

THE MEMORY MAN: T14 BOOK 1
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CHAPTER ONE

March 2nd 2024

It all began the day I read my obituary.

Using the Cartesian Cogito and Occam's razor I reasoned that I was alive, so there were three options.

Somebody was trying to threaten me.

Somebody had good reason to think I was actually dead.

Somebody was sending me a coded message.

I could think of more effective threats, particularly with the resources and moral contortions available to the people I was currently pretending to work with. Besides, if they had worked out who I really was they would have just rung the doorbell and shot me in the head, or at least tried to. They would also have no way of finding out about the code system unless they'd captured one of my fellow agents and tortured them. No, be sensible, don't let your imagination run away; there's already enough paranoia in the organisation.

Although this was one of the publications where I could expect to find such coded communications, this one didn't make sense. Part of it seemed to be a message directed at me, a warning, but the rest wasn't part of our code system, or rather the last two sentences were a meaningless jumble of various messages.

In any case, a knowingly false obituary could potentially draw unwanted attention, despite the fact that only around a dozen people knew me under that name. The group I'd infiltrated knew me by that name so it was a high risk strategy.

The problem with being properly undercover, not just playing at it, is that you are entirely on your own. Last year I had been briefed on my mission and then cast adrift. Since then I had not been able to directly contact anyone at T14. Unless my life or cover were in immediate danger, I had to deal with everything myself until the mission was over. I'd amassed nearly enough evidence to put the gang away but there were still a few loose ends.

Anyway, the point was that I couldn't just phone up the office and ask what the message meant; I had to figure it out for myself. Assuming it had come from HQ then it was not a risk they would have taken lightly - I'd only received two messages since the mission began. But it had to be from them: the chances of anybody accidentally using so many of our code phrases in a genuine obituary were infinitesimally small, even allowing for the coincidence of it being somebody else with such an

unusual surname.

I came to all these conclusions in the newsagents. I purchased a few items and quickly returned home, whereupon I locked and bolted front and back doors, turned off all but one of my phones and closed all the curtains.

Unlikely as it was that anybody had been stupid enough to enter my house during the twenty minutes I'd been out I checked all my traps nevertheless. They weren't traps in the James Bond sense, rather items I placed in certain exact positions that couldn't fail to move if anyone entered a room. A piece of sellotape on a door opening is always a good standby, or tiny pieces of bluetac strategically scattered over a carpet. Several items of apparent junk mail were also strewn across the length of the tiny hallway – there was no way anyone could traverse these without treading on some of them.

I gathered them up and paused for a minute, listening intently. There was no sound of movement so I made my way through the living room - no problems there - to the kitchen and back door. It would be impossible to move or climb over the tumble drier I kept up against the door without disturbing the pieces of bluetac under its feet.

Everything was okay so I relaxed very, very slightly. It was just after 10am so I had plenty of daylight left in which to escape if needed. People think darkness is best for an escape but they're wrong - nobody can look inconspicuous at night. If you think you're being watched or followed the best course of action is to stride out purposefully in broad daylight among plenty of witnesses. If I didn't receive a phone call by midday then that was what I would be doing.

I started packing and cleaning away anything I couldn't leave behind. Still unsure whether I would be returning to the house, I had to hedge my bets.

Two hours. There was a lot to do but I took the time to sit down and rest, drink plenty of water and coffee and eat the three Mars bars I'd bought. It would be a long day and I had absolutely no idea what would be required of me so I needed to fill up on energy while I could. I also needed some space to think.

If I wasn't contacted today then that brought up a whole new smorgasbord of complications. It could mean that my own employers

had ordered my death, though that made no sense – besides, it just wasn't cricket. Mind you, I thought I had ruffled Peterson's feathers when I... no, that's absurd. He was a creep but he wouldn't have me killed. He wouldn't dare.

It could be a double bluff - I think that they think I've been dealt with and then compromise myself. It would have to be somebody who hardly knew me to think I'd fall for that one. Or it could be that everybody, my employers included, thought I was already dead. But then who was the message for?

Would it be such a bad thing? I had plenty of money squirrelled away in untraceable accounts so I could just disappear and go back to living a normal life. However, I couldn't do that without knowing for sure and I couldn't think how to find out without revealing my continued existence. I wasn't sure if I could actually be charged with treason but I was certain that any perceived dereliction of duty or hint of going AWOL would be frowned upon in a rather severe manner. Besides, I fucking love my job.

I churned things over in my mind as I drank a third coffee and continued packing.

An hour or so later I fired off emails to the few people with whom I maintained the identity delta seven. This served a double purpose. Firstly to cover myself in this 'real' life by telling all the regular people who were likely to contact me that I was going on holiday for two weeks. I often went on these spontaneous 'holidays' - it fitted in with my cover story about having won the lottery eleven years ago and being single with no ties or responsibilities (if only) and also got everyone used to me disappearing with little or no notice when something cropped up. This meant nobody would call at the house and become involved in any possible conflagration.

Secondly, it would let one of the very few people I really trusted know that I was in fact still extant and had read the obituary. They would by now have also read my obituary and been equally puzzled (at least, I fervently hoped they would) by its true meaning and been checking for a secure communication. I had inserted three code phrases known only to the two of us in the emails. I was confident he would have read the message by now - he obsessively checked them several

times a day - but it was strictly one way traffic, I couldn't possibly risk contacting him directly. The gang I'd infiltrated may seem a bit stupid but I had no idea how sophisticated the people behind them were. They knew about my lottery cover story but they thought it was a cover for what I was doing with them rather than for my real job.

I slapped my forehead in frustration. How stupid could I be? The most obvious explanation was that Adam had posted the obituary as a warning. Jesus, I'd been doing this job too long, got myself caught up in the old habits of the public school brigade – seeing intrigue and mystery at every turn instead of coldly and logically assessing the facts. It meant that I was in danger but he couldn't be specific. After all the work I'd put in to the mission... still, I couldn't ignore the message. Whether the obituary was a threat or a warning and regardless of who had sent it, there was only one possible inference I could draw from it – disappear, and quickly.

I checked a few things on line, looked at the weather forecast, printed out a few train times - none of which I had any intention of taking - and shut down my laptop.

There was no room left for denial; it was 12.26 and I had received no contact. I checked the contents of my rucksack and jacket pockets for the eighth time and retied the laces on my trusty hiking boots. The rucksack was heavy but I'd toughen up after a few miles. Taking the gun without having my ID on me was a risk but one I had to take. If the gang saw me departing I'd have no choice but to kill them all and ruin a years work.

I intended staying in youth hostels and similar accommodation to begin with so that I could get a good nights sleep without worrying about being ambushed. I could also use free wi-fi and other people's mobiles to gain information without revealing myself; indeed I took great pleasure in stamping on one of my phones until the screen cracked and it died the death its appalling customer service deserved – it would make a good prop to elicit sympathy and offers of lent phones.

Maybe I could even get myself a shag – it had been a while.

As I left the house it never occurred to me to check the local news. Who knows how my actions would have changed had I known that two

days previously somebody who lived a few streets away had been followed from their home, dragged into an alleyway and stabbed to death. I still don't know whether I'd have stayed, for that person looked remarkably like me.

By three o'clock I was well away from civilisation and making good time. The country path used to be a railway line and frequent, monolithic stone bridges and archways peppered the route.

I hadn't seen anyone for over an hour which perfectly suited my current mood. I was wearing headphones but not listening to anything, a handy trick if you want to avoid passing conversation. I was one hundred percent sure that nobody was following me so I relaxed, maintaining only a peripheral alertness for any sudden movement, and had a really good think.

I needed proper contact with Adam but couldn't think of how to achieve this securely, bearing in mind that I couldn't currently be sure of what was happening at HQ. In any case, it was one of the few unbreachable rules that an agent maintaining an undercover identity never goes to the office and never makes uncoded contact. If they want you they'll find you but currently nobody could find me, no matter how badly they wanted to.

Adam would know by now, unless something serious had kept him from checking my emails, that I was unharmed. However, if somebody was out to get me, or thought they already had, then were they also after Adam, or at least tailing him? He was in a very difficult position and couldn't just abandon whatever else he was working on and devote all his attention to my situation, even if he were able to ascertain whatever that situation actually was.

I followed this line of thought for a moment: if it was his message then what would he expect me to do? Leave the house and go incognito - fine, job done, but what then?

Had my identity been compromised? If so I could have several rather unpleasant people trying to find me in order to do something rather unpleasant to me. It was no good, I simply had to contact Adam, otherwise it meant I was completely in the dark as to what to do next and had no idea whether or not to continue using identity delta seven.

CHAPTER TWO

Adam nodded peremptorily at the thin, crooked figure of Peterson. Fortunately the deputy director of T14 was, as per usual, bustling about looking important and clearly didn't have time for a conversation. Adam breathed an audible sigh of relief as the man left the room. The other four occupants also seemed to visibly relax. It wasn't any kind of deference, respect or fear that made people avert their eyes in Peterson's presence, rather, in addition to his unctuous, unpleasant manner, his uncanny resemblance to the "Simpsons" character Mr Burns.

Adam continued his journey to the kettle and made himself a coffee. Even without the disturbing presence of Peterson, the room maintained an almost reverentially silent hush; this wasn't the sort of organisation where casual gossip was advisable, or even tolerated. There was also a well understood code of etiquette which meant that, by sitting in a corner on his own, Adam would not be disturbed unless it was absolutely essential.

He chose a comfy, Victorian-looking armchair that would be more at home in the House of Lords and sat down with his coffee and notepad. He desperately needed a brainstorming session away from his office, some space to think. He stretched out his long legs, brushed out an invisible crease in his trousers, and flattened down some imaginary wayward strands of his short, dark hair.

He had, of course, read the obituary on his way to work, but only to check that they'd spelled it correctly. He knew from checking Agent 45's email account that his message had been received and correctly interpreted so hopefully any immediate danger had been averted. Nonetheless, he still had little idea what, if anything, was really happening. Nobody he had encountered thus far today had said or done anything to indicate that there was something relevant he didn't know about. Peterson did seem to be even more agitated than usual but it was hard to tell with such a highly string, St. Vitus dance of a personality.

He should go straight to the top and talk to the director, but he was incommunicado for a couple of days, so Adam had had no choice but to phone in the obituary. Protocol meant he should have gone to Peterson, but he didn't trust him enough to put Agent 45's life in his thin, grasping

hands.

Adam took a sip of coffee and began making some notes. The murder could, of course have been a coincidence. It certainly, from what he'd been able to glean from the pathology report, appeared to be a thoroughly amateur attack rather than the work of any professional killer. However, he simply couldn't dismiss from his mind the uncanny resemblance between the murder victim and Agent 45. A woman in her mid thirties, long, straight blond hair, five feet eight inches tall, blue eyes, similar figure - they could have been sisters. The location of the victim's home was also only a few streets away from the current residence of Agent 45. The killing had taken place at night so it would be perfectly understandable for it to be a genuine case of mistaken identity. There was no mistake about the viciousness of the beating though - it was clearly meant to kill her.

If it was meant to be 45, that obviously left the unanswered questions: did whoever had ordered the killing know it had been fucked up? If so, had they already instigated a fresh plan with a proper professional at the helm? If that was the case, how could Adam alert Agent 45 inconspicuously? She was already in hiding, so that was good, but with so little information he had to tread very carefully.

Peterson.

For some reason Adam drew the deputy director's name in block capitals and put a large circle around it.

It had never occurred to him before that he didn't trust him. Why? He trusted everyone else in T14, you had to because your life often depended on them. Something was wrong. He didn't trust something specific about Peterson. There was something nagging away at him but he couldn't place it – some reason to suspect Peterson of something. Well, it was currently the only starting point Adam could think of so he resolved to take every opportunity to observe the deputy director today and see if anything materialised. In this business a suspicion was enough to warrant an investigation but he was reluctant to put anything on an official footing without anything tangible to present. Still, there was no problem in his looking into Peterson this afternoon, that was well within his job description; he could easily invent a spurious technical reason for looking at some personnel files – some kind of random check.

Adam finished his coffee and made another one. He could hear that the people sat around a table were having a general conflagration that he could legitimately join, so he went over and subtly steered the conversation around to Peterson and his private life.

After a few minutes a woman Adam had very few dealings with and consequently only knew as Agent 64 threw out a remark that almost made him spill his coffee. Fortunately he quickly regained his composure and masked it as humorously exaggerated disgust.

“Of course,” said Agent 64, “the creepiest thing about the old man was that time he made that awfully crass drunken pass at 45.”

“Aha!” thought Adam as he walked as casually as possible back to his office, “I knew there was something.”

Peterson turned away from the bar and almost fell over. This was the most drunk he'd been for decades but his marriage was in such a state that he just didn't give two shits anymore. He wasn't going to make director at his age anyway so the only possible future available to him was another few dreary years of stagnation and then retirement with his ungrateful, harping wife and revolting children. He could picture himself in years to come doing pointless domestic chores his wife had given him to keep him from under her feet.

“I'm fucked if I'm spending all day up a step ladder,” he spluttered, startling the barmaid.

She shook her head pitifully as he ambled off in the general direction of a wall.

On the other side of the room Agent 45 was looking at her watch and wondering how long it would be before she could politely leave. Not only was this 'social event' more tedious than an ITV Sunday, it was also in her opinion a flagrant breach of policy to have so many members of the organisation together at one time with no security and a free bar.

She was woken from her reverie by a nudge from a passing colleague.

“Run for your life, the old man's eyeing you up!” he choked as he sauntered past looking for a good spot from which to view the ensuing carnage.

She looked up to behold the terrifying spectacle of a man in his late 50s, who'd never been particularly attractive to begin with and to whom age had not been kind, looming towards her out of the tacky neon lighting like a pissed space-hopper. She grimaced and tried to ignore him but he ploughed into her with all the grace of a double decker bus driving over eggshells.

“Hey, the lovely Jennifer!”

She frowned and looked around their immediate vicinity.

“Don't use my real name you stupid twat!” she hissed, desperately trying to both control the security situation and rid herself of the company of this repulsive old stick insect.

Several witnesses observed from a distance as Peterson, just about managing to stay on his feet, grabbed Jennifer's left breast and squeezed it like a dog's toy. Half of them turned away wincing, the other half ran at top speed towards the unlikely couple. It was not concern at the event itself or for Jennifer's welfare that prompted either reaction, rather a genuine fear that she may well spoil her career by killing the old man before anyone could stop her.

Luckily she was far more in control of herself, merely grabbing his scrotum and twisting it ninety degrees anti-clockwise.

Adam shuddered at the memory of the deputy director curled up on the floor screaming his head off. That was over two years ago and Jennifer had been undercover, and therefore out of Peterson's view, for nearly eighteen months now. At least, that's what Adam thought. He was wrong.

He looked up the relevant regulations to see what scope he had. He would give Peterson the works. If he had been up to anything, he would have been pretty good at covering his tracks. However, Adam also knew that he was easily rattled, and likely to betray himself if he was trying to hide anything. Not that Adam believed he had actually tried to have 45 killed, that made no sense at all. But he had no firm leads and... okay, he admitted it to himself: he didn't like Peterson, and the idea of turning his house over appealed to him because the old man would hate it but could say nothing.

"He'll be in the office all day, damn," thought Adam. "I can't justify waiting until tonight. Although," he smiled, "that means I either get to kick the door in or scare the shit out of his stony-faced wife."

As he put the procedure in motion, Adam reflected on the unfairness of his last thought.

"Twenty odd years married to Peterson would be enough to turn anyone to stone."

CHAPTER THREE

It's often handy for work to have a digitally enhanced memory, though now I can't remember what that work is because the Firewire stick I plug into my neck has crashed and I don't know who or where I am.

All I can access now are disassociated fragments of corrupted files and what little I can dredge up from my actual brain. This means that the only things I currently know about myself for certain are that I had a pet dog called Red when I was nine, I once got told to piss off while trying to get Ian Botham's autograph, and I don't like Cadbury's Cream Eggs. It's not much of a life but it's all I have now.

I've had to hide myself away in this room because everyone I see could be my best friend, my worst enemy, or my wife.

I think I had one of those yesterday, or ten years ago, or however long I've been here, though it could equally be a corrupted image of someone I've never met.

I can remember the basics, like eating, drinking, going to the toilet. All that seems to be provided for me in this room but I don't know how or why or by whom. Am I on holiday or in prison? I've no way of knowing.

Maybe I didn't shut myself in here after all because sometimes...

Sometimes I think people are talking to me but they can't be real. If they are then I've totally and irrevocably lost my mind

because I can't understand anything they say.

Why don't I leave the room?

I'm scared.

This may all be a dream, I've no way of knowing.

Maybe I've always been like this. I think I used to be normal but maybe that's an illusion. Maybe I'm just mad. After all, surely you'd have to be mad to allow yourself to be turned into a computer? Maybe I did something awful and this is my punishment.

I'm hungry now, I hope some food will arrive soon.

If the people are real, why won't they tell me where my mind is?

CHAPTER FOUR

Adam was disappointed that he didn't personally get to break into Peterson's house. It was also deeply irritating that his wife kept following them around, nagging them about placing ornaments back in the correct position. He felt as if he were being assessed by a menopausal infant school teacher.

That was the only reason Adam decided to check her phone.

It was not part of standard procedure, but he could easily justify it later as being the way to get her out of their hair and allow a proper search. This turned out to be correct as she kicked up such a fuss she left everyone else alone and concentrated all her ire on him.

Margery looked highly perturbed as Adam plugged her phone into his laptop and scanned it, but almost certainly because she was socially affronted rather than having anything to hide.

He really wasn't expecting to find anything, just to keep her occupied.

He was therefore as surprised as Margery when his laptop emitted a loud alarm.

"What's that?" she demanded, leaning around to look at his screen.

He pushed her unceremoniously away.

"That's classified information," he half shouted.

She was about to protest but checked herself. Adam sometimes displayed a passive, even slightly wimpish exterior when it suited him, but now his eyes betrayed a seriousness that was not to be challenged. Margery saw sense and made a tactical withdrawal to the kitchen.

Adam stared for a moment longer at the piece of information that had triggered the alarm, allowed himself a smile of self justification, unplugged her phone and put it in his pocket. Saving the search information, he closed the laptop and went upstairs to see what the rest of the team had found.

"In here," said an enthusiastic young man in his first few weeks with T14.

Adam looked over his shoulder at the piles of money hidden away at the back of Peterson's sock drawer.

"Ten thousand quid, all in twenties," he said, handing one of the piles to Adam.

He leafed through them. Non-consecutive serial numbers, all in different states of wear and tear.

"Maybe he was going to buy himself a suit from this century," quipped the young man.

"Maybe," said Adam distractedly. What the hell was the old man planning to do with the money? "Okay, photograph and log it all and put it back. Carry on."

The rest of the search turned up nothing else but Adam was confident he had more than enough. In these days of virtually instantaneous electronic transfer of money, where even a newspaper could be bought more quickly by waving a card than by handing over coins, there was no legitimate reason for anyone to have large amounts of cash in their home.

Ten thousand pounds was about the going rate for an amateurish hired killer these days, and the number flagged up on his wife's phone belonged to somebody who possibly fitted that job description.

CHAPTER FIVE

Two figures stood in the middle of Grand Central Station, New York. One a petite, athletic looking woman of thirty with a neat bob of dark red hair, the other a man in his mid forties with closely cropped, rapidly greying hair, a weeks stubble and a frame which suggested he favoured a few pints of beer over anything athletic.

“Jesus, why are there so many American flags everywhere, this isn't Baghdad?”

John fumbled irritably for a cigarette, remembered he was in America, decided it would be more stressful being shot than going without one, so put them away.

“They give free guns to school kids but you can't fucking smoke anywhere!”

Hannah raised her eyes and took a deep breath.

“As soon as we get to the hotel you can have a drink,” she said, trying to placate him.

“Oh yes, drink, I can have half a pint of fizzy cows piss in a bottle but I can't have a fag to go with it, can I? At least I can smoke on the balcony.”

John glanced up at the gargantuan stars and stripes hanging from the ceiling.

“The only English people this keen on flags are the BNP.”

“They put that up after September 11th.”

“Typical jingoism,” snorted John.

A passing couple eyed him with disgust. John was impressed they knew what the word meant.

Hannah put an arm around him and laid her head on his shoulder.

“That's enough,” she whispered, “you're drawing too much attention.”

John assembled his face into a passable imitation of contrition.

“I'm sorry, darling,” he said hugging her tightly.

“I'll go outside and see if we've been met,” he whispered, “you check the locker.”

Hannah broke the clinch and stared reproachfully at him – he wasn't sure whether it was genuine reproach but that was a good thing; if she could fool him she could fool anyone.

“You just want to smoke, don't you?”

“Of course, I'm awake and sober. If we have any future assignments here I'll demand enough expenses to cover forty fines a day.”

“Okay,” she patted him on the back just hard enough to hurt, “you go and have a cigarette, honey, I'll get a coffee.”

“Good idea,” thought John as he walked briskly towards the exit, “drinking coffee from a Styrofoam bucket is the best way to fit in around here.”

Hannah bought a small coffee, which still required both hands to carry, and strolled across Grand Central Terminal. Looking as if she had all the time in the world she pretended to spend a minute looking for the locker rather than going straight to it. Putting her coffee down on the floor she tapped in the combination and opened the locker. A box wrapped in gift paper and tied with a pink bow awaited her (“patronising twat!” she muttered to herself).

Careful not to reveal in her actions how heavy the contents were, she picked up the package and slid it into her overnight bag.

At the hotel John paced up and down the tiny balcony doing a fair impression of an industrial chimney.

A familiar, satisfying metallic click from the room behind brought him to his senses; he reluctantly stamped out his cigarette and went back to find Hannah screwing the silencer on to the rifle. He looked at his watch.

“There's ten minutes yet, I could have finished my fag!”

“I need the smoke to clear so I can see the target,” said Hannah, standing up and carrying the rifle towards the balcony. “Anyway, the motorcade may be early.”

John grinned sarcastically.

“Very funny. He's arriving by cab. Trying to be inconspicuous.”

She put on thick gloves and unlocked a small box.

John stopped grinning and took several steps back as Hannah gingerly removed the minuscule poison dart from its vial and loaded it into the rifle.

“I had a friend who was killed by that stuff,” he said, more to himself than out loud.

“I know,” said Hannah, trying to concentrate on her delicate task, “they used an umbrella.”

“Bloody Russians,” he muttered. “Still obsessed with Graham Greene.”

She snapped the rifle closed and placed it carefully on the bed.

“Come on, help me move the table.”

He snapped out of his reverie and picked up one end of the heavy, fake antique writing desk this hotel chain always helpfully provided. It was probably intended to lend an air of opulence to the room rather than to assist an assassin's rifle to reach over the balcony railings but no matter.

Hannah fitted the table-top tripod to the rifle and lined up the shot while John went to the mini bar.

“Do you want a beer?” he asked.

She slowly stood up, turned to him and placed her hands sarcastically on her hips.

He looked up from the fridge, awaiting her answer.

She waited a second for the penny to drop.

“Oh, of course,” he smiled sheepishly.

“We'll be in the bar in fifteen minutes.”

“Yeah, sorry, wasn't thinking.”

He sat down on the bed but it squeaked so he got up and went into the bathroom, put the lid down and sat on the toilet.

He couldn't remember how many times he'd been with Hannah in these circumstances but it always fascinated him. How somebody so placid and sweet looking could be so removed and calculating. Killing people always bothered John, he really preferred not to if at all possible. He thought Adam was the same most of the time, though Jennifer often seemed to positively relish it.

“Yuk!” exclaimed Hannah from the other room.

“Problem?” he asked quietly.

“No, it's just Richard Miller picking his nose. I could have done without a telescopic view of that.”

A few minutes passed while John stayed as quiet as possible, only moving his arm to take the odd swig from the overpriced and underwhelming bottle of beer.

“Here goes,” said Hannah quietly.

John drained the rest of his beer and checked that he had the room key in his wallet. He took out his phone and waited.

After what seemed a few minutes Hannah let out a deep breath and stood up.

John got up, put the beer bottle in the bin and left the bathroom as she began to dismantle the rifle.

His phone rang.

“Okay, see you in the bar in five minutes.”

He put the phone away.

“Bingo. Let's go.”

They packed the rifle away in its presentation box and dragged the desk back. Hannah smoothed over the indentations it had made in the carpet while John shut the balcony doors.

As they left the lift and walked through reception John paused.

“What do you want?”

“Vodka and orange please, I'll just put Auntie Donna's present in a cab.”

She went down the hotel steps and scanned the street. Ignoring the

dirty looks from the drivers of the crocodile of yellow taxis parked at the curbside, she stepped into the street and hailed a passing cab.

“Take this parcel to this address, please,” she said, giving him a fifty dollar bill.

“Sure thing, mam,” said Jason Thomas in a terrible imitation of an American accent.

“Thank you very much cabbie,” she said in a tone she new would grate on him and slammed the door.

She paused to smile at the driver of the first parked cab and then went in to the bar to join John and Richard.

CHAPTER SIX

I booked into the youth hostel (yes I am over twenty five but there's no upper age limit) and plonked myself down in the TV room with a cup of revolting tea a pleasant but misguided hippie had thrust into my hand upon arrival. I'm not sure there was any actual tea in it, more likely it consisted of honey, twigs, lavender oil and fair trade well water. Although I was alone in the room I still felt politeness dictated that I took a small sip. I then got up, poured it into a pot plant, apologised to the plant and sat back down.

I had absolutely no desire to watch anything on telly nor converse with anyone but I was knackered after a six hour yomp through various densities of mud. I sat in the far corner of the room with my back to the wall out of habit; I didn't expect any trouble during the evening but then I hadn't expected any when I sauntered to the paper shop that morning.

I pondered my situation. The meeting tomorrow was the real fly in the ointment. Without further information, I couldn't know whether the terrorist cell I'd spent over a year infiltrating had discovered my true identity. Assuming that the obituary was a warning, which I had to go with as the most likely hypothesis for now, I couldn't think what else I could possibly need warning about except the people I was currently working with. This was my only assignment and so much had been invested in it that nobody at the agency would dare distract me from it without very good reason.

I would have to sleep on it and let my subconscious sort things out.

The following morning everything was crystal clear – I was up shit creek without a paddle, canoe or even a pair of wellies. As I saw my situation – and I'd been awake most of the night churning everything over – I had only one possible option. I had to go and see Adam this morning at his flat. It would have been much more convenient if I'd had time to reach this conclusion yesterday but so be it. I'd paid for one night in the hostel so I left at 4.45am before even the keenest rambles were up and about and began walking to the nearest train station. That would enable me to get to Adam's flat by about 6.40. He was a creature of unwavering habit so I knew he awoke every weekday at 6am and left for the office on foot at 7.15. I knew this from the few nights I'd spent with him about four years ago. We had a go at a relationship but it just didn't work. I suppose it was ultimately positive because the sex brought us closer together and got rid of any potential future tension or misunderstanding. I can't remember now exactly why we decided it wasn't working but anyway, it just didn't.

I grinned at the thought that, bearing in mind his obsessive compulsive timetable, I would arrive at the exact moment he finished his muesli and poured a second cup of tea. That would mean there was one left in the pot for me.

I quickened my pace, enjoying the anticipation of seeing the look on his face when he realised I'd climbed up the drainpipe outside his flat and crawled through the window he always left open for an hour after his morning bath to combat condensation.

The train was a few minutes early and I jogged to the alleyway at the back of his flat, arriving at 6.32. I actually waited a few minutes before ascending the drainpipe because I was so concerned with the timing of my entrance – I really should have behaved more professionally in case the place was being watched but I couldn't resist. In any case, it was my improvisational skills and quirkiness that made me such a convincing undercover agent so I was loathe to curb my natural instincts. It would also be a cracking story to tell everyone if I lived long enough.

For some reason I decided to flush Adam's toilet.

I'd have liked to see his reaction when he heard it but then I snapped

to and decided to confront him in case he got any ideas about getting lethal before he realised it was me. I knew better than most that underneath his placid exterior lurked a ruthless, calculating agent capable of astonishing acts of violence if provoked by sufficiently neerdowell people.

“It's me,” I called before walking calmly through to the kitchen. “Shall I pour the tea?”

He was actually standing with the teapot in his hand, gazing open mouthed at me. I smiled, picked up the teapot and refilled his cup before getting myself one.

“You've moved the sodding cups again,” I chided, “ah, here they are.”

I sat down and cleared myself a space on his meticulously cluttered dining room table.

His dressing gown had flapped open and I couldn't help myself.

“New pants, I see.”

He almost exploded with embarrassment.

“Don't worry, I've seen it all before. Now come on, pull yourself together we've got work to do. I assume it was you who posted the obituary?”

“Yes,” he said, gathering his thoughts and his dressing gown. He rummaged around on the overpopulated table and magically found exactly what he was looking for by reaching under an enormous pile of blank paper (I didn't ask, we hadn't the time). “I know it was risky but I had to, because of this.”

He handed me the local paper and went to get dressed, taking his tea with him, no doubt to steady his nerves at my abrupt entrance.

I stared at the photograph of Libby Stevens. The resemblance was indeed uncanny and her address was only three streets away from my current residence. I'd never seen her before but then I deliberately avoided anyone local who might decide to pop round unannounced at an inconvenient moment. The back lane where she'd been killed was half a mile away but if she was walking into town from her house then it was the first obvious place for an attack if someone was following her. That

was almost certainly what had happened. If they'd broken into her house then it would have been clear that it wasn't me they were really after but as things stood Adam was absolutely correct in posting the obituary, I just hoped Imran and the boys hadn't read it.

“So,” he said, coming back into the room having dressed himself immaculately in three and a half minutes flat, “are we on the same page?”

“I'm afraid so, which really drops me in the shit. I have a meeting today where they're going to give me concrete plans for their attack so I can decide exactly what weapons to provide them with. It's what we've been working for this last year and half but now I can't fucking go.” I punched the table in frustration.

“No, you certainly can't,” said Adam, sitting down and finishing his tea. “Not unless I can establish this morning whether you've been compromised. Okay, we have three options. One, it was a coincidence that this woman looks like you and she was murdered by someone uninvolved with us. I've seen the pathology report and it wasn't a professional hit but it was unusually violent, even for a stabbing. There was no attempt at rape or to look for any money or jewellery, she had both on her within easy reach. The only conclusion I came to is that the sole purpose of the attack was to kill her as quickly as possible but that the assailant didn't really know what they were doing and basically just knocked her out and then kept stabbing her at random until he was sure she was dead.”

“You mean if he was a pro he'd have slit her throat first to silence her?”

He nodded.

I screwed up my face in consternation. “But there were plenty of people in the vicinity and nobody heard anything or saw anyone running away or anyone with blood on them, which means that, amateur or not, this person had thus far got away with murder. They must be reasonably clever and competent to have managed that.”

“Agreed,” said Adam, “Therefore we have to assume until we know otherwise that there was some reason why a person or persons as yet unknown wanted to silence this woman. It could be a psychotic boyfriend or something but that's massively unlikely. Option two: your

cover with the cell has been broken and they killed this woman by mistake.”

“That's not it,” I interrupted, “they've all been to my house, they would have done it there. And if they knew who I really am they would have known they'd have a fight on their hands, this woman died easily.”

“Okay then, option three: somebody unconnected to the cell or your present case killed the woman thinking she was you. There is no evidence to suggest this and I can't think of anything in your operational history that would lead to such a scenario.”

“Neither can I,” I said, “but until we find out more information, we have to go with that as a working hypothesis, it's our only option.” I looked at him and grimaced. “Like you posting the obit was your only option, and me climbing your drainpipe was my only option. I don't like not having options, it makes me tetchy. Do you get the feeling we're missing something obvious?”

Adam stood up and began pacing back and forth. It irritated me hugely but I stopped myself from saying anything - I knew if he didn't do this he'd have to do something much worse so I closed my eyes and let the behaviour play itself out.

“I have been working on this at the office when I've been able. Actually your timing's rather good, I'm going to confront Peterson this morning.”

I opened my eyes to see that he had stopped pacing and was watching me intently for a reaction.

“You don't mean you suspect Peterson of trying to have me killed?”

It was an absurd conclusion, but hadn't I leaped to it yesterday?

“Suspicion is all I have but he's acting even weirder than usual.”

“I haven't even seen him for over a year, since I bumped into him at the supermarket. He was acting really oddly then now I think about it but I put it down to the presence of that horsey wife and the cast of 'Children of the Corn' rather than me.”

Adam sat down. Clearly it was his reticence at mentioning our beloved deputy director that had caused the pacing.

“I did some digging under the guise of a random security check.

Whether it's anything to do with you or Libby Stevens' murder I don't know but he has done something very stupid. His wife's phone has been used to call a local criminal who fits the description of amateur killer for hire, and yesterday I found ten grand in cash in his sock drawer."

"That would mean he hasn't paid out for the hit, though."

"I know. I'll find out why when I question him this morning."

"Oh, I wish I was going to be there, I love it when you question people."

I surprised myself with the lascivious tone of my remark and Adam blushed visibly.

"What do we know about this criminal?" I asked hurriedly.

"Not much, I'm calling in at his local police station on my way in."

I glanced up at the kitchen clock.

"You'd better be on your way. I'll..." I stood up and then sat down again, "actually I don't know what to do."

"You'd better stay here. What time's your meeting supposed to be?"

"Three o'clock. I'd need to leave here at two to make it in time. No, hang on... fucking hell! No, I can't possibly go. I'd have to return to the house and call some people and pick up some samples to show them."

"I can't see Peterson before ten at the earliest; then I have to establish the facts and decide whether or not to put it, whatever it is, on an official footing." His eyes flickered along with his brain activity as he performed multiple simultaneous calculations. "No, you simply can't go."

"Which means, if my cover is intact, they'll assume I've run away or sold them out or... well, a number of options, none of them good."

"Will they expect you to contact them before the meeting?"

"No."

"Good, that at least gives us a bit of breathing space. Okay, you stay put. I'm sure they couldn't trace you here but just in case..."

He opened a kitchen drawer and rummaged around at the back. Like a rabbit from a magicians' hat he produced a hand gun and a box of

ammo, placing them on the dining table.

“Thanks,” I pouted, “you always get me the nicest presents. I have one already but two Glocks are better than one”

“I worry about you,” he mumbled, gazing down at the floor.

Jesus, this was all getting a bit kitchen-sink drama.

I got up and walked around the table towards him.

"Thanks for everything, I do appreciate it. And it's nice to see you after all this time."

"You too," he said quietly.

I put my arms around him. For a second he stood in statuesque silence, then reciprocated. We stood in silence for about thirty seconds, like school kids at the last dance of the evening. Ever the gentleman he made no move but I knew what he was thinking. I was thinking it too and I felt inconveniently horny – it had definitely been a while.

As I broke the hug I caught a glimpse of an unidentifiable expression melting away from his countenance.

“Right,” he said, gathering himself once more, “I’ll phone my land line at five past one. If we have to take any sort of drastic action that gives us almost two hours to play with. In the meantime you know where everything is.”

“Except the cutlery.”

He opened a draw which, the last time I’d been here contained a role of fuse wire and 4 broken i-pods. It now contained cutlery.

“There’s plenty in the fridge, have you got your set of keys with you just in case.”

“Never leave home without them,” I patted my pocket, “you’re the only person I can really rely on.”

He blushed again.

“You can watch TV or...” he trailed off.

“I’m sure I can amuse myself for five hours.”

He smiled.

“See you later.”

He went out into the small hallway so that I wouldn't have to observe his ten minute ritual of repeatedly checking his keys and wallet before leaving. I went into the living room and put the TV on loudly so I could pretend not to hear when he actually left.

Sure enough, ten minutes later I heard the door open and close. I went out and put the deadbolts across, then into the kitchen where I made myself a bucket of coffee and loaded the extra gun.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Adam ensured that the weighty folder he carried was facing away from him so that the name of Peterson was clearly visible. He gathered his concentration and opened the door to the coffee room.

A few people nodded covertly in his direction.

“Excuse me, sir,” said Adam, measuring his tone very precisely, “could I have a word?”

Peterson turned around and immediately clocked the folder and his name. The colour told him that it was a top security folder, the toppest possible security the organisation could muster. He turned even paler than usual and seemed to shrink slightly into his own skin. Adam ensured that he did not break eye contact with the man but also maintained a non-committal, unconcerned expression.

“Yes... what is it?” asked Peterson, affecting an unconvincing air of authority over Agent 37.

“There's no urgency, sir, but if you could come to my office in, say, ten minutes?”

Peterson nodded meekly.

“Thank you, sir, in your own time.”

Adam smiled and turned slowly away, leaving Peterson silently flapping in the middle of the room like a moth under a bus. As he shut the door behind him he was already convinced that his mornings work had not been wasted but it would nevertheless be extremely interesting

to hear what the old man had to say.

Back in his office, he planned his line of attack, focusing more on what he wouldn't be saying.

As Adam suspected, it took Peterson less than five minutes to knock on his door. Whether it was due to nerves or a desire to try to catch him out Adam neither knew nor cared; if it was the latter, it was a desperate and doomed strategy. On the spur of the moment he decided to get up and quietly open, then noisily close a filing cabinet drawer.

“Come in,” he said, ensuring that Peterson noticed him locking the drawer as he entered. “Good morning again, sir, please take a seat.”

The old man was trying and failing to maintain his usual icy composure and oily superiority but it was a losing battle. Surely 37 couldn't know anything?

Adam had to admit that he was enjoying this hugely and that much of his conduct had more to do with intimidating the deputy director than gaining any insight into his mental state. He randomly circled a word on the piece of paper attached to the clipboard he held, tapped his pen on the paper, ostentatiously clicked the nib back into the pen (careful, don't overdo it) then put the pen down carefully on the desk.

“As you know, sir, from time to time I am required to conduct random security checks on all staff, no matter how senior.”

The impatience was written all over Peterson's face like florescent graffiti but he maintained his silence.

“Yesterday, your name was drawn from the hat, so to speak,” Adam smiled, as if making a little joke. Peterson didn't flinch. “I'm sure it's a matter of little import but nevertheless I am duty bound to bring it to your attention.”

He picked up the pen and ran it down the list of numbers on his clipboard.

“I was browsing through the records of your wife's mobile phone.”

The deputy director could not help reacting and thus confirming the first piece of information Adam required: he knew full well which call had been spotted and exactly why he was in trouble.

“There has been a call to a number which gives us cause for concern.

Tell me, sir, does your wife keep her phone with her at all times or does she sometimes lend it to a friend?"

Peterson looked confused, then hopeful, then angry with himself for looking anything at all, all within the space of two seconds.

"Well," he spluttered, "I mean she's her own woman, I don't know what she does all day when I'm at work. She does have friends, I think. I mean there's no knowing what they get up to... I mean I don't know... she may let a friend make a call on it."

"I see." Adam paused just long enough to be really irritating. "Does she ever lend it to you?"

"Why... why should she, I have my own?"

"Of course, your official phone but all those calls are recorded, aren't they?"

"Yes," he replied quietly.

"But we don't go as far as to tap the phones of agent's wives." Adam smiled again. "Anyway, it is an undeniable fact that somebody has used your wife's phone to contact the sort of person that we really don't like our people to associate with. A criminal type. So what we have to establish now is who made this rather unwise call and for what nefarious purpose." Shit, he was really enjoying this.

Peterson swallowed as if trying to get rid of the evidence.

"Tell me, sir, this is a rather delicate question but does your wife have any sort of drug habit?"

"How da... no, nothing like that."

"What about your children?"

"They're eight and eleven!"

"I'm sorry, I don't have any children myself, I've no idea how old they start these days." Stop smiling, you're overdoing it. "Do you have any drug habits, sir?"

"No, I do not."

"Hmm!"

Adam crossed off a few words on his sheet and stared thoughtfully

into the distance for a few seconds.

“Oh dear! In some ways it would be easier if this were just a matter of a bit of a naughty drug habit, perhaps we could look the other way. If we can eliminate that possibility then I'm afraid what we're left with are a whole variety of altogether more serious options. I've been to have a little chat with the police today.”

He left the sentence hanging in the air for a few seconds. Peterson volunteered nothing so he continued.

“It seems that, as well as being a small time drug dealer, this individual with whom your wife's phone has been in contact recently is a rather larger time thug, one could even say psychopath for hire. He's conducted some very nasty business in the past, a lot of unnecessary violence against people who really don't deserve that sort of fate.”

The words were chosen at random but Peterson suddenly looked aghast, even slightly ashen-faced. Adam paused for a moment to think through the implications of this reaction. It seemed to be the word 'fate' that had hit Peterson so hard.

That sealed the deal as far as Adam was concerned.

“Would you just excuse me one second, sir?”

Before Peterson could react, Adam had strode quickly out of the room, shutting the door behind him. He nodded to Agent 71, a man in his early 20s whose eyes lit up at the prospect of having some real work to do for once. As Adam left the outer room the man took out a small handgun and fixed his eyes conscientiously on the door behind which Peterson was slowly resigning himself to whatever fate now awaited him.

He drew no moral conclusions from his situation, just sighed at the hole he'd managed to dig for himself. Well, if the worst came to the worst, at least he wouldn't have to see his family anymore. His lips managed to form a very thin smile.

Adam shifted impatiently in his seat and glanced at his watch. He was anxious to get back to his flat and work out what he and Jennifer were going to do next.

The head of T14, known by the codename A1, sat at his desk making notes and pondering over what he had just been told. He was a lean five feet ten and had an impressively thick head of grey hair for a man of fifty seven. He'd been the director of T14 ever since its inception ten years ago. He was a thoughtful man with a sharp mind who kept himself in shape so that he could join in the dirty work if required.

“Okay,” said Bill White, “you go back to your flat and proceed with Agent 45 to safe house Omega. You remember...”

“Yes,” snapped Adam, standing up and making for the door.

“Hang on, sit down. We have something far more important to deal with. It's actually rather convenient that she's suddenly become available.”

Adam sat down, undecided as to whether he was more puzzled or impatient.

“I have to get back...” he began.

“I'm sure she'll be fine for a few minutes. Agent 4 has gone AWOL.”

Adam stared at his superior.

“But he can't. We always know where he is, unless he...”

“Exactly,” said White gravely, “His back up drives haven't been active for almost four days and now we're getting no signal from his sticks. We can't trace him at all. The last signal we got was twenty four hours ago - it indicated that his stick had been removed. Nothing since.”

“Then he may be helpless. He's never been without a stick except under supervision.”

“We know that he used his passport to travel to America thirty six hours ago, an unscheduled and mysterious trip. I don't need to tell you how serious...”

“You want 45 and I to go to the States,” Adam interrupted.

“Yes. Proceed to the safe house and you'll be picked up there as soon as we've organised a flight. I'll deal with our local gang somehow, when I've finished with Peterson.”

Adam had totally forgotten about the old man.

“Right. Well, I'd better get going.”

He made for the door once again.

“And good work, you acted correctly. The problem with the gang is trivial compared with potentially losing Agents 4 or 45.”

"Yes," mumbled Adam.

“Finding Agent 4, alive or dead, is our top priority now. No expense spared, no red tape, I'm sure we understand each other, Adam.”

Shit, it must be serious if he's using my first name.

"Thank you, sir," called Adam over his shoulder as he shut the door and ran to the lift.

White sighed. His deputy could be a real pain at times but now he'd fucked up their biggest operation and endangered a top operative, never mind what it was he'd actually been doing. There was a definite smile on his face as he stood up and contemplated the conversation he was about to have with Peterson. It was a pity he had to deal with those pesky terrorists first.

Jennifer was all too aware that she was being followed at a distance, just as she was aware that somebody had been rather clumsily taking photos of her. That was fine and to be expected. The boys were just doing their job and checking her out. She'd be doing exactly the same, only doing it properly, in their position. Her job was to convince them that she hadn't noticed their cack-handed surveillance.

It was only a couple of months since the operation had begun and she'd been engaged in the business of getting into character and living a mostly normal life. Her character was a disgruntled industrial chemist who had been made redundant for political reasons and decided to get her own back by procuring and selling explosives to terrorists. So she spent her days being a normal unemployed person; going for long walks, to the library, cycling.

Her small house had been chosen because it was at the end of a culdesac, detached, and both adjacent houses were currently unoccupied (and would be for the duration of the operation because T14 had bought them as well). This allowed her to convincingly portray the bitter loner with few friends that was necessary for this operation. It was a pain to have one's entire social life limited to controlled meetings but

she was being well paid and doing important work. In any case, Jennifer was rather enjoying not having to go to the office or deal with any paperwork. At this stage of the operation she could largely relax and do as she pleased. She made the most of being able to read and go for walks in the countryside whenever she felt like. It was good in her line of work to keep in peak fitness, but there would soon be far more restrictions on her movements so she enjoyed the freedom while it was there.

After only twenty minutes this time they gave up. She briefly wondered which of the boys it was but didn't really care. She would have cared a great deal had she been able to take a proper look at the man following her, and see that it was in fact Peterson.

The gang of baby-faced terrorists had actually stopped following her a few weeks ago, having already satisfied their all too amateur curiosity. It would have creeped her out in the extreme to view the collection of photos that Peterson had built up over the last few weeks, some of them taken with a long lens through her kitchen window. His attentions, however, would soon shift away from Jennifer for an entirely unexpected reason.

CHAPTER EIGHT

I flicked irritably between three hundred and sixty channels of mind-numbing shit. Surely Adam never watched the majority of these god awful shows? I switched off the TV and began to pace up and down the living room. I didn't like having nothing to do. I didn't like staying in someone else's home. I especially didn't like knowing that soon three highly excitable, highly delusional, highly idealistic terrorists would be literally after my blood and all I had was two poxy handguns. Okay, that was unfair, they were both quite good as handguns go but I've never been that keen on them. They're more for show or idle threats than anything else. If you actually have to kill somebody a handgun is one of the worst way of doing it, one of the slowest ways – that's not good for them or you. Whenever I really have to kill somebody I prefer a more compassionate method; with a grenade or a quick burst from a Kalashnikov or H&K they don't know what's hit them because their heart stops beating in about half a second – there simply isn't time for

even that days breakfast to flash before them never mind a whole life. Death is a dish always best served quickly.

I don't keep a running tally of everyone I've killed but it's not that many in context. It depends which context though I suppose.

Anyway, I was becoming dangerously bored when the phone rang.

“Have you checked this phone for bugs?” asked Adam.

“Yes, I've been over the whole flat twice I'm so fucking bored.”

“Okay, we're going to safe house Omega. Pack some clothes for me and anything you can find for yourself, I'll be there in ten minutes.”

“What's happening?”

“We're going on a quick holiday with the kids.”

I paused. That was our personal code for America.

“When?”

“Tonight, probably. We've lost all trace of the Firewire sticks, no signals at all.”

“Fucking hell!”

“Exactly. I'll see you soon.”

I put the phone down.

What could possibly have happened? Had Arthur been captured? It must be serious if we were being jetted over there at such short notice.

I went into the bedroom and took down two suitcases from where they were neatly stored on top of the wardrobe.

Knowing his habits so well it was easy for me to predict what he would want to take with him. I did my best to pack his case as neatly as possible, though if something was seriously wrong with Arthur that may just be enough to distract Adam from worrying about me creasing his trousers.

I chucked in some t-shirts and shorts for myself, hoping that Arthur hadn't wandered off to one of the colder parts of America. Mind you, if he'd been totally disconnected he could be anywhere in the world, poor bastard. And if he'd been captured, well, that didn't bear thinking about.

Two hours later we arrived at the safe house.

"So," I asked Adam once we'd had something to eat, "what's he doing in America?"

"Nothing he should be. He's supposed to be on holiday, relaxing at home. His wife has no idea where he's been."

"Oh shit, that is very bad news." I pondered the implications. "So either he's sold out to someone - I can't believe that for a second - or somebody has got to him or it's some kind of technical fault."

"Yes, those are the only options," sighed Adam.

"I haven't seen him for over a year, how's he been?"

"Fine, no problems. His last brain scan revealed a considerable new amount of healed tissue around the injury and there have been no technical malfunctions of any kind for more than three years now."

"So where does that leave us?"

"Nowhere we at all want to be," said Adam, starting to pace again.

"It's not possible for..."

My phone rang and interrupted me.

"Okay, thanks."

"Flight?" asked Adam.

"We're leaving in ten minutes."

Captain Caveman to the rescue.

A spoonful of sugar.

Always fuck the green cross code.

Minus ten and counting.

Forty seven equals parsnip equivalence.

Sorry, but we cannot return any of your paintings.

Hyppocampal bypass implant.

I only want to help you, Rowland.

What's all that? Are these memories?

Right, I'm just going to sit here and think nothing until they go away.

CHAPTER NINE

“Bollocks,” muttered John, putting the phone down, “bang goes the sight seeing.”

Hannah knew from his expression during the five minute call that something somewhere had gone seriously tits up.

“Where are we going?”

“Washington, pack now.”

“Washington? Why, what's happened?” she asked, going over to the bed and pulling her suitcase out from underneath.

“We don't know. Arthur has gone AWOL. He's been disconnected since yesterday, no trace whatsoever.”

“That doesn't make sense.”

“No.”

“That's...” Hannah didn't want to even contemplate what this might mean. “So are we going to secure the hard drives?”

“The drives have been secured - they're back home, he never brought them with him. We're going to find out what's happened to him. The details we have for his last known location make no sense. Nobody has any idea why he's even in the country. They must be worried because 37 and 45 are flying out to meet us.”

Hannah paused and looked up from her packing.

“Then it must...” she shook her head. “I haven't seen 45 for ages, I thought she was tied up?”

John shrugged. “That's what I was told.”

She looked gravely at the floor for a moment. “They think he's dead,

don't they?"

"Don't overreact."

"I don't see any other explanation."

"All we can do is rescue the sticks and hope he's nearby."

"I suppose," she agreed reluctantly.

The following day, Agents 37 and 45 met up with Agents 61 and 22. They sat in their hire car, John impatiently tapping his hands on the dashboard.

"Come on Carter, you useless..." He heaved a sigh of relief as a taxi drove into the car park and pulled up next to them.

Adam opened the window and took the two suitcases from him.

"Bring them back in one piece," grinned Kevin Carter before speeding off.

"Dick head," muttered John as Adam opened the cases and handed out the Kalashnikovs.

Everyone checked and loaded their respective weapons and placed them on the floor.

"Don't drive too fast, John," said Adam, "we can't afford to waste time being stopped for speeding with these."

John grumbled something inaudible and pulled away in first gear with exaggerated slowness. Adam looked at Jennifer and raised his eyebrows as she stifled a laugh.

An hour later they arrived at the location of the last signal to be received from Agent 4.

Hannah stood next to the car and surveyed the scene with increasing despair.

"There's nothing here," she muttered, very accurately. They were in the middle of a field with nothing but other fields to be seen for miles.

Adam was busy walking around the field and inspecting the ground.

"No sign of any struggle or any vehicles," he sighed, returning to the group. "It's just a field."

Hannah once again waved her phone around the field, hoping in vain to receive a signal from the memory sticks.

"No sign of the sticks either."

"He must have been here two days ago," mused Jennifer, "but I can't see any reason why. Whether he's been captured or gone of his own accord, why the hell would he come here?"

"Maybe he was driving a long way and stopped for a piss," said John, sucking on a cigarette.

Jennifer looked at him.

"I'm not being sarcastic," he qualified, "why else would a man stop in a field in the middle of nowhere? The signal is only accurate to a couple of hundred meters, give or take. That could easily put him at the side of the road over there by the gate, behind those trees."

She had to concede it was the most likely explanation given their current lack of information.

"Okay," said Adam, "let's summarise. Two days ago all signals stopped. That means either a technical fault, nefarious and very clever interference from parties unknown, or he's dead and the sticks are either damaged or destroyed. We have to assume he's still alive and in trouble until we prove otherwise, we can't go to any US agencies for help, so what are we going to do?"

John used the dying embers of his cigarette to light another one.

"Unless his brain is completely scrambled," he said between puffs, "in which case he could be on the fucking moon for all we know, he must have been going somewhere, even if he himself didn't know why or was being taken there by force. There's no reason to come to the middle of nowhere and go back towards the airport so we have to assume he's in that direction." He pointed with his cigarette. "So, unless any more information turns up, all we can do today is keep driving in that direction and stop at every town, petrol station, hotel we find and... well, ask around I suppose."

He shrugged and turned his attention back to his cigarette.

"Any better ideas?" said Adam, looking around. "Okay, let's go. Who wants to drive for a while?"

Jennifer adjusted the seat and started the car, thankful that the weather was fairly mild. She hadn't had a chance to buy any clothes yet, and was still wearing Adam's shorts and t shirt. On the plus side, they made her look exactly unlike a Kalashnikov toting secret agent.

Forty minutes past, during which time John muttered "Why do they need so many fucking fields?" about five times to relieve the monotony of the ubiquitous landscape.

Jennifer slowed down as they approached a group of buildings.

"At last," she said, pulling into the parking lot.

A small motel, a gas station, a mini mart and, inexplicably, a shop selling brass instruments were all there was to be found in this tiny oasis.

"I'll go and check the motel first," said Jennifer, removing a photograph from the glove compartment. "Hannah, you may as well stock up on food and water, fuck knows how long this journey will last. And see if you can get me a couple of pairs of jeans and some vest tops. You two stay here. If anyone shows any interest in the car, take off and phone me."

She threw the keys to Adam and walked towards the hotel. He drove to the furthest part of the parking lot and turned the car around, reversing it into the spot.

"Hi," said an over-enthusiastic teenager behind the reception desk, "how may I help you today, miss?"

Jennifer showed him the photo.

"Have you seen this man? He's my uncle, he has alzhiemers and he wandered off a few days ago."

"Oh dear, I'm very sorry to hear that. Shall I see if he's booked in, do you have a name?"

Jennifer briefly wondered how in the world she would not know her own uncle's name, but let it pass. She had to be convincing on this point.

"I'm afraid he's so ill he can't even remember his own name," she said, throwing in a sad eyed look for added effect, "if he's booked in he could have used literally any name. Sometimes he thinks he's a character from 'The Posiden Adventure'."

"I see," said the boy, clearly feeling that this was now way out of his league. "Shall I fetch the manager?"

"That would be very kind," she sniffed, careful not to overact.

She was used to fooling people professionally, and the manager believed her story as readily as the pimply youth. After a few minutes of speaking to various members of staff, it was established that Agent 4 had indeed booked into the establishment two days previously, but had inexplicably left without staying in the room.

"I saw him in the corridor and he said he was going out," said one of the cleaners. "That was only a few minutes after he'd booked in. He never came back."

"Does he owe any money?" Jennifer asked.

"No," said the manager, "that's the odd thing - he paid for a week."

She filed away the information and decided not to react to it or think about it until she was safely back in the car.

"Thank you for all your help, we'd better get on after him."

"I hope you find him. We will, of course, keep the room free for the duration."

She bit her lip in frustration at her negligence.

"Could I have a quick look in the room, please?" She improvised: "He often writes little notes to himself about what he's going to do, he may have left something that could give us a clue."

"Of course," said the manager, "come this way, madam."

"As you can see," he said once they were inside the room, "he left none of his belongings behind."

"No, thank fuck," thought Jennifer, that would have been decidedly awkward.

She looked under the pillow and found three tell tale yellow post it notes.

"We haven't changed the bed," flustered the manager, "because it hasn't been used yet."

She was glad of his distraction, which gave her time to fold up the

notes and carefully pocket them. A search of the waste basket and the bathroom revealed no further clues.

She stopped briefly at the gas station, where they were spectacularly unhelpful, then joined the others in the car.

"He booked in the day before yesterday then left almost immediately after paying for the room for a week."

"A week?" said Adam. "Sounds like he was in hiding."

"I asked, as subtly as possible, if they'd seen him with anyone and they hadn't."

"He bought a few things in the shop too," added Hannah. "They remembered him because of his accent, and because he was agitated and confused."

"What did he buy?" asked John.

"They couldn't remember exactly, and it would draw attention if I asked them to check the till rolls or CCTV footage, but it was something small like chocolate, matches and pencils. I don't think he even likes chocolate, but it doesn't sound as if he was planning on a long journey."

"We don't have any time to waste," said Jennifer, "he has a two day head start on us. We'll have to keep going twenty four hours a day and sleep in shifts in the back seat. John, you'd better stock up on fags and Adam we'll need more water and, unfortunately, some toilet paper. I'll get petrol."

Ten minutes later they were back on the road, wondering how long it would be before they could get back off it and sleep in a bed.

Jennifer awoke to find Hannah urgently tugging her sleeve.

"Come on, the boys have been and I'm busting. Hurry up."

They slid inelegantly down a dusty slope towards some bushes.

"At least it's dark," said Jennifer. "How many miles, sorry, kilometres have we covered?"

"Just under two hundred since the motel. We've passed a few small places but we didn't think it was worth stopping to ask if they'd seen him because there was nowhere he could be staying. There's been nothing

else but, according to the sat nav, we're about ten miles from a medium sized town. Adam thought it best we all wake up before we arrive."

Jennifer nodded, and chose the least prickly looking bush to squat behind.

"How many of those do you smoke in a day?" asked Adam.

"Dunno, I don't count. Anyway, what's the plan when we get there? Split up and look for him individually?"

"I don't know," admitted Adam. "It seems by far the most likely scenario that he's wandered off alone because there's something wrong with his wiring and he's confused and lost. If we get desperate we could involve the local police but I'd rather not. Who knows what he may say when he's found?"

"Have you got those notes?"

Adam rummaged in his pocket and produced the three yellow slips of paper. John took them and got out of the car.

"I'll have a pace, it helps me think."

Leaving the door open, he began walking back and forth in and out of the cars headlights. Adam wished he had stayed put rather than leaving him in sole charge of four Kalashnikovs but then he heard 45 and 61 clambering back up the slope so relaxed back into his average level of tension.

"Come on, John, time to go," said Jennifer, shutting the car door behind her.

"Shush for two minutes, I think I'm on to something," he said, continuing to pace a slalom between the headlight beams.

She shrugged. "Okay, we may as well have some chocolate and check our weapons."

"Bingo," shouted John a minute later, causing Hannah to drop a handful of Maltesers onto the floor.

He got back in the car and did up his seatbelt. "Come on then, no time to waste, talk and drive."

Hannah gave up trying to retrieve the rolling chocolate ball bearings from under the pedals and started the ignition.

As she pulled out of the layby, John began to share his idea.

"We've been thinking these are random words and phrases but I've been looking for a pattern." He paused to take a drag on his cigarette while the others waited impatiently. "Of course we don't know in what order he wrote these or if there was any gap between each note, but I'm fairly sure they are telling us something.

"As you know, it would take at least two hours from the stick being removed for him to totally lose his memory of the last four years since the operation and the implant. After this amount of time, the implant should have done a fairly thorough job of repairing the damaged part of his brain. So, even if he were to be disconnected, he should still remember that he's an agent and everything he did before the shooting, possibly even up to last year. He should know all of us and that we're on his side, whatever else he can or can't remember."

"Well, that's good then, isn't it?" said Hannah.

"In theory yes, but I have some bad news. I stress this is only a theory but it's a distinct probability."

The other three braced themselves. Despite his offhand, flippant manner, John was the technical wizard of the organisation and knew more about Agent 4's implant than almost anyone else. Before joining T14 he had spent eight years working with computers and robotics.

"These words and phrases may seem random nonsense but there is a pattern. You see the way there are symbols mixed up with words and numbers? What does that remind you of?"

"Just tell us, John, for fucks sake," said Jennifer.

"How about a malfunctioning computer?"

"Of course he's malfunctioning, we know that. He is a computer."

"In a sense, yes," said John, "and I think he has a virus."

He took another drag and blew smoke out of the window as the car fell into silence.

"If that's true," said Adam, "then what could it mean for him?"

"Fuck knows," said John, "it depends where the virus came from and what type it is."

"He can't be breached from on line, can he?"

"No," said John, "that's not physically possible. He never connects directly to the internet for precisely that reason, we download and scan maps and relevant data and then upload them to the implant via the sticks. But if somebody had direct access to his sticks or drive, or plugged something else into him that contained a virus..."

"But who would have the chance to do that, and why, and how would they know about him anyway?" asked Hannah.

"Exactly," puffed John, "but I think I should say that, if I'm right, he could be in literally any kind of condition by now. Someone could have tried to feed him instructions, fry his organic brain, anything. So he may in fact not have a clue who we are. He may actually have advanced alzhiemers, albeit in digital form."

"Don't say that," pleaded Hannah, "that's horrible."

John shrugged. "We won't know until we find him."

Hannah slowed down as the lights of the town hove into view.

"So," she said, "where do we start?"

"So far as I can tell," said Adam, "there are seventeen places you can find a room for the night in this town. We have no option but to do them one by one. It's too mild to wear coats big enough to conceal our weapons so two of us will have to stay with the car. Jen and Hannah, you're more plausible, so you visit places and John and I will phone the others."

45 and 61 visited six hotels without success. On his fourth attempt, John struck lucky. He leaned back into the car and motioned to Adam to get the others back.

"We're outside..." John looked around, blinking against the neon lighting, "a bowling alley and a Burger King. Okay, thanks very much, we'll be five minutes."

45 was already running towards the car so 37 ran off to retrieve 61 from her futile sortie.

"He's a few blocks away," said John, spitting out the words in disgust, "or a few streets away if you speak English."

"Has he got himself into any trouble?"

"No, he hasn't left his room, but they were on the verge of calling a doctor for him so I think we've had a very lucky escape."

Risking a speeding ticket, they arrived as quickly as humanly possible.

Jennifer and John went in, carrying two of the rifles in a suitcase.

A worried looking manager, doubtless desperate to avoid a lawsuit from relatives for failing to give proper medical care or something, showed them straight to the room.

"Would you mind if we went in alone," said Jennifer, "he gets confused if there are too many people talking to him at once."

"Yes, we know," said the manager, scuttling away in relief from the awkwardness of whatever was about to happen.

When he had disappeared, John opened the case and took out one of the rifles, concealing it behind his back as best he could.

Jennifer knocked and slowly opened the door.

"Arthur? It's me."

Agent 4 was sitting on the bed staring into space. He was unshaven, bleary eyed and clearly hadn't changed his clothes in at least a week. It had been almost two years since Jennifer had seen him and this wasn't the reunion she'd been expecting.

He looked much older than his fifty two years and what remained of his hair was sticking out at unruly angles. He'd visibly lost weight and his skin was pallid. He quite simply looked ill and malnourished.

Hearing a noise nearby, John had to risk shoving her into the room so that he could enter and shut the door behind them.

"Arthur," she repeated. "Agent 4?"

At the latter he looked up. John breathed a huge sigh of relief.

"Do you recognise us?"

Yes," he answered, though barely seeming to register anything very much. "Warm and toasty."

John locked the door behind him and did a quick search of the room and bathroom.

He put down the Kalashnikov and lit a cigarette, taking out his phone.

At the site of the gun Agent 4 jumped off the bed and made for the bathroom.

"No, Arthur, we're your friends, remember. We have guns because we thought you'd been taken prisoner."

John paused in pressing the call button.

"What's the last thing you remember, Arthur?"

"Big blue helicopter."

"The helicopter was an op eight years ago. See what I mean about random jumble?"

He went into the bathroom to make the call to White.

"Arthur," said Jennifer, sitting next to him on the bed and taking his hand, "do you know what's happened to you?"

"When? Recently? No."

"No, I mean the last few years."

"No idea. No idea, no no no no no ideas, patent applied for."

"You were shot in the head four years ago and lost your memory. You had an implant to help you remember things and now something has gone wrong with it. Once we get you back home they can fix it and you'll be fine again."

He looked up at her mournfully. "I hope so. This is horrible."

45 felt her steely exterior slip for a moment. This must be what it was like to have severe dementia. Fucking hell. She hugged him and wiped away a tear.

"I don't know why but I trust you."

"Good," she smiled.

22 emerged from the bathroom.

"We can't get on a flight for four hours," he grumbled, "but at least that gives us time to relax a bit and have a proper meal. Have you found his sticks?"

"Don't talk as if he's not here," hissed 45.

John stopped and threw her an apologetic glance.

"Sorry." He turned to 4. "Sorry, old man, but you are a bit fucked up, aren't you? Some nasty bastard has literally messed with your head. Do you remember where you left your sticks?"

"I'm too young to walk with sticks," he said indignantly.

"No," said 45 gently, "your Firewire sticks. They work with your implant."

He closed his eyes and said nothing, so 22 and 45 began searching the room and his luggage.

"Bingo with a fucking cherry on top," said John after a few minutes, "they're both in here. Wrapped in a sock."

Agent 4 opened his eyes and pointed excitedly at the two tiny devices.

"My sticks, give my my sticks!"

"Hang on," said 45, "somebody has tampered with them. They may make you worse, we'll have to check them."

"I'll pack my roller skates," he said, getting off the bed and going into the bathroom.

Jennifer looked worried.

"I checked for exit windows or sharp objects, it's fine," said John. He plugged one of the sticks into the Firewire port on his phone, then handed it to 45. "You're better at typing with your thumbs, you do all the bloody passwords. Where's your phone?"

He took her mobile and dialled White again.

"No, sir, it's 22. She's using my phone to scan one of the sticks, can you divert all available resources to that ASAP. Okay." He switched the phone to speaker and dropped it onto the bed.

"Anything yet? We'll have to read the results ourselves, all the tech boys have gone home."

"You mean you'll have to," said 45, giving him the phone. "I'll make some coffee."

She switched on the kettle and, after checking that Arthur was okay, phoned Adam.

"Sorry, it's been a bit hectic. Yes, he's fine. He remembers us but nothing else for about eight years. We're having a stick scanned now and John will have to assess the results. We'll be down in about fifteen minutes." She opened a small foil sachet of coffee and sniffed it cautiously. "Give it ten minutes then get us five large coffees; we can't get a flight for four hours so it's going to be a long night."

"A flight," said Agent 4, emerging from the bathroom without a hint of roller skate, "where are we going?"

"Home," said 45.

"Where's that?"

"Well, the agency initially. We're scanning your stick now to see if it's safe for you to have it back."

He looked puzzled.

"Do I put it in my ear, or what?"

John broke his intense stare away from his phone and looked up at Arthur.

"Can't you even remember... no I suppose not." He shrugged and turned his attention back to the lines of code streaming across the screen. "You'd better show him."

Jennifer took Agent 4's hand and guided it to the back of his neck, pressing his finger against the socket that sat under his shirt collar.

He seemed initially startled, but then relaxed visibly.

"I remember now, that at least."

"Good. We'll be able to go soon. 61 and 37 are waiting in the car."

"I remember 37, tall handsome chap, but not 61."

"She only joined five years ago," said Jennifer, "I'm sure it'll come back when you see her."

He looked at the open sachet of coffee on the side.

"Don't drink that, it's disgusting."

It took a few seconds for him to realise what he'd said, but then he looked as pleased as 45 and 22.

"What the hell's going on there?" shouted a voice, startling 4.

45 picked up the phone.

"It's okay, his short term memory seems to be returning. Do you want to speak to him?"

"Who is it?" asked Arthur warily.

"Bill White, our boss."

He thought for a moment.

"I don't have anything to report."

"Never mind," said White, "so long as you're okay, Arthur. We're doing all we can at this end, I'll see you first thing in the morning."

Jennifer as subtly as possible switched off the speaker in case he wanted to say anything else.

"Fucking shitbags!" shouted John. "There's a complex virus, or something bad, on this stick. I'll try the other one. Shall we get out of here and get that coffee, I'm sure you could do with a decent one, Arthur?"

"I'm very hungry as well."

"Plenty of time until the plane," said 45, "we'll all go and eat, none of us have had a meal today."

"I'll let you know about the scan soon as," said John, taking the phone, "yes, will do. Bye."

Arthur smiled.

"I'm very happy to be leaving this room."

"So am I," muttered Jennifer.

Thankfully, upon reaching the car, he immediately recognised Hannah.

Still having to guard the weapons, they decided to take their rest break in shifts. 45 and 61 ate with Agent 4 in a diner while 22 and 37 ate burgers in the car, then they swapped and 22 and 37 sat in the coffee bar

with him.

John had scanned the second stick and not found anything untoward. Nonetheless, they decided it was too risky to connect it in case the virus from the other stick had infected the implant in some way. Besides, Arthur seemed quite happy and settled now.

They had spend a quiet ten minutes sipping coffee and sharing a box of doughnuts when Agent 4 suddenly stood up apropos of nothing. 37 and 22 tensed immediately and watched him carefully.

"You okay?" asked John.

"The box is going to fall," he screamed, "subroutine 61 failed."

John reached unhurriedly into the inside pocket of his jacket and took out a small leather pouch. He nudged Adam, who looked momentarily puzzled, then nodded his assent.

Adam got up and stood in front of Arthur, hopefully blocking the view of most people, especially the two cops sitting four tables away, from what John was about to do.

"Altzhiemers," he said in a loud, clear voice.

"Bollocking traitor cunt!" shouted Arthur as John stuck the needle smoothly into his arm. Within seconds he helped the limp, bleary eyed Arthur back into his seat.

"I'm a doctor," shouted John in his tweediest voice, "from England," he added unnecessarily. "I've given him a sedative. He'll be fine now."

A waitress came over and mopped up the coffee Arthur had spilled on the floor.

"Can I get you some more, sir?"

"No thanks, we'd nearly finished. We have to be on our way anyway."

Adam maintained a level expression as one of the cops got up and approached him.

"Can we be of any assistance, sir?" he asked.

"No, it's fine now, thank you. We're just on our way to the airport. We thought a holiday may do him good but we're taking him home now. He's never behaved like that before," he added, entirely truthfully. "He'll

be better when we get him back home," he said, fervently hoping that would also turn out to be true.

Thankfully, everyone seemed to lose interest, and they were able to get back to the car unimpeded.

"What's wrong with him?" asked Jennifer.

"Never mind," said John, seeing the two cops leave the building, "just fucking drive."

He waved politely at the police as they drove past. When he was sure they weren't being followed he explained what had happened.

"He should be pretty docile now until we land, touch wood."

"Good job he didn't do that at the airport," said Hannah, "they wouldn't have let us on the plane."

CHAPTER TEN

With massive relief throughout the whole agency the five arrived back without incident.

While 22, 37, 45 and 61 grabbed a quick couple of hours sleep, Agent 4 was put through a battery of tests by the team who had performed his implant operation.

They managed to wipe everything harmful that had infiltrated the implant and clean up the sticks. After a few hours, he was back to his normal self, barring a memory of the last few days, and allowed to sleep.

Meanwhile, 45 had gone into the director's office.

"What happened with Imran and co?" she asked.

"No problem there," said White, "they were pleasingly predictable. When you didn't show up at the rendezvous, they tooled themselves up and broke into your house. We're holding them now on burglary and firearms offences, that was easily enough to keep them for seventy two hours. We've since been over their house with a microscopically fine tooth-comb; we found more than I'd hoped for. I'll be going to the CPS later today and I'm confident we have enough evidence to at least secure

a trial for conspiracy to commit terrorist offences. The rest is up to the jury."

He leaned back in his chair and frowned.

"It would have been a nice bonus if you could have carried on until they revealed who was funding them, but I'll take this result any day. We've foiled their plans and that's the main thing. We would have been winding down the operation soon so no harm done really. Congratulations, Jennifer. I'm sorting out some new accommodation for you, just in case they revealed your address to anyone else."

"Thank you. I hate to sour the atmosphere, but what's happened with Peterson?"

His face darkened.

"That little runt is the thorn in the side of this whole organisation. I'm currently holding him in a cell downstairs."

Jennifer couldn't help laughing.

"I bet he doesn't like that."

"Actually, he seems almost pleased, which is worrying me. At the moment all I have on him is that he has surreptitiously contacted a known criminal and withdrawn ten thousand pounds in cash. I don't know what kind of contract he intended to pay for."

Jennifer blinked.

"Contract? You think he had a contract out on me and the guy he hired killed Libby by mistake?"

"I don't know that, and I certainly can't prove it."

"What's the murderer saying?"

"That is deeply frustrating. When the police raided his house he wasn't there. Obviously somebody tipped him off because he's vanished. Short of beating more information out of Peterson, I don't know how to proceed."

"I hereby volunteer to beat anything you like out of Peterson."

White smiled broadly. "I never said this, but as a last resort, I'm not ruling it out."

"I'll polish my knuckle dusters."

"I thought you could do that, metaphorically, and go and interview him now. If he has tried to have you killed, that might freak him out and make him talk."

She stood up. "I am in no way exaggerating when I say that it will be a genuine pleasure."

"I'm sure it will. Don't draw blood yet. Just see what you can find out."

"Cameras all set up?"

"Yes, whenever you're ready."

"Give me ten minutes."

Peterson looked up and couldn't disguise his confusion and unease at the sight of Jennifer entering his cell. He shifted in his seat and wondered what new form of cruel game was about to be played against him.

"What's the matter, surprised to see me alive?"

Peterson's face was a smorgasbord of reactions, each vying for attention. He evidently decided that saying nothing was better than attempting any kind of answer.

"This isn't proper interview protocol," he muttered half-heartedly.

"No," confirmed 45, "I should take you to a designated interrogation room and conduct a formal interview."

She paused just long enough for him to think that she may be about to acquiesce, then lunged towards him and grabbed his throat, pushing him back against the wall.

"Why did you pay someone to kill Libby Stevens?"

"I can explain..." he began, then didn't.

She let go of his throat in order to allow him to calm down, get over the disappointment that he'd caved so easily, and organise his thoughts. She waited a full minute but he said nothing.

"Were you, and take your time over this as it's fairly important, trying to have me killed?"

Jennifer cocked her head coquettishly to one side and waited.

He seemed understandably reluctant to answer.

"I've got all day," she said, "but you haven't."

"It was nothing to do with you. That is... I mean that you... you were never the intended target of the operation."

"Operation!" she spluttered, "That's rather overstating the capabilities of your hired thug. Would you care to tell me the origins of this operation?"

"No," spluttered Peterson, "it's... a personal matter."

"Personal. Interesting." She surveyed Peterson. "However, you are the deputy director of one our most secret secret services, so when you pay somebody to commit murder on your behalf that becomes really quite important, professionally speaking."

He looked at the ground, trying to summon up the courage to speak his mind.

"It's nothing to do with the service. I was having an affair with the woman. She threatened to tell my wife, I panicked." He actually looked sorry for himself.

"Panic!" she said in disgust. "You had your bit on the side murdered because you panicked?" Jennifer thought for a moment. "So it was just a coincidence that she looked like me?"

Peterson shuffled nervously and looked at the floor, trying to avoid her gaze. That was the one question he really didn't want to answer.

She stared open mouthed at the old man. "You were shagging her because she looked like me? You dirty fucking bastard!"

She took a firm stride towards him.

"Jen!" shouted Bill White.

It took her a moment to realise that the two way intercom had been activated. Of course it would be unprofessional to kill a man on the verge of retirement.

"To say you'll regret this is an understatement."

She walked briskly out of the room, slamming the door as hard as

possible to get some of the anger out of her.

After a brief stomp about she went back to White's office.

"Unorthodox as usual, 45," he said as she sat down, "but we have all we need to charge him with conspiracy to murder. I'll talk to him myself in a while. If I'm then satisfied that this has nothing to do with the agency and doesn't compromise us in any way, then I'll hand him over to the police. They can also find the murderer."

"I'd like to do that, sir, I feel sort of responsible for this woman's death."

"You had no idea he had any kind of obsession with you or anything?"

"No, none."

"Then it's nothing to do with you, put it behind you," he said simply. "I'm sure Peterson will cooperate with the police in due time."

"I suppose so."

"Apart from having to appoint a new deputy, which is a deeply tedious process, this is no longer our concern. Besides, there's still important work for you to do with Agent 4."

"Of course, I'd forgotten all about that. How is he?"

"So far as we can tell he's back to normal, but we still don't know who gave him that virus, where it came from, what it was intended to do, how they managed to administer it to him and, more importantly, exactly what he did during the period his memory is wiped. He was on leave for a few days and we think it happened during that time, so he could have been anywhere and doing anything. He has only a very patchy memory of the last couple of weeks for some reason."

"So we don't know exactly when the virus was introduced - it could have been a sleeper, so to speak."

White nodded his reluctant agreement.

"The main question remains how did anybody find out about him and his implant. I'd rather not have to tear the organisation apart and suspect everybody but I may have to if we can't find an answer soon. The implant team are doing all they can but the virus is like nothing they've ever seen, and of course this is totally new territory for all of us."

He ran a hand through his hair and stood up.

"If nothing is resolved in the next day or so you may have to take him back to the States."

"Yes," agreed Jennifer, "see if it jogs his memory or if anybody remembers meeting him. He could have said anything to anyone."

"Exactly. You and the others are off all cases until this is sorted - one way or another. Arthur has been a good agent, but I can't allow the organisation to be compromised."

"We're all expendable?"

"I didn't say that. Just see what you can do."

She nodded and left the office.

That afternoon 37, 45, 22 and 61 sat around an extravagant conference table on the top floor of the building. Being an old fashioned building, this unmodified room had windows that opened to some degree. John sat next to one of these, flicking ash out of the small gap.

On a white board were a tangled series of questions and assumptions but no concrete answers. They had been there for three hours and not really got anywhere.

"I think," said John, "that we're just tying ourselves up in ever increasing knots here."

"I agree," said Adam, "but how else can we proceed?"

"We could stop asking questions we can't answer."

"Isn't that our job?" asked Hannah.

"We're not going to uncover any new information by sitting here talking, are we?" said John. "I propose that for now we exclude all the unknowns and establish the facts more clearly."

"Okay," said Jennifer, "you're the statistician among us, go ahead."

John flicked his cigarette out of the window and went over to the white board, turning it over and wiping it clean.

"All we know is that at some point during the last few weeks some sort of code was somehow introduced into the circuitry of Agent 4. Subsequently, while on leave, he got on a plane to America for reasons

unknown and then seemingly travelled in a straight line from the airport until he stopped at the hotel where we found him. For some reason either he or someone else removed his stick, resulting in memory malfunction and disorientation. That is all we know that definitely occurred. Therefore, rather than playing guessing games, I suggest we focus on the code itself, the so-called virus."

"Why so-called?" asked Jennifer. "Do you think it isn't a virus?"

"I've not studied it extensively but even the simplest of digital viruses has some kind of purpose. I haven't found anything yet and neither have the tech team, which indicates what the purpose of the code is. There are no clear instructions encoded anywhere, it doesn't seem to have any logic to it."

"Can I just clarify," asked Adam, "that it isn't possible to feed instructions to Arthur which he will obey unquestioningly?"

"I'm afraid we can't say that for certain. The implant has replaced his hippocampus and the sticks give us access to that. The sticks backup his memories in digital form and allow him to read certain kinds of information from them. Who knows what would happen if somebody tried to feed him instructions? It's not what the implant was designed for but it's not beyond the realms of technical feasibility that it could be used for that purpose."

"Hang on a minute," said Adam, "you said the code was badly written, or maybe not even written at all. Surely that rules out anyone in T14 with any real access to him or his records? So we're looking for somebody who knows that he has the implant and the sticks, but doesn't know all the tech stuff or how it works?"

"Oh good, that rules me out then," said John dryly.

"And the implant team, presumably," added Jennifer. "If it were someone in our organisation then they would have known how to get their hands on the tech info at the very least. But I don't see why anyone internal would want to do this - what's the point in wiping his memory and sending him to a random place in America? What benefit could any of us gain from that?"

"I agree," said Adam, "anybody who works here knows Arthur doesn't have superpowers. But let's hypothesis for a moment, sorry, John. Suppose somebody external somehow discovered that we had an

agent with a brain implant who could process digital information. They may well assume, especially if they were from an especially paranoid or superstitious organisation or country, that Arthur was some sort of bionic man, or super weapon, or that they could programme him to be a Trojan horse. Surely they would, given the opportunity, take a punt, no matter how unlikely a result was?"

John lit another cigarette and looked out of the window for a few moments, mulling over Adam's idea.

"That is a very sound hypothesis," he agreed, "and I'm willing to go with it for the time being. But it doesn't get us any closer to ascertaining any of the who, when, where, why or how."

"No," said Jennifer. "I don't think we're going to make any more progress here. If somebody tried to make him a Trojan horse they've clearly failed. What we have to establish is what he did during his memory lapse. Maybe the purpose of the code was merely to confuse him so that whoever it was could get him to talk."

"We have no suspects at all, do we?" said Hannah. "If the code can't tell us anything then there's only one thing we can possibly do - retrace his steps."

"Well," said Jennifer, "there is one other thing, but it's a last resort."

The others looked at her expectantly.

"We could hypnotise him."

"Would that work?" asked John.

"I could do it, it's piss easy," said Jennifer, "it's no more than inducing a meditative, relaxed state. But with Arthur it has added complications. I wouldn't want him to start reliving the trauma of that bullet going in his head; he hasn't had to deal with that because it's always been a blank, no pun intended. Plus I've no idea if hypnosis would affect the implant. I agree with Hannah, we have little choice, if there's no tech answer by tomorrow, to take him back to the airport and do the journey again. John, is it likely that he removed his stick when he was in that field?"

"It's the most probable time, yes."

"So surely he must have had a reason for doing that, assuming

nobody else was with him at the time? Taking him back to that field should trigger some sort of memory if he's totally back to normal now."

"I agree," said Adam. "We all need a proper nights sleep. I vote we fill White in with our findings and then go home."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

With a day to go before returning to Washington, I was at a bit of a loose end. It was nice after all the running around I'd been doing lately but I felt honour bound to do something productive, even though White had told me to have a day off.

I mulled over the idea of hypnotising Arthur and decided that I would at least suggest it to him. I'd done a course in counselling and hypnotherapy about ten years previously and was confident I could do it properly. All I would be doing was relaxing Arthur and putting him in a state of semi-sleep where he'd be more likely to remember things. Brainwashing or any of that past-life regression shit wasn't on the agenda.

We discussed it for a good hour but in the end he decided against it. I think it was the possibility of reliving his shooting or the surgery, though I assured him that was massively unlikely, that put him off. It was just an idea, and in his position I'd almost certainly have declined as well.

So that afternoon I decided instead to go and see his wife to see if I could establish a more precise time for the start of his erratic behaviour. White had already interviewed her, but he probably just terrified her. I hoped I could take a more chatty approach and encourage her to reveal her thoughts in her own time.

"When will he be allowed home," Barbara asked me as we sat down in their conservatory with a pot of tea.

"He's fine so far as we can tell," I said, "but we're going to have to go back to America tomorrow. It seems to be the only way of maybe unlocking his memory."

"I can't complain, can I? When he signed that consent document for experimental surgery I wasn't happy, but I never thought he'd actually be

shot in the head. If he hadn't signed that paper he would have died, wouldn't he?"

I nodded.

"If he hadn't died, he would have been..." I searched for a polite way of saying it, "almost totally brain dead."

"Have you signed up for that?" she asked.

"I try to avoid getting shot as a rule but yes I have."

She hesitated. "He didn't do anything bad, did he? While he... didn't know what he was doing?"

"There's no evidence for that, but we still have no idea who did this to him or how. That's why I'm here. I'd like you to tell me absolutely everything that happened after he got home from work last Friday. Any tiny detail may be a clue, and at the moment we have none. You weren't planning to go away anywhere?"

"No," said Barbara, "he was due back on Wednesday so it wasn't worth going away. We were just going to have a quiet weekend, do some shopping, a car boot sale, go for a drive in the country on Monday."

"Was he his normal self on Friday?"

"Yes, he was fine until Sunday afternoon, then he seemed, well, odd."

"Okay, I'd still like you to tell me every tiny detail of your weekend. It's possible he was infected, tampered with, however you want to put it, during the weekend."

Barbara shuddered.

"You mean whoever did this to him was here?"

I paused. "Why do you say that?"

"I've been over everything many times. The only time we were apart all weekend was Sunday morning. I went to visit my sister, I was gone for three hours. Arthur said he'd cook lunch. When I got back he wasn't his usual self."

"We'll come to that in a minute. When you left the house, did you drive?"

"Yes, I took my car, the polo."

"Did you notice any cars or people when you left?"

"I'm sorry, your boss asked me that, but I'm just not spy material."

I smiled disarmingly. "That's fine. So, tell me precisely what happened when you got back from your sisters."

"He was very quiet the first few minutes, as if we'd had a row. We've never had a serious row, ever. Then I noticed he hadn't put the joint in, it was on the side in a tray. And he'd peeled enough potatoes for a whole village, it must have taken him over an hour. Then he started shouting that nothing was where it should be and where was the oven."

"He was generally disorientated?"

"Yes, that's it, disorientated. Very. It lasted about ten minutes and I was wondering what to do when he suddenly said he'd been given an urgent assignment and had to go. He just picked up his car keys and his jacket and left."

She looked upset for a moment so I tactfully sipped my tea and waited, hoping something else would occur to her.

"I put his mood down to the stress of having his time off taken away, and he has become slightly confused now and then in the past. You know, nothing serious, just annoyed when he can't remember something from a few years ago."

"I'm sure I'd be annoyed sometimes if I had a bunch of wires in my brain," I almost said aloud, but just managed to stop myself.

"And he didn't say anything else as he left?"

"No."

"Okay. Thanks for the tea, Barbara, you've helped make things a lot clearer. I'm sure when we get back from America Arthur will be given a proper holiday."

As I began to walk back to the office I phoned White.

"I've just been talking to Barbara."

"I couldn't get any sense out of her."

"No, I played the female sympathy card."

"You always were a good actress, 45."

I blew a raspberry down the phone. "Anyway, I'm convinced it happened within a three hour period on Sunday morning; that's when either the code was introduced or began to take effect. Can you find out what signal we got from him between 9am and midday? If he didn't leave home then somebody may well have been watching the house and nobbled him when Barbara went out."

"I'll get onto that right away. See you later."

Back at the office, we discovered that Arthur hadn't left his house until after his wife got back. It seems that he simply went to the airport and got the next plane to Washington, just taking a small, hastily packed suitcase.

The tech boys hadn't been able to decipher the virus any further, except to tell us that it was so incompetent that it was almost certainly a mishmash of coherent pieces of coding cut and pasted together at random. That meant at least that we definitely weren't dealing with a similar agency of a foreign power, but the alternatives were no less worrying. There was nothing for it but to go home and get some sleep in readiness for our second American trip in two days.

It took me an hour to fall asleep, during which time I kept hoping that Arthur hadn't got into any trouble on his little holiday. But more than anything I was burning with curiosity as to why he stopped in a field in the middle of nowhere to remove his memory stick. Was he accompanied for some of his journey after all?

CHAPTER TWELVE

After meeting Kevin and procuring some handguns so we could be more covert, though we 'could have got them just about anywhere in this country', as John kept pointing out, we proceeded from the airport to Agent 4s first known port of call, the field.

From the timing of the loss of his signal, it seemed that he'd not had time to do anything but drive straight from the car hire office to the field. There was then a worrying gap of about four hours between that and him arriving at the first motel, which was an hours drive at the most.

With no time to drive back to Washington and make it to the motel, the options all seemed nonsensical. Had he stayed in the field for three hours or sat in the car? Had he driven straight to the motel then sat in the parking lot for three hours?

Nothing on the drive seemed to jog his memory so we just chatted. It was definitely overkill for all five of us to be on this trip but I think White wanted enough of us there to reassure Arthur. Either that or he still didn't trust his implant for some reason.

This was entirely new territory for all of us. At the time of the operation it was never even considered a possibility that we were creating a bionic man, or that he would ever be anything other than somebody with an artificially supported memory. The Firewire socket was a rather crude necessity, simply a way to access the implant in the future without having to open up his skull again. It was only afterwards that they discovered Arthur could assimilate digital information in an organic way, allowing him to search information from his sticks as he could his own memories and thoughts.

Obviously this had proved massively useful over the years and been made subject to the Official Secrets Act. Even Arthur's wife didn't know about his enhanced capabilities.

But somebody appeared to, somebody who shouldn't, and that was worrying everybody.

Being such an unprecedented situation, we were all scrabbling about in the dark. There was simply no way anybody outside the organisation could have found out about Arthur, never mind get access to his sticks and our tech lab. It could have been an inside job but there were currently zero candidates and, unless we uncovered something that Arthur had done during the lost two days, there was no connection to anybody or any reason for what had happened.

In short it was a seemingly unsolvable mystery, but solve it we had to. We needed initially to establish where Arthur had gone during those three hours and whether he had spoken to anyone once he arrived at the motel and seemingly stayed in his room for two days. Even if there had been no problems or security breaches, we still had to find out who had doctored his implant, why and how, and if it could happen again.

When the GPS told us we were about ten minutes from the field,

Arthur suddenly became agitated. I was driving and he was in the passenger seat so I noticed him wringing his hands and shaking slightly.

"What's up?" I asked.

"This part of the road looks familiar," he said, "but it's still hazy. It's just frustrating, that's all."

"If you relax and just look around it'll come back eventually, don't force it."

"Even if I do remember, how do we know they're real memories and not a digital blip?"

Nobody answered because that was something else that had to be factored into our investigation - how reliable could Arthur's recall of his time with the virus ever possibly be?

"Sorry I was a bit down back there," said Arthur as we pulled up beside the field, "but having this memory lapse feels a bit like being shot again. I'm fine now so come on, let's get on with our job."

John enthusiastically volunteered to remain with the car - it would be disastrous if it were stolen; five people hitching would look very suspicious. With his case of duty free fags he was like a kid in a sweet shop.

The rest of us walked through the gate and into the field.

"You were within two hundred meters of where we've parked when your stick was removed," said Adam.

Arthur nodded and looked around. He began walking in a purposeful manner so we silently followed.

"Leaving aside the tangle of philosophical questions about false memories and so forth, I remember walking over to that tree in the far corner. I can't remember removing my stick though."

"We're you alone?" I asked.

He turned to me with a puzzled look. "Of course."

We hadn't discussed explicitly with Arthur the possibility that he'd been kidnapped and it didn't seem to have occurred to him. I let it go for now as his memory seemed to be partially returning.

"Can you remember why you came across the field?" I asked.

"No. I can remember walking here but my thoughts were all over the place, and I can only remember it as a series of short snippets, if that makes sense."

"No memory is ever a hundred percent reliable," I said, "it's always a re-presentation rather than a video tape. We just need to know if you met anyone or said anything during your blackout."

"I think I spent some time here," he said quietly, "but I don't know why."

He looked a bit shaky again so I tried to reassure him. "We still don't know what the code did to your short term memory. You could have thought you were on a mission or looking for something. Or, more likely, you just wandered off and got lost and it took you three hours to find the car again."

"Let's hope so," said Arthur, "I don't like not knowing what I did. White obviously thinks I did something bad or we wouldn't be here."

He said this as a statement rather than a question. Hannah, Adam and I exchanged a glance. He hadn't been present during our briefing for this expedition. The director hadn't said anything specific but he was clearly worried, as we all were, that an agent with 4's knowledge running about not knowing what he was doing or saying could be disastrous.

We reached the tree in question and paused. We were faced with a vista of even more fields, all seemingly leading nowhere in particular. No cattle or evidence of farming was in view, they were just empty fields.

Arthur looked around for a couple of minutes without speaking. I took the opportunity to survey the horizon with my binoculars. A tiny plume of smoke caught my eye about a mile away beyond a copse of trees. I handed the binoculars to Arthur and pointed towards the smoke. He stared at it for a while.

"Shit, I did meet somebody. I remember the smell of the smoke."

Nobody spoke for a minute.

"Come on then," Arthur finally said, "we'd better go and find out what I did."

We set off, all putting our phones on silent. I rang John and told him

to look for a road to the location of the smoke and be ready to pick us up if possible.

After twenty minutes we arrived at the trees. About a quarter of a mile beyond them we could now clearly see a rundown old farmhouse. I scanned the area with the binoculars. Although there was no sign of life the smoke must be coming from somewhere, and a rusty yet serviceable looking pick-up truck sat nearby.

I put the binoculars away and we all took out our hand guns.

"Anything else coming back to you?" I said to Arthur.

"I remember a gun," he said. "Sorry, nothing else yet, just the smell of smoke."

We moved on cautiously towards the edge of the trees. From there we would have no cover and the glint of binoculars in the sun would give us away to anyone inside the house.

We stopped under our last piece of cover. The house was now only a hundred yards away. We all listened intently for any human sounds.

As we were about to circle around the house, a dog wandered out from behind it. We froze but he saw, heard or smelt us anyway. An enthusiastic barking ensued and I motioned for everyone to move back a few paces and hit the ground.

Within seconds of us settling on the leafy floor and aiming our weapons the front door flew open and an angry looking middle aged woman with a tangle of greying hair stepped out holding a shotgun.

"That's the gun," whispered Arthur, "but it was a man who tried to shoot me."

Hannah, Adam and I processed this information without taking our eyes off the woman.

She shouted something that sounded like 'go fetch' and the dog ran directly towards us. Adam fired a warning shot into the air, at which the dog yelped and ran back towards its owner.

As the sound of Adam's pistol faded into silence the scene froze like a tapestry. Luckily for us the woman had the sun in her eyes and so couldn't see us or tell how many of us there were.

"Come back to finish the job have you?" she shouted. "You won't get

me so easily."

With that she and the dog ran back into the house, the door slamming shut behind them.

"Adam, Hannah watch that building like a hawk."

I took Arthur a few steps back into the miniature forest. I tried my phone but there was no signal.

"Do you know what she means?"

"Yes," he said in dismay, "I think I killed her husband."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

"I was highly disorientated," said Arthur, his memory of at least this part of his journey now all too uppermost in his mind. "I walked out of the woods and a man was suddenly there pointing a shotgun at me. He fired a warning shot but it only missed me by a couple of feet. I couldn't tell whether he was a very good shot or a bad one and had meant to blow my head off." He managed a small laugh. "It's not the sort of thing you want to happen twice."

"It's not your fault," I said, "it's whoever sabotaged your mind that's to blame."

"While he was reloading I panicked and rushed him. I grabbed the gun and smacked him around the head as hard as I could with the butt. He fell and struck his head on the ground. I wasn't sure he was dead but he looked it. I didn't know if anyone else was around so I just ran back through the woods, dumping the shotgun somewhere on the way. It soon became clear that nobody was following me so I walked back to the car. I may have sat there for a while trying to calm down and work out what was going on."

He seemed relieved to have got it off his chest.

"Are you okay to carry on?"

"Yes," he replied, "what do we do next?"

"Did you get all that," I asked, going back to join Adam and Hannah.

"The gist," said Hannah. "So do we just leave, or what?"

"I don't know," I said, "I tried phoning the boss but there's no signal here."

"Ssh!" hissed Adam. "There's a vehicle approaching."

"Cover me," I whispered, moving just out of the trees and focusing the binoculars. "I thought so, it's John, he must have heard the shot."

"If that woman thinks she's surrounded," said Hannah, "she may decide to go out in a blaze of glory."

"I agree," said Adam, "Jen, you'll have to risk signalling John in morse."

Using the glint of the sun on the lenses I flashed the word halt three times. I saw no return signal but the car stopped and reversed a few yards, then the engine petered out.

"As we can't use our phones here we'll have to call this ourselves. Suggestions?" I asked.

"We turn around and go back to the main road and leave her to it?" offered Hannah.

"We capture and interrogate her, make sure she didn't follow Agent 4 and learn anything she shouldn't know?"

"I told you," said Arthur, "I wasn't followed."

"Sorry, but we can't rely on your memory. You only have partial recall; she could have followed you back to your car, taken the license plate and called the cops. Or you could have come back here - there are still two hours unaccounted for."

Arthur nodded in agreement, but also threw an angry glance at Adam.

"What do you think?" I asked him.

"I'm not sure. I can't even be sure I did kill him, he may be wounded inside the house or in hospital. Regardless of that, she hasn't actually seen me, but then I don't think she did when I was first here. If we leave then she can't identify me. If the man survived I doubt he's in a state to identify me. I know I don't have total recall yet but why would I start blurting out state secrets for no reason? The mangled code just screwed with my memory, it didn't do anything else."

"So far as we know," said Adam.

"Well we can't stay here all day," I summarised, "we have no food or anything except handguns. We don't know how many people are inside, or how many dogs they have. They may be government-hating, survivalist maniacs with booby traps in their back garden. I vote we get out of here pronto and report back. They can check out local police and hospital records for any mention of the incident. I think on balance we have nothing to worry about here."

Adam nodded reluctantly.

I signalled to John to go back to the main road and we set off back through the trees.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

I chose to drive rather than being chaperoned around like a child. I knew they were only doing their job but 37 not trusting me was beginning to grate on my nerves.

Once we'd managed to get a mobile signal, 22 had phoned Al and updated him on our progress, such as it was. He was now going through the files of the local police force, coroner and hospitals. I'd tried to think of what had happened later on during my blackouts but largely drew a blank. It seemed that I needed direct sensory exposure before things would return in detail. So there was no choice but to keep driving and go to the two motels I'd frequented.

Nobody had yet come up with an answer as to what we would do upon arrival, however. The story that I was an uncle with alzheimers was the best they could come up with on the spur of the moment, but did that mean I had to act the part now? I wasn't sure I was up for that; in any case I had no idea what my behaviour had been like a few days ago and I wasn't sure I could reproduce it convincingly.

I recognised most of the route. I even began to remember some of the things I'd been thinking at the time. I chose not to divulge anything to the others because it all seemed like nonsensical ramblings and I didn't want to give them any further ammunition against me.

I hadn't really had time to come to terms with what had happened to me, or decide how I felt about some bastard messing with my memory.

Would it happen again? Was it someone I knew? Was it merely a dry run for getting me to actually do something against my will next time around? I couldn't think of any possible positive outcomes for this situation; not for me anyway.

As we approached the first motel, we began discussing our plans. It wasn't much of a discussion.

"I wasn't here long enough to do any damage, was I?"

"No," said 37, "but we still don't know why you left so abruptly."

"If I remember you'll be the second to know," I said sourly.

"I'm only doing my job, Arthur, we're all on the same side."

"At least one person isn't on my side," I said pointedly, "whoever gave me the nuclear headache." That shut him up.

"Are you getting anything at all?" prompted 45 when I hadn't spoken for a couple of minutes.

"I'm getting flashes of going in. I can remember what reception and the room look like. As to why I came here or left so quickly, still no idea I'm afraid." I gave up keeping my little secret. "I'm starting to remember some of what I was thinking at certain times during the blackout, but it's all jumbled up. Some of the code infected my implant so, and I'm only surmising this, I would have been disorientated by thoughts that seemed to come from nowhere. I have vague memories of being scared. I can only conclude that something I didn't like was going on in my head and I bolted out of fright. My memory is more or less intact now up to a few weeks ago, and I'm sure I've never been anywhere near this place before nor had any possible reason to come to this country when I did."

"Unless you thought you'd done something or were being followed," said 61. "Or maybe it was just random running away through fright, like you said."

"We may never know," said 45, "Anyway, are you getting anything useful from this place?"

I looked again out of the car window towards the small cluster of buildings.

"Nothing significant, no. I'm as sure as I can be that nothing happened here and I was just running scared from the mental

confusion."

"We need to find somewhere to stay tonight," said 45. "Adam, you drive to the next town after the one we stopped in before and I'll book us rooms. We'd better not hang around there in case we run into those cops but hopefully just driving through will trigger something for you, Arthur."

37 was just getting into the drivers seat when his phone rang. He threw the keys to 61 and got into the passenger seat.

"Hello, sir. Near fatal head injuries but he's off the critical list. No police involvement. Okay. No nothing at the first motel, we're just making our way to the second. Yes, fine."

He passed the phone to me as 61 accelerated away from the parking lot.

"The boss wants a word."

"Hello? Thank you, sir, a lot better now, yes. It's coming back in patches. I'm certain I was just running scared because of the confusion the virus was causing, you know, like a headless chicken. I don't think there's anything else to it, but we're no clearer to knowing who did this to me and why. I know that's your main concern."

I listened for what seemed like an age while A1 listed all the possible ways in which I could have compromised myself or the agency.

"Surely if I had met anyone interesting and compromised myself they would have killed me, taken me hostage, or at least stolen my sticks to analyse them?"

I said this loudly so that everyone in the car could hear me as well.

"I'm sure I just stayed in the room, sir." I hesitated after his reply. "Well, yes, I didn't know about the incident at the farm until I went back there. But we've already established that I had no visitors at the motel, and didn't leave the room or make any phone calls. Okay, yes. Thank you, sir. Bye."

I handed the phone back to 37.

"He says we're to have a thorough look around the area of the second motel and see if I can remember doing anything before I checked in. If there's nothing then we're to get the next flight back home. He's

confident nothing at the farmhouse can be traced back to us."

"That's a relief," said 61. "Let's hope this whole trip has been a waste of time and we don't find anything else."

When we arrived at the second motel I made a suggestion.

"There's no point all five of us wandering around here drawing attention. Three of you drive on to where we're staying and check in."

"I'll drive," said 22, "I don't fancy pretending to be a doctor again."

"I'll stay here with Arthur," said 61, "I need to stretch my legs after that drive."

"Okay," said 45, "any problems let me know. Either way, call in an hour."

I pretended not to notice 37 slip 61 another needle of that bloody elephant sedative. I know he has his mental problem, or whatever we're supposed to call it these days, but this paranoia about me was becoming increasingly annoying.

As they drove away I couldn't help breathing a sigh of relief.

"I don't think there's anything wrong with you," she said.

"Neither do I. Anyway, let's stick to the uncle story. I'm still booked into that room until tomorrow, may as well go in and take a look, see if it jogs any memories."

It took a deeply irritating five minutes to get past reception and the unctuous concern for my health from all members of staff. I suppose they thought they were being polite. If I did have alzheimers I would almost certainly have found it very patronising.

When we finally got to the room the feeling of fear instantly returned. I resisted the urge to run and tried not to panic. After a few minutes it all returned like a wave.

"I can remember most of it now," I told 61, "I spent two days sitting on this bed waiting for something to happen. I had the feeling something bad had happened and I was hiding in here in case it happened again."

"Can you remember what the bad thing was?" asked 61.

"No, just a... a vague sense of disgust."

"Disgust? That's a strange word to use."

I shrugged and went into the bathroom, looked under the bed, opened all the drawers and the wardrobe, switched on the television, opened and closed the window. Nothing I did unearthed any further memories.

"I think we're done here," I said. "We'll have a quick look around the town in case I went anywhere before checking in but I'm sure I'd remember by now if I had. I'm sure the sense of unease and disgust was just more confusion caused by the virus."

We left the room and handed the key back to reception, making a hasty exit before they offered to do a laying on of hands.

Feeling more confident now, I decided to use my implant for the first time in over a week. I went on and looked at a map of the area, zooming in to examine in detail all the places I may have visited. Surprisingly, something struck a chord. I thought for a moment, a moment too long.

"Something wrong?" asked 61.

I hadn't told her what I was doing.

"Just testing my brain, looking at a map."

"Is there a fault?" she asked anxiously.

"No, nothing like that, but I recognise a name. I can't think why, but I may have gone to a bar."

"But you don't drink?"

"No."

As we turned the corner I reluctantly admitted to 61 that I'd definitely been here a few days ago.

"Well I could do with a drink," said 61, "come on we may as well check it out. We're only doing our job. I can have a vodka on expenses."

We walked into the bar. Yes, this was the place. 61 ordered her vodka and coke and I had an orange juice. I began to finally relax. I was sure that this was the only place in town I'd been to other than the motel room. If nothing had happened here then we could all go home and I could get back to normal.

This delusion lasted just over a minute.

We turned away from the bar to look for a seat and a woman in the corner waved at me.

"Ed, over here."

I only just managed to hold on to my glass, not to mention my sanity, as I remembered what had happened the last time I met her.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

I handed my drink to 61 and ran outside. I kicked the wall next to the entrance a couple of times, bruising my foot. I heard the door open.

"What's the matter?" asked 61.

"I had sex with that woman."

Her face formed into a curious mixture of expressions. Disappointment? Confusion? Worry?

She put the glasses down on a table inside the door and followed me outside.

"You can't be blamed, Arthur," she said, putting a hand on my shoulder, "you were literally out of your mind."

"I doubt Barbara will see it like that."

"We have to..."

I never got to hear her suggestion because the door flew open and the woman I now reluctantly remembered was called Joyce staggered out.

The whole revolting episode came flooding back to me like a tsunami. I had sex with her because it was the only way I could think of to shut her up or stop her drinking. I didn't even enjoy it. In fact, even at the time when I didn't know who I was and that I was married, it repulsed me.

Hang on though. I was sure that later in the room I knew who I was. Did I know in the bar and I was now lying to myself? Or did I think I was someone else? It wouldn't matter to Barbara, I suspected.

"Ed, where are you going, you owe me a drink?"

"What did I drink when I... met you," I asked quietly.

"What didn't you drink, more like. Scotch, bourbon, gin, beer."

She looked at 61 with distaste.

"She's a bit young, isn't she?" she spat. 61's cheeks reddened.

"I'm his niece," she said, with what I suspected was partly genuine indignation. "I think we should just go," she said to me, "damage limitation."

"But what if I... disclosed anything?" I whispered. "We can't go back without a definitive answer for A1."

I glanced over my shoulder to see Joyce swaying like a tree in a hurricane.

"I'm not sure we'll get much out of her."

"Take her to another bar," said 61, "keep her topped up and I'll phone Jen."

"Don't leave me alone with her for long," I pleaded, "she makes my skin crawl."

61 nodded and walked away. I reluctantly scanned the map again and found a bar a few streets away.

I walked as slowly as possible, which was easy as Joyce kept having to prop herself up against the front of shops. We were so slow that 61 caught up with us before we'd even reached the bar. Before we'd had time to say very much, 45 screeched to a halt beside us.

"Bloody hell," said 61, "how many red lights did you go through?"

"Never mind," she replied, "it's a rental car they can't trace back to us. Get her in the back."

"Hey, who are you?" slurred Joyce.

"I'm his other niece, get in the fucking car."

Joyce started to protest vociferously. I was loathe to touch the woman under any circumstances. Seeing my hesitation, 61 took a quick glance around, put her hand over Joyce's mouth and dragged her into the car.

"Arthur," said 61 as we drove away, "can you find a deserted spot for us to park?"

I rummaged through the map once more.

"Second left up here," I said, having found a pet store that was now closed and had a small parking lot.

Joyce was making so much fuss that 61 had no choice but to pull out her gun. Even then she didn't entirely shut up, but she was at least adequately subdued.

As she recalled the encounter I tried to remain professional and focus on the security aspects. The personal stuff would have to wait until I got home.

Home. Barbara. Oh fuck.

After a revolting fifteen minutes of questioning, my memory of the incident fully returned, like a secondary cancer. It was clear that we had spent an hour drinking in the bar - she was already so drunk when I arrived she wouldn't have understood or remembered any state secrets in any case, but fortunately I said nothing very much at all - and then we... went outside and had sex in an alleyway. With the virus code and my first taste of alcohol in almost thirty years I'm surprised I was capable of anything.

I administered the sedative 37 had meant for me and we dumped her in the parking lot outside the bar; they were obviously used to scraping her up off the floor and hosing her down.

As we drove back to our motel, empty as I felt, I clearly realised one thing. Whoever gave me the virus had ruined my marriage, regardless of whether or not I decided to tell Barbara what I'd done. My only goal in life now was to find that bastard, hurt him and then kill him.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Peterson looked up as his cell door opened.

Despite his initial fears he had not come to any harm in prison. The police had agreed to White's request for the charge against his deputy to be put down as fraud for the time being, so nobody took any interest in the thin, tweedy old man who worked for the civil service or something. He shunned all social activities and remained in his cell all day

whenever possible.

White did not want to have to deal with the publicity about his deputy being charged with murder until all the loose ends were tied up.

This meant Peterson had 'enjoyed' a relatively uneventful few days in prison.

He knew as soon as White entered that this was about to change.

"We need to have a very frank conversation." Peterson did not reply.

"We've finally found your accomplice. He was in Brighton and fortunately too stupid to keep his nose clean. He was arrested for a relatively minor offence. We have a DNA match from Libby Stevens which proves he was not her attacker."

Peterson remained silent.

"Imagine my surprise when we ran a check against your DNA and discovered that you were the one who beat Libby Stevens to death. Phoning that man was a red herring."

"No it wasn't," said Peterson quietly, "I did try to hire him, but at the last minute he asked for fifteen thousand so I told him to forget it."

"So you thought you would kill your bit on the side yourself to save money?"

"It wasn't like that."

"Well then, by all means, please tell me exactly what the fuck it was like?"

"She was a CIA plant."

White looked at his former deputy. This was certainly unexpected.

"If this is more of your bullshit I am going to become very angry very quickly," he warned.

"It's true, I swear. She spiked my drink one night, maybe drugged me as well. I don't know what I said, it could have been anything. The next day, though I couldn't remember anything at all, I knew she'd done something to me. I searched her flat and found a passport in her real name. It's locked in my desk in the office."

White thought for a moment. He hadn't got around to clearing his

office and had seen no reason to search it; Peterson wouldn't be stupid enough to leave anything incriminating in his own office. But it would be exactly like him to leave something there which he hoped would bail him out of trouble.

"I presume you ran a check on her?" asked White.

"Yes, she was definitely CIA, though obviously now she's dead they'll have erased all her files and she'll have never existed. I kept the printout of my search but they'll just say we faked it."

"I'll have to go and think about all this," said White. "I assume you've told nobody else?"

"Of course not."

"Good. That's at least one thing you've done correctly. Don't go anywhere - I'll be in touch."

Two hours later White welcomed Agents 4, 22, 61, 45 and 37 into his office.

"CIA?" said Jennifer. "What the fuck were they doing messing about with Peterson? Blackmail of some sort?"

"I doubt she shagged him for fun," said Hannah.

"He says she drugged him to make him talk, though he's no idea what he said."

"There have been major advances in truth drugs," said Adam, "if it was one of the better ones he would have answered any questions she put to him."

"But what could they hope to get..." began Jennifer, before the realisation hit her like a snooker ball in a sock. She looked over at Arthur, then addressed the director. "When exactly did this drugging occur?"

"Two weeks ago, on Wednesday. Four days before somebody got to Arthur and gave him the virus."

Everyone exchanged shocked glances, then all eyes fell on Arthur.

He sat, open mouthed, words failing him.

"CIA," he eventually muttered. "The CIA scrambled my brain!?"

"Sounds like a bad horror film," quipped John. "Sorry, Arthur."

"But why?" said Arthur.

"We still don't know," said White, "but now that we know where the virus came from I've got the tech guys re-examining it. They're looking for any finger prints from known American programmers etc. Of course we never thought of America as being the source. Hopefully this will greatly narrow down our search. Anyway, I don't know what we're going to do with Peterson but obviously he's out of T14. That means I've had to give some thought to the subject of appointing a new deputy director. Arthur, would you be interested in the job?"

Agent 4 looked completely flummoxed for the second time in two minutes.

"It's more of a desk job than you've been used to but there are worse ways to earn a living."

"Barbara would be pleased that I was out of the way of bullets and people messing about with my brain," he said, forcing a smile.

"How is Barbara, since..." White found a reason to look down at his notes.

"Since I told her I'd shagged a drunken slapper in a Washington alleyway? She accepted the extenuating circumstances, but it's obviously not done us any good."

"No," said White, "well, maybe finding out exactly who did that to you will help."

"Yes," said Arthur slowly, "that would help a great deal."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

May 20th

Agents 45, 37, 61 and 22 entered the outer office exchanging puzzled glances. They knew that they were here for a special meeting but hadn't expected such a welcoming committee. In front of the double doors leading to the conference room were six heavily armed men wearing,

despite the sticky heat of late May, flak jackets.

John did a double take.

"Oi? What the fuck are you doing here?"

The shortest of the six men stepped forward and shook his hand.

"I'm in Close Protection now. I heard you'd ended up with this mob."

"We may be a mob," said John with a grin, "but we get paid many times more than you poor bastards."

"Jenny?"

Jennifer turned towards the other end of the line of armed men.

"Nobody ever dares call me that, except..."

"Hello," said the tallest of the group.

"Are you... you're in SO1 now, obviously."

"Yep. Not quite as lofty a promotion as you but it's not bad."

They hugged.

Hannah turned to Adam.

"Do you know any of them?"

"What?" he said distractedly. "No, no I don't."

"Oh, good, I was beginning to feel left out. Hang on. Jen, does that mean you were a... policewoman?"

"For my sins, yes."

"And you, John."

"SAS."

"Now that I can imagine but, Jen, I just can't see you in a police uniform."

Adam coughed to hide his embarrassment and was relieved at that moment when Bill White opened the connecting door and ushered them in.

"Sorry to keep you hanging around in the dark, so to speak, I'm sure you understand."

"Good morning to you all," said the Prime Minister, shaking their hands individually as if they were voters at a rally.

The agents took their seats in silence.

"It goes without saying," said White, "that everything said in this room is subject to the Official Secrets Act. It is not to even be discussed with any other agents, especially Agent 4. Is that understood?"

More puzzled glances, but they all nodded their assent.

"A lot of information has come to light in recent weeks," continued the director, "but I wanted to coordinate all of it before taking any action. The time for action has arrived, that's why you're all here now."

Adam began jiggling his leg anxiously under the table. This was clearly the biggest thing they had ever dealt with. What the hell was going on?

"It transpires that Peterson's killing of Libby Stevens and the sabotage of Arthur are connected. The connection is the CIA."

He left a long pause for the revelation to sink in, before filling them in with the details of Peterson's now confirmed story.

"It goes without saying that we can take no official action because the person known to us as Libby Stevens is no longer, and never has been, a CIA agent. To all official purposes our deputy director has murdered an innocent member of the public. I've managed to keep a lid on that for now but that's a problem I have to deal with, it needn't concern you."

"Anyway, before I give you your next mission, the PM wishes to address you."

The Prime Minister stood up and looked around at his audience, his speech training kicking in automatically.

"Firstly I should congratulate you on your tenth anniversary. Anniversaries are a time for reflection, and also for looking forwards. T14 was set up to bring together the combined skills of the SAS, SO15 and MI5 and has been, until now, concerned entirely with terrorism prevention, ensuring that the events of twenty fourteen are never repeated. They haven't been, thanks to your hard work.

"I am, naturally, currently involved in preparations for the ceremony to mark the tenth anniversary of the attacks and remembrance of the

eighty thousand victims. However, we are now faced with an even greater threat. This threat could destroy the entire fabric and economy of this country."

The Prime Minister fixed them with a stern glance.

"We are now, effectively, engaged in a cold war with America."

The four agents displayed individual looks of shock, confusion and incomprehension.

"With oil now topping five hundred dollars a barrel, global car use has plummeted to barely twenty percent of its level at the turn of the century. This has negated America's economic stranglehold on the world, along with the increasing rise of India and China. Naturally, the good old Yankees are still refusing to cooperate with anyone outside their precious borders and are more isolated now than ever.

"Thanks to our joint technological ventures with Germany and India, Britain is once again leading the world in economic growth. Increasingly smaller, cheaper, more efficient electronic devices are about the only thing, other than food and utilities, that most people can now afford. This has allowed us to revitalise our moribund manufacturing industry and remain relatively prosperous in these times of global economic disaster.

"However, this prospering economy of ours is more vulnerable than at any time in our history. A terrorist attack on the national grid would render all our products nothing more than door stops. Then there is the problem of espionage in our research and development establishments; the list is disturbingly long.

"Since the problems you've had with the CIA and your Agent 4, we've been doing some nosing around. It seems that the CIA make frequent use of honey traps. They did it with your deputy director, they may well have also done this to Agent 4. It is possible that they hoped to blackmail the agent into using his technological capabilities to smuggle vital information to them which would enable them to infiltrate our technology innovators and use our success to restart their flagging economy. If this was their intention then it failed, because your colleague immediately told his wife about the incident and therefore negated their blackmail opportunities."

"But..." stammered Hannah, "that means they were able to

programme him in some way. That should be impossible."

"Fucking hell," said John. "Sorry, but I really need a fag."

The Prime Minister watched with amusement as John went over to the window, opened it as far as it would go, and leaned out to light his cigarette.

"Anyway," continued White, throwing a sideways glance at John, "I have taken the difficult decision not to tell Arthur about this. Especially in the light of what I am about to say." He let out a heavy sigh. "Further examination of the virus has revealed that it is highly probable that direct instructions were somehow fed into his implant and then erased themselves upon completion. This means that we cannot rule out the possibility that he was given further instructions of which we are unaware. There may still be instructions inside him that are hiding themselves effectively. In short, Arthur may now be a sleeper agent for the CIA."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

"Only the six of us will ever know this," continued White, "but from now on this agency will be split into three sections. Section one will continue with all the work we have been doing for the last ten years in combating domestic terrorism. Section two, which will be headed by you four, will be concerned with protecting our technological research and development infrastructure, especially from CIA infiltration or sabotage. Section three, the most difficult of all, will be exclusively involved in using Agent 4 to feed false information to the CIA.

"Believe me, I'm as unhappy as you about using Arthur in this way but we have no choice. There is currently no technical way of establishing whether or not hidden code is functioning in his implant because we never foresaw this kind of scenario. We're working on a vastly improved firmware for the implant but that could take months. In the meantime we simply have no way of knowing if Arthur is trustworthy, so we have to assume that he isn't.

"It's convenient in a way that this new responsibility has been thrust upon us. I've just briefed Arthur on everything except the possibility of

hidden code and told him that I will be coordinating the new division, leaving him largely in charge of the running of the original work of T14. He's more than capable of that but I will have to keep a close eye on him. I've already given him a piece of inconsequential false information, which I'll come to shortly."

He picked up a pile of files from the table and gave them to the four agents.

"Those are your detailed briefings for your new missions, which will begin immediately. As you may know, there are four locations where high level research and development of the sort the CIA are interested in are carried out - Cambridge, Aberdeen, Cardiff and Sheffield. There is already an increased police presence at these locations and a ramping up of internal security, but we are still going to check out all of them. 45 and 22 will be going straight to the lab in Cambridge where they produce brain-computer-interfaces and various types of semi-organic implants. That is the most likely target and John, your technical knowledge will be invaluable there. 37 and 61, you will be going to each of the other three in turn and assessing the work they do and how concerned we need to be about their methods and security. Both teams will have five additional agents. Only you four will report directly to me. I will then decide what, if anything, to pass on to Arthur, and possibly the CIA. Any comments?"

John threw his cigarette out of the window and went back to his seat.

"It all seems too complicated to me. Is it necessary to feed false info to the Yanks? If they act upon any of it, all you'll have proved is that Arthur is in some way giving them information. It won't tell us anything technical about how they've done it or what their precise intentions are towards our tech industry."

"That is all true," said White, "but to be honest I just want a quick way to prove one way or the other whether they are using Arthur. I know it's not foolproof but I'm going to try anyway - if nothing happens, no harm done, if they go for it then we know for certain we can't trust Arthur."

John nodded, then turned to the Prime Minister.

"Suppose we find a CIA spy inside one of these places? What do we do, kill them and bury them in the woods?"

"There's no need to be facetious, John," chided White.

"No," said the Prime Minister, "that's a valid question. Obviously this isn't an officially declared conflict and therefore the British government cannot possibly sanction the use of lethal force. Off the record, however, the CIA are fighting dirty on this one, so we may be forced to play them at their own game. We believe they have lost three of their own agents in unsuccessful brain implant operations, which explains their desperation to get their hands on one that actually works.

"I am confident that, were one of their agents to be caught in one of our facilities, the CIA would not make any public declaration and would be willing to sacrifice that agent, just as they were with Libby Stevens. I believe that even the president doesn't know what the CIA are up to, but that's par for the course over there. Obviously I never said this, but their current incumbent is something of a straw-chewing retard.

"Anyway, to get back to your question, John, any attempt by anybody whomsoever to infiltrate our top secret installations can be legitimately and legally met with lethal force. There are enough fences and warning signs, and anybody who gets a job inside is made all too aware of the consequences of misconduct or leaks.

"I have no official knowledge of any of this, and ultimate responsibility for this operation rests squarely on the capable shoulders of your director."

A perfunctory knock on the door was swiftly followed by a head appearing.

"We have to go immediately, sir," urged one of the special branch officers.

"What's the problem?"

The man hesitated.

"Everyone in this room has higher security clearance than you, Frank, just spit it out."

The man reddened ever so slightly, but soon regained his composure.

"One of your cabinet has... an indiscretion has occurred."

The Prime Minister made it clear with a look that he wasn't going anywhere without more information.

"It's the culture secretary. She's been filmed by a newspaper buying cocaine."

The Prime Minister retained his outwardly calm expression as he turned to Bill White and shook his hand.

"Good luck to all of you. I'm afraid I have to go and deal with this." He nodded towards the four agents and walked briskly from the room.

The conference room door thudded shut, whereupon the Prime Minister could be heard swearing effusively.

Inside the room, four T14 agents exhaled slowly and looked at each other.

"I think we need more coffee," said John, taking out his cigarettes and heading for the window.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

"It doesn't look like a top secret research laboratory," said Agent 98.

"And that would be a good thing," said Adam sarcastically. Only he and Hannah knew this was a red herring. The other five agents had been told that this was the first of three locations. In fact this extra one had been set up entirely as a trap for Arthur and the CIA - the only way anybody could know about this location was if the Americans had gleaned the information from Arthur in some way.

It was a perfectly harmless research lab specialising in shampoo and deodorant. The staff within had been told that their location was being used as a practice ground for trainee surveillance and to carry on regardless.

There was no need for T14 to enter the buildings, merely to make themselves inconspicuous and see if anyone came nosing around. The other five agents had been told that there was a tip off that somebody else was doing surveillance and that their job was to catch them at it. It was sort of true.

For more than an hour nothing happened. The team were parked in two delivery vans, one at the front entrance and one at the rear. Through tiny holes they watched the surrounding area with cameras and various

scanners and sensors.

Adam's mind was beginning to wander when Hannah's voice came through the radio.

"37?"

"Yes," he replied, immediately regaining his focus.

"Do you have anything there?" she asked.

Adam surveyed the various monitors and pieces of equipment. He looked at the other agents, who all shrugged in turn.

"Nothing here. You?"

"Maybe. Binoculars, eight hundred yards away. It's a fairly large wooded area so it may be a bird watcher or something, but they've been fixed in this direction for three minutes and counting."

"Can you zoom in any further?" asked Adam.

"Already at maximum," replied Hannah, "It's also quite windy so the motion sensors can't pick up anything among all the foliage. Could be one person, could be a dozen."

"Or it could be a trap to deflect us from an attack from the front," mused Adam. "I think I'll take a look, keep me posted."

He picked up a small headset mic.

"Patch all comms through to this," he said, putting it on.

"Done."

He put on a long coat, placing a handgun in each pocket.

"Keep me in vision and let me know of anything suspicious immediately."

"Yes, sir," nodded one of the agents.

Adam left the van and walked through the car park. This side of the building was near a road with no place for concealment. The only way to covertly watch the buildings from the front would be with a similar vehicle to theirs. He walked the length of the road twice and saw nothing but a few parked cars and an old woman dragging a poodle along.

Beyond a patch of grass was a row of houses, but trees prevented anyone getting a good view of the laboratory from there. He was about to return to the surveillance van when Hannah's voice came through.

"Those binoculars haven't moved for ten minutes, they have to be watching the building. How about I get out of the van and prowl around with a machine gun, see if that gets a reaction?"

"No," said Adam, "there are plenty of rifles with a range of eight hundred yards, you'd be a sitting duck. There's nothing out front, no place at all for concealment. Okay, 98 come and pick me up. Hannah, send me the grid reference of those binoculars."

"Will do."

A minute later the van pulled up and Adam got into the passenger seat. He pulled up a map on his phone and marked the grid reference Hannah gave him.

"We'll pull up four hundred yards before that and scan the area. They may have a vehicle occupied in there as well, we don't want to drive straight into it."

Ten minutes later they pulled up on a dirt road.

"Well," said Adam, "what do we have?"

"Sensors show only one motor vehicle in the entire woods," said 94, "we're just training the camera on it now."

Adam and 98 looked at a flip up screen mounted on the dashboard. A car came into focus.

"Zoom in as tight as you can," said Adam.

The image of the car enlarged, until a man could be seen standing next to it smoking a cigarette.

"Heat scanners show no other occupants of vehicle," said 94. "The only other people within scanner range are two people with the binoculars."

"Are you getting this, Hannah?"

"Yes, it's obviously just a scouting party, not an assault squad or anything. What do we do?"

"I'd better phone the director."

Adam pushed a few buttons on his phone and took off his headset mic.

"It appears they've sprung the trap."

"Immediate danger?" said White.

"No, looks like a low key surveillance job. Just three of them, one car and a pair of binoculars. They may have heavy duty weapons and explosives in the car, of course, but the one we're looking at next to the car doesn't look very threatening."

"Neither do you," said White, "but I know better."

"Yes, sir," said Adam, blushing. "Anyway, shall we bring them in? They've been watching the place for twenty minutes now, there can't be any innocent explanation."

"I agree. How far is the car from the other two?"

"Half a mile."

"Okay, capture the one with the car and make sure he doesn't communicate with the others. Search the car and get back to me."

"Yes, sir."

Adam put down his phone.

"Hannah. As soon as you hear us capture the car, come and join us."

"Okay, good luck."

"Right," said Adam to 98, "you stay here and record everything you can."

He got out of the van and went around to the back where the other two agents were already checking their weapons.

"Now listen, this is your first proper mission. We are not here to kill these people, we're to capture them with the minimum of fuss. If you see them going for a weapon, shoot them once in the leg. Understood?"

They both nodded excitedly.

"Stay in there until my signal."

Adam walked around to the front of the van and got back in.

"Let the handbrake off and slowly go another two hundred yards

down the track."

98 nodded and did as instructed.

"Okay, that's close enough," he said a minute later.

"Hannah, let me know if those binoculars move an inch."

"Will do."

"94, 96, time to go."

The three agents walked slowly down the dirt road, keeping an eye out for anyone innocently walking in the woods.

As they got to within fifty yards of the car, Adam did up his coat to hide the rifle slung over his shoulder. He still had the two handguns in his pocket. He checked both of them and then put them back, placing his hands gently on the trigger of both.

"I'm going to go and ask him the time and try to take him on my own. Any struggle you two come running, and I mean running, and disable him as quickly as possible."

Adam crept quietly through the woods, keeping off the road. He got to within fifteen yards of the car. He saw the man take out a packet of cigarettes and a lighter. Making use of the few seconds of distraction, he walked briskly out onto the path and towards the man.

"Excuse me," he said, just as the man lit his cigarette, and maintaining his brisk pace towards the car, "I've got myself a bit lost. Do you have the time on you?"

The man looked slightly flustered as he put his lighter in his trouser pocket and rolled up his sleeve to look at his watch.

"Ten past three," he said in a strange accent that didn't sound at all natural.

"They don't train them like they used to," thought Adam as he surreptitiously looked inside the car.

"I was going to do some bird watching, but I seem to have forgotten my binoculars." he said, closely watching the man's face and hands. "Have you got yours with you?"

His reactions were slow, but all too predictable. Adam had plenty of time to knock the gun from his hand while it was still halfway inside his

jacket, and take his own gun from his jacket pocket and point it at the man's head.

He threw him roughly against the bonnet and handcuffed him.

96 and 94 ran up.

"Well done, sir," said 96.

"Never mind that, tell 98 and 61 to get here now."

Even at a brisk trot, and assuming they were a lot fitter than this guy, it would take the two with the binoculars at least six minutes to get back to their car, more probably ten.

"Who are you?" demanded Adam. The man said nothing. "Search the car," he said, taking the keys from the man's pocket and throwing them to 94.

"Hand gun and boxes of ammo in the glove box," said 96.

Adam searched the man fully.

"Handguns and no ID, that's not a typical bird watcher."

The man remained silent and expressionless.

98 pulled up in the van and Adam pushed the man towards him.

"Put him in the back and keep an eye on him. If he makes a fuss, shoot him in the leg."

Something about Adam's unnaturally calm expression clearly unnerved the man, and his eyes betrayed considerable panic as he was lead away.

Adam checked his watch. Five minutes.

"Come on, get that boot open."

96 unlocked the boot.

"Shit! These guys mean business."

Adam glanced over the assortment of machine guns, detonators, and even a small grenade launcher.

"That's a lot of equipment for three men," he said. "Okay, lock the car."

Aware that the other two men may be on their way back any minute,

may be using their binoculars to check their route, and may have taken a few items from the boot before leaving, he didn't want to hang around in the open.

"Reverse the van four hundred yards and get 61 and her team down here on the double," he said to 98. "96, you stay with me." He took a pair of binoculars from the van and hung them around his neck.

As the van pulled away, 37 and 96 took positions behind trees about fifty yards from the car.

"Hannah, how long?"

"There's a bit of traffic, we should be at the car in six minutes."

"Stop when you see our van and all three of you proceed on foot. 98 and 94 have one suspect in custody and I need you here for the other two. Their car contained quite an arsenal, including a grenade launcher, fuck knows what they may have with them. Phone White and update him and get here as soon as you can."

"98, all good with you?"

"Yes, sir, just pulling up now."

"Everyone maintain comms silence unless absolutely necessary until my next order. I don't want any distractions if we have to take these two on our own."

He raised his binoculars, taking the chance that this would signal the returning men.

"No sign of them yet," he whispered.

A few minutes later he caught a glimpse of them walking through the woods, just as he heard Hannah whisper that she was approaching.

"They're on their way," he said, "be ready for anything. They should reach the car in about three minutes."

He put the binoculars down on the ground.

"Keep your eyes on that path beyond the car, 96."

96 nodded.

Adam ran back to meet Hannah and the other two agents.

"I need you to be in position to take them out if necessary," he said to

Hannah. "We have the other one, he'll talk eventually. The gear these guys are carrying they're no angels, that means we are authorised to use lethal force if necessary. If they fire at us or go to open the boot, kill them."

Hannah nodded. She quickly choose a position and cleared some leaves and twigs away before lying down on the ground. Her trusty rifle was already assembled so she just had to fit the small tripod and adjust the site.

"89, 87 you take position here and be ready to back me up."

Adam moved further into the woods and crept his way towards the car. If they hid behind it, he needed to be close enough to get to them within seconds and surprise them.

They didn't have long to wait before the men emerged from a clearing and stood looking at the car.

Adam was close enough to hear their conversation.

"Oh god, I bet he's off in the woods having a piss," said one of them irritably. "I told you he was useless."

The other sighed and took a spare set of keys from his pocket.

"Hannah," whispered Adam as quietly as possible, "if that one takes a weapon from the boot shoot him instantly and I'll disarm the other one."

"Okay," she whispered in return.

The man with the keys checked the doors and found them locked. He walked towards the boot. The other man looked around and produced a handgun from his waistband. The gun was fitted with a silencer.

"These are more professional," thought Adam, focusing his attention on the man and preparing to rush him.

Hannah steadied herself as the first man opened the boot. He reached in and for a frustrating few seconds she couldn't see what he was doing. Then he turned away from the boot holding a machine gun. As he slammed a magazine into place, Hannah gently squeezed the trigger.

The bullet ripped it's way through his collar bone with such force it knocked him around a hundred and eighty degrees before he slumped to the ground, still clutching the machine gun.

"Cover the injured man," hissed Hannah into her mic as she let go of the rifle and pulled a Kalashnikov from her backpack.

The shot and the cry of his colleague distracted the other man, who turned in amazement to see what was happening. This allowed Adam to get up from his hiding place and run towards him.

"Drop the weapon," he shouted, aiming his handgun squarely at the man's chest.

The man instinctively turned and raised his gun at Adam.

Before Adam could pull the trigger the man jerked in the air and blood sprayed from his chest like an exploding colander. He fell backwards, dropping the gun.

Adam glanced around to see Hannah running towards him.

"Check on the other one," he said, marching towards the felled man.

Before she could react several more shots rang out.

Adam and Hannah instinctively hit the ground.

"Sorry, that was me," shouted 87, so loudly that his voice distorted in their headsets.

Hannah rolled over to see that the man she had shot first was now a bloody mess.

"Don't shout into these things, you could perforate our eardrums," she said.

"Sorry," he said quietly. "He was turning around towards you and he had the gun in his hand."

"Well done," said Adam, getting up from the ground. "Come on, let's get out of here before the noise attracts any members of the public. 98 drive down here as quickly as possible."

"Yes, sir."

Adam checked the men, they were both dead.

"I'll drive the car back to headquarters, see what forensics can find," he said, locking the boot and pocketing the keys.

"Put the bodies in the van and I want two people guarding the other one, he's our only lead now."

They began clearing the scene as quickly as possible while Adam phoned White.

"They weren't out for a picnic," he said, "they had a grenade launcher. They may have been planning to attack the lab. You'd better inform the local police in case they send anyone else to do the job." He heard sirens in the distance. "And could you do that very quickly, we're about to have them on the scene."

He put his phone away and helped to get the bodies into the van.

The sound of sirens died away after a couple of minutes, but a police car arrived shortly afterwards.

Adam took out his ID.

"We know the situation," said one of the officers, stepping out of the car, "anything we can do?"

"Pretend this never happened," said Adam. "We have to get going now, but if you could clear up the bullets and wash away the blood that would be a big help." He took out his phone and pulled up the map with the grid reference he'd marked. "Do you know this area," he said, showing the officer the phone.

"Yes, it's just down there," he replied, pointing to the path through the clearing.

"If you could check out that area and bag anything you find. Two of our suspects spent some time there with binoculars, any forensic evidence could be useful."

"What were they watching?"

"Nothing, as it turned out. They were wasting their time."

Adam turned the car around and followed the two vans back up the road.

CHAPTER TWENTY

"I feel like I'm a kid going to the seaside," mumbled John as they bounced around in the back of a seven seater people carrier.

"Next you'll be asking if we're there yet," said Jennifer, looking up

from her notes. "Anyway, how are we going to play this? Are we going to blatantly say why we're there and hope somebody looks guilty, or go in undercover? You could pass muster as belonging in this place but I wouldn't have a hope."

"Officially we're 'checking out their security procedures'," said John, "which is what we are doing. But in addition we'll also be ferreting around to see if they've already been breached. I'll also be familiarising myself with their latest advances and assessing which, if any, the CIA would be most interested in."

"So you deal with the boffin side of things and the rest of us will look for any potential breaches. Okay. And we can't take any weapons in?"

"No, the equipment is too sensitive: one stray gunshot could ruin several million quids worth of equipment. All employees are thoroughly searched and scanned before they enter, there's no way anybody could smuggle a weapon in."

"But there are bound to be things in there that could be used as weapons. There's a canteen with cutlery and there must be a few blunt instruments here and there."

"Yes, of course," said John, "but that shouldn't worry you."

"No, it doesn't, I'm just thinking long term - a potential mutiny from inside when we're not there to stop it."

"You mean like a terrorist hijacking a plane with nail clippers?" grinned John.

Jennifer merely stuck out her tongue.

"We can't guard against every possible eventuality," continued John, "we're just here to give White and the PM a report on whether we think the CIA are likely to have a go at this place and what steps we can take to prevent that."

"I assume the highest possible vetting was carried out?"

"Naturally," said John, "but somebody could have got to them since."

"A plant?"

"It's a possibility we have to consider. Everyone has a price or a skeleton in the closet."

"There's nobody new been employed here for two years. We've no reason to believe the CIA knew about Arthur's implant before they got to Peterson, so we can assume they haven't installed anyone themselves."

"No, it would have to somebody they'd nobbled fairly recently. It's far more likely they'll try some sort of electronic surveillance or breaking in during the night."

"They don't even know what's being worked on here, do they?"

"I hope not."

An hour later they arrived and began a tour of the premises.

"It's not a very secure building," said Jennifer.

"What do you mean?" said Simon Parker, director of research. "All inner doors have locks that can be only opened by iris recognition."

He had worked there for seventeen years and the idea that there was anything wrong with his establishment was unthinkable.

"The exterior of the building could be opened with a pen knife. Or a couple of grenades at most."

"Grenades? Here? That's ridiculous."

"You do know why we're here?" said John.

"Yes, but I really think..."

Jennifer's phone rang.

"White," she said, answering it. "Fuck," she said shortly afterwards. A few minutes later she said "Okay," and put her phone away.

"Well?" asked John.

"Location D1," she said, pausing to let the significance sink in. "Three heavily armed agents keeping watch. They had a grenade launcher, the works."

John sighed. He had been hoping that 4 hadn't been compromised, but it was useless denying it now.

"What happened?"

"Two of them dead, the other in custody."

"Dead?" said Parker. "What on earth are you talking about?"

"One of the other research establishments we were keeping our eye on: the foreign power we don't want to give away our technology to has also been watching it."

"Grenade launcher," repeated Jennifer, "that would get you in here, no problem."

Parker looked around uneasily, his certainties unravelling like string in a tsunami.

"That establishment was..." she chose her words carefully, "bottom of our list. You are top, in terms of how interested we believe these interlopers may be in your work."

"But nobody should know about our work?" he protested.

"A lot of people shouldn't know a lot of things, but they do."

"Are you suggesting that we have a leak?" he asked indignantly.

"That is one of the things we are here to establish," said John.

Parker looked as if his whole universe had suddenly collapsed into a black hole.

"But..." he stuttered.

"They probably don't know any details," added Jennifer, "just the general gist. You are the top research facility in your field."

He beamed proudly.

"So you're an obvious target for anyone wishing to infiltrate that field."

"I suppose so," he conceded reluctantly.

"We believe that this foreign interest has arisen since the arrival of your last new employee, so it's highly unlikely that you have a mole here."

"A mole? Everyone here is strictly vetted."

"Not by us," said John, "we have different levels of strict."

Again, Parker struggled to take this in.

Jennifer patted him on the shoulder, trying to reassure him, but he flinched and seemed even more uncomfortable so she suggested they get some coffee.

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

May 23rd

In many ways I was glad to take the deputy directors job. Taking it from Peterson was certainly a bonus, given that he may well have set in place the train of events that lead me to that American alleyway. Of course it was ultimately the CIA who were responsible, but there was no rule saying I couldn't bear an equal grudge against my predecessor.

Barbara was certainly a lot happier, and I wouldn't do anything to spoil that. I now had more regular hours, a pay increase, better pension, and I no longer had to work weekends or travel very much.

That was all well and good, and I suppose I was the obvious choice to fill the vacancy having joined T14 on day one. Nevertheless, I was still suspicious. Given the stakes involved in our new mission to protect the tech industry and economy from CIA sabotage, it seemed odd to me that Bill didn't want me on board. Surely my enhanced capabilities could be put to vital use in that arena? Yet here I was largely stuck behind a desk. Okay, I was coordinating our traditional domestic terrorism operations, but still it didn't make sense to me.

Maybe I was just being paranoid but I had the distinct impression that there was something important that everybody was keeping from me. What that might be, or how I could find out, I as yet had no idea.

I wasn't completely out of the loop, however, as I discovered when the director walked into my office.

"Arthur, I have some good news, in a manner of speaking."

He filled me in on the details of the operation in the woods.

"He's not saying much but he's clearly CIA We traced the hire car, booked out on an American passport. I thought you might like to sit in on the interrogation."

I tried not to look too happy about it.

"If this man knows anything about how and why they sabotaged you, your presence may unnerve him and make him slip up. So give me a few minutes and then walk in unannounced."

We walked down together to the interrogation block.

"Do you recognise him?" asked White, pointing at a monitor in the next room.

"No."

"Okay, in your own time, Arthur."

As he left, I pondered my recent thoughts.

Was I being paranoid? He certainly could have kept me out of this, but he hadn't. Strictly speaking it wasn't procedure to allow me in on an investigation in which I had such a strong personal bias; nevertheless, Bill was. Surely if there was one person in the world I trusted, beyond Barbara, it was Bill White?

I decided to put these doubts away for now and concentrate on what was before me - potentially, one of the men responsible for trying to ruin my marriage and my life.

I watched for a few minutes as he said very little. He wasn't cocky or confident, just following his training. He was obviously the junior of the trio, probably little more than a driver. Nevertheless, he was CIA so he may well know something about what happened to me - anything would be better than the big fat nothing we currently knew.

I entered without knocking. As he looked up at me he tried very hard not to react but he had clearly at least seen a photo of me. I smiled at him.

"Hello, have we met? I'm afraid I can't remember because somebody scrambled my brain."

He looked unnerved but remained silent.

"You know," said White, "you have no jurisdiction in this country. You are violating all sorts of treaties by even being here, certainly by bringing an arsenal with you. We are entitled to hold you indefinitely under counter-terrorism legislation. Officially, you are not here. We could always take you back to the woods."

He opened a folder and pushed a selection of photos towards the

man. They showed the bodies of his two colleagues in the back of the van. He paled visibly and twitched slightly.

"Now," said White, "there are two options. One, you cooperate, tell us your name and everything about your operation and we put you on a plane back home. Two, you fail to cooperate and either spend your life in a British prison or we take you back to the woods and dump your body there as a warning to the CIA not to fuck with us. Which is it to be?"

The man still seemed to be actually hesitating, as if deciding which option to go for.

"I haven't got all day," emphasised White, taking out his handgun and checking the clip. I knew he wouldn't actually shoot the guy on the premises, but our director could be genuinely terrifying when the mood took him.

"Okay, okay, I'll talk," the man said hurriedly.

White put his gun away and reached for his laptop.

"Name?"

"Arnold Jefferson."

"Employer?"

"CIA."

"And your purpose for being in our country?"

"To evaluate your progress in computerised brain implants."

"And then?"

"To... infiltrate your establishments and either sabotage your research or take it for ourselves."

"I assume your president doesn't know about this operation?"

"Of course not."

"So legally you don't have a leg to stand on. And this man here?" he said, pointing to me. "What do you know about him?"

"He has a computer chip in his brain but we don't know exactly what it does. I've only ever seen photos of him, I had nothing to do with the attack on him."

"Who carried out that attack?" said White, his eyes not leaving the laptop.

"The two who were with me, and two other agents."

"Where are the other two agents now?"

"I can't tell you that."

"Can't or won't?"

"I don't know exactly where they are."

"But they are still in this country?"

He hesitated and White looked up.

"You're still nowhere near that plane ticket home, Arnold, I need a lot more than this from you. I need to know exactly what you did to my agent, how and why."

"I don't know the technical details, I swear," he said.

That was almost certainly true, he was clearly no Einstein.

"We wanted to see if we could programme his computer chip and turn him into a double agent."

White looked up at me.

"Looks like you had a lucky escape, they clearly know very little about your implant. The rumours about their tech being way behind ours must be true." He turned back to Arnold. "Okay, I'm more or less satisfied with your answers so far. We'll take a break now, but I need more, understand?"

He nodded gratefully.

White and I left the room and walked back towards my office.

"You've got plenty to be getting on with. I'll give him half an hour to think and then have another go at him."

"He won't be getting on a plane, will he?" I asked.

"Of course not, but I'm gambling on the supposition that he's too stupid to realise that."

I returned to my office thinking that I had almost certainly done Bill a disservice. He could easily have interrogated that agent without my

knowing.

I had to admit that the whole brainwashing incident was still affecting me. The only way I could see to ever get back to normal was to find the person who had engineered my meeting with Joyce and have a little one to one violence with him.

White manoeuvred Arthur out of earshot and returned to the interrogation room and dismissed the other agents. He made sure all the recording equipment was turned off.

"My final question is this: I repeat, how many CIA agents are currently in this country."

He hesitated: this was clearly the one piece of information he did not want to divulge.

White looked him in the eye.

"I could have you buried in the woods within the hour. If you put me in an especially bad mood, I might not even bother to kill you first."

"I don't know the exact number, I'm pretty low down in the pecking order, honestly."

White believed the poor wretch. "A round figure will do."

"About fifty."

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

I have to admit that my mind did wander somewhat as John and the boffins talked for hours about quantum computers, brain chemistry and organo-electric implants.

Eventually I left them to it and made myself useful.

The building wasn't entirely devoid of good security features. It was designed in a sort of maze pattern with lots of corridors leading ever inwards to the centre. The canteen and offices were in the outer parts of the building and all the confidential stuff was central, meaning you had to negotiate several doors to access anything important. True they all had iris recognition and the central areas had keypads requiring access

codes as well, but it hadn't been designed with CIA infiltration in mind. In fact the building infrastructure hadn't been updated in fifteen years.

I took out my phone and began making some notes. The doors all needed replacing with bomb-proof, multi layered steel. The exterior needed a lot of work. Even if they couldn't get to the inner core of the building, it would be a breeze currently to walk in and kidnap anyone from the canteen.

After twenty minutes I had done all I could for now so decided to go for a coffee.

I sat down in the canteen and took a bite of my donut.

I looked through my notes again and emailed them to White with the subject heading 'urgent recommendations'.

An hour later, John was still like a kid in a sweet shop, so I went outside for some fresh air.

I went over to 81 who was sitting in the people carrier.

"Go and get a coffee and stretch your legs," I said, "I'll stay here."

"Okay, thanks."

It was a bit breezy but still pleasantly warm, so I left the front door open and sat in the driver's seat. I adjusted the dashboard monitor and pulled up the list of staff vehicles. Apart from people on holiday or working elsewhere today, they were all already here. That was easy - any vehicle arriving now was noteworthy.

I was just wondering what to do with myself when White rang me.

"I've spoken to the PM They've agreed to pay for everything you recommended. It's arriving tomorrow and I want you to supervise all the installation."

"Good, that gives me something to do."

"Bored, 45?"

"A bit yes. I've done all I can today and John is still talking to the egg-heads. I'm giving the juniors a free reign, practise their observation skills. There's nothing..."

I broke off as a noise caught my attention.

"45?"

"This road doesn't lead anywhere else, all legitimate vehicles are already here, and I can hear what sounds like a sizable vehicle approaching. Hang on a second."

I switched on my throat mic.

"Anyone not doing anything very important get out to the car immediately."

I reached under the seat and took out a handgun, putting it in my trouser pocket.

Grabbing the keys from the ignition, I ran around and opened the boot.

"What's up, Jen?"

"John, ask if they're expecting any deliveries or visitors today."

I took a Kalashnikov and slung it over my shoulder, pocketing a spare magazine.

"No they're not, what's up?"

I glanced up at the turning that lead to the security gate.

"An unidentified lorry is approaching the entrance."

81 came running back out. I threw him a rifle.

"Stay behind the car door and cover me," I shouted as I ran towards the security gate.

"Do you know who that is?" I shouted to the guard.

"No," said the bemused man on the verge of retirement. "What's the problem?"

"None, hopefully."

I moved under the barrier and the lorry screeched to a halt. I could see only one person in the cab and he looked like he urgently needed the toilet.

"Get out of the vehicle," I shouted, waving the rifle in his general direction.

A shaking man in his mid twenties clambered out of the lorry. He was wearing a t-shirt so it only took two seconds to frisk him for weapons. I jumped onto the step and glanced in the cab, nothing out of the ordinary.

"I'm looking for B&Q," he stuttered, "I'm lost."

"Just a random security check, can you open the back, please?"

He walked erratically around and undid a padlock before lifting the rear shutter. The lorry was full of plastic garden furniture.

"Okay, thank you."

I walked back to the guard.

"Do you know where the B&Q is?"

"Yes, you go back..."

"I don't want to go to B&Q, tell the boy." I made my way back to the car. "False alarm."

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

Bill White tried his best to look like an anonymous civil servant as he weaved his way through the ubiquitous film cameras and stuffed-shirt journalists that populated Downing Street like a plague of redundant boils. He was wearing an especially drab suit and carrying a battered old briefcase.

He made the least fuss possible as he produced his ID for the police officer on the door of number ten.

The PM was standing at the bottom of a staircase trying his best not to look anxious as a constant stream of people passed by.

He shook hands briefly with White and they made their way up the stairs.

A few minutes later they sat down in the private quarters.

The three T14 agents who had arrived hours earlier and swept the premises had nothing to report and left briskly.

The PM poured some tea and offered him a slice of cake.

"No thanks," said White.

"Right then," said the PM sipping his tea, "where do we stand now?"

"In no man's land with a bloody great target painted on our back, potentially."

"Potentially?"

"I have yet to verify this information, in fact I need your help in order to do so. At present I'm the only person who knows this, and we need to know if it's true at the earliest opportunity. The CIA agent, and I'm one hundred percent satisfied that he and his two late colleagues are indeed such, told me that there are currently around fifty agents in this country."

The PM paused.

"Fifty? What, you mean stationed, or planted?"

"That's what he meant."

"I know that your agents make excursions across the Atlantic now and then, for legitimate purposes, but the CIA have no business being over here."

"Exactly. It's part of our brief that we do not interfere in the business of other countries or conduct any operations that do not directly involve the security of this country. This is new territory. It is now undeniable that the CIA have not only somehow bugged or compromised my agent, but are using information gained to conduct an operation involving our research and development facilities."

He reached into his briefcase and pulled out a sheet of paper.

"You were in the forces, weren't you, sir?"

"Yes, two years in the marines."

"That's what those three agents had in the boot of the car for their trip to the woods."

The PM looked over the extensive list of weaponry and equipment.

"I agree, that's way over the top for a surveillance exercise. It also demonstrates a worrying confidence, don't you think?"

"Almost contemptuous, I'd say. Or it could indicate, which is what

we originally thought, that they were working alone with no base and so had to carry everything with them."

"And where did they get the stuff from?"

"That's what I need your help with, sir. I need you to find out, as quietly as possible, of course, if there is any CIA smuggling going on. This equipment is mainly of US manufacture, I need to know how they got it over here, and whether the men themselves came via traditional means or by some sort of..."

"Invasion?"

"Three's a pretty small invasion."

"But fifty isn't."

"That could be a red herring to get us to spread our resources too thinly. However, if there really are fifty agents in this country with a commensurate amount of equipment and weaponry then we need to find them yesterday."

The PM sipped his tea thoughtfully.

"This goes beyond security, this is an international incident. This is... unbelievable."

"I agree. How soon can you check passport control for a trace of these men and any other suspect Americans?"

The PM stood up with a sense of urgency.

"Wait there, I have to inform the foreign secretary of this."

"I understand that, sir, but, you know..."

"Don't worry, I'll give him my scariest face and tell him to keep his fucking mouth shut. In fact, shall I get him here? You're a lot scarier than me."

Bill nodded, trying not to laugh.

"Help yourself to cake," the Prime Minister said over his shoulder as he left the room.

Twenty minutes later the PM returned with a flustered and windswept foreign secretary.

"Ian, this is Bill White, director of T14."

He shook hands awkwardly and sat down.

"I know you don't always see eye to eye with MI6," he began, "but I've had to get them on board. It's the only way I can possibly find out if CIA agents are stationed here."

"But you only gave them minimal information?"

"Yes, of course. I just told them that heavily armed Americans had been captured on our soil and weren't playing ball. I didn't even mention the CIA."

"Good," said White.

"So," said Ian nervously, "what's this all about?"

"Stop fishing, Ian," said the PM brusquely, "this goes way above you."

He seemed to accept that without resentment or slight.

"They'll report to me within twenty four hours. They're checking old disused ports, places the IRA used to use for smuggling, and flagging up any suspect American visitors."

"I think that's the best we can expect, Bill," said the PM.

"I suppose so. I would do it myself but I now have to divert all my available agents to... more pressing matters."

"I understand," said the PM, "would you like to leave and get on with that now?"

"I will make some calls, but I need to discuss things further. With both of you," he added, getting up and walking out of the room as he took out his phone.

"Bloody hell!" said Ian. "This is..." he shook his head in bewilderment.

"This is the most important work you will ever do, and nobody will ever know anything about it. If you fuck up in any way, everyone will know."

"Yes." Ian acknowledged quietly.

"You look as if you could do with a brandy."

Without waiting for a response, the PM went over to the drinks cabinet and filled two glasses.

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

May 24th

"Are you all secure?" asked White.

"Yes," replied 45, 37, 22 and 61 in turn.

"We are now in a situation so serious there isn't a bright enough colour to represent it on the visible spectrum. This is by far the biggest thing we've ever faced."

He told them of the likelihood of fifty CIA agents being on their soil and the MI6 report due the following day.

"We can't waste any time. We must secure all four establishments immediately. I need each of you to head up a team at the respective locations. 45 I want you to stay where you are and supervise the refit tomorrow, the rest of you will shortly be picked up by helicopter and taken to the other locations. 37, pack some jumpers, you're going to Aberdeen. 61 you're off to Cardiff and 22 to Sheffield. You will each have six agents, and 45 will have twelve as that's the most likely target.

"We have no reason to suspect that the CIA have any intention of destroying the establishments but you never know what those crafty fuckers are up to. Why did they have a grenade launcher and all that ammo for a simple surveillance op.?"

"Now, in order to put them at their ease, I'm going to tell Agent 4 that we believe there are five of their agents here. That should make them overconfident and hopefully underestimate our operational plans."

"Any news on 4," asked Hannah, "I mean how he's passing information?"

"I'm fairly satisfied he's not doing it deliberately, if that's any comfort, it certainly is to me. I've also ruled out any bugs in his office so I think it must be something to do with his implant. I don't know if it's possible for them to be literally reading his mind. 22?"

"No, they could only read the data which is sent digitally to and from the sticks."

"Hmm. Well, I've got the tech team working twenty four hours a day on this so fingers crossed."

"If there really are fifty heavily armed agents over here," said Jennifer, "and all of them launch an attack on this place, me and twelve agents won't be able to stop them."

"I think the chances of them doing something so ridiculously public are infinitesimally small," said White, "but they may have a plan to mask it as a terrorist attack from the middle east, who knows what they're planning? Just in case, I've arranged for some back up to be on standby. It's dependent on the various locations. 61, you will have a squad of SAS soldiers."

"Oh brilliant," said Hannah, "tiny men with moustaches who stink of roll-ups."

"What do I get?" asked Jennifer. "If all of them go for this place hell bent on just destruction, I'll need a lot of firepower and manpower."

"I'm working on that as we speak, 45, but we can't make a public show of this. I've done a rush job on the order for all the reinforced doors and external work you requested. It will be arriving in three lorries at 1am. Those will park along the front perimeter and completely obscure the building from view, allowing your extra personnel to disembark unobserved. You will have twenty soldiers from a paratroop regiment, all trained in riot containment and hostage situations. I know you'd like more but I believe that's the maximum presence we can maintain in those buildings without it being the headline on the morning news.

"That portacabin building that's used for general storage and visiting workmen etc. will be the para's base. You will clear that building out as far as possible today and cover the windows. Food and general supplies will be arriving in about half an hour, enough for two weeks. Store them in the portacabin.

"The exterior work on the building will be stretched out for this two week period. It's hoped that by then they will either have sprung our trap or we'll have firm information on their intentions."

"Trap?" inquired 45.

"Yes, I'm going to tell 4 that the location will be rendered impenetrable within a week. That may draw them out. But we still have to accept that their plans may be far more subtle. They may go for one of the softer, less likely targets and merely try to steal information."

"When will you plant this trap, if you see what I mean?"

"I'll give you two days to reinforce the innermost doors and secure the labs. No, tomorrow's Friday, that gives you three days. I'll tell Arthur first thing Monday morning."

"Okay," said Jennifer, "anything else I need to know, or can I get on with clearing the portacabin?"

"No, go ahead," said White, "I'll brief the others."

"Okay," said Jennifer, "see you around guys."

CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

The following day, Bill White found himself back in Downing Street.

"No foreign secretary today?" he asked.

"No, I sent him to his constituency to make it look as if there's nothing important happening today. He'll appear on the news tonight cuddling orphans or stroking autistic donkeys or something. Although if any of this becomes public, it will look really bad."

"If it becomes public no amount of PR will save you," said White matter of factly.

The PM let that go unanswered.

"Right," he said, picking up a clutch of papers from the sofa, "here it is. Our best guess for the number of CIA agents who have travelled here over the past few weeks is seventy three."

White's normally unflappable exterior wobbled slightly. He found himself gripping the arm of his chair.

"Some of them stayed for a few days and went back. In short, we believe that fifty is about right for the number still present on our

shores."

"And their intentions?" asked White none to hopefully.

"All we've been able to establish in this short time is that there is no official policy to account for this fact. It seems likely that even most of the CIA don't know about this operation, whatever the hell it turns out to be."

"Okay, so we don't know their intentions, do we have anything at all on their location or resources?"

"A lot of this is speculative deduction at best, Bill, but it does seem that groups of them are staying at locations consistent with checking out your five facilities."

White hadn't told the PM about the red herring he'd used and saw no need to mention it now, merely made a mental note to strengthen the surveillance there.

"There are some rental properties taken out by Americans a few miles from each one of the five. MI6 are watching all of them now."

"I don't mean to pull rank but if they're all as well armed as the ones we killed then surely MI6 can't cope with that?"

"I agree," said the PM, "I've told them to keep their distance for now and report directly to me. I really don't know how to play this, Bill. Do we storm in and round them all up, alerting them to the fact that we've rumbled them, or let them reveal whatever their plans are?"

"My agents have all the establishments secured," said White, "and we're working as quickly as possible to reinforce the main target in Cambridge." He hesitated, measuring his words carefully. "I won't go into details but I believe I have a way of drawing them out in Cambridge. I intend to spring that trap on Monday once we have made the labs themselves stronger than a nuclear bunker. The belief in T14 is that they will attack, if that is their intention, during the night when the building is unoccupied. Even the CIA isn't arrogant enough to launch an attack on our soil in an overtly public manner. I know their president is as thick as a ton of thick cut potato chips but congress wouldn't put up with their agents making headlines in such a manner."

"Leaving aside that totally justified smear on his character, I agree - he may be an utter chimp but he can always withdraw their funding.

Speaking of which, I hate to bring up such petty matters, and I know that our entire economy is at stake, but I can't fund this operation indefinitely."

"I understand that, sir. The reinforcements at Cambridge were long overdue anyway and will last fifty years at least, they represent excellent value for money in the long term. If the result of this is that we also refit the other establishments then we can attain similar long term security without the need for any serious personnel deployment."

"I agree," said the PM, "I wasn't questioning that. I meant we can't have hundreds of troops and agents on high alert for months on end."

"No, of course not. I don't have the numbers to maintain this operation for long anyway without compromising our usual work."

"Yes, that's another factor. I have to visit a lot of families over the next few weeks and assure them that the events of ten years ago could never be repeated. Those assurances will look more hollow than a super-model's novel if a foreign power comes over here and blows up one of our top research facilities. But this goes beyond politics, Bill. I see this operation as an extension of your usual responsibilities. You were set up to keep this country safe from terrorism and that's exactly what you're doing."

"Just out of interest," said White, "how will you play this publicly? Assuming we are successful, in which I have full confidence, will you make any announcement at all? Will you inform the president?"

"That will have to be decided afterwards, in conjunction with the foreign secretary. Anyway, you have enough to be worrying about. I think you should spring your trap as soon as possible."

CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

May 28th

By eleven thirty Sunday evening we had replaced all fourteen doors that lead to the central high security area. I had great fun testing three of them against a grenade launcher. They all passed with flying colours - it would take a substantial amount of explosives, and time, to blow your way through that lot.

All external windows had been replaced with bullet proof glass and a globally controlled shutter system had been installed. We left one of the lorries in the car park, with some building equipment piled up next it.

I decided to get a proper night's sleep for the first time since Wednesday.

We still didn't know how they were getting their info from Arthur and how long it would take to filter through to the agents over here, or indeed where those agents were based, or what they intended to do... okay, there was loads we didn't know, but there was a fair chance that if they were going to act on our planted info then it would be some time tomorrow.

Some of the marines could barely string a sentence together but I was confident in their ability to point guns at people when required. In all fairness, they had more experience in dealing with the sort of attack that fifty CIA men may launch against this complex. Only six of us had been given iris recognition access to the labs themselves but that would only be needed if an attack began while the staff were in residence. Considering the work they were engaged in, I was surprised they seemed to stick to a nine to five, Monday to Friday schedule. I suppose they had to rest their brains sometime.

I put my sleeping bag down in the canteen and set my alarm for five thirty, enough time for a couple of coffees before the cleaners and catering staff arrived at six. Having trained myself to sleep under any conditions whenever I could, and also having been working constantly with only cat naps for three days, I drifted off in under a minute.

I was just rinsing out my coffee mug when the phone rang. I'd never known White to be up and about before six, it must be important.

"Everything okay, 45?"

"I made it through the night without the marines emptying a fire extinguisher over me or pissing in my shoes, so I'm happy. Are you in the office?"

"No, I'm in my kitchen. I've just had a call from our tech boys; they've discovered how the Yanks are stealing a march on us. Thankfully it completely exonerates Arthur, he has no way of knowing

what's happened."

"How are they doing it?"

"It's good timing that we've been able to glean this this morning. We've been re-examining the scans they took when you brought him back from Washington. The cheeky bastards have put a nano microphone in his access socket."

"A nano microphone? I didn't know they existed."

"It's pretty crude, but they estimate it can pick up any conversation within twenty feet."

"So any time you've sat across a desk from him, or he talks on the phone..." I was staggered at the appalling ramifications.

"Exactly."

"So how are they getting the sound? Some sort of transmitter? What range has it got?"

"We don't know, but it certainly wouldn't cross the Atlantic. Best guess at the moment is that thirty miles would be pushing it. They tell me they could remove it fairly easily without harming Arthur, but I thought we'd leave it there for a few days at least."

I pondered the possibilities.

"So they could have a receiving station anywhere within thirty miles - it could just be a laptop recording everything - and then pass anything significant on as and when. Bollocks, that doesn't tell us anything about where these fifty agents may be based."

"No, but at least we know that one way or another they are likely to know whatever I tell Arthur within a few minutes. That's why I've called you first. It's up to you now at what time I bait the trap. How's progress over there?"

I filled him in on the details.

"I estimate it would take a truck full of high grade explosives to get into the central core, and that's not exactly covert. I don't think anyone could force their way into the labs without bringing the roof down on top of them. And even if somebody got hold of the door codes, the iris recognition is all but infallible. There's still some work to do on the outside, and when we leave they need more security staff than an old

guy with a limp, but right now Houdini couldn't get into that lab."

"Excellent, well done."

"Is there anything else? I have to get everyone organised for the arrival of the staff."

"Just the timing of my leak."

"Oh yes. Could you make it about four thirty this afternoon? I'll make sure all the staff have left by five, then we don't have to worry about them getting caught up in anything. All things considered, I think a night time attack is far more likely."

"I agree, 45. Shall we make it three thirty? That should give them time to get the information from whoever is monitoring the bug. Even they wouldn't launch an all out attack without a little bit of planning."

"Okay, fine," I said, "three thirty it is. We'll give the impression of a deserted building by five thirty and keep an eye out for any surveillance. I assume we treat this as a terrorist attack if it happens?"

"Of course, we have no information to the contrary, do we 45? Officially we have no idea who these people are. Anyway, as far as I'm concerned they fucking are terrorists. In fact," he paused, "you know what, I've been stuck behind a desk for too long. I think I'll come and join you this evening if I can. I'll let you know later."

At six thirty that evening I met A1 and escorted him to the building via the open waste ground at the back.

He quickly briefed all T14 agents and then he and I squeezed into the portacabin with the marines.

"We are expecting an attack or attempted infiltration this evening," he said, "and hopefully we will have half an hours notice of their arrival. Your mission is to support my agents in defending this establishment. We may face up to fifty men armed with assault rifles and grenade launchers. My agents prime concern is protecting the inner core of the building from infiltration or destruction. We are also concerned with keeping this out of the public eye as far as possible. I don't want an all out firefight here tonight. We may well only get a dozen or so infiltrators. If that is the case I want them all captured alive with the

minimum of fuss. If they just try to enter the building we let them do that and my agents will take care of them. However, this is officially a terrorism prevention operation, and we are authorised to use lethal force if required."

He was about to continue when his phone beeped an alert. Within seconds, my phone followed suit.

I read the message and we showed our phones to each other. More messages came through.

"Right, listen up," said White, "we are expecting an imminent visit from a dozen men. 45 get everyone inside and secure the labs."

I ran out and gathered our twelve agents, leading them towards the first lab door.

"They'll arrive in about twenty minutes," I said. "We're only expecting a scouting party of a dozen but we have to be prepared for anything. We've had reports that the other groups all left their locations at the same time by truck. Our other teams are staying put in case they return but there's no way they can reach us tonight travelling by road. We're assuming that tonight the local team will scout the premises and launch a full assault tomorrow with all fifty or so agents, but that's no more than an assumption at present.

"So for tonight we wait and observe. The infra red cameras will allow us to track them if they get inside the building, maybe even identify some of them."

In the event, all that happened that night was that a van parked near the entrance and took lots of photos, while somebody under the ruse of looking for a runaway dog had a good look around the perimeter of the building.

Tracking devices placed on the vehicles of the other groups showed that they had indeed abandoned their bases and were all heading for Cambridge, so 61, 37, 22 and their teams were all choppered back to an airfield ten miles away so that they could join us for the events of next evening.

CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN

The following day we kept all the staff away and erected high fences around the perimeter with large signs proclaiming 'danger: building work in progress'. That meant that nobody in the surrounding houses could see anything and we were able to move around freely and plan for the attack.

We slept in shifts throughout the day so that we would all be fresh for the early evening briefing.

I discussed with White the possibility of planting further red herrings via Arthur but in the end we agreed it would be over-egging the pudding. It seemed overwhelmingly likely that they would soon be exactly where we wanted them. We also figured that if, as we suspected, these fifty agents were working outside usual CIA boundaries, they wouldn't be reporting back to Washington. Hopefully we could capture and interrogate them, or indeed kill them if necessary, and they would remain forever rogue agents who had mysteriously disappeared.

There was always the possibility that word would get back and we would be facing an international incident of unprecedented stickiness, but that was for the politicians to worry about.

Mid afternoon found me in the canteen filling up on coffee and carbohydrates.

"How are you not twenty stone?" said Hannah as I tucked into my second plate of sausages, chips and bread and butter.

"I've never thought about it, I just eat when I'm hungry. I suppose I burn it off somehow: chasing terrorists, going for walks, a good, hard fuck."

I immediately felt sorry for Adam as he choked violently and tea came out of his nose. I nudged him under the table with my foot and smiled apologetically.

"Anyway," I said, "who knows how long we'll have to wait before breakfast tomorrow?"

"Speaking of which," said John standing up and draining his tea, "I'm going for a puff around the perimeter."

"I'll join you," said Hannah, "I need to stretch my legs before we're cooped up in here all night like battery chickens."

"Sorry," I said when they'd gone, "that just slipped out."

"It's my fault, I shouldn't be so sensitive."

"It's one of your finest qualities," I said, causing him to blush again.

"When was it you sent that email to get me out of the house?"

"Two, nearly three months ago, why?"

"Fuck, it seems like years. It's all rather kicked off since then, hasn't it?"

"I suppose without Peterson killing Libby we'd never have known anything was awry. They may never even have gone after Arthur."

"Maybe," I said, gathering a few chips on my fork, "who knows?"

I munched away, thinking for the first time about how everything seemed to stem from that one confusing day.

"I suppose," I concluded as I finished my meal, "that it was only your concern for me that led to all this. Otherwise we may never have caught Peterson, I'd have finished my assignment and Arthur would never have gone to Washington."

White came over to our table to save Adam the embarrassment of having to form a reply.

"All set?" he asked, pouring himself a tea.

"Can't wait," I said genuinely. "This will be the biggest feather in our collective caps."

"Unless it goes pear-shaped."

"Can you have a pear-shaped feather?" I mused. "Never mind, something worrying you?"

"Nothing specific," said White, "just the potential scale of this. I'll have to answer to the Prime Minister for whatever transpires tonight."

"He supports us, doesn't he?" asked Adam.

"More than we could hope for, yes, but the aftermath of this could be enormous."

"We're a non-political organisation," I said, "leave all the PR bullshit to Downing Street."

"Of course, but I still have to think about the public impact of our operations."

"Your welcome to it," I said, "I just want to get on with my job and catch the bad guys."

White smiled.

"Tonight you'll have all the bad guys you could ever want. Try to leave some of them in a state to answer questions."

"I only ever kill people who try to kill me or someone else first."

By six o'clock the T14 teams were all ensconced within the main building, save for John's team of six who were parked around the corner ready to capture any getaway drivers or agents who didn't enter the grounds of the complex. They were also to keep any members of the public from entering. John, of course, was the first to volunteer for this outdoor position.

We had to wait until past one o'clock in the morning for any action.

"Four highly suspicious looking black vans just turning into your road," said John, "trust the fucking Americans."

I grinned to myself before gathering my concentration.

White was in the portacabin with twenty Marines, the other ten covering the rear waste ground. I heard him over my earpiece telling them to be ready for anything.

As well as our usual Kalashnikovs we were all also armed with pistols and silencers. I dreaded to think how many other weapons Adam had about his person. Boys and their toys. I contented myself with a knife strapped to each leg and a couple of stun grenades.

In an office near the first of the lab doors I watched the monitor as John poked a pen-sized camera around the corner and filmed the vans parking up.

"A1," I said into my mic, "45 here. They're not exactly being subtle are they? Are they really just going to park four huge vans within view of a residential street?"

"I bloody hope not," he replied. "Fingers crossed they drive into the

complex."

Fortunately they were professional enough to move part of the fence with minimum noise and replace it after themselves.

"A1, 22 here. Do you want us to stay outside or move in and disable their vehicles?"

"Await further instructions. Keep watch on the outer perimeter for now."

"Will do."

I watched on another monitor as the four vans parked up and switched off their engines.

Nothing happened for ten minutes, I suppose they were discussing tactics and checking they hadn't set off any alarms when they entered.

"Scanners indicate eleven personnel in rear of each van plus one driver," said White.

"Let's hope they don't have the same scanning equipment," I said quietly, "or they'll know what's waiting for them."

Being an unofficial operation, they would most likely be limited to what they could easily get their hands on upon arrival. Even the CIA would notice a pile of its own equipment going missing.

The rear door of one of the vans opened and eleven men moved out. They were all wearing ski masks, hardly standard CIA issue.

"No sign of comms units," said White. That was to our distinct advantage. Mind you, who were they going to communicate with?

I followed them on various cameras as they circled the building. Thankfully they showed no interest in the portacabin. Having disabled all the dummy cameras we'd mounted on the exterior, one of them beckoned towards the vans and the other thirty three men streamed out. They were either very brave, arrogant or stupid.

We deliberately hadn't yet reinforced the main door, so they easily broke the padlocks we'd placed and all forty four of them moved into the reception foyer.

"Nothing happening at the rear," I heard White whisper, "anything with you 22?"

"Negative, quiet as the proverbial," confirmed John.

"Okay," continued White, "it seems we won't be joined by anyone else tonight. 22, come in and capture the drivers as quietly as possible, I'll provide cover."

"On our way," said John, in a manner which I knew indicated that he was taking a last drag of his cigarette before moving off. I couldn't help smiling again. One day I fully expected to see him capture or kill a terrorist with a fag hanging from his mouth like Dot Cotton in a launderette.

Now that there were forty four armed CIA agents in the building, we were outnumbered. Not that I was bothered, I relished a challenge. But I knew that as soon as the drivers were eliminated we would be joined by at least twenty marines, and that could easily turn into a bloodbath.

I kept an eye on two monitors at once, one showing the vans outside, the other showing the people inside the building.

"All forty four infiltrators are moving away from reception towards the centre of the building," I whispered, "22 the drivers are all yours, no interference."

"Roger and wilko," said John perkily, doubtless anticipating being able to light up again in a couple of minutes.

I saw him and the other three creep through the fence.

To make things even easier for us, two of the drivers had got out and were having a seemingly casual chat next to the second van. Using the first van as cover, they moved around behind the two men.

John and 74 advanced and simultaneously placed both a hand over their mouths and a pistol to their heads. The other two moved around the back of the other vans but they must have heard something because both drivers jumped out brandishing machine guns. I heard White order the two marines to fire their single shot, silenced rifles and both men slumped against their vans.

I saw White running towards the vans and John handcuffing the other two so I switched my attention to the other monitor.

The forty four appeared not to know quite where they were going, and I could barely contain my amusement as they poked their weapons

into various store cupboards and lavatories.

"All secure out here," said White, "61, are they with you yet?"

Hannah didn't answer, confirming what I could see on the monitors that they were almost within earshot.

"45 here, they're almost on top of team one. Shall we let them continue?"

"No evidence of explosives in the vans," cut in John, "in fact there's fuck all in here except food and drink. Whatever weaponry they have on them, that's it."

"No radios either," added 74.

"Okay, hold fire for now," said White, "I want to know what they're planning. I'm coming in with a dozen marines to secure the entrance."

Through my headset I heard Hannah let out the tiniest sigh as the infiltrators trooped past her team.

My mind was boggling at the thought of all forty four of them sticking together like a rugby team. I supposed they would have intercepted our references to the 'central area' of the building and, without any further knowledge, were simply working their way towards that.

I suddenly noticed that six of them had rather bulky backpacks.

I reported this to everyone, and posed the question of what may be in them.

"Everyone keep an eye on those six men," said White, "if anyone reaches for those backpacks we have to react immediately."

As my team were the closest to the centre that would almost certainly be us doing most of the reacting. And at their present rate they would be with us in about two minutes.

I was therefore delighted when they split into two groups. Half of them seemed to be setting up some sort of barricade while the rest continued moving towards us. I immediately appraised White, who couldn't see a monitor, of this development.

"A1, I think you have to start picking off some of these," I said, "my team can't take twenty two of them easily, not to mention whatever's in

those packs and all six of them will be with us soon. Must be explosives or grenades or something. I think we have to risk storming them immediately - we could even be talking about a suicide bombing."

"Okay," whispered Al, "listen everyone, teams one and two advance immediately on that barricade - kill all of them with silencers. I'll then come through with the marines. Teams three and four prepare to storm the forward group on my command. Take some alive, then hit the lights and find out what's in those backpacks."

I switched off the monitors; we'd be relying in our eyes and ears from now on.

I heard nothing except the footsteps of the advancing twenty two men at the far end of the long corridor which lead to the first of the fourteen security doors. Nonetheless, as they were within twenty feet of our position, I heard Hannah say "Barricade destroyed."

I and my team from our position crouched on the floor of the office could only see the light of their torches. They were almost level with us and we had to act soon or one of their torches could betray us. I'd removed the plastic windows from the office a few days ago when I chose it as our last line of defence.

"Go team three," said White.

Shooting erupted from the rear.

"Go team four," I shouted in the confusion and all thirteen of us sprang up and aimed our weapons, the vivid red lights of the laser sites telling us all who was and wasn't covered.

As we had trained for so many times, it took a mere couple of seconds for each of us to have one man covered.

"Rear seven down," said Hannah. That left fifteen, and we had thirteen of them covered.

A volley of shots rang out and I could tell that someone in my team had been hit.

Three of the front thirteen took that as a signal to get clever and none of them had rucksacks so I shot them in the head.

"That ought to instil some order," I thought, moving out of the office to check things at the rear.

Team three had switched the lights on in their office base and Adam gave me the thumbs up.

"Drop your weapons," I shouted at the twelve who remained alive.

By the time White and the marines arrived we had established order.

One of my team had taken a bullet in the shoulder and he was carried away for medical attention.

I separated the ones with the backpacks and the rest were handcuffed and lead away.

"Hello, I'm Bill," said White in his admirably terrifying manner. "Now then, what have you got in there?"

They remained silent and all seemed to possess the steely superiority we'd often seen in CIA agents.

"You," he said, prodding one of them in the chest with his pistol, "slowly take off your backpack and place it on the ground. Open it very, very slowly and then stand up."

To emphasise the instruction I aimed my rifle at his head.

The pack was chock full of grenades.

"Is that what you all have?" I asked, looking at the others. Nothing.

Okay, that's how they wanted to play it, fine.

One by one we made them remove and open their packs. They all contained either Semtex or grenades. Maybe enough to get through three or four of our nice new doors. A week ago, it would have easily been enough to penetrate right through to the core of the lab.

Once all six had been thoroughly searched for weapons or detonators they were handcuffed and taken to the canteen to be stood over by marines who looked really pissed off that they hadn't got to kill anyone tonight.

White congratulated us on a successful mission and phoned the Prime Minister for his advice on what to do next.

As we were sorting through the bodies, a murmur arose.

I checked a few other corpses to make sure and as subtly as possible got rid of the few marines who were hanging around. I told them to start

loading everything from the portacabin into the black vans - I had the feeling we may need to make a swift exit.

"Sorry to interrupt," I said tapping White on the shoulder when they had gone, "but most of these aren't CIA."

His phone almost exploded and I clearly heard the Prime Minister shout "Who the fuck are they?"

"Look," I said, "two thirds of them are clearly from the middle east. No way they'd ever get in the CIA."

"I know this one," said Adam, "he was in the IRA."

For the first time in eight years I saw that White was actually lost for words.

I took the phone from him.

"Hello, Prime Minister, agent 45 here, I was at your briefing. We seem to have around thirty middle eastern men and at least one ex-IRA."

"But..."

"I couldn't agree more."

CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT

After a frantic clean up and exit and a few hours sleep, they found themselves once again in their meeting room with the PM.

"MI6 were fucking useless, weren't they?" said John. "CIA my arse!"

"Be fair, John," said White, "it was us that leaped to the CIA assumption in the first place."

"Those three we found in the woods were definitely CIA," said Adam, "Why would anyone be impersonating the CIA?"

"Street cred?" offered John sarcastically.

"Come on, this isn't a playground," said White sharply.

"I've been thinking," said Jennifer. "Suppose a small group of CIA agents were tasked with infiltrating our establishments, for whatever reason, and recruited whoever they could find in the mercenary yellow

pages. They get them all false US passports, arrive here and go to the old IRA network for their equipment."

"None of that makes sense," said Hannah.

"All the driver said was that the president didn't know what they were doing," said White, "but I can't believe an official CIA operation would use mainly mercenaries, and middle eastern ones at that."

"So what are the other options?" asked Adam. "Somebody hired the CIA? They're former agents trying to ruin the CIA? None of *that* makes sense."

The Prime Minister shook his head. "No it doesn't, but I have to decide what to do about it. Do we just pretend it never happened and deport the survivors? Charge them with terrorism offences? Do I talk to the US President or the head of the CIA? And what to do about the middle east and Irish connection?"

"We could do nothing and wait and see," said John. "If they were a totally independent operation and we keep the survivors in custody then nothing else will happen. If someone was funding them and they don't hear anything from them they'll know that the mission failed. I doubt they'd try again."

"Of course," said Hannah, "there's still the matter of Arthur and who put that nano mic in his head. Now that we have Irish and middle-eastern people involved, that opens up the possibility that there are people living in Britain who are helping them in some way. We have everyone who launched the attack but maybe there are people on the fringes who supplied them with weapons. Maybe Arthur is even still being listened to."

"I've been thinking about that," said White. "I'm now confident we can remove the bug without harming him or the implant - the question is do we want to? If there are home grown sympathisers still out there we need to find them."

"So we set another trap?" said Adam.

"What about Arthur though?" said Hannah. "We have to tell him eventually, we're not going to leave that thing in him forever."

"I think this is all becoming overly complicated," said Jennifer. "Keeping everything from 4 I mean. It's making our job much harder. I

vote we bring him on board. The longer we leave it the more he'll resent us."

"I have also been considering that factor," said White.

"This is fairly crude device, isn't it?" said John. "So the sound quality will be fairly poor. Couldn't we remove it and put in a container that he can carry around with him. Then when we don't want anything to be overheard just leave the container in another room?"

"That's a brilliant idea," said White, "that would solve a lot of problems. I'll see if that's possible now, excuse me."

He walked over to the other side of the room to make the call.

"So," said the PM, "how much further do you think this group extends?"

"It can't be that much bigger than the people we've already captured because it hasn't shown up on any radars," said Adam.

"No," agreed Jennifer, "if there was a large group assembling that sort of arsenal and manpower within these shores we'd know about it. All the planning must have been done in the States. Maybe they recruited the other guys as a red herring, to put us off the scent if they were caught."

"And it was rather a slap-dash, if well equipped, operation," added Hannah. "To leave only the four drivers outside is verging on amateurish."

"Or arrogance," said John.

"It strikes me," said Adam, "that they were either in a great hurry to accomplish whatever goal they had in mind, or they were given orders by someone who intended them to fail."

"Or maybe it was a suicide mission?" offered Hannah.

The Prime Minister ran an exhausted hand through his hair.

"So where does that leave us now?"

"We use Arthur to set another trap and see if anyone responds, and we double our efforts to find out where all those arms came from," said Jennifer. "In a way, if they arrived from the States undetected, that's even more worrying than them being amassed in our own backyard."

White concluded his call and returned to the group.

"The tech team see no problem in implementing John's idea. I'll set that in motion tomorrow, once I've worked out how to tell Arthur that we've been keeping this from him."

CHAPTER TWENTY NINE

May 31st

As I sat in the unnatural silence of our tech lab I had to grudgingly concede that A1 had done the right thing in not telling me about the nano mic earlier, and also that it was right to use this to our advantage.

As quietly as possible Steve put the thin silver chain with the small plastic box containing the bug around my neck. They had encased it in a model of my Firewire port and padded it to mimic the acoustics of where it had come from. It was gaffa taped to my neck so as not to be visible beneath a shirt collar, not that anyone would be looking for it.

"Okay," said Steve, going into the prearranged script. "You can relax now, that's all the tests over, Agent 4."

"Any problems?" I asked.

"No, there's still no trace of the virus or anything untoward."

"So you've still no idea how they got me on that bloody plane?" I added the bloody for good measure and injected some venom into the question that wasn't anything to do with acting.

"Sorry, we're still stumped."

I sighed loudly.

"Okay, thanks, Steve."

I went back to my office and made the call.

"I'm leaving now, sir, starting my long weekend."

"Oh yes," said A1, "going anywhere nice?"

"Driving out to the country to meet Barbara, she's been staying with relatives."

"Well, have a nice time, see you Monday."

"Bye."

I walked down to the underground car park and got into the van, switching the radio on loudly to cover any sounds from the people in the back. I adjusted the modified sat nav. It was inconvenient to have to keep looking at it but we couldn't risk any directions being given by headset. The reverse engineering that had been done on the bug required me to carry it with me in order for us to find the receiver.

All they'd been able to manage in such a short space of time was a system which would tell me whether I was getting further away from or closer to the signal. Someone in the back would keep a track of this information and feed directions through to my sat nav. It was clunky but it should yield results eventually and hopefully become more accurate the closer we got.

I turned left on a whim and drove in a straight line.

After a few minutes the screen flashed at me to turn right.

This tedious procedure continued for about two hours.

The sat nav flashed the words 'pull over' and a longer message began to appear.

It took a few minutes to find a parking space, after which I scrolled back to the start of the message. It said that they had now isolated the signal and the receiver was within a two mile radius of a spot indicated on the map. I typed a reply and pulled back out into the traffic.

Another two hours of tedious twists and turns eventually pinpointed an area small enough to search with our own detectors. I drove to the centre of the area and switched the engine off, leaving the radio on. I carefully removed the necklace and bug and placed it on the dashboard near a speaker. As quietly as possible I slipped out of the van and closed the door.

In the back of the van they were thankfully making much swifter progress.

After a few minutes we'd isolated the building where the receiver was. A search of the electoral register told us that it was a top floor flat. It was too small to contain many occupants so three of us felt confident

enough to go in with just handguns.

22, 45 and I knocked on the door but nobody answered. 22 was the lock-picking expert among us and it took him no more than a few seconds to open the simple yale lock on this rundown, converted house.

There were no signs of life as we ascended the stairs.

My hand held scanner told me there was nobody in the attic flat so 22 again picked the lock. Careful to look out for booby traps, we entered straight into a small living room. On a coffee table in the corner was a laptop and large aerial. The laptop was on and a message was flashing on the screen.

"Someone left it recording and they've run out of hard drive space," said 22.

He rooted around the few objects on the desk.

"There's a large external hard drive so it... hang on a minute."

He sat down at the laptop while 45 and I searched the rest of the flat for any useful forensic evidence. The thin layers of dust and total lack of any food or toiletries suggested it hadn't been inhabited for some time.

"This has been left for several weeks," said 22 as we returned to the living room.

"I don't think anyone's lived here during that time," I said, "there's not so much as a tea bag or a roll of toilet paper."

"It's run out of space to save any further recordings, but it may still be transmitting, that is passing the signal to somewhere else."

He turned up the volume on the laptop and we heard the sound of the vans radio.

"Hmm," pondered 22, "this could take some figuring out. Even though it's not recording anything it is still receiving the signal. I could switch off the laptop and unplug the aerial but if anyone is listening elsewhere that would alert them to it's discovery."

He took out his phone.

"Steve, can you come up here, please?"

"I'll go and let him in," said 45.

"Why record it if there's nobody here to check on it?" I asked.

"Obviously they intended at some point to come back and retrieve the equipment. We know for a fact that information you gave was passed on but if we caught or killed everyone at Cambridge then this is just sitting here by itself. It shouldn't take long for Steve to see if this is passing the signal to another location. If it isn't then we can safely assume that we've got the whole group."

Steve did indeed confirm after half an hour that no signal was being sent so we dismantled the equipment and called the forensic team in to sweep the flat. Matching this location to one of the group would be very helpful.

CHAPTER THIRTY

June 3rd

None of the fourteen survivors showed any inclination to say anything of interest to T14 beyond asking for food and water and a change of clothes. The two drivers and six men with the backpacks were all obviously American and almost certainly current or former CIA operatives. The other six turned out to be Iranian and only one of them ever spoke any English.

None of the forty eight men nor the four vans contained anything to identify them and the houses they had been using proved equally fruitless. No passports or ID of any kind.

The Cambridge lab had returned to its normal routine, save for 37 and five other agents taking over the day to day security and supervision of the remaining building upgrades. None of the staff nor the press or public knew what had happened three nights previously and White knew that circumstances allowed him to detain the prisoners for an indefinite period. Nonetheless it was deeply frustrating. Although he could hold them for months if needed he was ultimately accountable to the prime minister for their treatment and it would be his head on the block if there were any signs of confessions being beaten out of them.

There had been no reaction from anywhere in the world to the men disappearing or failing in whatever their mission was, indicating at the

very least that the CIA hadn't officially sponsored the endeavour.

White sighed and decided that a few days in the cells may loosen some of their tongues. It wasn't as if he didn't have plenty of other work to be getting on with.

As he was pondering his next move, John burst into his office.

"I've been thinking," he said between deep breaths.

"Good, that's partly what I pay you for."

"I suddenly wondered if Cambridge was their first attempted target."

White rapped his knuckles on his desk in frustration.

"How did we all miss that? Well?"

"I've spent the last two hours searching for any attacks or breaches or suspicious activity at research facilities anywhere in the world. I think I've found a motive, or at least a modus operandi."

John sat down and took out his phone, waving it past the transfer port on White's desktop computer.

"Open that, I've mapped it all out."

White opened the file and a map appeared on the screen, which he swivelled around so that they could both see.

"It appears to have started fourteen months ago in Iran. I'm not saying it was all this group but there's some sort of network doing this, barring a huge series of coincidences." He picked up a pen from the desk and used it to point at the map. "The first incident was a small fire and a stoning at a clinic in Tehran that was working on computer chips for brain implants. A few weeks later... well, hover over the dots and you can see for yourself."

White moved the cursor over the dots in numerical order. As he did so each brought up a date, location and brief description of a fire, mortar attack, armed assault, sabotage or conflagration at some sort of technology research facility. His cursor traced a line from Iran through Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Egypt, Libya, Spain, Switzerland and Germany, ending in Cambridge three days ago.

"I'm running all this through several bits of analysis software to see if I can make sense of the pattern and work out why they missed out

certain countries."

"Like France," said White.

"Exactly. Like I said, it may not all be the same group, but the dates would easily allow for travel between all the locations. It would take a few days but do you want me to investigate this properly - find out exactly what these facilities were working on and how it links with Cambridge?"

"I think that would be a very profitable use of your time. Well done, John. Then I can have something concrete to confront the evasive bastards with."

CHAPTER THIRTY ONE

June 7th

The PM and foreign secretary sipped their tea and waited patiently for John to set up his slide presentation.

Bill White, Jennifer, Arthur and Hannah already knew the gist of his findings but were still fascinated to know the details.

"Sorry this has taken so long," said John, "but, as you'll see, there is a lot of information I've had to coordinate and try to make sense of."

He switched off the lights and pressed a button on his laptop. A map appeared on the huge projector screen, the same numbered one he had shown White four days ago.

Using the cursor he traced again the order of the incidents.

"I'll give you the details of all these incidents in order. Whether they're all linked to the group we captured I don't yet know, but it seems likely that all these attacks are part of a single plan of action. It seems to have started here, in Tehran."

He clicked on the first dot and a clip of a television news report filled the screen.

"There are currently no indications of why this started and nobody has yet claimed responsibility," said the reporter standing in front of a smoking, half demolished building. "This establishment conducting research into computers and biomechanical implants came under attack

this morning when several employees arriving for work were stoned by a group of unidentified men. The building was then peppered with petrol bombs before the men ran off. We're hearing that two people died from smoke inhalation and equipment worth over a million US dollars was destroyed."

"The rest of the news reports are quite repetitive," said John, "so I've put together a slide show of photos and descriptions of the rest."

For almost an hour they watched as countless dozens of photos superseded each other, with John providing a narration.

"My conclusions," he said at the end, "are that, as there is no discernible logical pattern to their progress, either they were making it up as they went along and travelling at random, or this is the work of more than one group."

"And you say that there are many similar establishments on this route which were not attacked?" asked the PM.

"Yes, which indicates a lack of organisation, manpower, funding, planning or research, or alternately that they had specific reasons for targeting these and not the others."

"The dates don't make sense, do they?" said Adam. "There are whole weeks where nothing happens so they can't have been doing it all on one journey, assuming it was the same people. They must have gone home each time - although if it's the CIA and Iranians working together did they both go back home?" He shook his head.

"The alternative is that the phenomenon spread geographically and was taken up by a new group in each location," said Jennifer.

"Passing the baton," said John, "yes, that makes sense. Maybe that's what happened in the beginning and then a travelling group formed later on? I can't believe that if the CIA were on board and funding it from the start that there would have been such a gap between each event."

"Okay," said White, "this is all speculation until we have more information. Let's focus on the work these institutions were doing - that has to be the common link. Then we know which of our facilities we may have to protect in future."

"Unfortunately, I've drawn a blank on that," admitted John. "There simply isn't any connection, other than research into biomechanics. Why

Iran and the Yanks would want to go on a global spree of wiping out such research I can't imagine. And why was the first one in Iran itself? They can't have been trying to eliminate competition."

White stood up.

"Right then. I'll have to get back to questioning them. I think that's the only way we'll find out what their intentions were, but well done John, good work. I think we could all use some rest and relaxation, who's up for a few pints."

"Ah, the magic words," said John, "so long as we can sit outside."

"Would you like to join us?" White asked the PM before feeling rather foolish.

"I haven't been to a pub in years, I'd love to. Unfortunately the press photographers, irate voters and Close Protection do rather take the edge off."

CHAPTER THIRTY TWO

"We bloody deserve this," said Jennifer as they sat down in the beer garden. "Cheers."

They clinked glasses.

With work talk being a no no, the conversation inevitably fell to personal relationships.

"How's Barbara now?" asked Jennifer. "After the... you know."

"It's much better now, thanks."

"And how's your wife?"

"She's fine," said White, "still teaching."

"John, I assume you're still abstaining from all relationships?"

"Once divorced, twice shy."

"And how is my god-daughter?"

"She's fine," said Hannah. "She's six now."

"Six!"

"Yes, you owe her two Christmas and one birthday present."

"So she's in school now?"

"Yes, that's been an eye opener - it's changed a lot since my day."

"So has Eric gone back to work?"

"He's doing something part time to fit in with school hours."

"I suppose she's twice as tall as when I last saw her?"

"About that, yes."

"Does she still think you're a superhero?"

"No. I've managed to get her to answer the question 'what does mummy do?' with 'she's a civil servant'."

"Very wise," said John, "you don't want to be shopped by your own daughter."

The next morning Hannah and Jennifer were wandering around a book shop.

"What sort of level is she at now, reading wise?"

"She's pretty advanced. I know all parents say that but she's reading M.R. James at the moment."

"Wow. Okay, I can get her some proper books then. How about 'Alice In Wonderland'? I read that in junior school and loved it."

"She doesn't have that, I'm sure she'd like it."

"I'll get her both, if I can find them in this maze."

"Be thankful we found an actual bookshop."

"I've really missed this," said Jennifer, "living a normal life, pottering around, going shopping. I've been thinking about leaving."

"Really?"

"It's been building for a while. I keep volunteering for overtime, taking the job home with me. I think I've become quite a shallow person. When I was undercover I had a lot of time to myself. I read, I studied, I walked and cycled a lot. I often wished my life was like that, without the job part."

"I couldn't cope without having something to go home to."

"Maybe it's just the creeping approach of middle age or hormones or something. I still don't want kids but I think I now want a normal life, whatever the fuck that is. But how could I do a normal job after doing this for so long? And how can I leave? I still believe what we do matters. Sorry, ignore me, I just need a week off and a good sleep."

"Look, there's Alice."

"What? Oh I see what you mean," said Jennifer, taking two books from the shelf. "Is there anything else I can get her? That isn't a doll or a teddy bear."

"She gets through trainers like there's no tomorrow, she could always use another pair."

"Okay, then I definitely need some wine to complete my day off."

"It's like Crufts," observed Jennifer as they waited outside the school gates.

"Keep your voice down," hissed Hannah, "I have to pass futile conversation with these women on a sporadic basis for the next five years."

"What is that one wearing on her head? It looks like a felt yacht."

"Don't catch her eye whatever you do, you'll get a five minute lecture on racial purity."

"Oh, that explains the hat, she's clinically insane."

"It's a long story."

A girl waved at them from the playground.

"Is that her?" said Jennifer.

"Yes, six and a bit is very different to four and a half."

"I could make a crude joke about that, but since we're outside a kids playground..."

"Hello, mummy. Hello Auntie Jenny, how are you?"

"I'm alright, how are you, Chloe?"

"I'm six now."

"So I hear."

"Have you finished your assignment, with the 'civil service'?" said Chloe, giving her a knowing wink.

Jennifer couldn't help laughing.

"Yes, I thrashed those paper clips to within an inch of their life."

"Are you coming home for tea?"

Jennifer looked at Hannah.

"Am I? I was... nothing important."

"Come on," pleaded Chloe, "I want to show you my new laptop."

"Okay, I give in," said Jennifer.

CHAPTER THIRTY THREE

June 9th

White waited for the prison warden to retreat from earshot before he spoke. "This is a letter detailing the termination of your contract with T14, please read it very carefully."

Peterson's eyes ran down the page like greyhounds out of a trap.

"This is a dishonourable discharge," he said when he'd finished.

"Yes, it is," said White, smiling thinly. "You will remain subject to the Official Secrets Act and T14's own code of conduct until your dying day. You will say, publish, upload, divulge, talk in your sleep not one word about anything you've done, seen or heard over the last ten years, including Libby Stevens."

"You mean..."

"Yes, all charges are dropped, you will not be tried for murder. If you sign that letter you will be released tomorrow and your pension reinstated. I do not want to ever see or hear from or of you again. You will not come near headquarters or any of my agents, is that understood?"

Peterson nodded pathetically.

"But, this letter. I won't be able to get another job."

"You're sixty and independently wealthy, you don't need one."

"What am I supposed to do?"

"Go home and spend time with your wife and children," said White. He paused to enjoy the look of misery and defeat on his ex-deputies' face, then turned away.

The following day Peterson left prison and made his way home.

Half way there he stopped the taxi and got out.

He booked into a cheap hotel and installed himself in the bar. He rather thought he might stay there and drink until he couldn't remember where he lived.

CHAPTER THIRTY FOUR

"I feel a bit like a lab rat," said Arthur as they pulled up to the building.

"Don't worry," said John, "I won't let them crack your skull open and rewire you. I thought this was what you wanted - to learn more about your implant and the technology in general?"

"Yes, it is. Sorry, I'm just a bit nervous. I've a feeling that cracking my skull open is exactly what most of these scientists would like to do."

They passed through the new and highly improved checkpoint, handed in their weapons to the T14 agents in reception and made their way towards the inner core of the building.

"Remember," said John, "no mention of what went on here. Most of the staff have no idea what happened that night."

He introduced Arthur to Simon Parker, the labs director of research, and the three of them went through several of the security doors until they reached what looked like a small lecture room.

"I'll tell them about the implant if you want," said John.

"Yes, I'd much rather that, I feel a bit stupid not knowing how part of my brain works."

"Nobody properly knows how the brain works. But you don't mind taking questions about the practical applications?"

"No, that's no problem, just the technical stuff."

Around two dozen scientists and technicians sat in neat rows, some of them with laptops, or notebooks of the paper variety.

John plugged his laptop into the hundred inch screen and Arthur was treated to a giant scan of his brain with a bullet lodged in it.

"As you can see," said John, "the bullet almost totally destroyed the hippocampus. The prognosis was that Arthur would have no short or long term memory and would essentially be the intellectual equivalent of the current US President. Many of us at T14 have signed up to undergo experimental treatments if we are badly injured. If Arthur hadn't signed up for this he would probably have died. Instead he had this implant wired into what remained of his hippocampus."

He pressed a button on the laptop and a close up photo of Arthur's actual implant (before insertion, obviously) filled the screen.

"This was four years ago so it probably seems rather primitive to you guys now, but at the time this was very advanced. We believe it was one of the very first implants of its type to be successfully installed anywhere in the world. After a few initial teething problems it has functioned perfectly, and Arthur's hippocampus has demonstrated considerable cell regrowth, to the extent that his brain is slowly taking over memory functions from the implant. In a few years he should be able to return to using an entirely organic memory, although at the moment he is still vulnerable if the implant malfunctions. We'll come to that later but now Arthur will explain what the implant allows him to do."

Arthur stood nervously and went to the front of the room, turning to face the expectant audience.

"I'm no bionic man," he said, not for the first time, feeling even more foolish than usual. "Apart from having a digitally assisted memory all the implant does is allow me to access digital information and 'see it' in my head. Please don't ask me how it works, I just know it does. I can

search maps as if I had them in front of me and read any kind of digital information that's loaded onto my stick, though for obvious reasons I can't connect my brain to the internet. We recently found out what would happen if a malicious code was introduced into my system, and that's why I'm here. We've been totally unable to figure out what happened to me, and... I need to know."

"Apart from the people in this room fewer than twenty others in the world know my implant even exists, never mind what it actually does. But we are... I am willing to trade this classified information with you in the hope that it will help you with your work, and that you'll be able to help me ensure that I can never again be sabotaged."

He looked to John for support, indicating that he didn't have anything else to say. John got up and stood next to him.

"You've all this morning received a copy of everything we have on the implant and the virus that compromised it. Anything you can tell us would be gratefully received."

One member of the audience stood up.

"Donald Edwards, specialising in biomechanical software. I've done a cursory analysis of this code and it seems fairly amateurish."

"That's what our tech guys thought," said John, "but the problem we have is that we still don't know what the code was intended for. Arthur experienced severe mental disorientation and memory loss, got on a plane to America, removed his Firewire stick and then seemed to wander at random before, possibly, ending up exactly where the people who produced the code intended him to be. What we need to know from you guys is whether it's possible to turn somebody with this sort of implant into a Manchurian candidate, and how much whoever wrote the code knew about the implant."

"Based on my initial observation," said Donald, "I'd say that it wouldn't be possible to do anything more than disrupt or wipe his memories. Surely that would be enough to disorientate and confuse anybody?"

"But could they programme me to do something without my knowledge?" asked Arthur.

"I don't see how that's at all possible."

"Well somebody did something to me that made me go to another country and... do things. Things I would never have normally done. That sounds like brainwashing to me."

"Would it be possible to implant suggestions verbally when his mind was confused?" asked John.

"That's a possibility with anyone," said Donald.

"You've never mentioned that before," said Arthur suspiciously.

"It's never occurred to me before," said John, "but if they couldn't have implanted any direct instructions then that's the only explanation. Maybe it's sort of like sleep deprivation - if you disorientate someone enough they'll just do what they're told because they're too tired to resist."

"So it was really nothing to do with my implant - they could have got the same effect by drugging me?"

"Probably."

"Could you stop this happening to me again?"

"I have observed that access to the implant is very insecure," said Donald. "Leave it with me and I'll see what I can do."

"Okay?" asked John.

"Yes," said Arthur, "at least we seem to have made some progress."

"Right then," said John, "that's our end of the bargain. Now you can tell us what you're up to and maybe you can try some of your latest software out on Arthur."

Arthur didn't look keen to have more people fiddling with his brain, but he didn't voice any protest.

CHAPTER THIRTY FIVE

A few days later I felt much better about everything. The Cambridge scientists had modified my sticks so that only I could ever unplug them - some sort of DNA fingerprint sensor. That meant that nobody could ever again introduce any malicious code into my system. They also managed to modify the implant by non-invasive methods, god knows

how. The result was that more of my memories were now being stored organically, encouraging my brain to do more of the work itself and rely less on the implant for day to day normal functioning. They estimated that it would take only a few months for my brain to adjust - after that I would have a normal functioning brain and memory and the implant would be no more than an additional enhancement.

I also had some nifty new features installed. Using what we'd told them about the bug, they had fitted a nano microphone in the access port which I could focus to any distance from two feet to two hundred yards and record the sound onto the stick. That could come in handy.

It felt good to be in charge of my own mind again and the paranoia that had been obsessing me for many months had almost entirely dissipated. It was also useful to learn more about the technology that had been in my head for the last four years, though much of it was still beyond me.

I phoned headquarters and AI was delighted to hear about all my modifications.

"So it's been a worthwhile trip for you then?" he asked.

"Oh yes, sir, it's been fantastic. Although if I'm stuck behind a desk I can't put my upgrades to much use."

"Hmm. Well, to be honest I mainly gave you the job to keep you out of the way while we weren't telling you about the bug. Not that you're not the best candidate in the agency for deputy but I'd much rather have an agent of your experience out in the field. Talk to Barbara, see what she thinks about you going back to active duty."

"It would reassure her to know about the upgrades but I can't tell her, can I?"

"I'll have to think about that. In the meantime, how is 22 getting on?"

"He says he'll be finished in a couple of hours."

The following morning we met in the briefing room

"It's nothing that far fetched that the Cambridge guys are working on," said John. "It's mostly enhancements or replacements for everyday brain functions that have been lost in a stroke or what have you, with

purely commercial applications. They estimate that they'll be able to cure all symptoms of Parkinson's within three years."

"That's amazing," said A1.

"I reckon in ten years, given enough funding, they could just about cure death itself. Anyway, that's not our concern. They are also working on the sort of things that people like us, or indeed the CIA, would be very interested in. Arthur now has some of that stuff installed and it's pretty remarkable, isn't it?"

"Yes, it's fantastic," I said. "This focusable microphone for example. I haven't really explored it yet but I'm already working on loading in certain sounds, such as a gun being cocked, which would then be automatically brought to my attention if they occur in my vicinity. I could do the same for human footsteps, breathing, vehicle sounds, you name it. I'm not sure at my age I could cope with the full usage of all that but it's amazing technology nonetheless."

"And you're now totally sabotage proof?" asked 37.

"Totally," I said, looking at him pointedly. "Nobody except me can remove my sticks now."

"And you've made some progress on what may have happened to you?" asked A1.

"Well, sort of. We've eliminated a few possibilities. It seems the virus or whatever it was merely had the same affect a discombobulating drug would have. It seems certain that whoever administered it gave me verbal instructions to get on that plane and, in my confused state, I meekly applied, though stopping in that field and removing my stick indicates that I did a reasonable job of fighting against it. The only way we'll know is by getting one of those bastards downstairs to cough up the truth."

"Those CIA bastards wouldn't talk if we put them in thumb screws," said 22, "but maybe the Iranians would."

"We don't use thumb screws around here, John," said A1. "I do have an idea about how we could get them to talk but it's fairly drastic. Though I'm sure you'll be up for it, 45."

We all turned to 45, who looked quizzically at A1.

CHAPTER THIRTY SIX

It's childish I know but I was really relishing the idea of winding this guy up. I couldn't wait to see the indignation on his face when I entered the room, flaunting my hair and ankles. It was a particularly hot afternoon and normally I'd have been wearing a lot less but White advised me to cover up a bit, otherwise he'd just freak and say nothing.

We had his prints from the flat where we found the laptop and aerial so it seemed he was fairly high up in the pecking order. Thus far he had refused to say anything beyond the usual 'death to western capitalism' bollocks. White had spent a gruelling ten hours interrogating him and getting nowhere. In desperation he asked me to have a go, thinking that being questioned by a blond, white woman would confuse him so much he may inadvertently give us something useful.

He'd also taken me aside and had a quiet, unofficial word. The rest of the Iranians were clearly either in awe or scared of this guy and were taking their lead from him. White told me that if I was still getting nothing then it would be permissible to provoke him into attacking me and to kill him. The hope was that that would break his cultish spell and some of the others would open up.

If none of this worked then realistically we were left with one last, unpalatable option - to confront the CIA directly at their headquarters.

I collected my thoughts and entered the cell.

He didn't notice me at first because he was praying. I was sorely tempted to interrupt him and yell "here I am" but I restrained myself.

When he did open his eyes and register my presence it seemed to take a few seconds for his mind to comprehend the situation.

When it finally sank in he merely averted his eyes and started praying again. I was surprised for a second, and then deeply offended as I realised that he thought I was a prostitute been brought in to tempt him.

"Oi, you can stop that, I'm not here as a honey trap. I'm here to interrogate you."

Again he seemed befuddled but then broke out in staccato laughter.

"Ha! Are the western pigs so weak that they send a woman to ask me the questions?"

"Will you please accompany me to the interrogation room?" I asked with as much politeness as I could muster.

He just continued laughing at me and didn't move.

I lifted him off the bed with his arm behind his back and took him out of the cell, deliberately taking a long route past the cells of his fellow countrymen as White and I had discussed.

He let out a constant stream of Arabic rhetoric and I slowed my pace to give all the other Iranians a chance to observe. I had no idea what they were saying but some of the others were clearly terrified to see their leading light being manhandled, so to speak, by a woman.

On a whim, I threw him against the wall, hoping he would try to attack me. He played along all too predictably so I kneed him in the stomach and pushed him to his knees. I hadn't considered the religious significance of this gesture but three of the others began wrenching at their bars like caged animals. The other two just went quiet so I made a mental note to flag them up for questioning as they were likely to be more pliable and cooperative.

Having got all I could from this circus performance, I pulled him to his feet and pushed him onwards to the interrogation room.

Once he was seated he stopped physically struggling but retained the sullen, contemptuous expression.

"It was bad enough that the white-eyed atheist questioned me but now they are insulting me with a woman."

He spat on my shoes.

"Those are my best hiking boots," I shouted, incensed at the insult. If he was trying to intimidate me he failed spectacularly. I put my foot up on the table and grabbed him by his hair.

"Lick my shoe," I said quietly.

This was clearly melting his brain as his whole demeanour changed.

"I cannot lick the shoe of a woman," he said in a whisper.

"Either you do that or answer my questions."

Still he hesitated.

I had an idea, then decided it was an absolute last resort.

"Well, which is it to be?" I prompted.

I could tell he was eighty percent of the way towards cooperating. I waited a full minute and he continued to weigh up his options. I decided to go nuclear and use my last resort.

"Answer all my questions now or I'll take my clothes off."

He stared in disbelief.

I waited.

He still wasn't speaking so I lifted up my top a few inches.

He almost collapsed in on himself like a neutron star.

"Okay, okay, I will talk, please do not disrobe in my presence, you will send me to hell."

"Good job my ego isn't easily bruised," I said, "Right, when, where and why were you recruited?"

"I was not recruited, I started this," he said with visible pride.

I checked that the video and sound were recording.

"Tell me everything, from the beginning."

"I and a few brothers became aware that there were people in Tehran playing God. Turning men into machines, stealing their minds and their souls. We could not let this affront to God continue. We stoned the blasphemous scientists and burned their evil laboratory."

I was sorely tempted to ask whether having a pace-maker made my father a tool of Satan but I let him continue.

"I went on the internet and found other examples in my country, so we mobilised more brothers to fight the growing evil."

I let him blather on in similar fashion for a few minutes in case anyone was more interested in his delusional rantings than me. When he reached a natural pause, I prompted him to spill what we really needed to know.

"How did you become involved with the Americans?"

He smiled gleefully.

"That was the cleverest part of my plan. The CIA pigs learned of our good work and gave us money to continue on a bigger scale. They have their own economic reasons for wanting to destroy these abominations, that does not interest me. I allowed them to think that we are ignorant fanatics who will do whatever they say, but really I have been using them. They can get us into the heart of the west, into your country, and keep us invisible."

Not that invisible, I thought, but let him go on.

"You are keen for me to leave, aren't you?" I asked.

He nodded.

"Okay, I'll do you a deal. I will ask you one more question and then leave, so long as you continue to cooperate and answer more questions from some men. Otherwise..."

I pulled my top down a few centimeters, which I knew to him was like me wrapping my legs around his head.

"Yes, yes, I agree, please ask your question."

"What do you know about our Agent 4 and what the CIA did to his head?"

"I have not heard anything of an Agent 4 or his head."

I could tell he was being truthful, he was by now too scared of me to do anything else.

I got up and left abruptly, saving the poor man the dilemma of how to acknowledge my departure. I suspected he would have to do a lot of praying tonight.

I went straight to the room next door where White was tidying up his notes.

"You're lucky, it worked," I said, "I never would have tried it myself."

"It was a calculated risk, but isn't that our business?" he smiled. "Good job, though we'll have to destroy the footage when we're done with it."

"What, my finest performance?" I preened.

"Even nowadays we'd be in the shit for doing that to a Muslim, best nobody else ever sees it."

"We got what we needed from their side though, I think it's all down to those CIA bastards now."

"I agree, but I can't get anything out of them, and you flashing them isn't going to work."

"It might," I said, "if I went through with it."

He gave me a suitably headmasterly look.

"So what now then?" I asked.

"I'll review the footage and see what it adds to our picture," he said, "then I'll probably have to consult the PM again."

CHAPTER THIRTY SEVEN

The PM and foreign secretary exchanged equally nervous glances.

"Can I just clarify this?" said Ian. "The CIA decided to join in with a bunch of crusading towel heads who think computers are a tool of Satan to sabotage several scientific laboratories?"

"Very diplomatically put," said White, but the irony went straight over the foreign secretary's head.

"The Yanks were doing it because they were falling behind with their research and development and decided to destroy the competition, and the towel heads were doing it because putting microchips in humans is some kind of blasphemy?"

"In a sense, yes, though we're still only speculating about the CIA's motivations. Apart from the driver, who knows very little, they're all expert at not answering questions."

Ian shook his head.

"Fucking idiots."

Jennifer looked away and stifled a grin.

"Anyway," said White, "the point is that you two have to decide what you're going to do about this mess. I have fifteen prisoners and thirty

seven corpses, including Libby Stevens. Three corpses were ex-IRA men, eight of the survivors are CIA and six are Iranian. What the hell are we going to do with them all?"

John cleared his throat.

"Now really isn't the time for a joke, 22."

John took out a hanky and blew his nose extravagantly.

"There aren't that many options, surely," said Jennifer. "One, we say nothing to anyone, dispose of the corpses and then either lose the survivors in the prison system, repatriate them or kill them. Two, we go public and see what happens. Three, we contact the CIA or the US president and see what happens. That seems pretty much it to me, though I suppose that both sides of this table will have differing views on each option." She looked over at the PM.

"That's true, Agent 45. If this becomes public then you no longer have any part to play and it becomes a political circus. I don't much care for circuses."

"Who actually has the final say on this?" said Arthur.

"Nobody," said White, "that's why we're here trying to figure it out. This unprecedented set of circumstances simply hasn't been legislated for. In practical terms the prime minister and myself must reach an agreement."

"I've double checked the relevant legal small print," said the PM, "and we're entirely within legal boundaries thus far. We are also entitled, in the absence of any communication from their countries of origin, to hold these people indefinitely. Moreover, we are in no way obliged to seek out that communication ourselves. If they are here in any official capacity then it is the obligation of their country of origin to admit that within six weeks of their capture. If they are here at their own behest, then they are subject to our legal system and we're under no obligation to inform their homeland of anything."

"Speaking pragmatically," said Jennifer, "we're the only ones who know any of this has happened. The CIA agents may or may not have been authorised for this undertaking. If they were, I suspect we'd have heard from Washington by now. Therefore, if we happened to have killed all of them last week, then nobody would be any the wiser. Who

says there are fourteen survivors? History is written by the winning side."

"I cannot be party to the murder of prisoners," said White, "and frankly, 45, I'm surprised at you."

"I said I was being pragmatic," said Jennifer. "It's an option."

"No it isn't," said the PM.

Jennifer shrugged.

"Just trying to help. Anyone have any better ideas?"

John stood up.

"Yes, I'm going for a fag."

The posture of everyone around the table sagged in defeat. This wasn't going to be sorted out any time soon.

"I'll put the kettle on," said Jennifer.

CHAPTER THIRTY EIGHT

June 12th

"Wow, this is huge," said Hannah as they sat down in the Prime Minister's private jet. "It's like an aircraft hanger."

"Very well appointed," nodded White.

"You have a cocktail bar," said Arthur, "I haven't seen one of them for decades."

"That's down to my predecessor," said the PM.

"Why are there so many of us going to visit the CIA director?" asked Hannah.

"Because we don't trust the bastard," said White.

The PM nodded in agreement.

"Either he's an incompetent idiot who doesn't know what's going on under his nose or he ordered the Cambridge raid. Whichever is the case, we need to talk to him and we don't trust him."

"Have either of you ever met him?" asked Arthur.

"No. And that puts us at a disadvantage, doesn't it, Bill?"

"Yes, sir."

"They do have a long history of interfering in the affairs of other countries though, don't they?" said Hannah. "They're not a very ethical organisation - mind control experiments, shooting the occasional president."

White laughed.

"You've been watching too many documentaries."

"You're not saying you think Oswald killed Kennedy?"

"It's not part of my job to have an opinion on things like that," said White.

"What about you?" asked Hannah.

"I refer you to the answer given by my colleague," smiled the Prime Minister.

"The point is," said Arthur, "if we do prove he's guilty of planning, or at least condoning, the Cambridge raid, what can we do about it?"

"That depends..." began White.

They were interrupted by the pilot's voice on the intercom.

"Please fasten your seat belts, we will be taking off shortly."

CHAPTER THIRTY NINE

"We don't have a command structure," said Adam, chewing his nails.

"Is this about the big chair?" I said, getting up from behind White's desk and offering him the seat.

"No it bloody isn't."

I went over to Adam and took his hand from his mouth and squeezed it.

"Just think of it like the holiday before an election when there's

briefly no government. Belgium once went for two years with no government and nobody noticed. It's only for a few days."

He instantly snapped out of it and his demeanour returned to normal.

"Sorry. Right, what's on the agenda?"

"I have to give evidence against Imran and his cronies tomorrow, very boring. However, we do need to maintain a presence at the court just in case whoever was funding them decides to show up and spring or eliminate them. Then there's the usual job of coordinating all the information coming in and assessing it. Your department I think, John?"

"Oh," he pouted, "please miss, please can I go out and kill some terrorists?"

"When you've done your homework you can go and kill whoever you like. Right, John, you stay here and get on with that, we'd better go and sort out Operation Court House."

"That's not very original," said John, sitting down in the big chair and switching on the computer.

"I haven't had enough coffee yet to come up with anything original. And don't you dare light up in here, you know the boss has the nasal passages of a sniffer dog."

"I wouldn't dream of it."

"Come on, Adam, let's get some coffee and go to your office."

Two hours later we had assigned and briefed the agents for my court appearance. It was only the magistrates and would probably be over in half an hour, but if anyone were planning to spring the gang it was the softest target. They wouldn't expect a magistrates to be surrounded by heavily armed guards, but it fucking well would be tomorrow.

Just as I was beginning to consider a long lunch and a couple of glasses of wine, John burst in.

"We may have a problem," he said, wheezing, I hoped, from the effort of running up the stairs. "Peterson has disappeared. He hasn't been home since he was released eight days ago. His wife has just been doing her best to perforate my eardrums down the bloody phone."

"Why has she waited so long to report it?" I asked.

John couldn't help grinning.

"Apparently she doesn't want him back but she needs her housekeeping money."

"How utterly romantic," I said. "Does this have anything to do with us? I don't want to waste any time on that creepy old fucker."

"The CIA were very keen to pick his brains not so long ago, weren't they?" said Adam. "Now he's lost his job he has nothing further to lose - maybe they've tapped him again and he's defected."

"Shit, I hadn't thought of that. I'd better ask the boss about this one."

I phoned White and had a brief and fairly terse conversation.

"Well?" said John.

"To paraphrase," I said, "he wants us to find him and give him a good talking to. Come on, we'll get lunch on the way - I'll need enough energy to kick his arse if he's up to anything he shouldn't be."

After stopping off for a bucket of fried chicken, we went to the taxi firm that had picked up the old man from prison.

Adam went in, while John leaned out of the back window smoking and I tucked into the chicken.

"Surely the local coppers should be doing this?" he intoned between puffs.

"Margery didn't call them, she called us. She seems to think, even now, that she's entitled to go above the police for help."

"But this is a domestic matter, surely?"

"Unless Adam's right, and he had found himself some new employment."

"Do you think he has?"

"I wouldn't put anything past the old creep. I honestly don't think he has any principles at all."

Adam emerged from the taxi office brandishing a small piece of

paper.

"They dropped him off at this hotel. Do you know it?"

"I know the street," I said, "doesn't seem like Peterson's sort of place. Cheap b&bs I think."

Adam drove off and I finished the chicken.

What the hell was Peterson doing living in a b&b when he had a big, posh house to go back to. Oh yes, Margery and those awful children.

"No, he hasn't had any visitors," said the girl behind reception. "In fact, he hasn't left the hotel since he got here. I don't think he's changed his clothes. We wondered if we should call someone but it's none of our business really."

"Don't you have to be out of your room during the day in these places?" I asked.

"We have a residents bar and TV lounge open twenty four hours."

"Now I see why he's here," I said. "One last thing. Have you seen him talking to anyone in the bar?"

"No, he barely says a word to anyone - we all just leave him alone."

"Is he in the bar now?"

"No, he was in there until about five this morning so I heard. In fact, he'll have to leave his room soon for us to clean it."

"Okay, thank you, we'll remind him of that. Come on, let's cheer him up with a visit."

We trooped our way through the grim, dimly lit corridors until we found his room. I knocked loudly on the door.

"Alright," a croaky voice said, "I'll be out in a minute."

We waited for a couple of minutes. When Peterson finally shuffled out of the room I barely recognised him. For a brief moment I actually felt sorry for him - he looked a shadow of his former shadow. Then again I don't suppose a few weeks in prison would do my complexion any good either.

He barely seemed to register who we were at first. His eyes were bloodshot, he was even thinner, and he looked to me as if he were in the

mid stages of dying from alcohol poisoning. Much as I disliked, even loathed him, it angered me that the management of the establishment had let him get himself into this state.

"Fucking hell," said John, "you look like shit."

"What do you want?" he muttered. "I don't work for you anymore."

"Your wife phoned me this morning and melted my ear," said John. "We're just checking you haven't defected."

"Defected? To where?"

"Anywhere," I said. "Look, get a grip, Peterson. Go home or to a hospital but you're not staying here."

"I'm going to the bar," he said but as he tried to walk away from us he collapsed in a sorry heap.

I called an ambulance, had a good, satisfying shout at the manager of the flea pit, and then went for the glass of wine I'd been promising myself.

CHAPTER FORTY

Chad Winters had an obvious and quite sickening superiority complex. You would have thought the CIA director had just won the Nobel prize for uniting gravity and quantum theory. He showed us to our seats and then surveyed us over his glasses as if we were errant schoolchildren.

"So, what can I do for you, gentleman... and lady."

I didn't have to glance at 61 to know how much that pissed her off.

"You can tell us," said A1, keeping his voice level with obvious effort, "why several of your agents have been accompanying some Iranian gentlemen around the world blowing up scientific laboratories."

"I'm sure you understand that our operations must be kept top secret."

"And I'm sure you understand the diplomatic implications of your people going into other countries and committing murder and industrial espionage."

"Have you never killed anyone, Mr White?"

I zoned out of the conversation for a while and rooted around through the various sounds that were vying for the periphery of my attention. There were two people, very quaintly, listening outside the door. Old school. There was something else that unnerved me but I couldn't identify it. I set some software running to analyse it and tuned back in to hear the Prime Minister speaking.

"It violates all existing transatlantic treaties for you to turn up uninvited in our country and shoot at my agents. You were a few inches away from killing one of them. Anyway, I have several of your agents, most of them dead, cluttering up my life and causing me a great deal of extraneous paperwork. Not to mention what you did to this agent," he added, nodding in my direction.

"I've never seen this man before in my life," said Winters, throwing me a sickeningly well rehearsed smile.

I wished I'd been fitted with a remote lie detector, but I wasn't sure that was even feasible.

"What about this man?" he asked, pulling out a photo of Peterson.

A tiny flicker in his eyes betrayed him.

"What is this visit about, gentlemen?" he said, pointedly not denying anything.

"It's about you pissing all over our sovereignty," said the PM, rapidly losing his patience, "and trying to blow up bits of our country."

Suddenly the software completed its task and, for reasons best known to itself, sent an alarm to my phone.

The director almost jumped out of his seat and he began for the first time to lose his smooth demeanour.

I looked at my phone.

"We need to leave this building immediately, there's a bomb nearby."

Before I had finished saying the word 'nearby' three Close Protection Officers had lunged at the PM and virtually thrown him towards the door.

"It's a very small device and it's under this desk," I shouted. "Estimated impact zone no more than twenty feet."

"That's not possible," said Winters, but he was visibly shaking and I'm sure it wasn't fear of the impending explosion.

The two CIA men who had been standing outside the door had their weapons drawn and tried to stop us leaving but 61 and Close Protection dealt with them.

"I'm not quite sure what the etiquette for this situation is," said A1, dragging Winters from his seat and placing his pistol to his head, "but as you've just tried to blow up our Prime Minister I think you'd better come with us."

There followed a bizarre standoff as we very slowly exited the building in a series of stalemate moves.

Once all ten of us were inside the gargantuan prime ministerial limousine we were immune from their weapons and sped away as fast as the traffic would allow.

"Where are we going?" asked the bewildered driver over the intercom.

"Anywhere, just fucking drive in a straight line," shouted the PM.

"This is completely..." began Winters. A1 fixed him with an implacable, quizzical stare and he knew he had no comeback.

"Who the hell do we call about this?" said the foreign secretary.

"Nobody for now," said the PM, "we just drive."

A1 leaned over and whispered something to the PM, who nodded his agreement. A1 then whispered to me to find the nearest secluded spot where we could securely hole up and to tell the driver.

I closed my eyes, which helped me concentrate and block out all external stimuli whilst I communicated with my software. The nearest suitable place I could find was over thirty miles away but I supposed that we wanted to put some distance between us and the CIA headquarters. In this car we weren't exactly difficult to track.

I sent the map of the location to my phone and showed it to A1. He approved and I sent it to the driver's display unit. He gave a thumbs up through the bullet proof screen and pulled an extravagant u-turn.

A while later, 61, myself and two of the Close Protection got out of the limo and began to patrol the surrounding area of hopefully deserted

woodland while everyone else remained inside.

"I don't like this," said Key, "we should be getting back to the plane and the fuck out of this country."

"We can't do that," said 61, "your boss and ours both still have to meet the president. In fact, that's just become even more spectacularly bloody urgent than it already was. Just keep your eyes and ears peeled."

She came over to me.

"Can you find the nearest van hire place?"

"You have a plan?"

"Yes, a plan with a van, if there's somewhere near enough."

I dove into the map once more and found the required information.

"If you go back the way we came... hang on, I'll send it to your phone."

A few seconds later she was surveying the route.

"It's much quicker if I go across country," she said, "good job I chose to wear trainers today. A quick run and hopefully I can grab a cab on the main road. I'll need some cash though."

"I'm sure between the occupants of the car we can have a whip round," I said. "What's the plan?"

"I hire a transit van, or a people carrier with tinted windows if I can get one, and we use that to transport the PM and FS back to the plane. Then we can deal with Winters without having Close Protection flapping around us. In fact, they could take the van and we could be a decoy with the limo, whatever."

"Sounds like a good plan," I agreed.

"I'll see how much cash I can raise, I've no idea how much it costs to hire a van."

"I'll get their price list," I said.

We both walked over to the limo and I motioned to A1 to get out.

We filled him in and he agreed that it was a good plan.

"I'll need three hundred dollars," said 61, "that'll cover a cargo van,

it's like a transit. Not comfortable in the back but very anonymous."

"Sounds ideal," said A1, "good thinking, Hannah. I've been too preoccupied with the smarmy bastard to consider our wider situation."

"Any answers yet?" she asked.

"He's stalling - I think he hopes he'll be rescued soon."

"I couldn't detect any kind of electronic tracker on him," I said, "and the PM's car has all the latest scramblers installed. So unless they followed us they can't know where we are."

"We definitely weren't followed," said Hannah.

"Here's four hundred dollars, get yourself a mars bar when you get there."

"Actually, can you grab me a bottle of water from the car," 61 added, "I haven't been running for ages."

A1 leaned into the limo and got her some water.

"Hopefully the paperwork won't take too long," she said, leaning over and stretching. "I'll phone when I'm leaving and you can meet me half way up the track."

She ran off into the woods and A1 got back into the limo.

"Where's she gone?" asked Kev suspiciously as I returned.

"To get you a van so you can get the PM and FS back to the plane."

"Oh. Good."

The two of them went back to keeping their eyes and ears open and I went back to keeping my software open.

CHAPTER FORTY ONE

Bill White cracked his knuckles.

Now that the prime minister was no longer his concern he could dispense with the diplomatic niceties. He took his gun and pressed it to the director's head.

"I confiscated a firearm from you," he said, "and you invited me and

the prime minister into an office where you knew there to be a small explosive device. You obviously planned to find an excuse to pop out and then blame the explosion on terrorists who were after you. You've broken all the rules and therefore I am no longer bound to play by them. If I say that you pulled a gun on the PM and I had to shoot you he will give me his full support. Nobody knows where you are. I strongly recommend you talk quickly and accurately."

Hannah switched on the video camera on her phone and held it up to capture the exchange.

Winters swallowed hard and finally began to cooperate.

"We learned of the middle eastern attacks and decided that it would suit us to join in and destroy as many of these laboratories as possible for economic reasons. We're lagging sadly behind most of the world in this brain computer stuff and we don't have the money to invest in research so we needed to even the score. Initially we just gave the Iranians money and weapons but they were too amateurish for my liking and they kept taking days off to pray. So we teamed up with them but it was still far from ideal, lots of infighting and no discipline. Some of their ideas rubbed off on some of my more gullible men and the whole thing turned to chaos."

"There," said White, "that wasn't so difficult, was it? Now I need some more details from you. Your sixty four thousand dollar question is this - no conferring, no passing: why did you try to blow up the British Prime Minister?"

Winters hung his head in defeat. The rest of his statement was delivered in patches of hesitant speech while he continued looking disconsolately at his feet.

"I'm being blackmailed. A few weeks after we teamed up with the Iranians I had a visit from their intelligence people. They'd been digging for dirt on me and struck lucky... I had an affair with a young girl."

"How young?" asked Hannah.

"Fifteen."

Hannah cringed and Arthur looked away in disgust.

"Mormon, are you?" asked White.

"No."

"Never mind, carry on."

"They extorted money out of me, my personal money, to fund weapons and travel."

"That's why the attacks became more violent," said Hannah, "going from a stoning to machine guns and grenades. I assume you also gave them access to CIA resources?"

"What choice did I have?"

"Choice?" laughed Hannah. "You chose to fuck a teenage girl, you repulsive shit."

Winters didn't respond to that point.

The car tore onto the main road and the experienced driver made good progress. They had diplomatic plates but nevertheless picked up a police tail.

"Shall I ignore them?" asked the driver.

"Yes," shouted White, then realised he hadn't used the intercom, so he had to press it and repeat himself. He turned his attention back to Winters.

"So why did Iranian intelligence want the prime minister dead?"

"I didn't ask."

"You spineless bastard," said Arthur.

White's phone rang. He was going to ignore it, but then saw that it was the prime minister calling.

"Is there a problem?" he asked, dispensing with formalities.

He listened in silence for almost a minute.

"We're on our way."

He leaned forward and pressed the intercom.

"Get back to the airport as quickly as possible, the CIA have surrounded the plane. Don't stop for red lights just fucking get us there."

The driver nodded and accelerated rapidly.

"They think Winters is on the jet," said Hannah.

"Almost certainly," said White.

"So what are we going to do?" said Arthur. "Give up and hand him over?"

"No," said White, glancing at Winters who was now looking at them, trying to guess his fate, "that is not going to happen."

"Isn't he guilty of some kind of major international crime?" asked Hannah. "Can we arrest him?"

"I believe technically that trying to assassinate the British PM means he can be tried in Britain. If we get him back to the jet we can take him home. I don't believe even the CIA would storm the prime ministerial plane, it's far too public. Okay, we have to decide what we're going to do when we reach the airport."

Arthur had scanned the news networks and discovered that their situation was now a global story. Switching on the television screen in the car they all watched CNN as various people shouted, literally, about a plot to assassinate the British Prime Minister.

"Bollocks," said White angrily, "that's all we need."

"There must be six camera crews at least, how did they get there so quickly?"

"Some bastard back at CIA headquarters," said Arthur, looking once again at Winters with disgust.

"At least they won't try anything now," said Hannah, "but even so. It won't be good if Arthur and I become word wide TV stars, will it?"

"Certainly not," said White, "it wouldn't help me either."

"Hang on," said Hannah, "this car goes in the hold in the back of the plane, doesn't it?"

"Yes," said White.

"How about we just drive in to the hold and take off? You can't reach the inside of the plane from there but the air-conditioning in here should be enough to get us home in one piece."

"I don't like the sound of that?" said Arthur.

"Any better suggestions?" asked White.

"No," he admitted.

"Right, I'll phone the PM."

Half an hour later, to the frenzied bemusement of onlookers, CIA included, the prime ministerial car drove quietly onto the runway and approached the rear of the vehicle. The hold opened and the car drove up the ramp.

Two over-enthusiastic CIA agents ran after the car and stayed on the ramp as it was raised from the ground.

"Bloody idiots," said White, "what do they think they're doing?"

A dull thud indicated that they had begun firing hopelessly at the rear window. With totally blacked out windows they couldn't even see who or how many were in the car.

"Shall we deal with them?" asked Hannah.

White considered for a moment.

"Get ready, wait til the hold is nearly shut so nobody can get any footage."

She nodded and her and Arthur prepared to open the door either side of the car.

White took out his gun and pointed it at the CIA directors head. He was handcuffed to a sturdy rail so couldn't move but he may have tried to shout a warning.

Arthur switched off the lights inside the car.

As the last few feet of daylight began to disappear White gave the signal.

Arthur and Hannah, having pinpointed the position of their respective targets, quietly nudged the doors open, leaned out and fired three shots. Both doors were slammed shut and locked and the lights came back on.

"They're probably dead already, but they definitely will be by the time we land."

The driver came onto the intercom.

"The cockpit has tuned into our wavelength," he said, "I'll patch it through now."

A few seconds later, the PM's voice came through.

"White - everything alright back there?"

"Yes, sir, no problems. Two probable dead CIA in the hold, they won't last long without air con anyway."

"We've identified an airfield twenty minutes away," said the pilot, "we're heading for that so you lot can get out. I wouldn't fancy going all the way back to London in the hold, even in a luxury limousine."

"That's great, thanks," said White, releasing the intercom button.

"There you are, Arthur, only twenty minutes."

Arthur smiled.

Half an hour later, after checking that the two stowaways in the hold were no further threat and that they had no unwanted onlookers, A1, 4, 61, the PM's driver and Winters made a dash for the boarding steps.

Inside the plane they met up with the politicians and Close Protection.

White re-handcuffed Winters to an even sturdier handrail and left the PM's people to look after him. He went to the front of the plane to discuss their next move with the PM and FS.

"Now that we're here," said White, "I'm not sure what to do next. I did intend to go the Oval Office at the first opportunity but now I don't fancy leaving Winters here with a minimal guard. Also, considering what's happened, maybe going to see the president isn't the wisest move. If the CIA wanted you dead, who knows how high up it goes?"

"I think my people would be very happy if we went straight home," said the PM.

"I don't like any of our options," said Hannah. "Do you believe him? His explanation for why he planted the bomb?"

"I'm not sure yet," said White, "You could tell from his reactions that he knew it was there all along and he's openly admitted it but... I don't know. Maybe the president can shed some light on this whole bizarre set of events."

Hannah giggled.

"That idiot? You're being optimistic."

"Probably, but either the CIA director has gone totally rogue and taken half his agents with him or someone in the White House knows what's going on and has collaborated in, or at least given their tacit consent to, the assassination of the PM."

"None of this bears thinking about at all," said Arthur, "but I vote we get Winters back to HQ and put him under the heaviest possible guard."

"So," said the pilot, "Heathrow?"

White nodded.

CHAPTER FORTY TWO

We had a surveillance van outside the courtroom and a minimal presence inside. Being a magistrates there was no jury and we had closed the public gallery.

Imran and co were, of course, all handcuffed to prison officers so they weren't going anywhere without a bit of hacksaw action. I doubted their paymasters would bother to spring them - it was far more likely that they would try to eliminate them. Maybe they knew that they hadn't talked yet?

Nothing happened on the way but I was a few minutes into my evidence when I received a shout of code red in my ear piece.

"We're under attack," I shouted, "everyone on the floor."

The magistrate gave me a look which suggested that I was an errant schoolgirl who needed a smack around her silly little head. Her expression changed rapidly when two men with machine guns burst in.

Cursing the laxness of the agents in the van, I pulled out my Glock.

They were obviously unfamiliar with the layout of the court and, as I suspected, were here to liquidate their arrangement with the gang. I fired on the first one, just missing his shoulder. My second shot punched a hole in his chest and he was of no further concern.

Adam was standing behind the gang and the prison officers and was

still trying to get all six of them onto the floor and behind the totally inadequate protection of a few centimetres of oak panel. Luckily he was attending to the pair furthest from the door when the machine gun fire started. It only lasted less than a second because my third shot took off most of the head of the man who was firing it. Rather than the gun spraying around randomly like you see in the films it just stopped as quickly as the man's heartbeat.

"You okay, Adam." I shouted.

He popped up from behind the stand, speaking into his headset.

"Two fatalities, one serious injury, one minor injury - ambulances now."

He smiled thinly across at me.

John ran in and shot me a look that was equally angry and apologetic.

"Do you have a first aid kit somewhere?" I asked the terrified clerk.

"Yes," he said, and hustled off, glad for an excuse to leave the scene of the carnage.

"Sorry about that," I said to the judge as she got up from the floor, "I take full responsibility for this fuck up."

"No, I do." said John, picking up one of the machine guns.

"Not now," I said, "just secure the building."

He nodded and closed the doors.

"Is there a rear entrance back there?" I asked.

"Yes, of course," replied the judge.

"Adam, you okay to do first aid?"

He came over to me and whispered.

"The second officer has just been grazed on the arm, he only needs a bandage. I don't think his prisoner will make it."

"Do what you can," I said, handing him my pistol and taking the second machine gun.

I briefly wondered what John meant when he tried to take responsibility but pushed it to the back of my mind. I set about securing

the rear of the court until backup arrived.

Back at the office, the three of us held an impromptu mini inquiry.

"It's my fault," said John. "It was quiet as the grave so I nipped out of the van for a fag. I was having a look around as well, in my defence, but I was about fifty yards from the van when I heard the car pull up."

"Don't beat yourself up, it could have happened to any of us. I should have had more reinforcements inside, that was my call and I got it wrong."

My phone rang.

"Fuck. Okay, thanks. Imran didn't make it. But we may have a lead after all - it seems the two gunmen had genuine passports on them so we should be able to get something from them. Hopefully that can lead us back to the funding." I sighed. "I'd better phone White, then I think we could all do with a drink."

CHAPTER FORTY THREE

Two days later back at T14 HQ things had calmed down a fraction. Winters was being guarded more closely than the crown jewels as we awaited the arrival of the US President.

There was nothing for me to remotely listen to, no maps to scan. I could have taken the afternoon off but Barbara was busy and I didn't see the point in sitting at home on my own.

I still don't know why I decided to go and visit our former deputy director. Maybe subconsciously I knew some of what he was about to confess - the bit that related to me and my sabotage at least - and maybe the whole thing was somehow inevitable.

I walked down the hospital corridor and paused outside the door. It certainly wasn't concern for his health that had brought me here. Maybe it was the nagging feeling that the CIA director hadn't seemed to know anything about my implant or me being interfered with. Maybe it was just that I hated Peterson anyway and had come to watch him die.

I couldn't tell from his reactions whether he was pleased or scared to see me; I was too distracted by the awfulness of his physical condition. Despite the plush private room and expensive looking, shiny equipment, he looked if anything even worse than when the others had found him in that hotel.

"To what do I owe this pleasure," he said. His voice was too thin and quiet for me to detect any sarcasm.

"I just wondered if you'd like to unburden yourself of anything," I said. Peterson had no idea about my upgrades, so he couldn't know that I currently had my microphone activated and everything he said would be recorded, no matter how quietly he said it.

He chuckled quietly to himself.

"I'll tell you one thing. My wife tried to kill me."

This wasn't at all what I was expecting.

I was about to say 'Why?' but the multitude of reasons went without saying. I doubt many people who knew him wouldn't seriously want to kill him.

"Did she?" I opted for.

"That's what the ten thousand was. She took it from our joint account to pay that idiot to try to kill me."

I have to admit I was stunned.

"So that's why the call was made from her phone?"

"I should be disappointed that you all thought I was that stupid, but somehow I'm not."

"So what happened? Did he try to kill you?"

"Yes, the cheek of it. I'd just got home from work so I still had my gun on me. The dozy sod came at me with a knife. He's a big bastard but not even as brave as he is clever. He soon confessed everything. He was so stupid he still had the money on him. It was my money so I took it back."

"So why did Margery want you dead?"

He let out a throaty cough and then continued.

"What I told White was basically true but a little out of sequence. I had a very brief affair with Libby but I didn't realise she was CIA until later. I don't know why but she told Margery, I suppose she thought that would get rid of me."

I was taken aback at his coldness.

"So when you stabbed that woman to death, you thought she was a regular member of the public?"

"Don't look at me like that," he croaked, "we've all got blood on our hands."

"We did think for a while that you might have been working with the CIA. That's something, at least."

"I've been working for them for years and the look on your face right now makes it all worth while," he grinned in his especially unpleasant fashion.

Could this possibly be true? My mind was spinning and I was glad I'd thought to record it all.

"Did you corrupt my implant?" I asked, keeping the anger from my voice with concerted effort.

"Of course it was me, and I put you on the plane to Washington. But I didn't have anything to do with you fucking that old whore, that was your own freewill."

I clenched my fists tightly - not because I believed him about it being my choice, but because he was clearly enjoying my distress.

"Is there anything else useful you have to tell me?"

"No, that's your lot. Goodnight folks," he chortled.

"Indeed it is," I said, placing my hand over his mouth. In his emaciated state it took less than a minute to kill him. He didn't even struggle. It's annoying but I think I did what he wanted, the crafty bastard.

I called for a nurse just as the machines started bleeping.

I went outside, got into my car and phoned A1 to fill him in.

"And you recorded everything?" he asked.

"Yes, I've just finished emailing you the sound file."

"Good. There's no need for anyone to know exactly how he died, not even any of our colleagues, understood?"

"Yes, sir, understood."

"Well, this gives me even more to question Winters about."

"Unless... maybe he was just bullshitting me. About working for them. Judging from the state of him I don't think he'd have lasted much longer anyway - maybe he just wanted to throw a spanner in the works out of... I don't know, resentment of some sort?"

Al sighed.

"I wouldn't put anything past him. Keep that aspect to yourself for now, play nobody the recording. You and I will search his office and home and go through all his paperwork - that's routine after an agents death in any case."

When the call ended I felt strangely unrelated. I didn't feel that I'd got revenge on the person who almost destroyed my marriage and could well have got me killed. I didn't really feel anything.

I shrugged and drove back to the office.

CHAPTER FORTY FOUR

June 18th

With two hours until the arrival of the president I found that the events of the last few months had finally caught up with me. Ever since that day when I read Adam's obituary warning I'd barely had time to stop and think. But today for some reason a curious lull had descended on the whole building. I found an empty room and stretched out as best I could on two chairs. I suddenly felt exhausted in a way I had never experienced. I needed a week in bed and some mindless television to wind down but that wasn't currently an option. I made a mental note to take some time off as soon as I possibly could.

Who knows how different things could have been if I'd taken that day more seriously? But all we had to do was escort the president from his

plane into our trusty prime ministerial limo. It was a journey of a few dozen yards at a major airport which already had a high level of security.

Naturally, being American there was lots of stupid bunting and cameras in attendance but maybe that's just me trying to retrospectively shift the blame.

It seemed to happen very slowly now that I look back on it. I wasn't paying attention, I know that, because normally I would have seen him moving through the group of photographers long before he reached the front and started firing.

It may well have been as long as two seconds after he got off the first shot that I came to and reacted. I was some distance away from the president and his entourage, a position I'd chosen because I wanted an easy ride. There, I've said it.

The first shot hit one of the bodyguards in the chest, but he was wearing a bullet proof vest. The second hit an assistant press secretary in the arm - he was fine after some minor surgery.

In a situation like this, the president's people gather around him and cover him, rather than trying to deal with the threat. I've always thought that was a stupid policy, even before this happened.

Their policy meant that it was up to us to neutralise the threat. The nearest of our people was John. Maybe he, like me, was coasting that day, not taking the assignment seriously enough.

Before he could fire, the third bullet hit him squarely in the throat. It tore through the top of his spinal column. At his age, and with all the squillions of fags he'd smoked, the trauma was too much for him and he was DOA at the hospital.

I didn't realise John had been hit when I started firing. In the panic, and because we had no proper plans worked out, four of us all fired at once. Luckily all our shots hit the intended target and there was no collateral damage - with so many people clustered together it could have been a disaster.

I put two bullets into the assailants torso before I came to full alertness, realised others were also firing, and turned my attention to the rest of the crowd. Luckily they were all cowering for cover and no

further threat presented itself.

White's duty was to get the president into the car and away as quickly as possible. Luckily the PM had decided to stay away from the media circus so we didn't have him to worry about.

In all the confusion it was about five minutes before I found out that John had been shot. He was clearly already dead but Adam was still trying CPR. Hannah fixed me with a look that threatened tears.

Unbelievably, as we were being driven back to HQ, I fell asleep for ten minutes. I suppose it was a defence mechanism, a better alternative than thinking about how royally we had fucked up.

I'd lost colleagues before, but none I'd known for so many years, and never had I before felt any culpability in their deaths.

That evening Hannah and I found ourselves at Adam's flat getting rapidly pissed and trying to find consolation in each others company.

We didn't talk much and passed three hours in relative silence.

I groaned as my phone rang.

"Shit. It's the boss, I'd better answer. Hello?"

"Are you with 37 and 61?"

"Yes, at 37's flat."

"You all need to come in immediately."

"We've all had a lot to drink."

"I imagine so; I've had a couple myself. I'll send a car for you."

"We're not fit for..."

"That doesn't matter. Tonight I just need your ears and brains. Be downstairs in fifteen minutes."

"Okay."

I put my phone down and tried to focus.

"We'd better have a quick coffee, we're being picked up."

"What's going on?" asked Hannah. "We're not up to working now."

"I told him that, I think it's just a briefing. He needs us to listen to something."

"It must be massively important," said Adam, making his way to the kitchen.

"I wonder why he couldn't tell us over the phone?" said Hannah.

I shrugged and went to look for something quick to eat.

The agent who took us in had thoughtfully bought us coffee and donuts, so by the time we got to the conference room we were all suitably awake.

The PM and FS were there, along with Arthur and around three dozen other agents, and a man I didn't recognise.

White cleared his throat and the room quickly descended into silence.

"It goes without saying that we all deeply regret the loss of our colleague John but tonight I need you all to get your heads together because we are faced with our biggest challenge yet. I'm going to hand you over to the vice president."

Oh, I thought, that's who he is. I suppose in my line of work I should watch the news more often. Though not today.

"We have identified the man who tried to assassinate the president and killed your agent. He was a CIA agent."

He paused for the room to absorb this and emit general exclamations of confusion and disbelief.

"We have also found clear evidence that they were intending to blame the bomb they hoped would kill your prime minister directly on the Oval Office. Earlier today we found... evidence of that plot. It seems that the CIA have gone entirely feral and have been trying to depose the president. When this failed, they tried to assassinate him this afternoon."

"This obviously gives us a huge problem domestically, but the one that concerns you folks is what we charge Mr Winters with and who gets to prosecute him. Mr White."

"Thank you. Well, now you know as much as I do. Tomorrow we are going to hold extensive talks between the president, vice president and

other White House staff and the prime minister, foreign secretary and myself. The CIA, as of an hour ago, no longer exists and all available agents are under arrest. However, we believe that there could still be a small number of them in this country. For that reason the talks will be held in an underground nuclear bunker facility. All personnel will be ferried to the location in stages throughout the night and early morning.

"We also have the added problem of publicity. All sorts of things, some true some not, are now flying around the internet. From a T14 perspective we now have to face the real possibility of either Iranian, IRA or CIA loyalists trying to liberate our prisoners. That means we need to considerably up our guard on this building as well as securing Downing Street and the bunker. All other assignments are suspended until this situation is resolved."

When our building was converted in 2014 no expense had been spared. The basement area, where our cells were located, had been vastly expanded and almost qualified as a bunker in its own right. Almost as if they had foreseen a situation like this arising, it could be sealed from within in a manner which would take days to break through.

After hopefully a decent nights sleep, our job would be to remain sealed in that basement until the fate of the prisoners was decided. Knowing how slowly the wheels of international diplomacy could turn, I wasn't expecting a speedy solution.

The rest of the building would be almost deserted, save for a dozen agents securing the one and only entrance and conducting routine, hopefully fruitless, patrols of the twelve floors.

From the basement we could monitor the street outside and stay in touch with proceedings at the bunker. All we had to do was feed and water the sixteen prisoners: the former CIA director, the sole survivor from the initial encounter with the surveillance trio in the woods, and the six Iranians and eight CIA from the Cambridge raid. There would be two dozen of us in the basement. It should be a routine assignment but then we'd thought that about the airport and the magistrates.

CHAPTER FORTY FIVE

"Jeez, you guys must have been shit scared of the Russkies."

White was by now thoroughly sick of the US President. He'd kept up a string of inane remarks for at least five minutes now, along the lines of 'call this a bunker, ours are much bigger' etc. Some of the words he hadn't even recognised as belonging to the English language but he was sure most Americans had the same problem with their 'leader'. It was so obvious that the vice president should take over he couldn't help wondering why that hadn't already happened. How did this fuckwit ever get a second term? That was democracy, the least worst system.

They finally arrived in the meeting room.

After some pathetic and embarrassing argument about who was going to sit in which seat, proceedings finally got underway.

"The situation is this," said the Prime Minister. "We currently have ten CIA agents, including the director, in custody, along with a number of corpses. For some time they have been infiltrating our country and continuing a global campaign of destroying certain types of scientific establishments. In this endeavour they have collaborated with several Iranian insurgents and some former IRA terrorists. Finally, they tried to blow up me, my foreign secretary and the head of our foremost terrorist agency."

The president listened to all of this with an expression which suggested that someone was reading him the menu in a restaurant. White couldn't believe it but he was gazing about like a child and almost grinning.

"Well well, this is certainly a pickle," he said. "This room is quite big."

The vice president shifted uncomfortably.

"Is he a piss head or something?" wondered White. "He seems to have some sort of attention deficit thing going on."

The vice president took over the discussion, allowing a modicum of sensible progress. He again stated that they had found convincing evidence of a CIA plot to assassinate the prime minister and blame it on the president, thus killing two birds with one stone. He also said that it was an agent directly answerable to Winters who had tried to kill the president at the airport.

"We are pressing for Winters to be charged with treason, among other things. I understand that you have your own issues to sort out with him but I think it's better all round that he meets with a swift death sentence rather than languishing in an English jail for forty years."

"We would not raise any objection to that," said the Prime Minister.

"Which leaves us with the thorny issue of all these agents of ours."

"Who currently are languishing in our jail, or the morgue," said White.

"Precisely. Domestically it will be tricky but I think we could just about swing it for the survivors to be tried here - after all they have not, so far as we know, committed any crimes on American soil."

"No," said the Prime Minister, "but they have committed crimes in several other countries. I've already had some strong representations from Sudan, Egypt, Libya, Spain and Germany for them to be extradited for trial in their own countries. The logistics of that are mind boggling but we have to come up with some kind of compromise to appease all those other countries."

"Send in the guards," said the president.

The vice president once again twitched awkwardly.

CHAPTER FORTY SIX

After we'd fed the prisoners, which I found quite weird, and eaten ourselves, not literally, we gathered together and listened a few times to the recording of Peterson's confession.

"It doesn't add up," said Adam.

"Did he seem delirious at all?" I asked.

"No," said Arthur, "I'm sure he knew what he was saying. He seemed to be enjoying my reaction so he could well have been winding me up but I can't think why. Why waste your dying breath telling pointless lies?"

"What did he actually die of?" asked Adam.

"I'm not sure," said Arthur.

"I mean did he have a stroke or something that could have affected his brain?"

"I don't know, I'll have to check with the hospital."

"Is it even worth us talking about this?" I asked. "I mean, we're already investigating the CIA, who no longer exist anyway, and we have their director down the corridor. Does it really matter if Peterson was working for them or not?"

"I suppose not," said Adam. "Even if he was he can't do any more harm now. None of those agents will be redeployed by the Americans in another organisation so even if they do have some information on us or Britain they'll never again be in a position to use it."

"Hang on," I said, "remember what that driver said? He knew about your implant but he said something else. Can we get the recording down here?"

Adam opened his laptop and accessed the interrogation archive.

"Yes, here it is." He hit the space bar.

"And this man here?" we heard the boss ask. "What do you know about him?"

"He has a computer chip in his brain but we don't know exactly what it does. I've only ever seen photos of him, I had nothing to do with the attack on him."

"Who carried out that attack?"

"The two who were with me, and two other agents."

"Where are the other two agents now?"

"I can't tell you that."

"Can't or won't?"

"I don't know exactly where they are."

"But they are still in this country?"

Adam stopped the recording.

"What is it, Jen?"

"I knew it. When he says 'two other agents' one of them could be

Peterson. He's never seen him here, he may not even know he works for us, he could just know him as a CIA agent. I know it doesn't prove anything but it shows that it's possible Peterson was telling the truth."

"I know it doesn't matter to T14," said Arthur, "but I need to know. I have to know who set me up and put me on that plane, Peterson or the CIA."

"Then we shall find out," I said. "We don't have anything else to do at the moment and, although you can't be compromised in the same way again, we do need to know exactly how it was done. It was a breach in operations, something we didn't foresee. It could have implications for the future. If it was the CIA then how the fuck did they find out about your implant? I'm sure the boss would want us to find that out."

"Thank you," smiled Arthur.

"But how do we find that out?" said Adam. "Peterson's dead so we can't ask him, if it was the CIA then that person could well also be dead now. I don't know how to go about this."

"John..." I said, before remembering, "would have known. If I'd been on my game."

"It wasn't your fault," said Adam, "I was much closer than you and I couldn't stop him. It was a systematic, joint failure on all our parts. In any case, John himself was closest of all..."

We lapsed into silence for a while.

"Anyway, getting back to how we figure out Arthur's problem. Given how clumsy the CIA have been lately," said Adam, "they've probably left us a clue somewhere. If it was that easy for Peterson to find proof of Libby Stevens being an agent, it shouldn't be that difficult to find proof of them getting to Peterson."

"And if we don't find proof?" I asked.

Adam sighed.

"I don't think we can make any progress on this while we're stuck down here."

Hannah came through on our headsets.

"All quiet down there?"

"Yes," I replied, "they've had their food and thankfully they're behaving themselves for the moment."

"I'm off home now," said Hannah, "for a bit of normality. Well, probably a bedtime story about a fucking wizard but you know what I mean."

"Bye, have a nice evening."

"See you tomorrow."

The conversation fell back to John.

"I wonder what's in his will?" I asked.

"I doubt he left anything to his ex wife," said Arthur. "I met her once, even I felt tense just being in a room with her. No wonder he started smoking when they met."

"Really," I said, "is that what started him off on the fags?"

"I think part of it was that she really hated smoking."

"Did they ever have any kids?" I asked.

Arthur hesitated.

"I don't suppose it matters now. They had a son who died aged seven. I'm the only one here who knows, he didn't want the sympathetic looks."

"He was always rather withdrawn, wasn't he?" I said.

"You've never wanted children?" asked Arthur.

"God, no. Never had any maternal instinct, never played with dolls when I was little. Besides, I've never had any relationship last long enough to get pregnant."

Fuck! Of all the things I could have said with my stupid, big mouth.

I could tell Adam was hurt by my slip so I found an excuse to get rid of Arthur for a few minutes.

"I'm sorry," I said when he'd gone, "I didn't mean it."

I went over and sat on his lap and gave him a cuddle.

"Death makes you think about that sort of thing," I offered. "And thinking I was pregnant for twenty four hours just wasn't as big a deal for me as it was for you."

"I've missed you so much," he sniffed. "I was gutted when you volunteered for undercover work."

"I didn't do it to avoid seeing you."

"Didn't you?"

"Of course not!" I looked at him. "Is that what you've been thinking all this time?"

"You know me, I am that pathetic."

"Oh get a fucking grip," I said far too harshly.

I gathered my thoughts for a few moments.

"Look, if we worked in a normal office doing a nine to five job then I'd jump at the chance to move in with you and have a proper relationship. Sometimes I think about quitting T14 and having a normal life but what else could I do? I couldn't work in a shop after doing this for a living. I need the variety and excitement, I need to feel that I'm doing something that's important. Being here makes me feel alive. I have to confess that during those eighteen months undercover I often felt lost - many of the days seemed long and pointless. Besides, what happened to John could happen to you or me at any time. I couldn't cope with losing someone I'd devoted my life to."

"Unless we die together in a car crash or explosion one of us is bound to die before the other, that's life, so to speak."

"I know, but I can't deal with that. My Granddad was married for fifty years then spent the last four years of his life utterly alone - I could never cope with that. I'm physically strong but emotionally quite weak at times."

"You never know what's around the corner or what may or may not work out," he said, stroking my hair, "you can't turn down a chance of happiness on that basis."

He wasn't pushing me towards anything but I couldn't help being persuaded by his argument. I took a deep breath and decided to be more pragmatic for once.

"Look," I said, "whenever this current crisis is over and we get rid of these prisoners we're both due some holiday. How about we go away for a week - trekking in Scotland, whatever you want. Just spend some time

together and see what happens."

"Sounds like a plan," he smiled.

Arthur coughed politely.

"Sorry to interrupt, I can go and check some more imaginary things if you like."

I laughed and stood up.

"No, it's fine. Isn't it?"

"Yes, it's all fine," said Adam.

CHAPTER FORTY SEVEN

I really wished A1 was with me. In fact, I wished he was here instead of me. I'm just not cut out for diplomacy and arguing the toss. I didn't have the authority to conduct these talks and they knew it. That's why they kept me hanging around and every few minutes would send somebody to stick their head around the door and sneer at me.

Still, I wasn't going to stoop to their level. Instead I kept myself busy by having a good listen to much of the building and recording anything of interest.

There was nothing significant to T14 but I had sod all else to do so I carried on listening. The ambassador was clearly having an affair with his secretary, of all the cliches, and committing some kind of minor financial misdemeanours.

After more than an hour of this childish shit I was ready to call it quits and walk out. Maybe somebody spying on me saw me pick up my coat and look theatrically at my watch because a few seconds later the ambassador finally appeared.

"My profuse apologies," he said with a smile that clearly indicated he meant the exact opposite, "there has been much important business today."

"Yes," I thought, "you've been fiddling your expenses and your secretary. Talk about multitasking."

I entered the room and he seemed disappointed that its opulence

didn't visibly impress me.

"Please take a seat," he said, before proceeding to waste another few minutes of my time in an attempt to humiliate me further. Eventually I opened my briefcase and took out a newspaper and he finally began to talk.

"There is not very much for us to discuss," he said flatly. "My country is deeply offended at your callous murdering of our brother citizens."

"Then they shouldn't have gone on a global spree of sabotage and murder," I replied equally flatly.

He smiled thinly.

"This is not the time for a theological debate."

Had I said it was?

"The point is," he continued, "that we are demanding the release of our prisoners and the bodies of those you murdered."

"That will not be happening," I said, "our investigation is ongoing."

"In that case," he said, standing up in a manner which indicated that the meeting was at an end, "your infidel country will feel the full wrath of Iran."

"Cut the crap, what are you threatening us with?"

"You will soon see. All of you will soon see."

"And that is your final word. You are not interested in negotiations of any kind?"

"We do not negotiate with the lackey of the infidels."

"If we're all so corrupt why do you have an embassy here. Why are you in our country? And why, if you're so holier than though, are you shagging that blond, white woman who, if I'm not mistaken, is one of our corrupt, infidel, western, capitalist pig dogs?"

I can't describe the look he gave me, it was like nothing I've ever seen on a human face before. He was obviously very shocked that I knew his secret but I think I made a mistake in telling him because there was no way I could possibly know this. No human way. Therefore, I think the look partly meant something along the lines of 'I am clearly face to face

with the devil'. Yes, probably something like that.

Once out of the building I phoned White.

"The news is really quite bad this end," I began.

CHAPTER FORTY EIGHT

With Arthur being engaged in his diplomatic duties it was left to Adam, Hannah and myself to try to find a final answer in Peterson's office. What with everything that had happened since his departure and imprisonment, we'd all been too busy to do more than a perfunctory search.

Now that the global news was busy with Winters and his impending trial and probable death sentence, T14 had slipped gratefully out of the headlines. No attempt to liberate the prisoners had been forthcoming so we'd set up a roster of junior agents to guard them in the sealed bunker and the office had returned to normal.

The three of us had been given one day to try to put an end to the speculation about our former deputy. If we couldn't find any answers today we'd be required to return to normal duties, after a weeks much needed leave. By paying way over the odds, Adam and I had managed to get a hotel room in the Scottish Highlands for four nights. We would go there and walk and talk. Maybe other things would happen.

In the meantime, I was determined to do all I could to get the answers Arthur needed.

Peterson had a reputation for hardly using his computer but Adam was nonetheless conducting a thorough search. Hannah and I began emptying his filing cabinet.

"What are we even supposed to be looking for?" said Hannah. "Surely he wouldn't leave anything incriminating in his office."

"Normally I'd agree," said Adam, "but remember that Arthur said he seemed to be taunting him. If that's the case he'd be likely to leave something cryptic or at least some red herrings or something. For somebody who purported to hardly use his computer he has a lot of password protected folders on here. Even if it's a wild goose chase we

have one day to give it our best shot."

"And I for one am not letting that bastard get one over on me, even from the grave."

I returned my attention to the files.

After two hours we had torn the office apart and found nothing of any interest. Adam couldn't get into some folders on the computer so we left it to one of the tech team and decided to have a go over Peterson's house in a last desperate bid to find some answers.

Nobody was in so we went around to the back and broke in through the conservatory.

After another hour that search had proved equally fruitless.

"I'm sure we're missing something," I said staring idly out of the bedroom window over the vast garden. "I'm positive he's hiding something from us, even if it's just a note saying 'I was never in the CIA, fuck you'. Come on, think. If I were a crafty, creepy old bastard where would I hide my secrets?"

Something caught my eye.

"It's been right under our nose all the time," I shouted, "come on."

I took them back out into the garden.

"What do you see?" I asked them.

"A big garden, trees and stuff," shrugged Adam.

"And?"

"A shed?" said Hannah.

"Exactly. The garage is full of gardening stuff, they have a conservatory, so what does he need a big shed for."

"Hiding from his wife?" suggested Adam. "I'd have moved in to the shed years ago in his position."

I strode confidently over to the shed.

"A combination lock. Interesting."

Looking around, I took out my Glock and blew the lock to

smithereens.

Inside, the shed was almost totally bare. There was indeed a chair, a kettle and several empty scotch bottles, suggesting that he had spent some time in here. I was right about the total lack of gardening implements.

Hannah stepped outside then back in again.

"This is a raised floor," she said, "there's a good four inches underneath these floorboards."

The only tool in the shed was a long screwdriver, perfect for prising up floorboards. I got down on my hands and knees and used the torch on my keyring to examine the floorboards. I soon found the area that was scuffed with screwdriver marks and prized up those boards. Sure enough a large metal cash box was hidden underneath the shed floor. A quick look around revealed nothing else so I put the boards back and stood up.

The box wasn't even locked.

"Well," I said, "here goes."

I opened the box and the three of us stared at the contents.

"Oh," said Adam, "I wasn't expecting that."

CHAPTER FORTY NINE

The following day the prime minister was becoming increasingly frustrated at the president's wandering gaze and incoherent speech. He was causing such a hindrance that White genuinely felt like shooting him.

"The goddamn mushrooms have stolen my hair again," he shouted.

"Mr President..." began the vice president.

"Sarah, put that spoon down."

The PM stared in total amazement as the vice president reached behind him and removed a USB stick from his neck. The president slumped to the floor. The aid walked over to the sofa, picked up a cushion, and placed it underneath the president's head.

"Sorry about that. An early experimental implant, he won't let us upgrade it. When he gets that bad we have to reboot him."

"What the fuck?" said the Prime Minister, accurately summarising everyone else's questions.

The V.P. sighed.

"I suppose we've been lucky to get away with it this long. He had quite a severe stroke many years ago, before he was elected, and we gave him an implant. Although it was our latest design at the time, we're way behind you and Europe in these matters and... well, frankly it doesn't work properly. To be honest it's getting to the point where we're thinking of removing it, publicly announcing that he's had a stroke and putting him out to pasture. Anyway, can we get back to the talks now?"

With a rather bemused air they all gathered themselves but before they could refocus on their discussions a T14 agent ran in.

"You have to turn on the news. Iran are threatening a nuclear strike if we don't give those prisoners back."

The foreign secretary let out a shrill laugh.

"Looks like we picked a fucking good day to be in a bunker, doesn't it?"

CHAPTER FIFTY

Monday May 12th 2025

"Please, drop all the formal nonsense and call me Tim", said the man who had been prime minister for ten years up until the previous Thursday.

"Actually you will now be known as Agent 10," said Bill White.

The former PM smiled.

"Yes," said White, anticipating the question, "it is partly as a nod to your previous address, but also a matter of practicalities. At our last intake just over a year ago we recruited Agents 96, 97, 98 and 99 and we find that 'Agent One Hundred' or 'One Zero Zero' is too much of a mouthful."

“Especially if you have a gang of lunatics running at you with machetes,” I chimed in.

“Thank you for the pertinent example, Jennifer,” continued White without breaking his stride, “so we are now reusing numbers as and when they... become available. It was either 10 or 22.”

I'd spent months dealing with the guilt I felt about John's death but hearing his old handle still caused me a pang of grief. I was glad I wouldn't have to call our new recruit 22. Not that I'm superstitious, but getting a former PM killed would be even more of a fuck up.

“Before we give Agent 10 the introductory briefing we need to settle the matter of his security. The announcement was made yesterday that he is retiring entirely from public life to spend time with his family.”

I thought of the sarcastic joke John would have made on hearing that cliché.

“Obviously his family will have the usual Close Protection but during the hours he is on assignment with us he will... erm...”

“Look after myself,” said Tim. “I appreciate this may be a bit weird for the rest of you at first but at least we've already worked together and I just want to be an Agent and get on with the job at hand. Nobody watches my back any more than you would for each other, okay? I'm not a prince poncing about on a frigget.”

We all nodded our assent.

“Obviously, Tim's experience will be invaluable to us in international matters so I anticipate he will spend much of his time at base camp, but also go out in the field as and when. Needless to say the fact that he now works for T14 is subject to not only your usual contract but the Official Secrets Act. In fact, to make things easier, I've decided that only the people in this room will be aware of his presence.”

“Even my wife doesn't know what I'm doing, I've told her I'm a 'security consultant'.”

“To further help keep this between ourselves,” continued White, “we will be opening a new location henceforth known as 'base camp'. No details of this location are ever to be written down or spoken about outside of this group or the location itself. It is an anonymous building to which you will all be taken this afternoon by the most direct route

from this office. You must learn this route by heart. Further details of procedure will be explained at the location later. Any questions?"

Other than looking around the room and making a mental note of who was present, nobody needed anything further, so we made preparations to leave in three cars as the boss gave our new recruit the introductory schpeel.

The last car arrived at Agent 10's new premises just as Adam and I had finished looking the place over. It was definitely well chosen, a warehouse with small front office at the end of a largely deserted industrial estate. The only windows were thirty feet up and too small for anyone to get through and the only entrances were one huge rolling garage door and the porch in front of the office. CCTV was already in place and we'd managed to hook ourselves up to most of the cameras on the whole estate to monitor who was coming and going. There were only four other units in operation, all near to the main road. It was a further half mile to our place, along three side streets that nobody would ever venture down unless they knew where they were going.

At the back of our unit was an enormous car park backing onto waste ground that could only be accessed, other than the single approach road, by crossing a wide river tributary that had no bridge. On the other side of the river was a waste disposal site, rarely visited. The car park was large enough to allow a helicopter to land, should the need arise. It was about as isolated and defensible as you could possibly hope to find in the middle of London.

The cover story was that we were a company storing and distributing electrical components that had to be kept at a constant temperature. It was not out of the ordinary for such an establishment to have a twenty four hour security presence, and this one certainly would.

"White has been busy since Thursday," I remarked, plonking myself down on a huge four seater sofa on which anyone up to six foot six could comfortably sleep. "This is nicer than our house."

"I told you I'll get around to decorating when I have time," said Adam, before realising that I was winding him up. "Yes, it's fit for purpose," he continued, immediately snapping back into full-on professional mode as only he could. "Which door are we going to use

for access?”

“Why not both?”

“I don't like that flimsy porch, it's not secure enough. I think we should seal it totally.”

I pondered this for a moment.

“I suppose in the unlikely event of any genuine accidental visitors, it wouldn't seem odd if they knocked on the porch and someone answered by opening the garage door. I assume we're bricking up the fire escape, surely that's the weakest point?”

“All the rooms back here are being fitted with fire doors,” said White as he entered the main office, “and panic buttons will be throughout the unit by tonight. The nearest fire station is only ten minutes away. And there are sprinklers throughout, so yes we're going to brick up the fire escape. I've been speaking to our chopper pilot and he thinks he could get through the garage door.”

“Thinks ?” I laughed. “Has he measured up?”

“Apparently if he tilts thirty degrees to the left he can just get the rotors through.”

“Surely he'd just crash straight into the opposite wall,” said Adam in disbelief.

“He's been through it with a computer model and he's confident he can pull it off by cutting the engine at the right moment and gliding down and through the door. We'll put crash mats and shock absorbers against the wall.”

“Is this a scenario you have any reason to anticipate,” I asked, eyeing the boss with curiosity. I couldn't imagine what kind of bizarre Hollywood blockbuster style chain of events would lead us to want to fly a chopper into a warehouse.

White looked over his shoulder to check nobody else was in earshot.

“Despite what he said about just being another agent, to me he obviously isn't. If we're bringing him here by chopper and someone has got wind of who he is I need to get him inside the building and shut that fucking door pronto.”

“Isn't this a lot of time and expense to go to for one agent?” I asked.

“It isn't just for his benefit, as you'll see during the full briefing. Which by the way starts in three minutes, so, Jen, I suggest you get out of bed and grab yourself a coffee.”

I jumped up and sprang to mock attention.

“Right away, headmaster.”

White kept his composure but I knew he would be cracking a smile as soon as he was out of my sight. It was one of the many great things about him that he tolerated, even encouraged, such informality within the organisation. It was vital that we could wind down for a few minutes wherever possible rather than being on high alert every second of the day and burning out.

I poured myself a coffee and made my way to the main part of the warehouse.

“Okay, pay attention,” said White when everyone was gathered, “we have a lot to get through and we have some further deliveries due in half an hour. This is now base camp, known only to the twelve of us. Between 8am Tuesday and 8pm Thursday this will be the residence and workplace of Agent 10. During those hours he will be working with us on a consultancy basis though he is also as of now an agent with security status green and privy to anything and everything that everyone else here is. He will assist us with international matters and any of our operations with a political element. He will use his experience to monitor international and domestic situations and assist myself and the deputy director in the formulation of strategy etc. He will also be on call outside of those hours if I feel that his military or political experience can be of use in the field.

“Base camp is also an emergency gathering place for everyone in this room. If HQ or your own residence is in any way compromised you immediately make your way to this location. It can also be used as a safe house if needed. During Agent 10's hours of residency three of you will be here on a shift rota system to assist in strategy formulation, information gathering and to maintain the premises. Outside of the direct emergency, there will be no direct communication between base camp and HQ – no paperwork will be generated here and nothing is to leave this location. Officially, base camp does not exist, not even for the other agents. Is that crystal clear?”

We all nodded dutifully.

“37, you will present me with a verbal report each Friday morning detailing all the work, conclusions and suggestions generated during the week.”

Adam nodded.

“I will not be visiting this location again unless seven kinds of shit hit the fan at once.”

He then went through the details of everything that was about to be delivered and where it was to be installed. I anticipated the latest in a seemingly never ending series of caffeine-fuelled long nights.

By four thirty that afternoon it was just myself, Tim (as I still couldn't get used to calling him), Adam and Hannah. Since we'd officially become an item, Adam and I weren't normally assigned to the same team but fortifying buildings was one of my specialities, and Adams obsessive attention to detail was vital in ensuring we hadn't missed anything in setting up base camp. Hannah was monitoring the CCTV and double checking Adam's list. Earlier she had supervised the installation of the small armoury and was currently the only one of us armed with anything other than our handguns, though as usual I was sure Adam had secreted many weapons about his person. Even though we'd been living together for several months now, he still never kitted himself out in front of me. I figured it was one of his rituals that made him feel better so I left him to it.

We'd quickly decided that it wasn't worth fortifying the outer door of the porch and this would in any case draw unwarranted attention to the building should anyone get lost on the estate and innocently find our new foxhole. It was covered by cameras and the alarm system anyway.

The inner door had a window which had already been covered with a Venetian blind and plastered over before our arrival. Now Tim and I set about drilling huge masonry nails into the walls and securing a plate of bomb-proof steel to the plaster. If we ever needed the door as an emergency exit it was now literally tough shit.

I was glad to do this job with Tim to try to get to know him better and to make him feel part of the team. Besides, Adam was useless at D.I.Y.,

one of his few faults. As soon as it was dark I would go up onto the roof and roll out our special slippery matting that made it impossible for anyone to comfortably move around up there, along with a few booby traps for good measure. Then we would board up the tiny windows with the same bomb-proof steel and we were ready to go. Or rather stay. With our own electricity generator and supply room the building could easily accommodate four people for months if necessary.

By the time I came down from the roof at seven forty we were all done. I was too impatient to wait for dark so I just told Hannah to alert me if anyone appeared within five hundred yards. Nobody did and the job was soon done.

“Come and have some food, Hannah, there's no need to monitor the cameras now; there's only one way in and out of this place and we're eating within sight of it.”

“Okay,” she shouted, and emerged from the office a couple of minutes later.

“Bloody hell,” she said on seeing the spread Adam had prepared, “I didn't know we were expecting royalty.”

“I hope this isn't for my benefit,” said Tim.

“No it's... I'll explain later.”

Obviously nobody had thought to tell him about Adam's OCD stuff. I moved the subject on.

“So, Tim, now that we've installed you here what do you think of your new bat cave?”

“I'm very impressed at the speed with which you got this all together.”

“I'm sure White hasn't just decided all this in the last four days.”

“No,” Tim conceded, “I suspected that I would be out of a job months ago and we discussed the possibility of me being of some use to T14, but he really has got this place together since Friday morning.”

“That'll be the virtually unlimited budget you give us, gave us,” I said, tucking into some sweet and sour chicken. “I assume your successor understands the importance of that continuing?”

“It was one of the few things I said to him,” he replied, not without feeling.

“Good, we can't have us eating beans on toast while saving the free world, can we?”

We chatted about trivialities for the rest of the meal (I'd explained to Tim that relaxation where possible was a part of our working method). Afterwards, with glasses that sadly contained orange juice rather than Chardonnay, we turned back to work matters.

“I had a chat with the US President on Friday before I left.”

“Does this one have a working brain?” I asked.

Tim smiled. “He'll do. He seems to have done a good job in dealing with the dismantling of the CIA. All their security services are now on such a tight leash I don't think we have anything to worry about from them for the foreseeable future.”

“What about the general world situation?” asked Adam. “How are things in Iran these days?”

“After everything that happened last year it seems that everyone is playing it safe.”

“Not everyone,” I said, “we still have plenty of work.”

“Yes, I meant the politicians and security services. After coming to the brink of a nuclear war and the CIA almost killing the president, most countries are entirely occupied with their own internal problems and paranoias. Foreign affairs barely exists as a subject in many parts of the world at the moment. I'm hoping it'll be a good few years before large scale international terrorism is something we have to deal with.”

“But the fanatics are still out there,” I said.

“Of course, there's no logic to the actions of people who've been so thoroughly brainwashed. In the absence of a coherent command structure somebody is bound to do something crazy eventually. Whenever there's peace there are always people who see it as a betrayal of some ideal or other and want to stir things up.”

“Northern Ireland,” said Hannah.

“Exactly. So I'm hoping that amongst this relative quiet, any new 'noise', so to speak, will be easier to detect.”

We finished our meal in silence, all pondering the conversation and wondering what the future held for the world.

CHAPTER FIFTY ONE

Tuesday May 18th

Barbara and I had decided to make the most of my morning off by having a stroll around the shops and then an early light lunch. I wasn't due back until one thirty so we planned to pick out some new curtains for the bedroom and then go to the cafe.

It was a pleasant day, not too warm, and I was very much enjoying the relaxation of having a bit of normality after all the chaos of last year. Fortunately, Barbara had been very understanding about the circumstances of my American adventure and in fact we were now closer than ever.

We were chatting about some friends we were going to see that weekend. Just as we entered the soft-furnishings department, my implant caused me to stop in my tracks. At first I thought that I was picking up some sort of radio signal or interference from someone's phone, although that shouldn't be technically possible.

I quickly realised that something else was causing the noises in my head.

Barbara and I were holding hands and she winced as I inadvertently dug my nails into her palm.

“Sorry,” I said brusquely, “something's very wrong.”

Before she could utter even the first word of her question I felt her hand go limp and as I turned towards her she seemed to be in a dead faint. I felt a microsecond of dizziness myself but it passed and I managed to catch her before she fell.

It was only after I'd carried her over to a sofa and put her down that I looked around and realised that everyone else in the vicinity had also fainted. In its own clever multi-tasking manner my implant was already alerting me to the fact that it had just counteracted a dangerous electrical signal.

Glancing again at Barbara I ran towards the escalator, slowing down only slightly to take out my phone.

“I have a code purple in John Lewis,” I blurted out to A1, not having time to appreciate the absurdity of the sentence. Purple was our code for a serious public event of as yet unexplained origin.

I ran down the escalator as fast as I could without tripping over and saw that everyone on this floor had also passed out.

“Hang on,” said A1, “we’re picking up some emergency calls. Any immediate danger in your vicinity?”

“No, everyone’s just dropped to the floor.”

I paused by a young salesman who was slumped in front of his counter.

“I’m checking someone now. He’s breathing... pulse normal.”

I looked around. “Everyone seems to have just fallen where they were standing.”

“Except you.”

“I felt something odd for a moment but my implant counteracted it. Details are already being sent to Agent 7 for analysis.”

“Good. Oh shit, this is bad. It seems to have happened over an area roughly one square mile. I’m monitoring police and ambulance calls from witnesses on the edge of... whatever the fuck this is.”

“Oh dear,” I said as I walked further along the electrical department.

“Don’t tell me something else is happening?”

“No, it’s an elderly woman, seems to have hit her head on something, there’s a lot of blood.”

“You were with Barbara, weren’t you? Is she alright?”

“Yes, luckily I stopped her falling. I’ve left her on a sofa. Hang on, I think somebody is coming round.”

A scraping noise behind me had alerted me that the young man I’d just examined was trying to get up. I rushed over to him.

“Be careful. It’s okay, you just fainted.”

He gave me a strange look then staggered to his feet, picked up the nearest heavy object and made as if to throw it at me. He was barely strong enough to lift the television and he slumped back to the floor, dropping it with a crash that sounded apocalyptic in the eerie silence.

“What was that?” cried White.

“I don't know. Some kid woke up and... I think he tried to attack me but didn't have the strength. Now he's collapsed again. Shit! Barbara.”

I raced back towards the escalator, reasoning that it would be quicker to run up the one I'd just come down than waste time finding the other one.

“By the way,” said White, “you'd better disable any CCTV cameras you've appeared on.”

“Of course,” I puffed, making my painful way up the recalcitrant stairs, “I'll take care of that in a second.”

I made it to the top and slowed my pace in case others were also waking up but nobody had moved. I checked Barbara's pulse and breathing then saw to the cameras on these two floors.

“I'm patched in to cameras in the street where you are,” said White, “People seem to be waking up in a sort of pattern.”

“Pattern?”

“Yes, sort of... as if they're doing it in sequence, like a flock of birds taking off.”

“Hang on a second,” I said, focusing my attention and my microphone zoom. I picked up noise from outside, then the ground floor of the shop, then the floor below, then the floor I was on, each quickly but systematically following the other. I relayed this puzzling information to A1 then attended to Barbara.

“Well,” said 45, “this is all a bit bloody sci-fi, isn't it?”

“Unfortunately it's all too real,” said A1 grimly.

The chief members of T14 had all gathered at base camp in order that Agent 10 could be involved, violating our new rules within eight days.

“I'm bloody glad I got the boot now,” he said, trying to bring some

much needed levity to the situation.

I became aware that A1 was looking at me impatiently.

“Just another couple of minutes,” I said, “and we'll have coordinated all my data with that of the emergency services.”

“This was a test run, wasn't it?” said 45. Her inflection was more that of a statement than a question.

“Probably,” said A1.

“It must have been,” said 37, “there's no possible reason why anyone would want to attack a random selection of the public in this manner. If they wanted to cause mayhem or kill they would have chosen a different location.”

“We are certain that somebody did this on purpose?” said 61. “I mean that it wasn't some kind of.. I don't know, electrical storm, chemical leak?”

“The area seems to have been too well defined for that,” said A1, “the pattern of people affected and not affected is too neat. A chemical leak would have spread on the wind, this didn't.”

“Okay, we're ready,” said 7. Usually he was confined to the lab back at base, dealing with my implant and other tech matters, but since the death of 22 he'd taken over some of his work, us being thus far unable to find a permanent replacement for John's eccentric collection of skills.

Everyone gathered around the three computer screens on which 7 had arranged a variety of information sources.

“This is the chronology from the implant,” he began. “Eleven fourteen and twenty seconds it detects an anomalous electrical signal at a distance of seven hundred and twenty metres, give or take. Even I'm impressed at the efficiency of 4's device, because it would have taken two seconds for the sound waves to reach him, and the processing occurred less than four seconds after this happened.”

He picked up his pointer and touched one of the screens. A still picture became a three second clip of CCTV footage. Everyone watched intently as, next to a small lorry parked in a side street, a number of people were seen to clutch their heads simultaneously. One man managed to scold himself with the polystyrene bucket of coffee he was

carrying, while other people dropped bags or stumbled slightly.

“That lorry is the source,” I said, “the company details on the side and the number plates are both fake.”

We let the clip run a few times before stopping it.

“After a high frequency burst of sound that nobody could hear but obviously felt, which lasted just over two seconds, there followed one second of silence punctuated by some kind of echo from the signal. Then after another three seconds, give or take, a lower pitched but still ultrasonic to human ears burst lasts for around ten seconds. This burst rendered everyone into a sort of blackout state. It's also interesting that some people fainted while others appeared to lose consciousness but remain on their feet.”

He tapped another screen and we all watched footage from another street where dozens of people fainted just like Barbara and fell to the floor, but three people just stopped in their tracks.

“Can we zoom in close enough to see if those three have their eyes open?” asked 45.

“I'm afraid not,” said 7. “Based in our initial estimate from six randomly chosen cameras it seems that between one and four percent didn't fall over, but that's a rough estimate only. It'll take some time to go through all the footage. The lorry appears to be at the centre of an area of just under one square mile. There was no effect at all beyond that and people within the periphery merely stumbled initially but remained on their feet and conscious.”

“Latest casualty figures?” asked Agent 10.

A1 pushed a few buttons on his laptop.

“Nowhere near as bad as eleven years ago, but still we're looking at hundreds of injuries, maybe a few dozen fatalities. A lot of traffic was grid locked but at least three buses crashed. Hang on... Steve, have you got live footage from that camera by the lorry.”

7 clicked a few buttons and tapped a screen.

“There you... bloody hell!”

“I thought so,” shouted A1, “the fucking thing's still there. Arthur, quickest way to get me to that street?”

I rummaged through the map in my head.

“With the rush hour traffic now and all the chaos it's much quicker to wait here for the helicopter.”

“Thanks,” said A1 turning to his phone. “Pick me up from base camp now, priority one,” he barked. “We'll drag him off the fucking toilet and tell him to bring a bucket with him!”

I caught 45's eye as she stifled a laugh.

“They should be starting the cobra meeting about now,” he said, pressing some more buttons on his phone. “Hello? This is Bill White, is the Chief Superintendent there? I need to speak to him urgently regarding today's incident.” He tapped his foot impatiently. “Is everybody on the fucking toilet... hello, Alan, Bill White. I need you to seal off...” he looked over at me and clicked his fingers.

Having just looked at the map the name of the street was fresh in my mind.

“Fallow Lane, W2”

“... Fallow Lane, W2. There's a lorry there we believe to be responsible for the incident, you must seal the street and keep your distance until I get there. Because you can't deal with it and we can. Look, Alan...”

A1 continued to argue the toss and I used my initiative and my implant to locate the helicopter and display it's progress on one of the screens. I nudged his arm.

“Hang on. Yes?”

“He should be here in eight minutes, you'll have to land on a roof and leg it down the stairs. I'm checking roof access now, initial estimate you'll be on the ground in twenty three minutes.”

“I'll be there in twenty three minutes, Alan, get the fuck on with it.” He put his phone away and took a deep breath. “Well done, Arthur.” he said, patting my shoulder. “Right, you and... Adam, no Jen, you and Jen are coming with me. Arthur, I'll need you to scan the lorry, see if there are people or booby traps in it, and Jen if there are people in there I'll need you to beat the confessions out of them. Adam, you stay here and take charge of gathering new info and liasing with me.”

“Covert or tooled up?” asked 45.

“I think we're past covering this up and it's a matter of principle that we're more tooled up than Mr Plod.”

“Come on, Hannah, tool me up,” grinned 45.

CHAPTER FIFTY TWO

In the event, we decided that a little more chaos wouldn't make any difference so the chopper dropped us directly in the street.

We were wearing our distinctive flack jackets, which was our way of telling the police to stay out of our fucking way. As this was an unusually public situation for us, we were also all wearing shades and baseball caps – I know, fashion nightmare but we can't become publicly known faces, especially Arthur.

The goons had at least done a reasonably efficient job of clearing the street and surrounding buildings but were unable to prevent a large crowd amassing at the barrier. Luckily, the street was a dead end and the lorry was some distance from the main road, so we were able to use the chopper as cover and disembark in a hopefully anonymous manner.

I saw one of the goons stifle a laugh at me with my hair tied back and flowing from a baseball cap. I suppose I may have looked a bit like a blonde bimbo out for a jog, except for my jacket and rifle. Normally I wouldn't be seen dead with a baseball cap or out jogging.

We scanned the vehicle and found no signs of life. I had a quick look underneath and Arthur couldn't detect any obvious traps. The safest thing to do would have been to blow the door off from a distance but we couldn't risk destroying vital evidence inside. With our headset mics on, all our comms were being relayed to base camp.

“It looks like a normal lorry,” I said, “just a rolling back door with a simple padlock.”

I knelt down and examined the lock and door with a magnifying glass.

“No sign of any tamper-proof devices, I vote we shoot the lock off and get on with it.”

“Agreed,” said White.

“Stand back,” I said, letting my Kalashnikov dangle by its strap and taking out my trusty Glock pistol. “Much quicker than pissing about with skeleton keys,” I said as the lock disintegrated and fell to the ground.

I pushed up the door, alert for movement from within but it was as empty as we had thought. Empty of people anyway.

White signalled to the chopper pilot to keep an eye on the street and we all got in the truck and closed the door.

“Apart from the laptop, I’ve no idea what any of this stuff is,” I shrugged.

“Me neither,” said White, “Arthur?”

Arthur looked around at the various metal boxes festooned with knobs, dials and switches.

“I couldn’t name any of the individual items but this dial has sound frequencies labelled on it, so I think we can guess what it’s all used for.”

“We need Steve,” I said.

“He’ll never get here in this traffic,” said White, “I’ll send the chopper back for him.”

“What about forensics?” I said as the boss made to leave the truck. “Surely our priority now is to get this thing turned over and get a lead on these people?”

He paused for a moment, churning over our options. Meanwhile, Arthur had obviously been busy with his implant.

“Actually, the traffic is beginning to clear.”

Combining the power of his implant with his phone he’d brought an up to the minute display of traffic density in the surrounding area up for us to see.

“It’s only the few streets around here that are seriously congested,” he said.

“And most of that is probably because of us and the chopper,” I added. “If you send Clive back to base camp for Steve, I’m sure the crowds will lose interest and by the time Fiona gets here by car the cops

should have cleared the streets.”

White smiled.

“I knew there was a reason I pay you both so much. Good work.”

He ran to the chopper, which soon began to throb with the sound of take off, before liaising with the head cop.

Once we'd borrowed some of their handy white tents and cordoned off the lorry, the crowd did lose interest and, forty minutes later, Fiona, our forensic scientist, was able to make an unimpeded entrance.

While she worked her magic in the truck, White, Arthur and I sat in the back of the forensics van talking with everyone back at base camp.

“What puzzles me most,” said Hannah, “is why they left the lorry behind.”

“They obviously worked it remotely so they wouldn't themselves be affected and intended to collect the equipment later,” said Adam. “If it wasn't for Agent 4's implant we'd never have got onto the source of the signal so quickly.”

“Which means they may well have come back to the area as soon as the signal stopped,” said Hannah. “They may be hanging around now.”

“I doubt it,” I said, “I think we blew that by storming in with the chopper.”

“Sorry, couldn't help over hearing,” chimed in Steve, who was with Fiona in the truck. “There is another possibility. Our implant managed to identify and counteract the signal in a couple of seconds, so it's obviously not a technically complex thing to do. They may well have designed themselves some sort of blocking device so that they could be in the signal area without being affected.”

“I've checked the footage from the time of the signal to your arrival and nobody left the lorry,” said Adam, “I'm going back now to find when it arrived and when the occupants left but it'll take a while.”

“It can't have been there for long,” I said, “or it would have had a parking ticket or been clamped. I checked for that when we arrived.”

“I don't suppose there's any point in leaving the lorry where it is?” said Tim.

“What do you mean?” asked White.

“Well, even if they had a device to block the signal, I doubt they would have stayed within the area anyway. Agent 4 said that the man in the shop turned violent. That may have been the intended purpose of the signal. Even if it wasn't, they could have no way of knowing how people subjected to this signal would behave, assuming that this was a test and they haven't used it before. So if they cleared well out of the area they may well not have been able to get back in due to the general chaos. We managed to stop most of the news crews broadcasting anything of your arrival and the police pounced on anyone taking their own photos. There's a slight chance the perpetrators don't yet know we've found their equipment.”

“Or,” added Hannah, “they may just be so arrogant or convinced of their own invulnerability that they haven't even considered that anyone could trace the signal. Or perhaps the people driving the lorry weren't the people who designed the gear and really aren't that clever – maybe they were just told to deliver the equipment and leave it there. Maybe someone without much in the way of brains is waiting until this evening or even tomorrow to collect the lorry.”

We all pondered these new possibilities in silence for a while.

“I think it's a gamble well worth taking,” I said. “We clear out of here as soon as possible, tell the police to keep schtum, maybe even tell them it was a false alarm or something, and then do a stake out.”

“7, how long will forensics be?” asked White.

“Nearly done. Amazingly there are fingerprints everywhere in the cab, but nothing whatsoever on the equipment.”

“I told you,” said Hannah, “amateur drivers and equipment design pros.”

“Steve,” I asked, “you haven't done anything to the equipment that they could detect remotely, have you?”

“Not unless there are very sophisticated trembling devices in it,” he replied, “there's definitely no form of alarm or surveillance in here. If they closely examine the equipment they'll see traces of the forensic examination.”

“That doesn't matter,” I said, “we'll have the bastards by then.”

“Well, boss,” I said, “do we go for it? There's nothing I can contribute to analysing all the data or the tech stuff, I may as well stay put here for a day at least.”

“I agree. It'll be dark soon, they'll almost certainly wait for that, if they are waiting at all. It'll take us about fifteen minutes to clear out, what do you need, Jen?”

“Arthur, are you up for a night vigil? If they get away you'll be invaluable in tracing them.”

“I'll phone Barbara and make my excuses.”

“Great. Hannah, bring me yourself and... three agents with a car, along with 53 and... 74, five pairs of night vision goggles, the thermal imaging kit, the usual stakeout supplies and extra buckets of coffee.”

“You're really enjoying this, aren't you?” said White.

“That's why you pay me so much, boss,” I grinned back.

An hour later we were all in place, five of us in the street and a back up car a few hundred yards away just in case. I would have preferred a second car in the street itself but there was nowhere we could park it that wouldn't draw attention.

We'd hacked into the CCTV system and had every inch of the street displayed on three laptops. Hannah, being our long range specialist, was positioned on a roof-top covering the lorry with her favourite rifle. Luckily for us all the buildings were offices which would soon be closed for the night. As it didn't lead anywhere, there would be no reason for anyone to be in this street after 7pm. We'd checked out all the buildings and none had any night security staff so the street should be deserted until the morning rubbish collection at 6am.

After a while we observed the last of the office staff locking up and heading off towards the main road.

From the prints found in the cab (no ID yet) we knew that only two people had driven it there but there was every possibility that a larger team would be returning. However, I was confident that the five of us and the three in the backup car would be more than a match for whoever showed up. Or, of course, we could all just be wasting our time.

I was in a handy underground car park that only had one of those barrier arms with a swipe card system and a flimsy rolling plastic grill secured with a padlock (but not for long). I put the grill back down, leaving an inch gap so that it could be quickly opened. The grill was of a lattice work design with plenty of gaps big enough to fire through. We were some distance from the truck but by standing at the left hand side of the grill we had a clear line of sight so that 74 or myself would be able to blow the rear tyres out, as well as seeing anyone getting in or out of the back (there was no connection from the cab to the rear compartment).

I hadn't worked closely with 74 before and he wasn't much of a conversationalist but he did have great powers of concentration. Eschewing caffeine for chocolate bars and extra strong mints, Jason could stand or sit for hours at a stretch seemingly in a world of his own but alert to the tiniest sound or movement. This being the case, and doubting very much that anything would happen in the early part of the evening, I left him at the entrance and retreated to a flask of coffee.

Arthur and 53 were in the rear room of a ground floor office we'd purloined for the night with the laptops.

"All clear," said 53 in response to my question. She was only about twenty five, one of the youngest T14 agent by some years. Rather quiet and mousey in personality she was incredibly strong for her slight frame, like Hannah. She apparently ran a marathon every fortnight and seemed to spend all her spare time running, swimming or doing something athletic, and ate a very strict vegetarian diet. She worked well with Arthur because they were both quite reserved yet highly efficient and she had had some unfortunate trouble with a couple of younger male agents (now very much ex-agents). I think she was a lot more comfortable around Arthur and White than younger men. I know for a fact that Suzy disliked being around Adam, though I've never told him that. On one assignment she was shocked to see how ruthless and brutal he had been with two men, despite the fact that he was perfectly justified in beating a confession out of the two bombers to save dozens of lives. I know that that side of him is entirely absent except under very specific circumstances but 53 was still very wary around him. I had appraised White of the situation and, with almost a hundred agents, it was easy to keep them apart without hurting Adam's delicate feelings.

Hours ticked by and nothing continued to happen. I was increasingly sure that this was going to be an embarrassing waste of time.

Hannah was the one with the clearest view of the whole street so it was her who finally broke the silence.

“Rubbish truck now entering the street.”

I looked at my watch.

“It's not even three thirty, they're a bit keen, aren't they?”

I thought for a moment.

“Arthur, what colour are the garbage trucks in this district. What markings do they have?”

With his implant it took only a few seconds to find the requisite information.

“This is wrong,” he said with a sense of mounting urgency, “it should be a recycling collection. No, it's completely the wrong type of vehicle.”

I had already put down my coffee and run to the car park entrance.

“96, are you getting this?”

“Already on our way,” he replied.

“Park just out of sight and stay in the car. 53, alert A1 and record all cameras. 4, get yourself to the door and be ready to exit. 6,1 keep on the truck and be ready to blow the tyres if it moves. 74, prepare to exit on my signal, 4, hold back.”

I quickly double checked all my equipment and weapons and held a position just behind the plastic grill, ready to shoot through it if necessary.

Sure enough, the erroneous rubbish vehicle pulled up next to the truck. From our position they were now out of sight.

“Three occupants,” hissed Hannah. “two exiting, driver keeping engine running and appears to be preparing to turn around.”

“Both men casual dress, no visible weapons,” said 53, obviously having zoomed in on the CCTV footage. “One approaching rear of target vehicle.”

Indeed I shortly observed a middle aged man who didn't look like any

kind of threat, or tech genius, amble around into sight and give the padlock I'd replaced a cursory look.

“Okay, prepare to advance,” I whispered. “61, do you still have the driver in sight?”

“Yes, he's just idling, waiting for the others to move off is my guess.”

“Good. He's yours. If he gets out with a weapon shoot to disarm, no weapon give him a warning shot.”

“Roger.”

“Man unlocking driving side of target vehicle,” said 74, “ready to take him.”

“I have target passenger in site, ready to take.”

“Okay, on three.”

I grabbed the grill and braced myself.

“One, two, three.”

I threw the light, flimsy barrier upwards without difficulty as 74 crawled underneath and covered the target driver.

“Stop, hands on the vehicle,” he shouted, having fortunately moved his mouth mic so as not to deafen the rest of us. The guy seemed terrified and all but threw himself against the now open door of the truck, making no attempt to resist or reach for a weapon.

“Target one secure,” shouted 74 as I ran around the other side of the truck to join Arthur. Although approaching his mid-50s and no marathon runner he was still in reasonable shape and as sharp as any of us. The second man just stood there, his face frozen in utter confusion. I quickly cuffed his hands behind his back and threw him against the truck.

“Target two secure,” I said, my mic still being on, before running towards the front of the other vehicle.

“61, what's he doing?”

“He's jumping out of the cab. He's left the door open, I've lost...”

She didn't need to finish the sentence. Moving quickly and taking a wide arc around the back of the rubbish truck with my kalashnikov in

front of me I saw the driver running towards me. He raised a handgun in a manner which suggested that he knew what he was doing. I let go a short burst and rolled over on the ground in case he managed to get off a shot. He did squeeze off one shot as my rounds virtually severed one of his legs but it stuck harmlessly in the tarmac. The bullet, not his leg. He slumped to the ground but was still holding the gun in one hand and began thrashing around violently, squeezing off one shot into the air, so I shot off that hand. You can't be too careful in this job. With a final spasm he stopped moving.

“Target three eliminated,” I said. Even if he lived he wasn't going to be doing any more shooting.

“Come down, 61. 53, start packing up the gear. 96, keep the end of the street clear and get rid of any spectators.”

I unlocked the back of the truck and we put the two men in there with Arthur and Jason guarding them. I then moved the rubbish truck and, with great difficulty, managed to park the huge thing in front of the lorry. The third guy was already dead so I dragged him and rolled him under the rubbish truck. Now all anyone passing the end of the street would see was a deserted side road with a parked lorry and a car near the entrance. Hannah and I then went into the office to help Suzy pack everything away. With no residences near by I hoped we'd been lucky and that nobody had heard the shots.

White had been sleeping in his office as a precaution and I now appraised him of the situation.

“Pity about the driver, sounds like he was the senior man. The others may know almost nothing.”

“Yes, I'm sorry boss but he'd already starting squeezing the trigger when I opened fire, another half a second and I'm sure he would have hit me in the head.”

“And from the angle he parked the lorry and the open door I couldn't get off a shot to disable him,” said Hannah.

“He looked like he had a very good aim,” I added, “and I've just checked his gun – dumb dumb bullets and the gun looks custom made.”

“Shit,” muttered White, “that's not your average criminal. Okay, can't be helped. Hopefully the other two can at least give us a decent ID on

him. Do you need me to send a car for you?"

"No, Arthur can drive the lorry with the others in the back and Suzy and I can go in the backup car. What shall we do about the rubbish truck? Is it worth preserving it for forensics?"

"No," said the boss, "I'll inform the police and they can deal with it. I'm sure these were the same guys as dumped the target vehicle so we've got forensics on them already. Besides, we can get three sets of finger prints off them tonight."

"Two and a half," I corrected.

"Highly amusing, 45. See you soon, I'll put the kettle on."

"Fucking hell, he's in a good mood considering we've just woken him up."

"Well," said Arthur, "we're making relatively good progress. Less than twenty four hours after a major incident we've captured two of the perpetrators and all their equipment."

"Yes," I conceded, "but we're a long way from solving the case. We still don't know who built the equipment and why, or how many other trucks like this there may be."

"Ever the optimist," said Arthur.

"Ever the realist," I said.

CHAPTER FIFTY THREE

After four hours sleep, Hannah, Arthur and I gathered in the bosses office for a video chat with Adam and Tim at base camp.

"We'll have another go at them later," said White, "but I'm confident these two men are just hired idiots. I don't think they even know what was in the lorry and both seemed genuinely shocked that the other one had a gun."

"We should have had more people covering the street," I said, "We should have been able to capture him alive."

"No use crying over spilt blood," said White, "If he was as much of a pro as his marksmanship indicates then he would also have been

proficient in not answering questions. Anyway, we have several puzzle pieces to work with so let's move on. The latest from forensics is that the equipment and the back of the truck was spotless. Apart from us there's no trace of anyone ever having been in there or touched the equipment. It was a sterile environment, which means we're dealing with people who have some sort of forensics team of their own. That rules out a small group of fanatics, aside from the sophistication of the equipment itself. We're looking at people with serious money, tech expertise, and copious resources. It's likely to be a fairly large group."

"You're not saying we're dealing with another rouge CIA situation?" I said.

"I hope not, but it's a possibility. I've spoken with MI6 this morning and we should have their latest info on known foreign groups with this sort of capabilities within the hour. We're currently searching the homes of the two men downstairs, so far we've found no trace of a passport for either of them but they're almost certainly just being used as drivers."

"Something about this doesn't add up," said Adam. "Terrorists don't carry out trial runs in public. Even if they can only cover an area of one mile they could have chosen a place and time that would have caused ten times as many casualties."

"I've been looking at the footage from traffic cameras," said Tim. "In the few minutes before the event the traffic slowed considerably in some of the streets in the covered area. I'd have to look at footage from all the streets affected but it's almost as if they set the signal off when it would do *least* damage."

"I agree that they could have chosen a much more effective target," said Hannah, "but if they didn't want to kill loads of people, why didn't they do it in a more remote area?"

"They needed somewhere they could dump a lorry for a day where it wouldn't attract attention," I said.

"Okay," said White, "we're veering off into speculation. We need to establish who designed this equipment and what their ultimate purpose is. Nobody has yet claimed responsibility or made any demands but we must assume that by now they know that the lorry has been found and removed. However, as they did such a thorough job of cleaning the equipment and both vehicles were stolen, we have no leads on the

people behind this except what we can get from the drivers.”

“Anything on the dead one yet?” I asked.

“He had no ID on him and neither his fingerprints or DNA are on record. I'll get the autopsy result in a few hours.”

“What about the gun?”

“Untraceable, all markings filed off.”

“So he *was* a pro,” I muttered to myself. “What about the other two?”

“No criminal records for either,” said White. “Both unemployed laborours. More than likely their story about being approached in a pub and offered a few thousand quid to steal the rubbish truck is true.”

“Obviously the dead guy intended to drive the target vehicle away while the others disposed of the garbage truck,” I said, “but the fact that he went to all that trouble, and risk if they are indeed just regular blokes, indicates that he or whoever he works for at least considered the possibility that their equipment might be discovered. If they knew for certain it had been they would have sent more than one armed man to deal with it, or just left it.”

“But stealing the wrong type of rubbish vehicle shows a lack of planning,” said Adam, “or that it was done in such a rush they just took what they could.”

“Or,” suggested Hannah, “that they were so arrogant that they thought a sloppy operation would do.”

“Or,” I added, “that there was a proper plan but the two hired bozos cocked it up.”

“How long can we hold the two for?” asked Adam.

“I'll have to let them go by the morning,” said White, “I'm not sure they can actually be charged with anything criminal other than conspiring to steal the rubbish lorry. Obviously we will keep tabs on them both for a few weeks in case they're contacted again.”

“This is a bit left field,” said Adam, then hesitated.

I looked at the screen.

“Go on,” I said, flashing him an encouraging smile.

“I've been wondering whether the timing is significant.”

“Quarter past eleven?” said Hannah, puzzled.

“No, I mean the date, politically significant,” he said, glancing nervously at Tim. “I mean coming so soon after a General Election.”

“What are you driving at?” asked Tim, looking equally puzzled.

“I don't know,” admitted Adam, “it's just a thought that's nagging away at me. Maybe somebody is planning to destabilise the new government. Maybe they'll threaten something much bigger and they think the new PM is an easier target, more likely to cave in to save his job. Just a thought.”

“I suppose,” I said, “that if the PM were contacted we would be informed immediately?”

“I met him last week,” said White, “he's aware of the way we work and I've spoken to him yesterday and this morning, I've no reason to think we can't trust him. They do check out people before they're allowed to run the country, Jen.”

I gave him a sarcastic grin.

“Yes, but maybe Downing Street would try to deal with a blackmailer themselves, keep it quiet and pay up.”

“Not possible,” said Tim, “all calls in and out of number ten are recorded and strictly monitored, all mail examined. So many people are involved there's no way you could keep something like that quiet - well, not so quiet that we wouldn't find out anyway.”

“Surely,” said Hannah, “the most important thing is working out what to do if they try it again?”

“Yes,” said White, “any progress on that, Arthur?”

“We're working on it, or rather the tech guys are. They've analysed what my implant did to counteract the signal and they're now experimenting with devices which can replicate that. They're also, of course, examining the equipment for any clues as to where it was put together. Agent 7 is fairly confident that they could totally nullify the signal before it takes effect; remember that I detected something a couple of seconds before the first people fainted? That would be the equipment 'warming up' or... I didn't understand the technical details but

sort of moving up through the frequencies like gears, until it gets to the right one.”

“Like tuning in an old radio?” I said.

“Something like that, I think,” said Arthur.

“How long before they can perfect such a countering device?” asked White.

“They should have a prototype by tomorrow but then they'll need to test it. But in order for it to work they would have to get fairly close to the source of the signal. Building one with a massive range would be a lot more difficult.”

“Well that's something at least,” said Adam. “If we can find their HQ then we can take the device with us and they can't use the signal against us.”

The phone rang.

“It's Downing Street,” he said, “yes, Bill White.”

An unusual silence followed. White looked as if he didn't quite understand whatever was being said. When he eventually put the phone down he continued to look somewhat confused.

“The PM wants to come here immediately and see the equipment.”

We all exchanged looks of incomprehension.

“Tim,” I asked, “have you any explanation for this?”

“No,” he said thoughtfully.

Since the lapse in concentration that had, whatever anyone else said, resulted in John's death, I'd done some work on myself. I'd read up on some psychology, the proper stuff about how the brain functions, and I'd even done some Buddhist meditation to learn to both properly relax and properly pay attention. I'd tried to be better at my job because I didn't want to get anyone else killed. As a by product of this I also found that I was rather sharper at taking in and processing information.

Seeing the new PM on telly I, for some reason, took an instant dislike to him. There was something about the way he seemed to enjoy being in front of the cameras, a triumphalist sneer to his acceptance speech that

just set me against him from the start. However, as this new case would mean we'd be liaising closely with him, it was part of my job to be impartial. Therefore, when he first came to HQ I made it my business to observe him very closely.

Call it retrospective embellishment or whatever you like but I'm sure that I sensed a nervousness in him from the moment he walked through the door. After nodding at one of the Close Protection officers I knew, I fixed my attention firmly on the man who was unfortunate enough to remind me of the slimy, press loving git who'd been PM when I was a girl.

He seemed to be skittish, in a hurry. He was very keen to see the equipment, rather than learning about our progress on the case. Within two minutes I had an even lower opinion of him.

When we got to the tech room where they were examining the gear he made a bee line for the laptop and leant over it with his hands behind his back like a major inspecting his troops. I quickly positioned myself a few feet away where I could keep an eye on him. He stood up and tried to slip his hand surreptitiously into his pocket. I inched my way closer to him. I could tell from the bulge in his pocket that he was fiddling with his wallet and seemed to be trying to quietly extract something from it. After a few seconds his hand slid out of his pocket. He abruptly turned back towards the room and began loudly firing questions at the boss, no doubt in a pathetic attempt to distract everyone.

I saw his hand move.

Not wanting to panic Close Protection I shouted above him.

“Do not move your right hand.”

He froze in panic and tried to palm the Firewire stick up his sleeve.

“I said don't fucking move,” I hissed in my best menacing voice.

I saw his hand begin to tremble violently.

My former police colleague read the situation and moved forward, grabbing his arm.

“Move away from the laptop, sir.”

I took the stick from him and held it up for everyone else.

“He was trying to put this in the laptop.”

“No, no... I...” he spluttered helplessly.

White's face expressed a level of anger I'd never seen before.

“Did you not read the really big sign in the entrance about not bringing any electronic equipment in here?” he said quietly. “Did you not listen when I briefed you about T14?”

I wrenched the wallet out of his pocket, opened it and found the small silver bag he'd used to outwit the detectors. I threw the stick to Steve.

“I think we'd better find out what our colleague has been up to,” I said. He visibly bristled at my disrespectful turn of phrase but really wasn't in a position to say anything at all.

“Arthur,” said White quietly, “what's the protocol for arresting a prime minister?”

Arthur did his characteristic squint as he accessed his implant.

“You... you can't bloody arrest me?” he whined, trying to force some dignity and authority into his countenance, and failing derisively.

“Yes we can,” said Arthur, as dispassionately as if he were reeling off a recipe, “Page one six two, paragraph three. 'In the event that a senior T14 agent has reason to believe that the prime minister is acting in a way which threatens national security or is attempting to impede the work of the agency, he may be placed under immediate arrest and detained indefinitely at T14 HQ. This overrides all other relevant protocols.'”

“You should have read the small print.”

White glanced at me, his eyes saying “drop it now” but I just couldn't resist that one.

“So,” I asked as the boss sat down behind his desk, “what did the little toad have to say for himself?”

We'd all been kicking our heels for the last two hours, not knowing what to do with ourselves. We'd discussed some of the political and security ramifications with Tim (who we'd sneaked in under a blanket like a prisoner) but without knowing what was going on it was mainly speculation. Considering that this was going to be the global news story of the year, the atmosphere was more akin to bored school children

confined to the hall on a rainy day.

“I've yet to verify his story but if it's true he wasn't fit to be PM in the first place.”

“I always thought he was a slimy fucker.”

“Yes, Jen. It appears you were right,” he sighed.

I was surprised at the level of disappointment registering on his face. He gathered himself together and began his summary.

“He claims the equipment was an MOD prototype.”

That was certainly interesting new information. We all looked at Tim. For a moment he was speechless.

“I never signed off on that, nor anything remotely like it. How...” He was lost for any further comment.

“I haven't yet contacted the MOD, I'd like to discuss that with you.”

Tim nodded.

“So...” began Hannah, “I mean, were the MOD trying to conduct a secret test? And what the fuck are they doing developing that kind of stuff anyway?”

“His story,” said White, in a tone which showed he could barely believe it himself, “was that it was stolen. They don't know who took it and he was attempting to erase the laptop so nobody would ever find out where it had come from. He apparently has 'friends' in the MOD and he was trying to save any embarrassment.”

“There has to be more to it than that,” said Adam incredulously, “he'd never take such a risk just to save some friends from embarrassment.”

“Besides,” I said, “I'm sure he only has colleagues and acquaintances, not friends as we humans would understand. Do you want me to have a go at him?”

White managed a smile. “I think we'll spare him that for now. I'll talk to him again when I've read the riot act to the MOD.”

“He's had enough time to think,” I said, “somebody should have a go at him.”

“I need to go mob-handed to the MOD. I've spoken to the deputy

PM, who is now in charge of the country and seems to have a bit more nous about him, and he's agreed that we should conduct a thorough and immediate search of the premises where this thing came from. If this is all true, what else are they working on unofficially?"

That was an unsettling thought.

"I'm not really mob material," said Arthur, "and you'll be a few hours at least going over that place. Perhaps I should interview him?"

"What are you thinking?" asked White.

"Well, I can bombard him with information, see how he reacts. As he talks I can search through his entire life history and see if he's lying about anything. I can ask him about these so called friends and instantly search out info on them."

"I think that's an excellent idea," said Tim. "What about me? Am I going to the MOD?"

"I reckon we should take him," I said. "He knows more about the way they work than any of us, even you."

White nodded in agreement.

"And it will make it more official and scary for them."

"I don't think I can ever be more scary than you," smiled Tim.

"Maybe not, but between you and the boss you'll make this about as official and rigorous looking as possible. Nobody will be able to argue with us giving the place a thorough going over."

White pondered for a moment.

"Arthur, how long to get to the base?"

"It's way outside London, too long by road."

"Someone will more than likely be waiting to hear from him that he's successfully scuppered the laptop," said Adam, "we can't afford to delay."

"Besides," said Hannah, "a fleet of choppers will scare the shit out of them even more."

I smiled to myself. I had been planning a night on the town but this was going to be a lot more fun.

“Arthur, how many agents should I take to secure the whole base?”

“I'm not sure we have enough people to secure the whole area adequately.”

“This is national security,” said Adam, “can't we co-opt the marines like we did last year.”

White looked at Arthur, who displayed his uncanny knack of seeming to read the boss's mind.

“Total staff present today... three hundred and sixty eight. Two hundred and eleven at lowest security level. There's an aircraft hanger big enough to house all of them.”

White brought up a plan of the base and turned the monitor so we could all take a look. Then he picked up the phone.

“Right,” I said, “Hannah, Adam, let's get ready.”

I beckoned Tim over to the door.

“We're going to get tooled up now. I know you're going in a political capacity but you're still an agent and if the MOD has gone native we don't know what we'll be faced with. I'd advise you to arm yourself.”

“You really think that's necessary?”

“Better to be over-prepared than in the shit.”

“I haven't got time to get a suit or anything.”

He was wearing dark trousers and a light blue shirt.

“I'm sure we can find you a suitable matching jacket that can accommodate a holster.” I took out my phone and opened the notepad. “What size are you?” I wrote down his measurements. “Better not have you wandering around the building, we'll get you something.”

CHAPTER FIFTY FOUR

Ninety minutes later, White's incredible operation had come together and we landed at the MOD base.

They were naturally rather unhappy at being invaded by us but knew that they had no comeback. Part of T14's remit is also to deal with

corruption in any other organisation in Britain, be it political, military or industrial. This was a mixture of all three. I think we may be able to technically invade parliament but we've never tested out that clause.

The marines sealed off the perimeter and separated all the lowest security level staff into one huge group. There was much chatter among them at being marched off into an aircraft hanger but at least it was a warm day and catering was already being set up for them. Once they had all been searched we left a dozen marines in charge and the rest of our enormous contingent entered the main complex.

This still left us one hundred and fifty seven members of staff with higher level security clearances. However, there were more than fifty T14 agents so we matched the seniority of our people to theirs. Most of our agents were assigned to three MOD staff and given orders to question them thoroughly without revealing the existence of the captured equipment.

Hannah coordinated all the work and collated the information, as well as overseeing the marines and keeping an eye on the press choppers that were circling like vultures despite the exclusion zone.

Meanwhile, White, Adam, Tim and I found ourselves in a plush boardroom with the nine people who made all the important decisions and had also signed the Official Secrets Act. This meant that we could inform them of the PM's arrest and our capture of their prototype without fear of the information being leaked.

White and Tim asked the questions, Adam sat at a laptop collating information, though we were also recording everything, while I stood back and trained my new powers of observation on the nine men. Two of them were supercilious and initially treated us like interloping children who had gate crashed a party, but once White had divulged details of the PM's arrest in his typically forthright manner their attitude soon disappeared.

“So,” asked Tim, “we would be very interested to know how this prototype came to be developed without my knowledge. There is no record of it's existence in any Downing Street file. You are a government ministry, not a private company.”

All nine looked shocked at the news of the PM's arrest but I felt that the three senior men betrayed something else, that they were angry and

therefore knew what he was up to. The other six seemed genuinely surprised at the whole situation and exchanged glances among themselves. The other three did not look at anyone else. They were too unflustered. I went over to Adam and opened a new note on the top right corner of his screen, typing in my thoughts. He smiled and nodded his thanks. I went back to focusing on the reaction of the three men to each and every question.

“You only have the PM's word that this device came from us,” said Jackson, who was commander of the base.

“Do you deny that it did?” asked White.

For the first time, he looked to his colleagues.

“No conferring,” said White, “just answer the question.”

“We draw up a lot of plans here... several departments... all working on...”

“Are you claiming that major projects are carried through here without your knowledge?” asked Tim.

“No, of course...”

“Did you know about the design and building of this equipment, yes or no?” pressed White.

Still he was reluctant to answer.

“Yes, we did,” said the man next to him.

Jackson stared straight ahead, showing no reaction.

The third of the men turned his eyes skywards.

The other six continued to display surprise and confusion.

“Boss, a minute outside.”

He turned to look at me.

“I believe it's important.”

We left the room as Adam stood up, picking up his rifle and pointedly fixing it in an intimidating position in front of him. As I closed the door I saw Tim surreptitiously unbutton his jacket, ready to pull out his gun if needed.

“I think we should get rid of the six on the right,” I said quickly. “I’ve been watching them all closely and I’m confident that all this information is a complete surprise to them. Jackson and his two cronies already knew what the PM was up to, I’m ninety nine percent convinced. Those six are people who get things done, the other three are the real top decision makers. It would be much easier to control just three of them.”

“Do we have anyone to look after the others?” he asked. “They’re still important. They will have been involved in some way in the manufacture of the machine, even if they weren’t told about its ultimate purpose.”

“Hannah?” I said into my headset mic.

“Yes?”

“Do you have anyone to question six of our lot? They’re top security level but we want to separate them.”

“Hang on a second.”

“We can guard them out here until someone is ready for them,” said one of the agents who were posted outside the door.

“Time is of the essence, isn’t it?” I said to White.

“Yes. Okay, let’s get them out. Seat them over there.”

“Jen?”

“Yes?”

“I can have someone for them in ten minutes.”

“Great. Thanks, Hannah, they’ll be outside board room C.”

“Okay, any developments your end?”

“It’s looking hopeful. Any results for you yet?”

“A few negative ones, I’ve just sent the details to Adam. One or two possible leads, I’ll let you know. Out.”

I followed the boss back into the room. “Could you six follow me, please?” I said. They exchanged further looks of surprise but stood up without complaint. Jackson’s two colleagues looked distinctly nervous. Good, I thought.

“Call me if any of them move from their chairs,” I whispered,

tapping my headset.

The agent nodded and I shut the door.

I was pleased to see that Tim had been thinking and had taken up a position much closer to Jackson, leaning against the wall in an apparently casual fashion but in fact towering over him in a fairly intimidating manner. White clocked this and moved his chair a lot closer. The three men were now cornered in the top left side of the room. Once I'd exchanged a few words with Adam I took up a position on the right of them, effectively hemming them in.

“So,” continued White, looking at the middle one who seemed ready to cooperate, “you knew about this equipment?”

“There's no longer any point denying that, is there?” he said.

“Not now, you idiot,” hissed the man on his right angrily.

Jackson continued to stare ahead impassively.

Three different approaches. Questioning them together could prove tedious.

I was about to suggest that we should take them back to HQ and interrogate them individually when Adam let out a strangled expletive.

“What is it?” I asked, not taking my eyes off the men.

“According to Arthur, the PM's arrest is breaking news. I'm just checking now.”

I glanced at the boss. In front of our 'hosts' he betrayed nothing but I knew from his eyes that he was ready to explode.

I could scarcely believe the arrogance of the man but Jackson actually stood up.

“You'll be wanting to attend to that then,” he deadpanned, making as if to leave. I'm not sure if he really thought that he had so much authority or bearing that we would part like the red sea and let him stroll away.

I moved towards him but Tim was nearest and pushed him unceremoniously back into his seat.

“I could sue you for assault,” he bristled.

“Oh shut the fuck up, you dick head!” shouted White ferociously. In all my years with the agency I'd never heard him so angry.

He stood up abruptly and went over to Adam.

Tim took out his pistol and held it in front of him.

“Arthur, what the fuck is going on?”

“I'm trying to trace the leak now,” came Arthur's voice from the laptop speakers, “no luck yet.”

“Okay, let me know the second you have anything at all.”

“I was about to suggest anyway,” I said, “that we return to HQ to continue our little chats.”

White didn't miss the emphasis I placed on the plural s, and nodded his agreement that we should separate them. He motioned to Adam to take over guard duties and soon we had replaced the two agents outside the door.

Hannah was just allocating the last of the other six to an interrogator.

“The PM's arrest has gone global,” I said flatly.

This rendered her speechless for a second.

“If we take those three back in separate choppers,” I said, thinking aloud, “we could get a head start on them.”

“Good idea,” said White, barely pausing as he adjusted his headset, “Three choppers to leave in ten minutes. How's everything else going?”

“Slowly,” said Hannah, “we've accumulated tonnes of information, it'll take a good day or so to compare and verify all of it.”

“Any general gist?” I asked.

“Most people seem genuinely ignorant about the lorry and the gear, but ten or so people have heard rumours of something important being stolen.”

“I think you need Adam to help coordinate this giant mess,” I suggested, “shall I go in and relieve him?”

White nodded, so I went back into the room and sent Adam out with his laptop.

“Right then,” I said to the three men in my best patronising voice, “does anybody need the toilet?”

To my delight Jackson nodded, so I accompanied him myself because, if I'm honest, I found him even slimier than the PM and couldn't resist the opportunity to humiliate him further. Besides, I didn't trust him one iota.

Back at HQ we barely had time to show our three guests to their accommodation before even more shit started to hit the fan.

As Adam, Arthur, White, Tim and I entered the main meeting room we were greeted by the deputy PM, looking as if he'd gone three rounds with a tsunami, and a man of impossibly impeccable bearing. He stepped forward and extended a hand towards Tim.

“Nice to see you again, sir.”

“Hello,” said Tim, shaking the man's hand uncertainly. He took a moment to gather himself. “This is Peter Harrington, the Queen's personal representative.”

The rest of us, not for the first time in our careers, exchanged confused glances.

“We have a very serious situation on our hands,” said Harrington.

“I'm perfectly aware of that,” said White, “but it's on our hands. I fail to see how it's on yours.”

“Her majesty has had a phone call from the American President. He is very concerned that Britain does not become a destabilised nation.”

“Funnily enough, so am I,” intoned White, “it's my job to prevent that and you are currently delaying me in carrying out my job.”

“We are all on the same side,” said Harrington, still smooth and unruffled, “we have the best interests of the United Kingdom at heart. I just have two questions.”

“Then proceed with all due haste, sir,” said White, and I had to turn away and stifle a giggle.

“Are we under an immediate terrorist threat?”

“No. So far as we can establish, the device which caused the blackout

was an MOD prototype. We're confident that we have the only example in existence.”

“The MOD?” said Harrington, raising his manicured eyebrows. “What on earth were they doing with something like that?”

“That's what I will be finding out as soon as I can get downstairs and question the head of the base it came from.”

“Did you have any knowledge of any project like this?”

“None whatsoever,” said Tim, “which is very worrying.”

“Indeed.”

“And your final question?” asked White.

“Why has the PM been arrested?”

“He attempted to sabotage the laptop which controlled the blackout device. He claims that the device was stolen from the MOD and that he was trying to avoid any embarrassment to the government by preventing us from discovering it's source.”

The deputy PM, who seemed too scared to speak up, looked utterly defeated and began staring at the floor.

“I see,” said Harrington. “What crime does that make him guilty of?”

“We're not sure yet, possibly treason. Either way, he can never hold public office again.”

“Oh dear,” he said in the same tone he would have used for a Corgi shitting on a palace carpet.

“He's no great loss,” I said.

Harrington glanced at me down his aquiline nose but said nothing.

“Is that it?” asked White.

“I would now like to have a political conversation with Mr Saunders,” said Harrington.

“Come on then, let's get to work,” said the boss, striding out of the room.

I was the last to leave, throwing what I hoped was a supporting smile at Tim as I closed the door behind me.

“My office,” said White. We all followed.

“So what's our plan?” I asked when we'd gathered around his desk. “Let the bastards stew or go at them full tilt straight away?”

“I think we should collate all our data first. Adam, get Hannah.”

Adam unpacked his laptop and in a couple of minutes we were holding a conference call.

“We'll be finished questioning the last few groups within fifteen minutes,” said Hannah. “Do we pack up and go or keep searching? It could take days to go through every nook and cranny of this base.”

“Surely,” said Arthur, “we should at least close the base down until we establish what has happened. Either this machine was stolen and they're guilty of a massive security breach, or they conducted the test themselves. I don't see any other possibilities.”

“Shall I send everyone in the aircraft hanger home?” asked Hannah.

“Yes, do that straight away.”

“Back in a minute.”

“We could use the marines to seal the base while we do a proper search,” suggested Adam. “But what exactly are we looking for?”

“Evidence of any other unofficial projects and exactly who was involved in this one,” said White. “And also evidence of whether or not this burglary story is true.” He tapped some buttons on his computer. “Still nothing on our gunman from the lorry.”

“Put his photo out to the media?” I offered.

“Maybe,” pondered White. “But if it wasn't stolen then one of those three downstairs must know who he is. As I see it we have two immediate options. We stay here and interrogate them hoping to clarify matters or we leave them to think for a day or two and put all our resources into searching the base. Opinions?”

“I vote we explore the base now,” said Adam. “The three downstairs can't do any more harm and surely it's a priority to establish ASAP what's been going on at the base?”

“I agree,” I said. “Two days in the cells should persuade even Jackson to come clean. Whether or not the machine was stolen, we still

don't know what the point of the test was or even who carried it out. The two drivers clearly know nothing, the dead guy hasn't helped thus far, I vote we all go straight back to the base. We can clear everyone out, get the marines to secure the perimeter and go over every inch of the place.”

“There'll be mountains of paperwork to go through,” said White.

“Surely everything's on computer now?” said Adam.

“The MOD are very old fashioned, they still have hundreds of filing cabinets.”

“They're on their way out now,” said Hannah, “should take about ten minutes. What about the rest of them?”

“We need the place clear to do a thorough search,” said Adam, “but we need someone to guide us around.”

“We can use those six other senior people,” I said. “They have the authority to gain us access to anywhere in the base and they can explain anything we may find. They all seem likely to cooperate. So, do we storm the Bastille twice in one day?”

“Give me half an hour,” said White, “I need to ensure HQ is secure before we go and organise further supplies.”

I thought about this for a moment. I'd forgotten about HQ.

“I could mind the shop,” I said. “I'm not really one for going through filing cabinets. If we only have minimal personnel here we could go to lock down, make things easier. If Arthur stays as well we could go through all the info from the interviews, go over everything again including the blackout, talk to Steve about the equipment. Tim could stay and help us as well. Plus he's on hand if there are any more political developments.”

White scratched his chin and considered all this.

“Okay, fine.”

“I'll go and see how Tim's getting on with Lord Snooty.”

I left the boss' office and went back up to the meeting room, via the kitchens. I anticipated drinking at least three coffees before they had finished but to my surprise I found Tim sitting on his own outside.

“Where's his royal ponciness?” I asked.

“He just left.”

“Interesting conversation?”

“Yes.”

He offered no elucidation.

“Anything we need to know about?”

“I’ll let you know when I’ve digested it all.”

“Fair enough. In the meantime, we’re having a sleepover.”

He looked at me quizzically.

“That sounds like a good plan,” he said when I’d explained everything. “What exactly does lock down mean?”

“You’ll see when they’ve all left. I’ll need to show you the codes anyway. Basically, we turn the ground floor and basement into a bomb proof bunker and clear all the upper floors. Have you been down to the dungeons?”

“No.”

“There’s a very comfortable living area away from the cells with enough food to last a few months. We can work down there or up top. Either way we’ll have plenty of space and relative peace and quiet.”

Forty minutes later we were down to just a dozen agents and I showed Tim the protocols for locking down the building. Firstly I tapped in the codes to bring down the three foot thick steel shutters and then we manually levered the bolts into place.

“Now this can only be opened from the inside.”

“It’s a bit like being in a coffin,” said Tim.

“But with air conditioning and catering. Now, it’s just a formality but we have to check the upper floors are all clear before we seal off the ground floor stairs and disable the lift.”

We went through a perfunctory search but we knew perfectly well who was and wasn’t in the building.

I took Tim back to the main computer.

“This disables the lift.” I tapped in the codes and steel shutters slid

into place in front of the lift doors. Again we bolted them in place.

“And finally the stairs.”

We walked over to the huge door which resembled that of a bank safe.

“Same code as the lift,” I said, tapping in the digits on the door's keypad, “and hey presto.”

A beeping alarm sounded for ten seconds and then the door vacuum sealed itself. A steel shutter came down and we bolted that into place.

Going back to the computer, I called up White.

“Lock down completed, enjoy your trip.”

“Thank you, 45. Out.”

“Come on, Tim, I'll show you around the dungeon then we can get to work.”

Twenty minutes later, after checking on our four prisoners and ignoring Jackson's blustering nonsense, I showed Tim how to seal the dungeon door and we walked through to the room which Arthur had been setting up.

“Oh good, you found some comfy chairs,” I said, letting myself flop down in an armchair. I put my feet up on an office chair. “Okay, where do we start. Arthur?”

“I thought we could go through things chronologically,” he began, “and then something we learn about the blackout itself may provide an insight into something else.”

I nodded as Tim settled himself in an adjacent chair.

“They've managed to further isolate the electrical signal and are fairly sure where in the brain it was targeted. As well as causing general confusion, it seems its purpose may well have been to induce violence. From what 7 has been able to learn from a neuroscientist, the blackout was probably an unintended consequence. It was an attempt to stimulate an ancient part of the brain, our so-called 'fight or flight' mechanism.”

“So people would react differently to it?” I said.

“That kind of makes sense,” said Tim, “from the point of view of the perpetrators. If you wanted to cause public disorder, or a massive

distraction, then a large group of people all becoming either scared or violent would do the job.”

“So you were right all along about that guy in the shop who tried to attack you?”

Arthur nodded.

“Okay,” I said, “so we're fairly sure we know what the intention of the equipment was, and that it went wrong somehow. Good, that's some useful progress. Does this test indicate that this sort of equipment is unreliable on a mass scale?”

“7 thinks so.”

“Perhaps that's for the best. Okay, what's next?”

“In the last few minutes we've had the DNA results on the driver you killed. He was originally from Israel though probably moved away at a fairly young age.”

“Israel? Any ideas on that, Tim?”

“Nothing comes to mind immediately. I mean their intelligence services are devious bastards and get up to all sorts of stuff but I can't think why they would conduct such an operation here. They're still heavily reliant on America and we're still, publicly at least, friends with America so they've no reason to want to attack us.”

“Lone ideological freak?” I suggested. “Have we got an ID on him?”

“Not yet,” said Arthur, “he isn't on file in this country and it'll take time and a lot of diplomacy to get any results from Israel.”

“Unless the MOD has been leaking like a sieve, how would any foreign power know what they were up to anyway?” I said. “They can't have gone totally rogue, can they, Tim?”

“No, that's not possible. So many people have to sign things in triplicate before they can do almost anything. I'm sure this machine is a one off... unless...”

I waited for him to elaborate.

“What?” I prompted.

“Unless they stole it from someone else.”

“If that were the case,” said Arthur, “then there will be no paper trail to find.”

“Maybe this thing was never on an MOD base in the first place,” said Tim. “Maybe they found out about it and employed the three drivers to steal it.”

“From where?” I said. “Who the hell could have built such a machine privately?”

He shrugged. “Just an idea from left field.”

I had a sudden brain wave. “All our problems revolve around not knowing who made the machine. Isn't there some way of... taking it apart and forensically working out where the components were manufactured? At least if we knew which country it came from that would be a start. I'll call... oh yes, Steve's on leave, isn't he?”

“He's been working non-stop since the blackout, he needed some sleep,” said Arthur.

“It's not so much a question of where this particular device came from,” said Tim, “it's more important that we know what they intended it to do and who has the knowledge to build another one.”

“I guess we'll only know that when we take it apart.”

“That is next on the agenda,” said Arthur, “once we've finished analysing the laptop. Another day at least.”

I got up and paced the room in frustration. “We can't just sit around doing nothing. It'll be two days at least before they've finished at the base. The only thing we have are the three MOD knobs and the PM downstairs.” I looked at my watch. “I think they've had enough time to think things over, let's have a go at the cooperative one. What's his name?”

“Mike Jones,” said Arthur.

“Tim?”

“I don't see there's anything else of much use we can achieve today, may as well give it a go.”

I phoned White and he agreed, so the three of us went down to the dungeon and took Mike to the living quarters. I figured he'd be less nervous in there than the interrogation suite and Arthur could record

everything. We gave him tea and cakes and after ten minutes of small talk I felt he was as relaxed as he was ever going to be. I had put my Kalashnikov on the floor beside the sofa where he couldn't see it, so none of us had any visible weapons. It was too hot to wear a jacket and cover a holster so I changed into cargo trousers and a vest, placing my glock in one of the expansive side pockets. I also got Arthur to remove his ever-present tie, figuring that our casual appearance would help even more. I also had a notepad and pen on my lap, which may have fooled him into thinking that he wasn't being recorded.

“So, Mike, the other two are being very uncooperative. It's rather a pain for us to have to stay locked up in here babysitting you – I'd much rather be sat in a nice beer garden this evening. I'm not saying if you talk you can go home immediately but, if you give us some useful information, you can spend the night in here instead of the cell and I promise that you'll be released tomorrow.”

Everything I said was entirely true so I held his gaze, hoping he would see that I was being genuine.

“In our department it's drummed into us that secrecy is a top priority,” he began, “There's a high level of paranoia among top level personnel. Some of them seem to think we're still fighting the cold war. There are even people who don't trust their own colleagues. It's a very insular world, not being able to tell anybody outside anything about what you do every day. I think that some people, if they don't have much going on outside the department, get a little bit stir crazy.”

“Would you say Jackson is stir crazy?” I asked.

“I wouldn't go that far, but he's deeply paranoid. If I met him in the outside world I think I'd take him for a conspiracy nut.”

That was very interesting and I wrote it down.

“Does he see it as his department?” I asked. “Is he one of those old colonel types?”

“He definitely sees his decision as final.”

“Even on the instigation of projects?” asked Tim.

“Especially that.”

“The final decision is always that of the prime minister... whoever

that turns out to be.”

I was puzzled by that but I made a mental note and let it pass.

“Did Jackson conceive this project – did he want to build a machine that could affect people's thought and behaviour remotely?”

“Yes. I know it's against all the rules,” he turned to face Tim, “but I really do think that he would have told you, or you successor, about the project when it was completed.”

I glanced at Tim and Arthur.

“Completed? So it wasn't ready for use?”

“No. We knew it was at the stage where it would have an effect but we didn't know what.”

“What was the intended purpose?”

“To disorientate people in a more subtle way that we saw during the incident.”

“How do you mean?” I asked.

Mike sighed. “What Jackson actually wanted, and we still don't know if this is technologically feasible, was a machine that would confuse people, make them slightly dizzy, affect short term memory, but not in a way that would be noticeable to anyone else. He wanted to be able to 'disarm' or pacify a large group of people without anyone noticing that it was happening. The hope was that individuals would just think they had a headache or a bit of flu coming on. The military purpose was to render groups of enemy combatants 'dozy' for a short period to enable an easier attack.”

“That's actually quite a clever idea,” I said grudgingly, “but if you ever tell Jackson I said that I'll break your arms.”

“So was it actually stolen or not?” asked Tim.

“As far as I know, yes. I came in one day and Jackson held an emergency meeting. The machine was there the previous day and now it wasn't. No trace of a break in, all relevant CCTV had been wiped and they must have disabled the alarm system.”

“Not the work of your average criminal,” I muttered.

I wrote some more notes and thought things over. Then I got up and

went into the corridor.

“91, 94 come and get yourselves a drink,” I shouted.

As they approached I whispered “He's quiet as a church mouse but he's still in our custody so keep an eye on him, and above all else keep him in one piece.”

I motioned to Tim and Arthur to follow me.

“I think we can trust him,” I said.

“I monitored his body language, all indicates he's telling the truth,” said Arthur.

“So, what we're now looking at is that Jackson developed this thing in secrecy, intending to present the finished article to the government and be hailed a national hero, or whatever was in his peculiar mind. Somehow it was stolen, or allowed to escape unnoticed, and used in a test by an unknown third party.”

They both nodded their agreement.

“That certainly simplifies matters. All we have to do now is get the other two to verify his story and identify the dead guy. Come on, let's go and give the boss some good news. Could be their search isn't needed after all.”

As we closed the dungeon door behind us I suddenly remembered Tim's expression after his meeting with the royal bloke and his comment later about who would be PM.

“Are you ready to tell us what happened in your meeting?”

“I've not had much time to think about it yet but I would like to discuss it.”

“Okay, I'll talk to the boss then we can grab a coffee. I think we've earned ourselves a little break.”

White was delighted at our apparent progress.

“As it's cost so much money to instigate this we may as well finish the search. It may come in handy in future to know more about how the MOD works. Besides, I've had the leader of the opposition bending my ear about 'leaving no stone unturned', 'we must be seen to act' etc. And there's still the matter of how this thing disappeared from the base and

who wiped the camera footage.”

“Do you want us to have another go at Jackson tonight?”

“No, leave him stew until morning. An uncomfortable nights sleep should persuade him that he's better off cooperating and getting himself released into more accommodating custody. How is the PM behaving?”

“He kicked off for a while but now he's given up. I think at the moment he'd prefer not to have to answer any more awkward questions.”

“Tomorrow I'll be talking to the Leader of the House and the Attorney General and deciding how to proceed with him. Any other problems your end?”

“No, I think we're done for the night now,” I said. “Steve's coming back tomorrow to finish dissecting the laptop and then hopefully in a day or two they'll be ready to take the equipment apart and examine the components, establish where they came from. I reckon we'll have this all sewn up in a few days.”

“I certainly hope so,” said White. “I'm badly in need of a bottle of scotch and a night of television. Over and out.”

“Nighty night.”

I decided I'd almost certainly had enough coffee the last few days so poured myself some orange juice and we settled back into our comfy chairs.

“I assume that the royal chat was about the current power vacuum?”

“Pretty much,” said Tim. “Obviously there's technically nobody in charge for three weeks before an election but a situation like this is totally different. The stock market has plummeted like a lemming and they are very keen to make a definitive announcement tomorrow lunchtime.”

“The queen wants you back?”

“There's no personal preference involved, obviously, but constitutionally we do need an immediate resolution. The current deputy PM is, to put it kindly, not even up to that job never mind actually being in charge permanently. Two options were put to me earlier. One is for me to hold talks with the government and get them to elect a worthy

leader within seven days. The other is to push for a general election and help get my party back in power.”

“Is either of those scenarios really your responsibility?” asked Arthur.

“Some people clearly think so. It's only because I'm here that I haven't been bombarded with calls from all sides. What do you two think?”

“My immediate reaction is 'Oh no, not another fucking election'. Arthur?”

“History shows that a second election is always unpopular and rarely delivers a much better result than the first one. The country voted for the incumbent party. Besides, surely it's the government's responsibility to sort this mess out themselves? It was them who elected that treacherous idiot leader.”

“Also,” I said, “another three week vacuum would surely be disastrous?”

“Those are the lines I've been thinking along myself,” said Tim, “and also, disloyal though it sounds, I wouldn't like my party to get straight back in in case they wanted me back as leader. My successor was very much chosen to lead the opposition, he's not seen as PM material.”

“Continuity,” said Arthur, “that's what the constitution demands, isn't it?”

Tim closed his eyes for a few moments and we let him mull things over in silence.

“I think I'd better make some phone calls,” he sighed.

“Fucking hell,” I said, “did the three of us just decide the future of this country?”

“I can only make suggestions,” said Tim, “I have no political power any more.”

During the silence I'd taken out my phone and gone on line.

“I think you underestimate yourself. There's a pole showing seventy three percent of the public want you back as PM.”

“Oh fuck,” he said, “I think I'd better start by phoning my wife.”

“I’ll show you how to make calls on the main computer,” I said, “that way your location can’t be traced. We still don’t want anyone knowing that you work here, even if you are going to leave soon.”

We both got up and made our way to the door.

“Arthur, you could give Barbara a call, we’ve nothing else to do tonight. In fact, fuck it, you may as well go home.”

“That’s against protocol.”

“Oh come on, what difference does it make? There’s still enough of the evening left, go home and have a meal with your wife. The three in the cells are going nowhere and there are nine agents to guard the church mouse. Go on, go home, it’s only a few minutes to open the front door enough for you to crawl out.”

“Okay,” he finally agreed, “thanks, Jennifer.”

When we had resealed the doors I showed Tim to the computer and then left him to it. I checked that everything was fine downstairs, which it was, so I found myself at a loose end.

I tried to think of what Tim would be saying to his wife and who else he would call but the possible permutations made my head spin. The fact that I was now the only other person on this floor with the man who could decide the future of the country was too much to contemplate. My brain needed some serious down time.

I realised that for the first time in weeks I could actually have a night off and get some proper sleep. I made a quick call to Adam then went back up to my comfy chair, placing a laptop on a table beside me. I went on line and found some good music, snuggled into my chair and closed my eyes.

A couple of minutes later my eyes sprang open. I’d forgotten about the small package in my locker, the contents of the hidden box in Peterson’s shed. I went to my locker, retrieved the disgusting items and took them to the toilets. Taking one last look, a mixture of disbelief and repulsion, at the dozens of photographs he had taken of me in my bedroom with a hidden camera, I tore them up and flushed them down the toilet.

Walking back to my comfy chair I put the whole affair (okay, bad

choice of words considering what happened to Libby) behind me. After all, it's pointless being angry at a dead man.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Marcus Freestone has been publishing novels and non-fiction since 2013. This thing that you have just finished reading (or are unwisely looking at the end of before you've started, tut tut, do people do that with e-books?) is his second novel. Before that he worked in journalism, a variety of tedious office jobs, completely failed to build a career in stand up comedy and was once paid £250 for a script for a TV series that was never made for reasons that were nothing to do with him or the quality of the script. His biggest success to date has been the 70,000 plus downloads of the free version of the e-book 'Positive Thinking And The Meaning Of Life' (though he is probably prouder of the time he stole the register from the school library). He will continue writing books until he is too old and tired to do so.

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He does not do twitter because his mind is too hyperactive to cram anything into 140 characters. He tried it once for a few weeks and couldn't see the point of it, and anyway all the #'s and @'s gave him a headache.

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