter, Julie?”

“It does, yes.”

Joab, wondering why she was so persistent, said, “Somebody who is important to my article.”

“And that's all you're going to say about it,” she huffed. “I thought we were a team.”

“Jesus, Julie, you're my researcher not my partner. You're the one who asked to help me. If you're not happy with the way I work, then feel free to leave.”

Realising she had gone too far, she mentally backpedalled. “Of course Joab. Sorry.”

Joab waited by Stonycreek River, peering into the water to pass the time. 15 minutes had elapsed, and there was still no sign of Andrew. For the third time he phoned, and each time he only got the man's message bank. Where the hell was he? Joab wondered. Shit! The source had probably gone to another buyer – one with the cash, Joab thought, pessimism clouding his thinking. Fuck! He was fed up with those skinflints at High Light. He remembered Andrew worked as a flight controller. That's if Andrew was his real name. It was all he had to go by so he phoned the airport. When a voice answered, he said, “I'm trying to locate one of your air traffic controllers. He's name is Andrew.”

“Do you know his last name, sir?”

"No, but how many Andrews do you have working there?"

"Please hold. I'll have to go and find out."

"No. Wait. I didn't mean that as a question. I just meant there couldn't be too many people called Andrew working in the control tower. So if you can just put me through to the tower..."

"I can't do that, sir. What's the nature of your call?"

"I was supposed to meet up with him this morning, but he didn't show. So if you could just contact the tower and ask for Andrew." "Andrew who, sir?"

Jesus. It was like pulling hens' teeth Joab thought, closing his phone.

Mentally kicking himself as he drove, by the time Joab had reached his lodgings he was in a black mood.

"How did you go?" Julie asked, cheerfully.

"Don't ask," he growled, going into his room."

"Not good then, I'm guessing," she said to his back.

Ten minutes later she knocked on his door. "Coffee Joab."

"Thanks. Come in."

Putting down the steaming mug, she said, "What's wrong with you?"

"He didn't show."

"Well, this should cheer you up. I contacted the old war horse. The General has agreed to meet with you."

"Right," Joab said, distracted. Using find and trace.com, Joab keyed in Andrew's cell phone number. The address came up. Ricky Clark, 6 Mulberry St. Berlin.

"So, are you interested in seeing this general?"

"Sure. Set up a time and place."

"I have. You meet this retired army officer in Pittsburgh, at the old observatory in Riverview Park. He'll be there at 2 pm."

"Great. But right now I have to find my contact. Meanwhile, see what you can learn about the NASA Centre at Cleveland Airport."

"But I've made us..."

"I gotta go," he said, heading out of the door.

"...breakfast."

About the only thing that stood out for Joab in Berlin was an off-season agricultural machinery sculpture standing sentry by the roadside. It added a touch of colour to the Appalachian Plateau. Joab pulled up outside 6 Mulberry St, to find nobody home. He tried his cell again but still got a recorded message. Joab went round the back of the air traffic controller's house. The back door was locked, but there was no screen. Checking to see no one was looking, Joab pushed hard against the door. It wouldn't budge. He took a step back and kicked it hard. The lock didn't shatter like they do in movies. Taking a deep breath the reporter gave the door an even harder kick. This time, the lock broke, and he was inside. He had to find the recording. Searching room by room he came up with zilch. What if Rick, Andrew's real name, had already sold it? What if he had it with him, wherever that was? What if he was hanging out for more money? Joab, busy going through Rick's things, didn't hear the knock at the door until the announcement, "Open up. Police."

“Shit!” The cops were at the front door. Joab headed for the back door – to be confronted by an overweight cop, with his gun drawn.

“Freeze, Down on the floor. Hands behind your back.”

Joab dropped. “I can explain, officer. It's not what it looks like,” Joab tried, knowing his burglary was what it looked like, and he was in deep trouble.

With the hand restraints on, the cop dragged Joab to his feet and pushed him onto a chair.

Officer Breally, having busted through the front door, joined his larger partner. He turned to Joab. “What's your name boy?”

“Joab Rackham. Look I was just...”

“You was just what? Breaking into the place to see what you could find?” Officer Smedley said, “You didn't waste much time.”

Joab looked from one cop to the other. “What do you mean.”

Breally said, “Dead man's shoes.”

“What?” Joab said, puzzled.

“What were you after?” Smedley asked.”

“I have business with the guy who lives here.”

Smedley asked, “What sort of business, boy?”

“I'm a journalist. Ricky had a story for me. But he wasn't here.”

“So you just break in.”

“Look, he was supposed to meet me this morning but didn't show. So I came here to find out why?”

Breally said, “I can tell you why.”

“Why then?”

“Because Ricky Clark was found shot dead this morning in his car at Somerset County Airport.”

Joab, wide-eyed, mouthed “Dead!”

Smedley dragged Joab to his feet. “You're under arrest for breaking into this premises with further charges pending.” Mirandized, Joab got pushed into the back of the patrol car, which then drove away.

It had been two hours since Joab had been left alone in an interview room at Shanksville police precinct, and no cop had been into the old, windowless room to question him. Joab, excruciatingly bored, knew this was a ploy to wear him down. But wear him down for what. He'd already told the police what happened, and they had caught him red handed breaking into the place.

Then two suits entered the room. After introducing themselves to a tape, Lieutenant Coombs said, “Where were you at 1 am this morning?”

“I want my lawyer present.”

“Why do you want a lawyer, Mr Rackham? Only guilty people need lawyers.”

“Okay, I'm guilty of breaking. Now get me, my attorney.”

Coombs persisted, “Where were you at 1 o'clock this morning?”

Joab sighed deeply, “At Ida's General Store, asleep.”

“By yourself?”

“I work with a colleague.”

“The name of this co-worker.”

“Julie Stopp.”

“Address?”

“What address? Hers? Mine?”

“Hers.”

Joab shrugged, “No idea.”

“When did you last see Rick Clark?”

“Yesterday evening, down by Stonycreek River.”

“Anyone see you there?”

“Possibly. I don't know.”

“What was the meeting about?” Coombs pressed.

“He had some information for me to help me with my story.”

“What story?”

“Just a story. I write for a magazine.”

Coombs kept on. “What is the story about?”

Joab took a deep breath. “The Shanksville plane crash on 9/11.”

“Mr Clark worked at the airport is an air traffic controller so what did he have to tell you about the accident?”

“That's between him and me.”

Coombs leant closer to Joab's face. “This is a murder inquiry, and you're number one suspect so don't give me any fucking client privilege crap. So I'll ask one more time, “What did Rick Clark have to tell you?”

“He said what they heard in the tower just before the plane crashed.”

“Shit! That's not exactly cloak and dagger stuff. I heard it on CNN. And it's certainly not worth killing him for.”

“I didn't kill him. Why would I be waiting down by the river to meet with him this morning if I knew he was dead?”

Coombs, not letting up, asked, “Anyone see you there? Joggers, dog walkers?”

“I didn't take much notice.”

“So, why did you kill him?”

Joab sat up straight. “ Jesus Christ, I didn't kill him. I'm a freelance journalist, not a fucking gunman.”

“Why did you break into the victim's place?”

“Because he said he had something for me but he didn't show up.”

“What were you looking for when the officers arrested you?”

Sighing heavily, Joab said, “Okay, I was looking for a transcript of the voice recorder from Flight 93. Look, just check with Julie Stopp. She'll tell you where I was at 1 am.”

It was 1:30 pm and Joab still had not returned. Julie had been waiting for an hour for them to do lunch together. They had not made any arrangements, but she was looking forward to them spending some time together. Maybe he'd gone straight to another interview. Well, it was down to

him. She'd done her bit. Julie grabbed her jacket and was about to head off for lunch when a loud knock at her door brought her to attention.

"Police. Open this door."

Julie did so to reveal two men in cheap suits.

One of them, Detective Ned Sharples, asked, "Are you, Julie Stopp?" Staring at him, she responded, "Yes. Why?"

"Do you share this room with a – he checked his notebook – Joab Rackham?"

"Yes. Why do you ask?"

"Do you know where he was around 1 am this morning."

"Here, asleep I should think."

"You don't know then?"

"I was asleep at the time. But I'm a very light sleeper. I would have known if Joab was moving around." She added, "Now if that's all, I have to get back to work."

Sharples handed Julie a card showing his location details. "Just in case anything else comes to mind."

"Why are you interested in Joab, detective?"

"Just following up his alibi, miss."

"Alibi for what?"

Sharples, having had enough of her questions, said, "I'm unable to say at present."

The hot, stuffy holding cell had sent Joab to sleep on the narrow bed. But he was soon awoken from his nap by the noise of someone unlocking his door. Instantly sitting up, he stared bleary eyed at the cop addressing him.

"Wake up Mr Rackham. There's a gentleman to see you."

Joab looked at the cop. "Who is he?"

The man, attired in an elegant woven dark suit, stepped forward. Removing his shades, he said, "Federal Agent Rogers. We need to talk."

"Can you get me out of here?"

"It's possible if you're co-operative."

"So, what do you want to talk about?"

"For starters what you were doing in Rick Clark's house?"

"I've been all through this."

"Well now go you get to go through it with me, from when you first met the victim."

Joab sighed deeply. "We met yesterday at the river. He said he had something that would be of interest to me. He did, but he wouldn't let me have it until he got paid. I organised to meet him at the river this morning to carry out the transaction, but he didn't show up,"

"Not surprising I'd say, seeing as he'd been dead a few hours. Tell me, what did he have for sale?"

"A copy of a recording from the flight deck of Flight 93."

"Why was that of importance to you, Mr Rackham?"

"It's useful for my article."

Rogers pressed, "What article?"

"I'm a freelance writer. I write articles for whoever will pay the most."

"An article about what?"

Joab, his eyes going heavenward, snapped, "That has nothing to do with anything,"

"But it does. Mr Clark was an air traffic controller. As such he was privy to classified information. The information he shouldn't have been sharing. So why did you want the recording?"

Joab stared at the Fed. "Okay, there's a lot of speculation about Flight 93 and what happened to it."

"What happened to it! It got spread all over a field near Indian Lake."

"Yeah, well I guess the recording would have clinched it. But I didn't get it," he shrugged.

"Did you get to hear what was on it?"

Joab sighed again. "A list of demands by the hijackers and shouts and screams."

"What kind of requirements?" Rogers pressed.

"Jesus, I don't know. It sounded like some list, but the audio was terrible. Then the engines started screeching, and the voice was drowned out. That's all I know."

Agent Rogers shook his head. "It doesn't make sense. The hijackers were fucking suicide freaks, not hostage takers."

"Yeah, that puzzled me too," Joab shrugged. Looking Rogers straight in the eye, Joab stated, "I didn't kill anybody, and I don't have the tape. So please get me out of here."

Rogers scanned the charge sheet. "You're being accused of breaking into Rick Clarke's house. I can't help you with that one."

"Okay, guilty as charged. Now let me go."

Rogers called for the custody officer. They spoke privately outside the cell. Returning to Joab, he said. Before you're released, someone's going to have to stand \$50,000 bail."

Joab stared at the agent. "\$50,000! Jesus man, I don't have the sort of money."

"Well, you're going to have to get somebody to stand surety for you."

"I don't know anybody around here. So who the hell's going to vouch for me?"

"What about your friend, Ms Stopp?"

"I don't think she's got an extra 50k hanging around."

Rogers opened his hands, smiled, and said, "Then I'm afraid I can't help you."

Two hours later Joab got his release. "Who stood surety for me?" he asked the custody officer.

"The party asked to remain anonymous. Just be thankful that someone's looking out for you." Joab was, but it didn't stop him being suspicious.

Joab stepped out of the cab outside Rick Clark's house, which had crime scene tape plastered over the front door. The police hadn't retrieved the recording, so somewhere in there was his prize. He picked up his rental and drove back to Ida's. Julie wasn't there. Nor were her things. So she'd bailed out on him, he figured. He made a well-needed coffee, sat down trying to figure out what to do next. The general's contact details caught his attention. He rang the number.

General Algernon Stubblington picked up his phone on the third ring. "Who is it?" he asked, gruffly.

"Joab Rackham. My assistant said..."

"Where the hell were you today?"

"I'm sorry about that. I was unavoidably detained."

"I can't stand tardiness, Mr Rackham."

"I'd like to reschedule."

"I'll give you one more chance. Same place, 7 am. If you're not there, that's it."

"I'll be there, General."

That dealt with Joab wondered where Julie was. He figured that the cops would have called on her. Maybe she freaked and decided to leave him. He wouldn't blame her if she had. Then he wondered who had put up \$50k to keep him out of jail. He couldn't think of anybody who would have done such a thing. He put it down to luck, figuring he was owed some of that.

While at lunch with Agent Rogers, in Berlin, Patricia settled on Rey-Azteca. All the dishes looked great, and Agent Rogers went for the Mole Poblano, served in very generous portions. He looked over at Patricia. "Mike Danvers said you had some info on Joab Rackham."

She looked at him suspiciously. "Why do you want to know?"

"Did he mention a Rick Clark to you?"

"Not that I recall."

"How about some recording to do with Flight 93."

"Nope, he didn't mention that either."

Rogers changed tact, "I still remember my first case, as a rookie. That assignment doesn't seem so important to me now, but at the time it was a huge deal."

"I'm sure it was."

"My target was a grifter working L.A. I had to play the mark. The man was a sweet talker. Almost got me convinced he had my interests at heart."

"Well, he was a con man."

"They all are, even your journalist, in his way. Don't let him fool you. He's dangerous, and we must stop him publishing anti-American rumours."

Patricia looked at the agent. "Did Danvers put you up to this?"

He spread his hands. "I don't know what you mean?"

"Now you're conning me."

He grinned, "Okay, you got me. But I still think it's timely advice. Don't get too close to this guy but find out about the recording."

Joab sat eating his fish, fries and salad, enhanced by Nick's unique homemade Tartare sauce, when a voice said, "Is the food good here?"

Looking up from his meal, Joab saw an impeccably attired middle-aged gentleman with a generous moustache.

"Do you mind if I join you, Mr Rackham?" the man asked politely.

"And you are?" Joab asked, puzzled.

"Just call me Cravy, the man said, taking a seat."

"Why are you here Mr Cravy?" Joab asked, looking suspiciously at the man who had a distinct Englishness about him.

Cravy smiled, "I'm here as your guardian angel."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"Where do you think the bail surety came from, the get-out-of-jail fairy?"

Joab swallowed a forkful of food, then said, “So you posted the bond. Why?”

“Not me old man. My superior.”

“Does he have a name?”

“Not for you, no. Now, in answer your question. My superior wants something from you.”

“And what would that be?”

The waitress arrived to take Cravy's order.

“What do you recommend?” the man asked.

The journalist shrugged. “I haven't eaten here before.”

Cravy scanned the menu and ordered a nachos. Looking at Joab, he said, “He wants that recording.”

Joab felt as though even a feather could knock him down. “Yeah, well I don't work for invisible people. I'm a freelance journalist, and I write what I like.”

“I'm not suggesting you shouldn't, Mr Rackham, but you want the recording, and you can't enter the house with the police present. I, on the other hand, can enter the premises, but I don't know what I'm looking for; by working together, we have a far better chance of finding the recording.”

“I've no idea where it is. It could be anywhere.”

“It wasn't in Clark's car or on his person. So I guess he hid it somewhere in his home. And, as you've already been snooping there you might be able to help.”

Joab stared at the man, goggle-eyed. “How the hell do you know all this stuff about me?”

“My superior is well informed. How do you think he knew about your little dilemma?”

Joab rubbed his chin, thoughtfully. “Do I get to keep a copy?”

Cravy shook his head. “Hardly. My superior needs the only copy.”

“What for?”

“That's his business.”

Joab shook his head. “I can't agree to that. I need a copy of the recording for my article.”

Cravy smiled, “A wave of his magic wand and you're back in jail. So, you see, you have no choice in the matter.”

“You bastards!”

“On the other hand, as soon as he has the recording he can make the burglary charges go away.”

“You mean he has influence over the Shanksville police?”

Cravy winked.

Joab said, “I'll only help you if the police drop the charges first.”

Cravy grinned, “They already have been. Now we can enjoy a relaxing meal.”

Chapter 8

“I never thought it possible that my belief system could shift from total faith in my government to oh my God! What's going on?” General Stumblington said, as he and Joab conversed near the old observatory in Riverview Park.

“Are you referring to the plane that hit the Pentagon?”

He turned to the journalist “Young man I'm a retired Major General in the United States Army. I was the commanding general of the United States Army Intelligence and Security Command from

1981 to 1984. So I'm not some nutty conspiracy theorist. Having said that let me tell you what I know to be correct about the attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Centre on September 11, 2001."

Joab, switching on his recorder, said, "Please do."

"Son I saw that hole in the Pentagon with my own eyes and I swear on a stack of bibles the Pentagon wasn't hit by any Boeing 757. And I can prove it."

"Prove it! How?"

"All the sensors around the Pentagon were off except just one. That one sensor captured an image of the object that hit the Pentagon." He looked Joab in the eye. "I saw that picture, and it looked a hell of a lot like a missile. But, after it went public, the imagery was changed to make it seem like a plane."

"So you're saying that you know for a fact that someone deliberately fired an American warhead at the Pentagon and that the CIA or whoever, covered it up to make it look as though an airliner hit it?"

"That's right, son. I couldn't believe it myself, but after looking at all possible scenarios, and believe you me I didn't want to be right, the missile hit is the only one that makes any sense."

"Okay, general, let's look at the imagery changing process. For the footage to look authentic a lot of expertise and time would be needed, right?"

"That's correct."

"Yet the fake imagery was up and running shortly after the explosion. Which means."

"... Someone had already made it up before 9/11."

"That's right. And I know why the image editors did it that way."

"Why."

The old retired officer said, "Let's sit on that bench," indicating a seat in the shade of a sprawling old Elm tree. Once seated he turned to Joab. "Let me tell you a story, Mr Rackham, and you tell me if you think it's credible."

"Okay."

"The terrorist who flew Flight 77 so expertly into the Pentagon's west wing was Hani Hanjour if you believe the official story. Now this man, three weeks before September 11, attempted to rent a Cessna at an airfield in Maryland. A flight instructor, dubious of Hanjour's pilot's licence, wouldn't let him go up without an experienced pilot to chaperone him. This guy couldn't even land a light aircraft without assistance. Now you tell me this. Do you honestly believe that this man, just three weeks later hijacked and piloted a fucking 757, pulling off a very low level flying stunt that even the most seasoned and experienced airline pilot would find virtually impossible to achieve? This guy was supposed to have flown that 757 just 20 feet above the ground and perfectly hit his target in the Pentagon."

"It certainly sounds incredible, general."

"Well, it didn't happen that way, because it was a fucking missile, not a plane, that hit the Pentagon."

"Where was the missile fired from?"

"Hell, it had to come from a military arsenal. Where else?"

"So the military fired a missile at the Pentagon! Why?"

The general hesitated. "I'm not getting into speculation. You'd be better off asking what happened to the real Flight 77?"

“Do you know the answer to that?”

“Hell, man. Do you want me to do your whole job for you?”

Joab grinned. Then he said, “As a retired general aren't you making yourself a target for Homeland Security by disclosing this stuff?”

The general looked at Joab. “Son, I served this nation to the best of my ability for over 50 years, and I feel utterly betrayed by this country's leaders. I'm 78 years old, with cancer and a dodgy ticker. What the fuck can the bastards do to me. Hell, a bullet would probably be doing me a favour.” He grabbed Joab's hand, “Just get the truth out there. Make sure people know what happened, and if there's any justice left in this fucking world, the moral powers of the law and the judiciary will charge and convict Bush and co for their hideous war crimes.”

Back at 6, Bridge St Joab met up with Cravy. There were no cops, just a checkered tape and a sign saying 'crime scene do not enter'. The man, handing Joab some plastic gloves, said, “So, what are we looking for, a tape or a disk?”

“An MP3 recording on an iPod.”

Joab started in Clark's office, where he'd been disturbed, by the cops the day before. He checked shelves and any drawers thoroughly and came up empty.

Cravy, meanwhile, concentrated on the kitchen, He emptied all the jars and tins into a garbage bin but came up with nothing. Undaunted he rifled through the drawers and cupboards; looked in the oven, the fridge and the dishwasher. But no iPod. Next, he started on the laundry.

Two hours later there was still no sign of their prize. Frustrated, Cravy asked, “Did you search the cistern?”

“Yes, of course.” Joab wondered why the Feds were after the recording, especially as copies were held by news services, which had aired it previously. There had to be something on it, something hidden, perhaps something the FBI wanted to remain hidden.

“Have you searched the shed?” the older man asked, exasperated.

“Yes, and the garage.” But there was somewhere they hadn't searched, and Joab wasn't going to let on. He asked, “Did Rick have a locker at work?”

“It's been checked already.” Cravy added, “Besides, somebody murdered him before he clocked in.”

“Then I guess we can safely assume his killer took the iPod,” Joab suggested.

Cravy sighed, “I'm afraid you may well be right. Unless of course, you've stashed it somewhere.”

“Do you seriously think I'm doing all this shit for fun?”

“I will have to tell my superior I can't find it. Your benefactor won't be happy. If we discover that you had the recording all the time, Mr Rackham, your miserable life won't be worth living. Do I make myself clear?”

Driving back to the motel Joab received a call from Julie. “Where'd you get to?”

“The cops came around asking about you. I freaked and decided to split.”

“Yeah, well it was all a big misunderstanding.”

Not believing a word of it, she said, “The general wasn't pleased.”

“It's all sorted. The article's coming together, so I probably don't need you anymore.”

Patricia wasn't expecting that. She said, “Oh! I was enjoying your company. How about I take you to lunch before I head back to Yonkers?”

“Thanks. That would be nice. But it's my treat as a way to thank you.”

“No Joab, my treat. I insist.”

Joab had long known it was no good arguing with a determined woman. “Okay, have it your way, Julie. How about we meet at the Rey Azteca. I ate at the restaurant last night. The food was excellent.”

“Okay, let's say 9 o'clock.”

It was 7:13. Joab reckoned had just enough time to go back to Ricks before meeting Julie for dinner. When he got there, the air traffic controllers place was deserted. So far so good Joab thought. He went around the back and pushed open the damaged door. Stealthfully the journalist went to the old stone hearth in the lounge. He reached up into the flue, and his hand encountered something – a small package swathed in bubble wrap. Retrieving his prize, Joab pulled off the wrapping. “Yes!” the reporter said, holding the iPod in his hand. He knew there was something on it the Feds didn't want people to know. It was also something the 'superior' whoever he was, wanted very badly. The expertise of a sound engineer was required to reveal the secret of the recording. Joab grabbed his wallet and found the business card Michael had given him. Michael Kronsky had sat next to him on the flight from England. He was an audio expert who worked in the movies. Joab needed to see him, and that meant going to Hollywood. That would have to wait, though. He plugged in the earpiece and listened to what was on the iPod. Satisfied it was what he had been looking for, he kissed it and placed it in his pocket.

Julie was already waiting at the restaurant when Joab got there. “So tell me what happened,” she said, as he sat down.

“What do you mean, what happened?”

“Why you were arrested?”

“What do you fancy?” he said, scanning the menu.

“I fancy you're avoiding my question.”

He sighed, “Okay, I went to visit a guy who worked as an Air Traffic Controller at SRA. He wasn't home. The cops saw me there and arrested me.”

“The cops just happened to be visiting while you were there. Why?”

“Because my source was found shot dead in his car early this morning. He was supposed to give me something but didn't show. So I went round his place to see what was going on.”

“But he wasn't there, and you went sniffing around for whatever.”

“Yeah,”

“Oh, my God! And they arrested you as a suspect. Which was why they came round asking about you.”

“Yes. Now can I order my dinner?”

As they ate, Julie said, “So you met this air traffic controller and a few hours later somebody murdered him, and you become their chief suspect?”

Joab shrugged, between bites of the best Nachos he'd tasted, saying “Their only suspect.”

“So, how come they let you go.”

“Because I'm innocent. The cops could only charge me with burglary.” “

You know what I mean.”

“Someone posted bail.”

“Someone! You don't know who?”

“I suspect it had something to do with an Englishman.”

“What Brit?”

Joab ate some food while working out what to say. At length he said. “I have no idea, but the question is, why did he help me?”

“Yes, Joab, but how did he know about your situation?”

“I’ve been asking myself the same thing. I guess he, whoever he is, knew about me before I was aware of him.”

“Which brings us back to why he helped you.”

Joab wiped his mouth. “He wants something from me.”

“What?”

He shrugged and continued eating.

Not letting up, she said, “Was he killed because he spoke to you?”

Joab rolled his eyes. He’d had it with interrogations that day. “How the hell would I know. Now let’s just drop it.”

Dinner continued in stony silence, Then Julie said, “So how did it go with the old general?”

“He told me some interesting stuff.”

“What stuff?”

Joab, casting his eyes around, said: “I’m not talking about it here.” Then, after a silent pause, he added, “I have to go away.”

“Where?”

“Culver City.”

“What’s in Culver City?”

“Who?”

“Okay, who’s in Culver City you need to see.”

“Christ, Julie, Enough with all the fucking questions.”

“Sorry. It’s just that ...”

“... It’s been a shit of a day, and I just want to relax.”

After a couple of minutes, she said, “I have to get back to Yonkers.”

“Okay.”

With downcast eyes, she said, “You’ll be glad to see the back of me. But your English politeness won’t allow you to admit it.”

Joab looked her in the eye. “To be truthful, Julie, you scare me a bit.”

“Scare you,” she uttered, bemused.

“You’re working for me gratis. You put up with my crap. You’re too good to be true. To be straight with you, I keep thinking you must have another agenda.”

She stared at him, mouth agape. She had to make it look real. Breaking her silence she snarled, “Well fuck you, mister.” With that, she stormed off out of the restaurant. All heads swivelled in his direction. Joab smiled nervously, then went back to his Nachos.

Agent Rogers looked at the pathologist in disbelief. “He wasn’t shot in the airport car park?”

The veteran doctor looked at the agent. “He was killed somewhere else, then driven to the airport.”

Rogers shook his head. “Why would the killer drive him to the airport car park?”

The medical man shrugged. "That's for you find out." He turned to pick up a scalpel. "Now we're going to see what's going on inside."

"I'll leave you to do that. But before you do where do you put the time of death now?"

"Obviously before 1 am, which was when he was logged entering the car park. "I'd say around 11 pm."

"Hm, that puts our suspect right back in the frame."

The pathologist, a stickler for following the rules, said, "Can I borrow your phone?"

"What for?"

"I'd better ring Shanksville PD and tell them."

Rogers said, "You could do that, doc, but I'd like to speak with the suspect first."

"Afraid I can't do that. If I hold back on this, it could be my job."

Rogers smiled, "Relax doc. I'll tell the police chief for you."

The pathologist shook his head. "Sorry. I have to do that."

Rogers fixed the medico in his gaze. "Okay, I'll lay it on the line but keep it to yourself. The suspect is an FBI asset helping us with a sensitive case of national importance. I need you to keep quiet till morning. Am I making myself clear?" Responding to the big FBI stick, the doctor answered, "Yes, perfectly. It does complicate things, though."

"Yes, life can get that way."

Chapter 9

Patricia Hamilton, while waiting for Special Agent Danvers to emerge from his office, wondered what Joab knew about her. The thing about her having a secret agenda nearly freaked her. He had not spelt it out, but that made it even more unsettling for her. At a loss for how to play it, she'd contacted Agent Danvers. He'd called her in for a face to face, which was why she was currently waiting to see him. Once she got to see him, she told him what had been going on. "I couldn't afford to get involved with the police without blowing my cover so I made myself scarce," she explained.

Danvers knew it could be difficult for new recruits. But they had to have a case on which to cut their teeth.

He said, "Don't beat yourself up over this. No matter how thorough the training it can never completely prepare you for field work. Going undercover can get tricky. It takes a lot of practical experience to get what you want from the target without raising suspicions. For journalists, suspicion goes with the territory." Changing the subject, he said, "So where is he now?"

"He's gone to Culver City."

"Why?"

"He didn't say."

"Did it have anything to do with the murder of Rick Clark, the air traffic controller?"

"I suspect it does, but he changed the subject."

Danvers looked across his desk at her. "You need to go there and find out."

Julie baulked. "That's hardly going to work. He suspects something's not kosher about me. I don't think he'll trust me again. Besides, he's working with some Brit who wants something from him."

Danvers sat back, his face a question mark. "Who is it and what is he after?"

"I don't know. Joab wouldn't tell me."

“You mean the 'target' Agent Hamilton.”

“Yes, sorry. All I know is that this anonymous Brit paid for Jo, er, the target's bail.”

Danvers nodded, “So our Mr Rackham owes him.”

“Don't you mean target,” Patricia said, instantly regretting it.

He looked at her. “I'm not close to him. Let me give you a bit of sage advice, agent. The closer you get to your target the less personal the relationship has to be. Don't ever forget that.” Then he said, “You'll need local knowledge. I'll give you a contact in the Bureau.”

“Yes sir,” she said, keeping well and truly in her place.”

“You'll have to build bridges with your target.”

“How do I do that?”

“Grovel, if you have to. Declare undying love. You figure it out.”

LAX was by far the worst airport Joab had experienced in America. Everywhere seem to be under some construction. And the smells! Depending on where he was he got whiffs of sour milk, urine, and stale tobacco in overfilled ashtrays. Joab was greatly relieved when he's jumped through all the red tape security hoops and stood outside the airport. His watch read 5:50 am – too early to ring someone, especially for a favour. A 23-minute cab ride got him into the heart of Culver City. The taxi driver proudly informed him that Culver City was the real heart of the West Coast movie industry and that it boasted many theme parks, including a new Star Wars world, which was yet another Disney project. As Joab paid the driver, he asked. “Where's a good place to get a bite this time of day.”

“The Akasha should be open.”

“Where is it?”

“It's pretty pricey.”

Joab didn't care. He had an extra ten grand to spend.

The driver added, “Mind you, The owner; one Akasha Richmond was Michael Jackson's one-time personal chef.”

“No kidding.”

The Akasha was already busy by the time Joab entered the multi-faceted cafe. An open bakery and café fronted the space, displaying a pastry-filled counter and wide-ranging coffee program. Joab took a seat amid reclaimed wood and brick walls with their arched cut-outs, exposed rafters, and a mobile crafted with pieces that look like space aged guitar picks. He wanted something light and went for the turkey burger and a fennel salad with fresh avocado.

It was still only half 6, too early to make the call. But, apparently, not too soon to receive one. Julie's name came up on his phone. “Hi Julie, what's up?”

“Sorry about the way I stormed out of the restaurant.”

“Yeah, I probably won't be able to show my face there again. Which probably doesn't matter that much as I can't see myself choosing Shanksville for my vacation.”

Julie laughed. He'd broken the ice. “I don't know why I reacted that way so I just needed to call to clear things up.”

“Yeah, well they're kind of clear now.”

“It was kind of exciting working with you.”

“Yeah, you too. Have a great life.”

“Hey, we might cross paths again.”

He didn't think so. Joab then put his plan into action. He rang the number on the business card.

Michael Kronsky picked up on the fourth ring. “Mike Kronsky, who's speaking?”

“Hi, Joab here. I'm the journalist you sat next to on the plane from London.”

“Yeah. So what do you want?”

“you're a sound engineer, right?”

“Audio special effects. But go on.”

“I need you to look at a recording for me.”

“With what in mind?”

“enhancing the sound.”

“Format?”

“MP3. It's about 3 minutes long.”

“Shouldn't be too difficult. I'm working on a movie at present, but I should be free in a month's time.”

“Shit! I need it a lot quicker than that. Can I meet you on the film lot?”

“Hey, steady on man. Why the rush?”

“It's something I need for an article I'm writing.”

“If you want my help you're going to have to tell me what the hell this is really about,” Mike stated, becoming suspicious.

“Okay, I'm going to trust you. It's allegedly a recording from UA 93 just before the plane spread itself around Indian Lake.”

“You're kidding me!”

“I need to know what the people on the recording are saying.”

Michael, figuring it could be interesting said, “Yeah. Okay, I'll be on the Columbia lot. Ask for me at the security hut.”

“I'll see you there soon.”

“YES!” he shouted, punching the air.

His elation was short-lived, brought to an immediate halt by the ominous tap on his shoulder.

He looked up. Much to his surprise, Agent Rogers loomed over him. “Christ, you certainly know how to ruin a man's breakfast.”

“How the hell can you afford to eat here?”

“I'm sure you didn't tail me all the way from Shanksville to ask me that.”

Rogers took a seat opposite the journalist. “Rick Clark wasn't killed at the airport.”

“So?”

“So where were you at 11 pm the night someone killed him?”

“Oh, so we're back to accusing me again.”

“Just answer the question, and if I'm satisfied, you can get back to your breakfast.”

“Probably getting drunk. There's fuck all else to do in Shanksville at night, or at any time for that matter.”

“Did anyone see you drinking in the bar?”

“I was only kidding. I was tucked up in bed.”

“With Julie Stopp.”

“No, I'm a married man,” Joab said, showing mock surprise.

Roger's pissed with the Englishman's bad attitude. Said, “So where is it?”

“Where's what?”

He leant closer to Joab. “Don't fuck me around. I can make you have an awful day if you don't cooperate. Now I'm convinced the murderer killed Rick because of the recording. So where is it?”

“I don't know. I was looking for it – remember?”

“Yes, and you went back for it with some Brit. You were both seen so don't try to deny it.”

“Okay, you've got me there. But we still didn't find it.”

“What was the name and address of the guy you were with?”

“He said his name was Cravy. That's all I know.”

“How do you know him?”

“I don't. Cravy works for the guy who posted my bail.”

Rogers brightened. “So he wants the recording.”

“I guess so. But Cravy didn't get it.”

Rogers stared at Joab. “That's because you already have it, Mr Rackham. Now if you don't turn it over to me, you become number one suspect again, and I haul you back and leave you to the tender mercies of the Shanksville police chief – capiche?”

“I wish I did have it. But I had to get \$10,000 before Rick would give it to me.”

Rogers shook his head. “Why did you go back to Rick Clark's house a third time.”

Joab looked at the Fed, blankly.

“Did you think that the FBI wouldn't be tracking your movements? You broke in at 7:23 pm and was out in three minutes, which means you knew just where to look. So where is it?”

Joab handed it over. “Now we're done, right.”

Rogers plugged in the ear buds and listened to the recording. Satisfied he had what he was looking for, he said, “You made a wise decision. Then, glancing at Joab's breakfast, he said, “That's probably the most expensive cold breakfast you're ever going to eat – so enjoy.”

“Fuck you, Rogers.”

Before Joab could get back to his food. His phone rang again. Annoyed, he grabbed his ringing phone. “Julie! What do you want now?”

“Joab, I behaved badly. I'm sorry and want to make it up. Where are you staying?”

“I haven't got that far yet.”

“I have a cousin who lives in Beverley Hills. He'll probably be able to put you up for a few days.”

“Thanks, it could be useful. Send me the details.”

She paused, then said, “Joab, I enjoyed the time we spent together. It wasn't always smooth, but I felt alive and would like to help you again.”

“Yeah, it was fun.”

“I could come over there if you like.”

“No, not necessary. Besides, I don't figure on being here long. I'll see you back in Yonkers if you like.” He added. “Now, I have to go,”

“I'll get onto my cousin for you. Take care Joab.”

“You too. Catch up soon.”

Joab needed transport. He picked up a 6-year-old Ford at economy car rentals and headed off to Beverley Hills, 35 minutes away. Julie's cousin, Matt Farmer, lived out on Ohio Avenue. Joab's phone GPS got him there in under an hour. Matt turned out to look a bit like John Goodman the film actor, including his size. He blocked the doorway. “You must be Joab.”

“And you're Matt?”

“That's right. Come on in.”

Julie said he lived in a Spanish-style house – some house. More like a mansion.

“Great place,” Joab complimented, as they sat in the spacious living room, drinking iced orange juice.

“My cousin tells me you're a freelance journalist.”

“that's right.”

“So what are you working on?”

Joab, trying to be polite, said, “Oh, I have some projects on the go.”

Not willing to let the journalist off that easy, he said, “My cousin said something about you researching 9/11.”

Now the pussy had escaped from the sack there was no getting it back. Joab knew 9/11 was a very touchy subject for many Americans. Feeling the eggshells underfoot, he said, “High Light, the magazine I'm currently working with wants to rake over old 9/11 coals.”

Matt, agitated said, “Why the hell can't people just accept it happened the way it did?”

“And which way was that? There're so many versions of events out there it's difficult to know which is true.”

Matt looked straight at Joab. “A bunch of fucking towel heads crashed American planes into American buildings. End of.”

Not wanted to be turfed out on his ear, knowing where he stood with the opinionated Matt, Joab just nodded. Changing the subject, Joab said, “You have a good view of the city from that window.”

“Yeah, it's not bad. Mind you it hasn't been a walk in the park sorting this place out.”

“Sorting it out?”

“Hell, I had to strip the joint down, turn it into a spacious three bedroom, three bath home, with living room, dining room, family room, master suite and centre island kitchen.”

Matt sounded like a realtor, but at least it got him away from his opinions on 9/11.

Culver city's slogans included 'The Motion Picture Capital of the World,' 'The Heart of Screenland,' and 'Where Hollywood Movies are Made. Joab, like many people, assumed Hollywood was where most of the movies got made. Only Disney still had the main studio in Tinsel-town. The Columbia film studios were established in Culver City, which is why Joab went back there. Following voice directions from the sat nav, Joab found himself driving along busy Washington Blvd, known for its art and culture and the new home for Columbia Studios. More precisely it is now owned by Sony Movies. Security guards stopped Joab at the twin arches He asked for Mike Kronskey who worked in the audio studios. One of the guards rang him and got the nod. A security guard gave the reporter a

map as well as verbal directions. Never having stepped foot inside a studio complex Joab had the naive idea he would encounter cowboys, pirates, spacemen and all manner of dressed up characters on his way to the sound studios. But he never passed anyone not wearing regular clothes. Mike Kronsky was waiting for him at the entrance.

“Hi,” Joab greeted. Man, this place is humongous.”

Mike grinned. “Hi. Come inside and tell me what this is about,” he said, taking Joab to a sound proof booth.

Once inside, Joab said, “I’m currently researching what happened to the airline passengers on 9/11. I obtained this recording,” he said, “of a conversation going on between the tower and the aircraft. There’s background noise, but we can still hear an alleged terrorist making a list of demands. I want to know what he was saying.” Handing Mike the MP3 player, he said, “Do you think you can help me?”

Mike grinned, “Let’s find out.

After carrying out some sound tests, using the latest version of Melodyne. Mike explained, “This baby can pick out individual instruments and notes from chords, so we’ll start here.”

Joab listened but couldn’t tell much difference in what he was hearing.

Mike said, “If voices occupy distinct frequency ranges we can use bandpass filters to separate them. However, this is highly unlikely, as most voices have most of their ranges in common. Still, it’s worth a try, so here goes.”

The recording didn’t improve. Undeterred, Mike said, “I’m now switching to FTT view in Audacity to find out where the voices fall in the audio spectrum.”

“This is incredible stuff,” Joab said, vastly impressed.

After importing the recording, the sound engineer said, “Now you can see the tracks of your audio file as separate lines in Audacity. This programme shows the waveform of the track. Flat sections are quiet while big vertical lines indicate the noisy parts.”

Joab watched, amazed, as the ambient noise disappeared leaving the voice to come through much clearer. The man spoke in English but with a strong Middle Eastern accent. The voice said:

“This is Hassan Izz Al Din on Flight 442. Among the 111 passengers are three members of the Kuwaiti Royal Family. We demand the release of 17 Shiite Muslim guerrillas held in Kuwait. If they are not released, we will kill one passenger every ten minutes, starting with the Kuwaiti royals.”

Joab and Mike looked at each other, agog. The journalist said. “Can you make me a copy of that?”

Mike, stunned, said, “What the hell’s that got to do with flight 93?”

“More to the point, why has someone tried to pass it off as a conversation between the 9/11 hijackers and the control tower?” Then it hit him! Joab now knew very precisely why Agent Rogers had to get hold of the recording. It had been pre-recorded from a previous hijacking and was used to make the alleged hijacking of Flight 93 more plausible. If the media ever got wind of it and they had the stomach to publish it, proof of the massive 9/11 fraud would be out there for all to know.

Mike said, “Jesus, it’s a fake.”

“The first part isn’t. You can hear the tower talking to Flight 93. Then a second, softer sound comes in, with the hijacker’s demands.”

“So they spliced it together. Jesus Joab, what the hell have you discovered here?”

Joab smiled, “The best evidence to date proving the 9/11 official explanation of events is false.”

“Man, this is fucking dynamite. Just make sure it doesn’t blow up in your face.”

Joab looked at him. "Mike, this never happened. I wasn't here and this, indicating the recorded disk, never existed."

"Are you fucking kidding. This information will go fucking viral on Facebook."

"Listen to me. The Feds have a copy of the recording. I saved this copy before giving them the original. As far as they're concerned, they have the only copy. As long as they think that, you and I are safe. If they find out about this, you and I are dead." Do you get it - DEAD!"

"So what are you going to do with it?" Mike asked, tersely.

"Transcribe it and hide the evidence where nobody can find it. Then I get my article published."

As the FBI has grown, some Headquarters functions had moved to other locations. The Criminal Justice Information Services Division became located in Clarksburg, West Virginia, where the Bureau's deputy head had summoned Agent Rogers for a briefing. He arrived at 1000 Custer Hollow Road, the Bureau's location, where he asked for directions to Deputy Director Mathers' office, which was on the fifth floor of the massive building. Exiting the elevator, Agent Rogers, found the office, entered and approached the woman behind a desk.

"Yes, can I help you?" she asked, brusquely.

"Agent Rogers to see Mr Mathers."

She checked his appointments. Rogers was listed. She picked up her internal phone. "Agent Rogers to see you, sir."

"Do you have the item," The FBI boss asked, once Rogers was in his domain.

Agent Rogers hands over the Flight 93 recording.

"Is it authentic?"

"I believe so, sir."

"Are you sure this is the only copy?"

"As sure as I can be. But I will say this. The recording of the Arab speaking is so muffled nobody can make out what he's saying. So I don't see there being a problem."

"Oh, you don't do you?" Mathers said, staring at Rogers. "What if this English journalist made himself a copy?"

"I have no way of knowing that, sir. I did have to put pressure on him before he'd hand it over. I don't think he would have needed any persuasion if he already had a copy."

"But you don't know that. And I want to know for certain. So deal with Joab Rackham. He's a dangerous loose end."

"And how am I supposed to deal with this?"

"Get one of our wet job people onto it."

"Sir, he's a Brit journalist. We don't know what he's written or how much he may already have sent to his publisher. If he ends up dead questions are going to be asked."

"Accidents do happen, Agent Rogers."

Chapter 10

Having secreted the evidence in a safety deposit box, Joab felt much easier. But where to go next with his investigation that was the big question? He reasoned that he had researched enough for the article and, perhaps, even a good book on the subject. But not a great book. He wanted something more than a work based on conspiracy theories. He needed cast iron facts and truth. But the proof was a hard animal to bring to heel. And the more people he questioned, the more visible and

vulnerable he became. Joab checked his messages. Julie had phoned twice; there was also a call from a Trooper Danville from Shanksville PD. How the hell had the cop gotten his number and what did he want? Joab wondered.

He dialled the return number A male voice said, "Hello."

"Is that Trooper Danville?"

"Yeah, Ben Danville speaking. Who's asking?"

"Joab Rackham here. I'm taking a big chance phoning you. So why did you call."

"You're the guy who's been asking questions about Flight 93 – right?"

"Right."

"Here's the thing. I have to be careful what I say, but I was there that day when the plane crashed, if that's what happened."

"Do you think something different happened?"

"I'm not talking about it over the phone. Where are you now?"

"Culver City."

"Are you coming back to Shanksville?"

"What, and be hunted down by your lot?"

"Relax, we have another suspect for the Clark murder. It turns out that his death had nothing to do with him being an air traffic controller. He was left in the car park to put us off the scent."

"I'm sorry, but I don't trust anyone at the moment."

"Google the Shanksville News. The story was in yesterday's edition." Joab mulled it over. "Alright, I'll come back there to see you, and only you mind. So when and where?"

"I'm off duty at 6 pm tomorrow. Meet me down by the creek, near the bridge. I'll send you my picture."

"Just a question. Why are you doing this?"

"Because I was brought up to do the right thing and I think it's the right thing to do."

Mervyn Chase arrived in the selected area, carried out the kill, and departed immediately. Mervyn was a master at his craft. The Feds didn't hand out hit assignments to just anybody. Yes, Mervyn was excellent at his job and very expensive. But the US government had very deep pockets. When he wasn't on the job, Mervyn slipped into the shadows – almost like a ghost. When he received the call from Agent Rogers, he immediately went into action. His preferred method of operation was for his targets to have accidents. This skill required more time than shooting the target because, for it to seem natural, he had to get to know the victim's habits. But it was worth it as nobody looked for a killer.

When is an accident not an accident? It was a rhetorical question, one that Mervyn Chase mused over from time to time. He sat in his Buick taking photos of the subject as he parked his car in the driveway of the Spanish style villa. The thing about causing accidents is that they had to look natural. They had to be an anomaly within the routine of the subject. It wasn't as easy as people thought. Even his FBI handler thought the Bureau overpaid the hitman. Mervyn had to get to know the target, without him or her being aware. For three days he had been monitoring Joab's habits, daily patterns and general lifestyle. He twirled his handlebar moustache and watched as Joab let himself into the house. What he didn't know was that Joab had changed his plans and was packing to go to the airport. He left a thank you note for Matt, left the key in a plant pot near the door, and packed his few belongings into the trunk of his car.

Mervyn watched as his target finished loading his luggage. Without being spotted, he tailed Joab to the airport, followed him through the cattle rails to the booking in counter. He caught a glance of the

destination on the reservation slip. After pulling out of the queue, Mervyn phoned his handler, saying, "Target flying to Shanksville. Shall I follow?"

Rogers thought about it. He finally decided, "Find out why he has gone back there Then report to me."

The hit man got back in the queue. This job wasn't panning out, and if things looked like becoming awkward, he was ready to bolt. In his line of work, he couldn't leave anything to chance.

Joab waited by the creek, as arranged. He scanned the area for any police activity. All seemed quiet so Joab settled down to wait for trooper Danville. He turned up about 10 minutes later. Joab saw the tall, gangly man bearing a slight resemblance to Sam Elliot, the actor. Looking like a cowboy, from his Stetson to his patterned leather boots. Danville said, "Howdy. Thanks for waiting."

"So what have you got for me?"

"Well, I was on duty when the crash occurred. It was my job to take statements from eyewitnesses."

"And what were you told?"

"Mostly witnesses gave different stories, but they all agreed on three things. Namely, there was no wreckage, no bodies, and no noise."

"How do you figure that out?"

"I didn't, but it sure bugged me. Particularly since Somerset County Coroner William Miller put this in his report."

"Can you get me a copy?"

"Nope."

"I can pay you for it."

Danville became agitated. Hell, man, I 'm not doing this for your damn money."

"I didn't mean to..."

"Look, I saw the original report, but he later changed some bits and left some things out."

"Why would he do that?"

Danville hesitated, then said, "All I know is that one time after we'd had a few beers, he softened up and admitted somebody from above had applied pressure to get him to change some of the facts."

"Who applied the pressure?"

"He wouldn't say, but after the crash, the Feds were sniffing around the place. My guess is that he got warned about writing anything that contradicted the official version of events."

Joab nodded. "What did you observe from the crash sight?"

"I was looking for anything that said tail, wing, plane, metal. There was nothing. Hell, I was amazed because it did not, in any way, shape, or form, look like a plane crash."

"What do you reckon happened?"

"The only logical answer to me is that it was blown up in mid-air, leaving just small pieces to rain down upon the earth."

"How does that explain the wing-shaped hole discovered at the crash site?"

The trooper sneered, "That hole was there long before 9/11."

Joab, surprised asked, "What do you mean?"

There was a winged shape hole in the ground, located at the same coordinates as flight 93's crash hole, er crash site.”

“When did that happen?”

“1984. USGS archives recorded this winged shape hole. I reckon it looks like a perfect place to centre a missile and cause an impact crater. I mean Who needs an airplane when they already had the wing-shaped hole made and waiting.”

“So someone found the perfect place to create the legend. The legend of Flight 93.”

The trooper looked at Joab. “The story read real good at first. But they couldn't fool everybody with such weak images and no evidence to back it up?” Danville paused, then added. “Hell, only Uncle Sam could tell a tale so outrageously fake that no one will dare tell the emperor that he's buck naked.”

“So there was no plane crash, just the impact from a cruise missile.”

“Yeah, that's the way I see it.”

“So what happened to Flight 93?”

Danville shrugged, “Dunno, but it sure didn't crash around here.”

“Thanks for your help. It brings a few pieces of the jigsaw together.”

Danville looked at the journalist. “You're either brave or stupid doing this. You can bet they're watching you, and if you become more than an irritation to them, they'll shut you down, quick as flicking off a light switch.”

“Who are this they you're talking about?”

“Same people that got Miller to change his report.”

Joab stared at Danville. “Someone has to raise questions about what happened to the Flight 93 passengers.”

The trooper looked around. “Yeah, give 'em hell, man.”

Joab watched as Danville walked away. The missile theory didn't make sense. But passenger plane didn't make sense either. That just left the drone theory. Joab took one last look at the peaceful river, then went back to his car.”

Getting a room back at the General store was no problem. Shanksville wasn't exactly teeming with tourists, despite the town's morbid draw card. Joab locked his door and listened to the recording he'd copied onto his laptop. The first part of the cockpit communication with the tower indicated that some passengers on United Airlines Flight 93 banded together to attack their hijackers, which, according to this account, forced down the plane. The second part was muffled, but Mike's magic had dampened down background noise, making the voice much clearer. It soon became apparent to Joab that the second part of the recording came from a much earlier aircraft hijacking. This revelation put a big question mark over the validity of the record. Joab stopped listening and made a note:

Eyewitnesses, some professional involved with the crash, maintain that a heat-seeking missile from an F-16 destroyed Flight 93. Other theorists add far-fetched elaborations: No terrorists were aboard, or somebody drugged the passengers. Perhaps the wildest theory suggested that all the passengers from Flights 11, 175 and 77 boarded Flight 93 so the US government could kill them. This idea came about to explain why so few passengers were on the four planes on 9/11. So few that they could well have all fitted on one plane. That would account for the people in the planes who lost their lives that fateful day.

William Miller thought all that business with Flight 93 was done with and buried. That was until he got a call from the journalist. He said, "Everything I have to say on the matter is in the public record. You can find it in the archives."

Joab added a little pressure. "Dr Miller, I understand what you are saying, but I've heard you made some changes to your initial findings. Why was that?"

"With disasters, like that of Flight 93, reports start off very sketchy and become refined as more reliable information comes to hand."

"But you made changes to what you had observed."

"Thought I'd seen. The mind plays tricks when affected by strange circumstances. Now that's all I have to say to you."

"I understand this can be difficult for you, Dr Miller, but there're many anomalies still unanswered."

"I can't answer any more of your questions. You need to ask the air crash people at the FAA."

"Yes, that's an excellent idea. So who investigated the bomb hoax from the FAA?"

"There was some woman in charge. I don't remember her name." The line went dead.

After getting rid of the nosy journalist, the pathologist made a call. "Hi, William Miller from the Shanksville Coroner's Office here. I just had a call from that reporter. He's sniffing around Cleveland Airport, looking for the FAA woman who investigated the crash."

"That means he'll probably go to FAA headquarters in DC. "Thanks for the heads up, Bill. We'll We'll get right onto it." Agent Rogers then phoned Julie. "Joab Rackham is heading for Washington. Find out what he's up to."

Chapter 11

The Federal Aviation Administration, nestled in the vast Department Of Transportation building, at 600 Maryland Avenue, was a nightmare for Joab to negotiate. It seemed that getting to see Catherine Hart wasn't as easy as he'd anticipated. The way specific departments were ensconced inside larger ones reminded him of Russian dolls nested inside each other. He eventually found the office of the National Transportation Safety Board, which dealt with aviation accident reports. At last Joab felt he was getting somewhere. He approached the reception desk, saying "I need to speak with Catherine Hart."

"And who are you, sir?" The receptionist asked.

"Joab Rackham."

"Do you have an appointment, Mr Rackham?"

"No, but I need to speak with Catherine Hart."

The receptionist, who flashed a false smile, wore a tag that read Janette Holder. She said, "Let's make an appointment for you." Looking at her computer screen, she said, "You're in luck. I can squeeze you in at 4:30 pm next Wednesday."

"You don't understand. I'm a journalist, and I need Ms Hart's input on a story I'm following up."

The woman looked at him. "That may well be so, but it doesn't change the fact that Ms Hart cannot see you now."

Joab shook his head sadly. "Regretfully, I will have to post the story without her version of events. It'll be a shame because I only need about 5 minutes of her time."

"What story are you talking about?"

“The sad saga of Flight 93 on 9/11.” Joab knew the words Journalist and 9/11 would get the receptionist's attention. It did, but not the way he expected.

She spoke into her intercom. Mr Brayle, I have a journalist to see Catherine Hart, in reception.” She looked up at the reporter. “Please take a seat. He won't be long.”

Mr Brayle was there within two minutes. He approached Joab, extended his hand in friendship, then said, “Now how can I help you Mr?”

“Rackham. I believe Catherine Hart was the FAA investigator who dealt with the Flight 93 crash near Shanksville.”

Flashing a genial smile, Brayle, the epitome of a top-flight executive, Said, “Mrs Hart is not longer with us. What do you want to know about the incident?”

“There are conflicting reports as to what happened on 9/11. Ms Hart was an eyewitness so I would appreciate her contact details.”

Remaining very calm and detached, Brayle said, “It's all in the report, Mr Rackham.”

“Can I see a copy?”

“But of course. It's been in the public domain online since 2003.”

“I would like to see a copy.”

“Just go to our Website,” Brayle smiled.

“I'd prefer to see the original report.”

“Certainly Mr Rackham. It will take a while to get it from the archives. Just leave your details, and we will contact you as soon as it is ready.”

Joab looked at the smug, smart man. “I can wait.”

“Oh, that won't be necessary. We'll let you know when to come in.”

Feeling he was being given the short shrift and could do nothing about it, Joab said, “I guess that's it then. I need to know as soon as possible, though.”

“Of course. Just leave you details with Janette.”

Joab watched as the smooth Mr Brayle disappeared back into the bowels of the humongous building. He gave the receptionist, his card. She gave him one in return. Joab stared at it. The card was one of Catherine Hart's, with her contact details. Joab looked at Janette. Thanks – but why?”

“Because Catherine is a good friend. Because they treated her badly,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

“In what way?”

“You'll have to ask her that. But don't mention my name.”

Joab smiled, “Don't worry, I won't let on.”

Back in his car Joab phoned a mobile number. “Hearing a woman's voice, he said, “Are you, Catherine Hart?”

“Yes. Who are you?”

“I'm a journalist working for High Light Magazine. I'd like to ask you some questions about the emergency landings at Cleveland Airport on 9/11.”

“That information is classified.”

“Yes I know, but there are conflicting reports in the public domain. As you were on site at the time, I need your help in getting the story straight.”

“I told you I cannot divulge that information.”

“Yes, I know. But I could just throw some versions at you, and you can only affirm or deny.”

Catherine despised reporters, but this guy was intelligent. “Alright, I’ll give you five minutes.”

“When and where?” Joab asked, grabbing a pen.

Shortly after, Joab received a call from Julie. “Hi Julie, what’s up?”

“How’s the investigation going?”

“Slowly but progressing.”

“I’m free to come and help now.”

Joab, feeling the work piling up, said, “Sure, It’ll be good to see you again.”

“You too. But if we make a habit of sharing the same room people might start talking.”

Going along with the flirting repartee, Joab said, “Maybe we should give them something to say.”

“So where are you staying?”

“The Washington Hotel.”

“What’s it like?”

“Great location and affordable. Only 15-20 minutes from Reagan National Airport. The Cons. Well, it’s a little dated, and there’s a lot of street noise. If you’d deign to stay here with me I’m in Suite 33.”

“Okay, I’ll see you around 6 pm.”

This reengagement was too smooth Julie thought. She would soon find out why he was sniffing around the Federal Aviation Agency.

Of the many and varied tourist attractions in DC, the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum was one that Joab had already visited. As he waited to meet with the FAA investigator Joab had a chance to visit some of the exhibits that displayed hundreds of aircraft and spacecraft. Joab mixed with clusters of visitors, and, like them, was intrigued by the many historic planes, including the 1903 Wright Flyer, The Spirit of St Louis; even the Apollo 11 Command Module. Joab, enthralled by these and many more giants of the history of aviation, nearly missed the woman he’d come to see. Checking her likeness on his phone, he pushed through the tourists in a desperate bid to reach Catherine before she left. Catching up to her, Joab said, breathlessly, “Catherine Hart?”

“Yes. You must be the reporter who phoned.”

“Joab, please.”

“Please don’t try being friendly. I’m only here because I know what you people write if you don’t get your way. So let’s get on with it.”

“It’s a bit noisy here, with all the school kids. Perhaps we can go somewhere a bit quieter.”

“Very well, there’s a bit of aircraft noise, but we could go up to the observation tower.

As aircraft flew in and out of Dulles International Airport, Joab said, I’m interested in what you know about Flight 93 on 9/11.”

Catherine said, “I worked in the Airport Safety and Operations Division of the FAA, so I dealt with the safety and certification of airports, their operations and safety practices.”

“Do air crashes come under that remit?” Joab asked, the severe-looking blond with short, straight hair.

“I oversaw emergency landings, aircraft rescue and firefighting.”

“So you helped Flight 93 land safely at Hopkins Airport in Cleveland?”

“All I know is that a Boeing 767 out of Boston made an emergency landing at Hopkins.”

“Because there was allegedly a bomb on board – right?”

“There were reports that there was a bomb on board. To put this in perspective, we already knew about the planes hitting the towers in New York, so we took the threat very seriously.”

“That would be Flight 93, right?”

“At the time I thought so, but it turned out to be Delta Flight 1989.”

Joab stared at her. “Doesn't the pilot quote his flight number when talking to the tower?”

“Of course.”

“Did the pilot say Flight UA93?”

“I'm not sure.”

“Then he announced himself as Delta Flight 1989?”

“That's what it turned out to be.”

“So, this pilot not only gets his flight number mixed up he even forgets which airline he's with.”

Catherine, feeling very uncomfortable said, “It didn't make any sense to me. I initially reported that the emergency landing was made by UA 93. My supervisor suggested that I change my story.”

“Which you did?”

“I had to if I was to keep my job.” Catherine looked around, nervously. “I feel very uncomfortable talking about this.”

“So why was it important to doctor the report? Was it because Flight 93 had officially crashed into a field near Shanksville?”

She went deathly white. “It's very dangerous to say things like that.”

“I need a recording of what went on between the plane and the tower. Can you get me a copy?”

She shook her head. “No, I don't work there anymore.”

“What, the FAA?”

“I started to doubt my sanity. I started putting questions marks about the official version of events in my report. I was severely reprimanded and told what changes I needed to make to complete the official story. They wanted to draw a line under the whole shameful mess. I couldn't oblige my bosses so I was invited to leave.”

“Do you have a copy of your initial report?”

“All my stuff about the plane was confiscated.”

“You haven't answered my question.”

“She sighed, “Okay, I did keep a copy.”

“Would you be prepared to let me see it.”

“She shook her head.”

He grinned, “You can't blame me for trying. He added, “I'd like to speak to the pilot of that plane, and I'll bet you have his details in your report.”

They waited for a 747 to take off from Dulles, before continuing.

She said, “Why do you want to speak to the pilot?”

“To find out why he was so confused that he got flight numbers and airlines mixed up.”

“He thought there was a bomb on board and had to make an emergency landing.”

“Isn't dealing with such emergencies part of pilot training, Catherine?”

“Yes, but even so...”

“Why are you making excuses for him?” He added, “You know him, don't you?”

She stared at Joab. “That had nothing to do with my professionalism.”

“He could provide some vital clues, like where the bomb threat came from, for starters.”

“The tower received a message somebody had hidden a bomb on Flight 1989. They relayed it to the captain.”

Joab's face resembled a question mark. “Why?”

“Why what?”

“What did the bomber want?”

“I've no idea.”

“Was the caller apprehended?”

“Not as far as I know,” Catherine answered.

“Who was the Air Traffic Controller who took the call?”

“Surely you don't expect me to remember that?”

“I thought you might have mentioned it in the original report.”

“I'll look it up and let you know.”

He looked at her. “It's critical.”

“And I keep my word.”

She did. She rang Joab that evening with the name of the ATC who spoke to Flight 93.

He couldn't believe it. “Did you say, Rick Clark?”

“He communicated with the Captain of Delta Flight 1989.”

“It can't be the same guy! He worked at SCA.”

“I don't know anything about that. All I know is that Rick worked in the Cleveland tower on 9/11.”

“Shit, he's not any use to me.”

“Why not?”

“Because he's dead.”

“Dead! How?” Catherine asked, agitated.

“Shot dead in his car.”

“Oh my God!”

There was silence. Then the line went dead.

Damn, He'd scared her off.

Julie looked around the suite Joab had booked at the Washington Plaza Hotel. “This is a step up from Ida's,” she laughed.

Joab, in a serious mood, said, “Can you put on your Fed act to get Catherine Hart to give us her initial report?”

“From what you've told me she's a tough nut to crack.”

“She won't give me the pilot of Flight X and The ATC dealing with the plane is dead.”

Patricia sympathised, “I suppose I could give it a try. “But I'd have to be the one to see her.”

Joab hadn't thought it through. “No, I can't let you expose yourself to that kind of risk, Julie.” He pondered his dilemma. Then he said, “Okay, why the confusion? Why did the pilot initially misidentify his plane as Flight 93 if it was Flight 1989?”

“Maybe it was Flight 93, but he was told to radio in as Flight 1989.”

“And he forgot and got corrected by the tower.”

Joab got up. “Fuck it, Julie! I have to find that pilot.”

“How are you going to get Catherine to tell you?”

Joab brightened. “Maybe I don't have to rely on her. “Get onto United Airlines and ask them who the pilot was. They'd have to keep records.”

She turned to Joab. “Why would they tell me?”

“Because you're a Federal agent,” he winked.