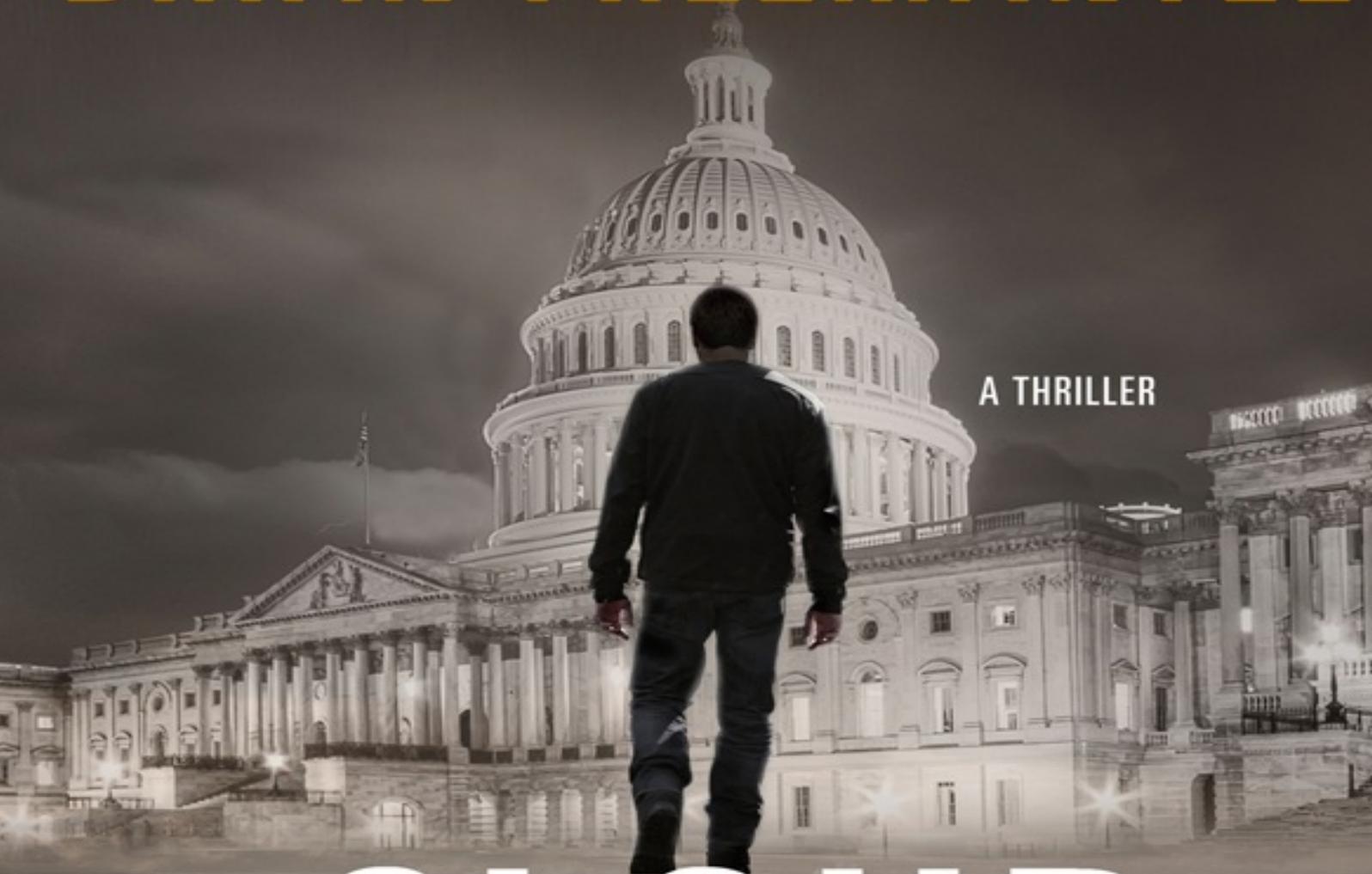


BRIAN FREEMANTLE



A THRILLER

THE **CLOUD**

COLLECTOR

BRIAN FREEMANTLE

THE CLOUD COLLECTOR

THOMAS DUNNE BOOKS
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For Camille Colon, my über-fan and friend

The mystery of how he [Osama bin Laden] kept in touch with his followers was at least partly solved yesterday by U.S. intelligence officials ... to send an e-mail bin Laden would type a message on his computer, copy it to a flash drive and hand it to a courier who would then drive miles to a distant Internet café. The courier would then send the e-mail from the café, making it all but untraceable.

—Report of a CIA briefing on how Osama bin Laden controlled Al Qaeda from his Abbottabad Pakistan, lair, *London Times*, May 13, 2011

I think it's a violation of human rights.... It [the use of drones] means you assassinate people without bringing charges, without finding them guilty, and in the process inadvertently causing collateral damage, that is the killing of completely innocent people who might be in the neighborhood.

—Former U.S. president Jimmy Carter, *London Times* interview, July 4, 2011

The forensically enhanced clarity from such a neglected CCTV was remarkable. Closing the blinds of the CIA's Langley viewing room into semi-darkness helped. The original TV camera on the wall of the single-storey winos' bar had been ten yards from the assassination, which was another advantage. The target car, a bumper-crumpled, windscreen-cracked Ford with a red offside front wing that didn't match the rest of the faded blue paintwork, came surreally into the silent picture from the left of the screen. It wasn't hurrying, slowed further by vehicles haphazardly parked on either side of the street. It was still too early for traffic restrictions or people. The front passenger had his window down, and a wristwatch on the sill. The wristwatch was a heavy mix of dials, control knobs, and numerals that would have glowed in the dark or been legible underwater.

The Ford driver found a tight space just before the telephone stand and put another dent in the bumper shunting into it. The passenger rolled his window up, but didn't get out. Neither did the driver or the scarcely visible third man in the rear. All three were heavily bearded. No-one appeared to be talking. A time counter had been superimposed on the screen: it registered six and a half minutes past five before the two men in the front got out and walked, still not talking, to the telephone. Neither attempted to get inside the hood. The driver rested his arm against the telephone ledge to keep his watch in front of him. Like the other man's, it had a lot of dials and knobs. Both men physically reacted to what must have been the incoming ring. One man grabbed the receiver, crowded beneath the hood by the other, preventing either from becoming aware of the ambush until the man they'd left in the Ford emerged from its rear, waving and obviously shouting. By that time the three who'd come from an unobtrusively parked fawn Toyota were close enough to fire point-blank. They did so precisely, bringing both men down with body hits and finishing off with single head shots. The other Ford passenger was running, and one of the hit squad broke away in pursuit but almost at once accepted that the intervening distance was too great and gave up, walking casually back to the other two bent over the bodies, rifling through their pockets. They straightened, laughing, as the returning man reached them. All three walked unhurriedly back to the Toyota and drove off in the direction of the Capitol, obediently halting at a red stoplight just visible to the CCTV.

* * *

'So how does it work?' demanded Charles Johnston, the newly appointed CIA director of cover operations.

Jack Irvine knew that having gotten this close he couldn't afford any mistakes. He could not give

this unknown man the slightest excuse to cancel, question even, the operation on which he'd worked so hard for so long to the exclusion of girlfriends, any other social life, even his belovedly restored but now neglected '92 Volkswagen. His operation—*his*, no-one else's—had to be preserved, and he'd done everything and anything to ensure that it was. The Anacostia video provided the proof that it worked.

As the cliché went, pictures were worth a thousand words and words were what Irvine intended to say. Neither Johnston nor the other two men with him needed to know the full details of what he had achieved as a National Security Agency highflier roaming way beyond Iran's official Halal Web site to discover its use of unrestricted, anonymous cyberspace darknets.

Irvine said, 'It's anti-terrorism, using the Internet—Facebook and chat rooms—as the jihadists use them: how bin Laden himself used them. And Al Qaeda and every other militant Islamist, anarchist and would-be terrorist is still using them.' It had echoed impressively when he'd mentally rehearsed it. Spoken aloud, it hadn't sounded quite so good; neither had the hesitation in his voice.

'How?' demanded Johnston. He was a large, heavy-featured man of self-protective conformity whose suits were always grey, shirts always white, and ties always plain. At that moment those heavy features were expressionless, betraying nothing.

'Taking terror to terrorists: we hack into their traffic, manipulate it....' Irvine, who despite the abandoned jogging routine was an athletically slim man suited to jeans, T-shirts, and loafers, gestured towards the now-blank screen. 'Atrocity-planning terrorists killing other atrocity-planning terrorists with no collateral damage: no dead, innocent civilians and children caught up in a Reaper drone attack; no accusations against our military. All are identified by the NSA from overseas intercepts leading us to individual groups within the United States. Proof of intended terrorist attack is never obtained from illegal phone, computer, or radio wiretapping or hacking in this country.' Irvine again indicated the screen. 'That's not our first success. If we can't create an internal war, we alert Homeland Security or other enforcement agencies overseas.' He was covering all the obvious objections, Irvine knew, disappointed there was virtually no reaction from the covert-operation director.

'So that's how it's different from the NSA's Prism Project and the Brits' Tempura programme of 2012 that got us so much heat. We hunt, don't wait?'

'Exactly!' agreed Irvine, acknowledging that Johnston had tried to prepare himself. Irvine was sure there was still no danger of his being found out.

'And what we've just seen is the result of an already-sanctioned feasibility trial?' pressed Johnston, ever cautious.

'Officially designated Operation Cyber Shepherd,' confirmed Irvine. 'I've already established an NSA team at Fort Meade; they're waiting to be briefed.'

Johnston jerked his head in the direction of the dead screen. 'What about the guy that got away?'

'Ismail al Aswamy, an Iranian in the U.S. on an expired student visa.' Irvine looked sideways at James Bradley, the operation's CIA supervisor, who continued studiously to ignore him. 'Jim assures me Aswamy's ours whenever we want to take him. For the moment we're ready to follow wherever he leads us.'

'What's the body count so far?'

‘The two you just saw taken out brings those eliminated here to a total of five. The other three were in Boston. Anti-terrorist police in Rome, Italy, have a group we’ve identified under surveillance. We’ve given the UK a lead in a town there called Bradford; no playback yet.’

* * *

Three and a half thousand miles away, in the Thames-side headquarters of MI5, its diminutive Director-General was even more curious at a lack of results.

His critics saw David Monkton’s reluctance to delegate as the man’s most obvious failing, while his matching number of supporters judged it his major attribute. In an organization as large and complex as Britain’s counter-intelligence service, delegation was operationally imperative. Monkton, whose life was tightly structured on self-imposed rules, evolved an equally reluctant compromise. He insisted upon daily, not weekly, updates on priority-designated cases from his divisional directors and carried out unannounced, unpredictable spot checks upon what he considered inadequate briefings.

This practise would uncover the nightmare scenario feared by every Western intelligence agency since 9/11 and 7/7.

David Monkton conducted the meeting not from his inherited desk, which he knew to be too large for someone of his stature, but by moving around the river-view suite, sometimes, such as now, out of his visitor's sight. Re-emerging, the MI5 Director-General went to a much-smaller side table upon which he'd spread the dossier retrieved earlier. Without looking back to Jeremy Dodson, his operations director, Monkton said, 'Why didn't this intrigue you as much as it intrigues me? As it *should* have properly intrigued you!'

Dodson, who'd actually consulted reference books for the diagnosis, decided Monkton's behavior was a classic example of a Napoléon complex, the insignificantly small man's constant need to bully. 'The police are adamant there's no link whatsoever between what came from America and the murder.'

'Which police? Special Branch? Scotland Yard's anti-terrorist division? Who?'

'A combination,' avoided Dodson uncomfortably. He shouldn't have left himself so exposed.

Monkton collected the file and finally returned to his over-sized desk, leaning forward over it and smoothing into place his immaculately trimmed toothbrush moustache that didn't need smoothing. 'I don't understand that answer, as I don't understand too many other things. Let's go back to the very beginning, to when we got the alert from the National Security Agency.'

The operations director breathed in heavily, only just preventing it from becoming a sigh. 'For Meade picked up some low-level Pakistani chatter and followed it to Germany. It included the name Roger Bennett with an indication that he was British, and so they passed it on to the Government Communications Headquarters at Cheltenham.'

'Who, quite properly, following established procedure, passed it on to us, which in practise means you. So tell me, what did you do? That's what I really want to know.'

'I strictly followed established procedure by passing it on to Scotland Yard's anti-terrorist unit,' recited Dodson. It wasn't going to be enough, he knew.

'And left it there, as someone else's responsibility?'

'No!' denied Dodson, the forcefulness just short of impertinence. 'The Yard traced Bennett to the London School of Economics; he'd dropped out and returned to his home in Bradford after two terms. He apparently knew Arabs there, but there was no evidence of radicalization or of his attending mosque in Bradford or anywhere else. The Yard is overstretched, as you know. They judged him too low-key to justify an intercept warrant on his phone or any other electronic equipment.'

Monkton let an accusing silence build. 'There was a Pakistani connection: positive suspect chatter'

You have the authority to apply for an electronic intercept warrant.'

'The Yard passed it on to the local police,' tried Dodson desperately.

'Who are now trying to find out why and how Roger Bennett ended up in a Bradford alley, stabbed to death and with half his tongue cut out.'

'Bradford police are investigating it as a gang killing. They have Bennett as a petty criminal, not a terrorist.'

'Did he have a criminal record?'

'In his late teens. Robbery with violence and aggravated assault.'

'Which I don't see in this file,' persisted Monkton, tapping the papers before him.

'It had nothing to do with terrorism.'

'Who, then, was making contact with him from Pakistan, through a German intermediary? And why was he on NSA's suspect airways list six months before he's found murdered?'

'I don't know,' miserably conceded Dodson.

'But I want to know,' insisted Monkton. 'Use proper channels to reach the chief constable, seeking his authority and assistance to clear up something we don't understand, that sort of approach. I don't want anyone believing their toes are being trodden upon or their territory invaded. And I don't want any media leaks.'

'I'll avoid that,' promised Dodson.

'I'll be extremely disappointed if you don't. And I'm already disappointed enough as it is.'

* * *

'Thanks a fucking lot!' protested Jack Irvine as the door closed behind the head of the CIA's cover division.

'You got a problem?' mildly queried Harry Packer, NSA's liaison director to the Agency. He was a bespectacled, balding man with the stoop of someone uncomfortable with his height, determined physically as well as figuratively to keep well below the parapet until he'd worked out the personal benefits of this operation. So far, he believed they might be considerable, and to climb out of the toilet into which his personal life was being flushed away, he needed all the benefits he could get.

'I think not getting any support or input from your two guys with whom Shepherd is being worked is a problem, yes,' said Irvine, over-emphasizing the irritation. 'I also think I was set up as the fall guy if Johnston scrapped the whole operation.' He'd done the right thing, holding back until now: he still had the back channel to the CIA deputy director if Johnston changed his mind. He'd marked both promotion-positioning backwatchers manoeuvring maximum advantages from Cyber Shepherd.

'But he didn't scrap it, did he?' James Bradley, Irvine's CIA counterpart, smiled. 'There wasn't a chance in hell of Johnston cancelling something already approved by our recently elevated deputy director. Johnston's ass is Teflon-tempered.'

Conrad Graham's promotion created the vacancy Johnston now occupied following belated recognition of Graham's role establishing the joint National Security Agency/CIA task force that he devised, with the Israeli Mossad, the Stuxnet cyberwar weapon. A worm that without detection overrode already-installed computer control programs, Stuxnet was introduced into Iran's uranium

processing facility at Natanz in late 2010 and unknown to its Iranian operators alternated between fast and slow the intended centrifuge rotations sufficiently to disrupt Tehran's atomic development.

They wouldn't mock if they knew how much he'd gained from Stuxnet, Irvine thought. 'So why the big silence?'

'Shepherd's your baby: you didn't need any help from us setting it all out for the new man,' said Bradley, a carelessly crumpled bachelor fattened by microwave TV dinners and whose invariably tightly buttoned jackets concertina-creased over yesterday's shirt. 'I thought we'd established the rules of engagement: you handle all the clever cyberspace shit. I pick up when everything gets down to ground level: a perfect combination.' And one that was going to get him a \$2,000 grade hike, reflected Bradley.

'That made us little more than observers today,' endorsed Packer. 'What *could* we have contributed that you couldn't explain better?'

'So what did you observe?' Irvine mocked back, even-voiced.

'New guy on the block, feeling his way in, is all,' said Bradley.

'And now it's time to move on,' hurried Packer, determined to get away from the CIA's Langley headquarters in time for that night's poker, upon which the monthly alimony depended.

'I'm coming up to Fort Meade fully to brief the team,' announced Irvine. 'Meade is where the facilities are, from where we're going to get the leads.'

'I'll make the arrangements,' undertook Packer, a career bureaucrat, not a cryptologist, who had already decided to associate himself with all that was safe—and probably documented—and steadfastly avoid anything and everything that was not. Staff movements were his responsibility, and he was apprehensive that Irvine's relocation to DC might prove too expensive.

'That would be a contribution,' said Irvine heavily, but then wondered why he'd bothered: he was going to keep them at a greater distance than they imagined they were keeping him. Looking at Bradley, he said, 'We haven't talked about al Aswamy.'

'What's to talk about?'

'You pick up when everything gets down to the ground,' irritably echoed Irvine. 'We still don't properly know how important he is.'

'He's locked in our box and we've got the key,' guaranteed Bradley. 'You look after your side, I'll look after mine.'

That's precisely what he intended to do, thought Irvine.

* * *

'Arrogant son of a bitch!' declared Bradley, generously pouring Jack Daniel's for both of them. They'd finally moved from the viewing room to the man's mission-assigned office, which had corner window views out over the Virginia forest as far as Rock Creek Park, although the Potomac was hidden in the intervening valley.

'He's the best Arabic scholar at Meade, never known an encryption he couldn't break, and he works a computer like Chopin played the piano,' enthused Packer sycophantically, gauging he had a maximum of thirty minutes before he needed to get on the road. 'And Conrad Graham judged him

invaluable on Stuxnet.'

'Which very obviously Irvine believes, too,' said Bradley, settling behind his desk. 'Important maybe, invaluable, no. This is a crusade against Islamic extremism, not a reputation-building exercise or redemption effort for the fuckups of his father.'

'He talked about his father with you?' asked the surprised Harry Packer, who'd imagined he'd be the only one to check out Irvine's background.

Bradley shook his head. 'Came up in all its sorry detail during his background check: hell of a mess. Sure as hell don't want to be caught up in a repetition.'

'That's hardly likely: this is altogether different.'

'It's got the potential.'

'Everything we do, either here or at Fort Meade, has the potential for disaster,' Packer argued back more for his own reassurance than the other man's. Shaking his head against a refill, he said, 'What about Chuck Johnston?' Today had been their first personal encounter.

Bradley considered his answer. 'Word is that there's never been a decision, right or wrong, with his name on it.'

A responsibility-avoiding principle he also studiously observed, Packer recognized. 'This hasn't got his name on it. Conrad Graham signed off.'

'That's why I knew Johnston wouldn't pull the rug from under us.'

'Still right to handle it as we did.'

'Don't want anything to come up and bite us in the ass, do we?' invited Bradley, adding to his own glass.

'Absolutely not.' He'd be back in Baltimore soon enough, Packer decided. He had a good feeling—a winner's feeling—about tonight.

* * *

'I've made all the necessary police approaches: gone back to Scotland Yard and GCHQ, as well. There's nothing beyond what you've already seen,' Jeremy Dodson told Monkton. 'And I've drawn up a list of officers if you want us to get physically involved.'

'I definitely intend our getting involved,' said the Director-General, for once behind his overwhelming desk. 'And I've already decided upon an officer.'

Dodson hesitated, covering his awkwardness by retrieving the sheet of paper he'd already pushed partially across the desk. 'You won't be needing this, then?'

'No, I won't be needing that.'

'I've still got time to brief him this afternoon,' offered Dodson hopefully.

'I've already done that, too.'

‘So MI5 is recruiting women now!’ The desk plate identified Edward Pritchard as a detective superintendent. The undisguised implication was that the employment barrel had been scraped from its absolute bottom, including splinters. The wall behind the man was a collage of overseas police force pennants and framed photographs of foreign events all featuring Pritchard in the foreground.

‘They have been for a long time now.’ Sally Hanning smiled, contemptuous of the chauvinism of the man who sat with both hands cupping a bulged gut, as if it needed support. It would have been charitable, which she rarely was, to think its burden was the reason for his not standing when she entered the room.

‘Actually licensed to kill!’

‘No,’ she said, impatient with the condescension. ‘Just to get easily irritated by irrelevant nonsense. Your chief constable promised every assistance. And that he’d send you a memo setting that out.’

Pritchard’s superciliousness slipped. ‘What, precisely, do you want?’

‘That promised assistance. I’d like to see the full case file on Roger Bennett, be updated on what progress there’s been about a possible Pakistani terrorist connection, and hear whether it had any connection with his murder.’ Sally smiled again, happy at the abrupt change in attitude. ‘In fact, I’d like you to talk everything through with me from the very beginning.’

‘I’m having the case file copied; it’ll be ready before you leave,’ said the detective chief stiffly. ‘There’s no connection whatsoever between Bennett’s killing and any Pakistani terrorism. Apart from what was passed on from America, which only amounted to half an A4 page, there’s absolutely nothing to substantiate a Pakistan connection to the man. We didn’t find any mosque he attended and therefore no evidence of any conversion or interest in Islam.’

‘What assistance did you get from Cologne?’

‘Cologne?’ queried Pritchard blankly.

‘The contents of that half A4 page were routed through Cologne,’ Sally pointedly reminded him. ‘Are the German details in the file being copied for me?’

‘I’ve just told you we don’t believe Bennett was involved in terrorism.’

‘Are you telling me you haven’t had any communication with Cologne?’

‘It wasn’t necessary. Bennett was a petty crook, nothing more.’

‘Why do you think he was killed, had his tongue cut out?’ broke in Sally, irritated at the returned dismissiveness.

‘He was a thug, small-timer imagining he was big-time,’ recited Pritchard wearily. ‘Offended someone who’d watched too many Hollywood films and didn’t like something Bennett said. We’ve got a lot of lowlifes of too many nationalities in Bradford, all fighting among themselves. Rog Bennett isn’t any loss to the community.’

‘I don’t understand your remarks about the tongue cutting and Hollywood movies?’

Pritchard gave an exaggerated sigh. ‘All those Hollywood films about the Mafia: what happens gangsters who shoot their mouths off.’

Sally didn’t immediately respond. ‘We’re discussing possible Middle East terrorism. Tongue cutting is for a different sort of offence there.’

Now it was the police chief who remained briefly silent. ‘You weren’t born in this country, were you?’

‘No,’ confirmed Sally, with no intention of satisfying the man’s curiosity. She’d inherited her Jordanian mother’s olive complexion and Chanel-chic, small-busted figure, and her blue-eyed natural blondness from her English father.

Again Pritchard waited, but when she didn’t continue, he said, ‘What is it a punishment for?’

‘Mostly dishonour.’

‘I’d say that’s the same thing.’

‘There’s a big difference,’ insisted Sally. ‘You know the lowlifes with whom Bennett mixed?’

‘None that know anything about his killing. Or who’d tell us if they did.’

‘What about family?’

‘He didn’t have any. Only son, mother died in the nineties, father nine months ago, when Bennett was at college in London.’

‘There were surely schools or colleges here he went to before graduating to the London School of Economics?’

‘Got there from a probation-rehabilitation scheme after convictions for violence; would have gone to jail, where he belonged, if the save-the-world evangelist couple he held—and stabbed—the knifepoint hadn’t pleaded in court for leniency to save his soul for God. People in the parole office read a book on how long he’d last in London. His probation officer won thirty pounds, bought drinks around.’ Pritchard looked pointedly at his watch.

Sally relaxed back in her chair. ‘Where did he live?’

‘In whatever gutter he woke up in. There was a room at a hostel, but it’s been emptied now, of course.’

‘I’d like to go through everything from the crime scene that you’re still holding: clothes, what he had in his pockets, stuff like that.’

‘You can help yourself to whatever you want.’

‘And an officer to take me to the hostel to see if there’s anything Bennett left behind.’

‘You can have anything you want,’ repeated the man, shuffling ineffectually to stand, to end the encounter. ‘Is that all?’

‘Unless something else comes up.’ Sally smiled. When it did, she’d decide to take Pritchard’s offer literally.

Jack Irvine's chosen team was already assembled in the smallest of the first-floor conference rooms in the National Security Agency's sprawling Fort Meade complex.

During their work together on Stuxnet, Irvine had recognized Burt Singleton—around whom it was said the NSA had been built—not just as one of its foremost cryptologists but as one of its most innovative thinkers. Marian Lowell, who positioned herself two rows farther back from Singleton, was an equally revered legend, a married-to-the-agency professional whose encyclopedic memory virtually made unnecessary the meticulously maintained research that Irvine believed to have shortened by months the final development of the Stuxnet worm. On either side of Marian, mother hen protecting her chicks, sat Shab Barker and Akram Malik, American-born grandsons of two Pakistani immigrant families whose respective hotel and leisure empires made possible Yale and Harvard educations with magna cum laude mathematics degrees. Proud of their American citizenship—the family name of Bibi had become Barker, Shabaz shortened to Shab—they'd also inherited a pride in their ancestry, which they considered shamed by the terrorist complicity and corruption of Pakistan.

'Marian's given me three-to-one against our finally hearing what the hell's going on,' declared Singleton, a flop-haired man who hid his prowess beneath a convincingly adopted Louisiana-ole-bole accent to match an appearance of constant perplexity. The elbows and cuffs of his jacket were leather-patched, and the cord trousers puddled over scuffed combat boots.

'You should have held out for ten.' Irvine smiled back, grateful for the man's unwitting icebreaker. 'But first you're going to hear an apology. We're going to run a highly classified project, Operation Cyber Shepherd, partnered with the CIA, who until now has insisted on my working with them on a need-to-know basis. What you're being told today you should have been told earlier, and I'm sorry you weren't.'

There were frowns between Singleton and Marian but no immediate challenge, which Irvine had half expected.

'Some things came up during Stuxnet that didn't specifically contribute to that project,' continued Irvine. 'They did, though, give me an idea that I ran past Conrad Graham, then the CIA's director of covert operations. He approved my exploring them as a possible operation, which for a time I did as a research project.' Irvine stopped, again risking an interruption he didn't want and fortunately didn't come. 'It's important for all of you to understand that everything you've so far done at my request was properly approved and authorized.'

Irvine was conscious of renewed looks between Marian and Singleton. The two Pakistani-Americans still gave no reaction.

'It's a CIA-financed operation, headed by a covert-division supervisor named Jim Bradley. Harry Packer's the liaison officer from here,' went on Irvine. 'Everyone in this room has the highest security clearance, higher probably than a lot of the CIA people working on the periphery of what's involved. We're not on the periphery. We're at the very core, the people making it work, and I don't want it continuing as it has until now.'

'I don't think I do, either,' intruded Singleton at last. 'I'd like what at the moment sounds like'

nonsense properly explained, right now!’

‘We’d all like that,’ insisted Marian. ‘Our employment contracts are with the National Security Agency, not the Central Intelligence Agency, by whose operating procedures none of us is bound.’

Irvine had forgotten Marian held a corporate law degree. ‘That’s why we’re having this meeting.’

* * *

‘To make the Stuxnet sabotage work we had to get to the Programmable Logic Controller of Iran’s Natanz and Bushehr facility computers,’ reminded Irvine. ‘Which we couldn’t, not by direct hacking. The Iranians had anticipated the danger of an Internet connection. Their nuclear PLCs weren’t connected but ran independently. Our only way in was to hack the personal computers of the Natanz and Bushehr scientists to create our botnets—or Trojan horses or spiders, whatever you want to call them—the moment they put their memory sticks into their otherwise protectively isolated mainframes...’

Marian and Singleton were nodding in recollection. Barker and Malik were both pressed forward, easily following the explanation.

‘Israel’s Mossad had a lot of personnel file details on the Iranian and Russian technicians at Natanz and Bushehr,’ picked up Irvine, his earlier tension easing. ‘Israel also have equipment similar to our own algorithm capacity and our dual random-number generators.’ Irvine cleared his throat, wishing he’d brought water into the room with him. Looking to Singleton, he said, ‘Am I making myself clear?’

‘I’ll let you know if you don’t,’ said the man with obvious reservation.

Was it just an irritation at not being included from the beginning? wondered Irvine. Or was it deeper than that, the resentment of someone twenty years his senior believing he should have been the project leader? ‘Once we got into the personal PCs, we automatically gained access to every name—and computer—on each PC’s contacts list, multiplying our botnet trawl. They were careless, these guys; had every excuse to be, I guess. They were inside what was supposed to be the most secure facility in the entire country. No-one could get to them, read their mail, which was why they wrote in clear, never encryption. I read a hell of a lot, we used a hell of a lot. There was one guy I picked out early on, signed himself Hamid. Came to believe that at another time in another Cold War he’d have been described as a commissar. Hamid didn’t close down after Stuxnet so I went on monitoring him on my own time back at Meade; tried to follow his communication routes, which started to go through cutouts, although too often still unencrypted. His using the anonymous darknet chat rooms didn’t surprise me. Facebook did. It took me a year to hack into all Hamid’s cutouts—as well as Hamid’s shared darknet account—to be able to follow the traffic both ways, although not quite as long as I realized that Hydarnes, his shared Tehran account, is that of a covert-operations division of Vezarat-e Ettela’at va Amniat Keshvar.’ Irvine paused, preparing his denouement. ‘We have our own Trojan horse deep inside, totally without Tehran’s knowledge or suspicion.’

Singleton interrupted disbelievingly, ‘You got us *inside* Iran’s espionage service!’

‘An active subversive operational unit of Vevak,’ qualified Irvine, using the acronym. ‘From that one discovery and the botnets we installed from the address-book links, we’ve established that they’

heavily using Facebook when they leave their darknet concealment to get into the West.’ The hesitation was again intentional, for effect. ‘And it hasn’t stopped with social networks. Through darknets I’ve got into chat rooms. I think we’ve got a handle on at least two, maybe three, darknets regularly visited by Al Qaeda groups in Arabia, Yemen, Pakistan, the Maghreb, Europe, and here.’

‘All that has emerged from social networks!’ questioned Marian Lowell, an angular-bodied woman whose blue-dyed hair was lacquered into a protective helmet and who always wore business suits. Today’s was brown check, with a belted jacket.

‘A lot of it,’ confirmed Irvine. ‘Don’t forget we didn’t then fully appreciate how social networks would be used to avoid censorship and security controls in the Maghreb revolutions of 2011. Then it was to publicize regime change. Think of the opposite. What better concealment can any sort of terrorist group have than to be among millions upon millions of social-network users, until now hidden from us, too, despite our worldwide signals intelligence-sharing with Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the UK and our bilateral exchange agreement with the UK. It’s the equivalent of double, even triple encryption with double, even triple anonymity.’

There was a contemplative silence. Singleton stirred as if to speak, but before he could, Barker said, ‘Okay, so we’re ahead of the game. We can alert counter-intelligence to prevent the attacks before they’re mounted. That’s our job; what’s different with what you’re doing?’

From anyone else Irvine would have considered the question sarcastic, but not from Barker, a soft-voiced, gentle-mannered man confronting a regretted teenage addiction to hot dogs, hamburgers, and molasses-soaked waffles with a self-devised white-fish, nut, and herbal-drink diet that contributed nothing to any weight loss but substantially to discomforting flatulence.

Irvine breathed deeply, preparing himself. ‘We’re not stopping when we identify a planned attack. We hack into the planners’ computers, add or remove or alter their messages—sometimes leaking to rival groups, intruding Shia or Sunni hatred—to turn one against the other.’ He paused. ‘So far two groups have destroyed each other instead of innocent Americans ... innocent civilians anywhere.’

There was utter silence for several moments. Then Singleton said, ‘I want to know a lot more than that.’

‘You picked up a private Facebook message to Boston six months ago that originated from Syria,’ reminded Irvine. ‘I got a botnet into the Boston recipient’s laptop. He was a Syrian immigrant. The CIA found an Al Qaeda suicide video in his apartment when they made a quick in-and-out intrusion. He’d formed up with two others, both Palestinian-born Americans with Hamas-based relatives in Gaza, all part of the Hamas–Al Fatah reconciliation.’

‘I don’t remember arrest publicity,’ complained Singleton. ‘When’s the trial? On what charges?’

‘There wasn’t a trial. I followed the Syrian-led group through their Facebook cutouts into their operational e-mails. They were buying weapons for Hamas through Mexican suppliers, shipping them through Colombia on a drug-supply route. I introduced an e-mail through Colombia to the gunrunner in Gaza control, showing they were operating a weapons-supply business on the side. All three got taken out by a Hamas hit squad.’

‘So we’re setting up our own Murder Incorporated and you’re inviting us to become part of a botnet hacking group to operate it?’ Singleton calmly asked.

‘Absolutely not,’ rejected Irvine, anxious to introduce the carefully prepared justification. ‘We got bogged down in an illegal war in Iraq, we got bogged down in Afghanistan—where no invader has ever won a war—and we’ve crossed too many borders of too many countries clandestinely fighting terrorists. And what’s the universal condemnation against America every time? Collateral damage, killing or maiming civilians. We identify a target in Pakistan, a Predator drone drops its bombs or fires its missiles, kills two or three terrorists—if we’re lucky—and wipes out twenty innocent or men, women, and children. You know our kill score of innocents so far in Pakistan? Three thousand and rising. And with every one of those innocent deaths also dies every hope of our ever winning hearts and minds and stopping America from being the most vilified and hated nation on the planet. This way there’s no collateral hurt. Those we trace who don’t kill each other we pursue and punish legally if at all possible. No dead innocents, no America Go Home banners, no American-flag burning.’

‘Didn’t we leave loose ends in Boston?’ relentlessly persisted Singleton.

‘Again, very definitely no!’ insisted Irvine, believing he was winning the inevitable moral argument. ‘Through the Syrian we got to two more whose supposedly hidden Facebook exchange claimed Al Qaeda affiliation. The FBI has the entire group under blanket surveillance—with court-approved wiretaps on cell phones, landlines, and Internet connections—until this new Al Qaeda affiliated group and other associates are identified. From the Colombian Facebook traffic there was a steer to the three-man Boston assassination team. The Boston assassination trio are based in Miami; their day job is acting as the conduit for a cocaine cartel working out of Medellín. Everything’s now with the Drug Enforcement Administration, who didn’t have the Miami three flagged until we told them.’

Marian said, ‘I logged other partial penetrations, following the guidelines you set for us. How many more fatalities have there been with your intervention with those?’ Once again it wasn’t an accusation.

‘Two in Washington, a month and a half ago,’ responded Irvine. ‘Both were Americans, former infantry who’d done four tours between them in Afghanistan. Came home not just disillusioned but anti-U.S.; converted to Islam and met their recruiter, an Iranian named al Aswamy, in an Arlington mosque. I got that from al Aswamy’s Facebook. He was using a binary code, half-encrypted on his private Facebook wall, the other half on a different time and day by cell-phone texts, read properly only when the two halves were put together. There was also a reference to another radicalized Muslim group in Annapolis; they’d apparently rejected al Aswamy after he made a recruitment approach; they’d identified him as a Sunni. They were Shiites.’

‘I got their cell number for you,’ remembered Barker.

‘Which was all I needed. Al Aswamy was routing through Pakistan’s Islamabad on a darknet to conceal his Tehran control. I hacked back into his Facebook traffic and his cell and reversed al Aswamy’s original message en route about recruiting the Americans. I added that they’d been dishonourably discharged from the U.S. infantry after an incident in Sangin in which two Shia girls were raped before the entire family were shot dead. It was an actual atrocity that occurred in Afghanistan, without any arrests. I also added, as if in reply to al Aswamy, that in view of the

Annapolis rejection he anonymously leaked to U.S. authorities that they were planning a terrorist attack and sent it as an apparently misdirected e-mail.’

‘That would have used al Aswamy’s e-mail address, as well as whatever identification he’d had at the time they had them have when he originally approached them?’ predicted Marian.

‘That’s how it worked.’

‘But not with one hundred percent success,’ challenged Singleton. ‘You said the two Anacostia Americans were killed. Al Aswamy’s the leader; what happened to him?’

Irvine smiled at the prescience. ‘He got away and I’m damned glad he did. The two Americans were hit at the very moment they were to get instructions for an attack, although we didn’t know that at the time. We only discovered it when we got the recording of their broken telephone conversation of five words: *The attack is to be ...* We’ve gotten more since. But not enough. Just that it’s still to be staged, but not where or when. Or precisely by which newly recruited group.’

‘You’re right,’ said Marian Lowell, even-voiced. ‘We haven’t gotten enough by a very long measure. What are you doing about it?’

Singleton unexpectedly answered, ‘The Facebook account and separate Internet addresses you’re having me monitor are al Aswamy’s, right?’

‘Right. And they begin on Halal and route through darknets from Iranian intelligence.’

‘What if they use a different Vevak route to Facebook that we don’t have?’ demanded Marian. ‘Could we call from a landline or cell we’re not aware of for the second part of a binary code? Or use any other sort of PDA we don’t know about and aren’t listening to? We’re wide-open on this!’

Irvine said, ‘You’re forgetting the Trojan horse I’ve got in the Tehran system. Anything protectively routed from al Aswamy would eventually go through the Tehran router in which I am embedded. I’d know the minute it arrived: the computer alerts are tied to my cell and that’s permanently on wherever I am. Additionally—and obviously essentially—al Aswamy is under the tightest twenty-four-hour, CIA surveillance. We couldn’t have missed anything, *can’t* miss anything.’

‘We’re relying on just one electronic source, an interrupted telephone call,’ Singleton objected. ‘I’d like a secondary confirmation.’

‘So would I,’ supported Marian at once.

‘So would we all,’ agreed Irvine, uneasy at the opposition from the two whom he considered the strongest of his team. ‘You tell me how often we’ve had two sources positively to be sure of a terrorist act.’

‘We guess or surmise rather than be sorry after an event,’ argued Marian. ‘You’re talking about an attack you *know* is going to take place. You surely can’t wait for the entire picture before we move. You pick up al Aswamy, you prevent an attack you’ve got evidence is going to take place. Waiting creates an unnecessary risk.’

‘Al Aswamy doesn’t move without our knowing. We don’t get something soon, I’ll reconsider. I’ll give it another week.’

‘This is going to be a totally cohesive group from now on, isn’t it?’ queried Singleton.

‘Of course.’

‘Everyone’s going to know *everything* that’s happening?’ persisted the man.

‘It can’t work any other way now,’ confirmed Irvine, illogically wishing there were, reluctant as he was even to have had to disclose as much as he had to those he implicitly trusted and upon whom he relied for Operation Cyber Shepherd to work.

Marian said, ‘What’s the CIA’s contribution to all this, apart from the half-assed need-to-know stupidity?’

‘Financial,’ replied Irvine easily. ‘It’s their budget, not ours. Additionally, when we isolate a foreign source or group, their guys on the ground, wherever that is, have to provide the backup for our manipulation. Likewise, here in America.’

‘What if the contacts here are Americans?’ seized the woman. ‘The Supreme Court has ruled it illegal for the CIA to operate against American nationals within the United States.’

‘But not upon foreign nationals in the United States,’ argued Irvine. ‘If it’s an all-American group we move against their contacts overseas and turn the American end over to Homeland Security.’

‘The CIA has a code-breaking facility,’ Singleton pointed out. ‘What’s our liaison with the division?’

‘None,’ said Irvine. ‘This is a specialized unit performing a very specialized function.’

Marian said, ‘I’ve never heard of a joint operation like this before.’

‘There hasn’t been one like this before,’ said Irvine.

‘That’s what worries me,’ said Singleton.

Marian turned to the man. ‘I’m not paying out on the bet.’

‘I don’t expect you to,’ said Singleton.

* * *

Irvine was fifteen minutes early for his meeting with Harry Packer, but was ushered immediately into the liaison director’s office for a glad-handed greeting. Before Irvine properly settled himself, Packer said, ‘I know I stayed out of it—and told you why—but between the two of us, I thought that was one hell of a presentation at Langley, Jack.’

‘Thank you,’ said Irvine guardedly. This was only his second meeting with the man and Irvine regarded this encounter as an assessment.

‘What do you think of Johnston and Bradley?’ It was important Packer identify the strengths and weaknesses of everyone with whom he was now linked. He wished to hell he’d better identified the strengths and weaknesses of those who’d taken \$500 off him after the Langley session.

‘Cautious, maybe,’ suggested Irvine. ‘Thought there might have been a little more enthusiasm for what could be a career-builder for them.’

‘That’s what I thought.’

A man of other people’s opinions, judged Irvine. ‘You foresee a working-relationship problem?’

‘Too early to say,’ avoided Packer. ‘But that’s why I think it’s important for you and me to work close together: make sure they don’t steamroll us, just because they’re financing the whole thing.’

‘How, exactly, do you see our working to avoid that?’ asked Irvine uneasily.

‘I’m not suggesting we’re constantly in each other’s pockets,’ quickly qualified Packer, eager to rig his selective-information safety net. ‘I know the CIA better than you do, can recognize the

curveballs quicker than you. I'll watch the DC manoeuvring, you keep me technically ahead with the code-breaking.'

Irvine couldn't have established the boundaries keeping the other man as far away as possible better himself! 'That sounds just fine.'

'And I want you to know, Jack, I don't have any reservations about how successful this operation is going to be.'

'That's good to hear.'

Sally was the anglicized name for Selwa, a change she'd introduced within a month of her parents' assassination. Unbeknownst to both she'd never liked the hybrid of an Arab name with her English father's surname: from her early teens she'd thought it appeared that she was undecided about which of the two cultures she bridged. It certainly did not reflect a rejection because of the atrocity, although it obviously coincided with her being moved from Amman to London. That relocation—and the initially unwelcome safe-house precaution—had been imposed by MI5 in its initial mistaken belief that the Jordanian network was being targeted by a militant Islamic Al Qaeda faction or the newly emerging IS. In the year it took for the truth to emerge—that her parents had been the unintended, wrong-placed-at-the-wrong-time victims of Hezbollah cross-border informer retribution—MI5 had recognized her Arab-language deficiencies and drawn heavily upon Sally's complete bilingualism. Six months after that, customary background vetting foreshortened because of her father's station-chief credentials, Sally officially joined MI5's Arab division. The only suitability examination to which she was subjected was psychological, to determine if she'd suffered mental trauma from the circumstances of her parents' murder. The conclusion was that she had neither emotional disturbance nor generalized Arab antipathy: the official verdict was "exceptionally well adjusted, at every psychological level."

A further finding of that psychological profile was that Sally Hanning's mental strength and resilience translated into a stubborn personal independence against authority in general and a refusal in particular to unquestioningly accept information even from supposedly professional or qualified sources.

Sally didn't consider her encounters with Detective Chief Superintendent Edward Pritchard or his deputed sergeant who'd escorted her to Roger Bennett's hostel to be either qualified or professional. Which was why, to prevent any warned-against secret-service publicity, she'd used the inherited authority of the sergeant who originally escorted her to return to the hostel alone later the same afternoon. It took her less than thirty minutes to recover Bennett's computer from a locker the earlier dismissive police search hadn't found, and which she, in turn, didn't bother telling the police chief about before leaving Bradford.

Before doing so Sally followed correct procedure, having Thames House officially advise the Government Communications Headquarters, Britain's equivalent of America's NSA, of her cross-country journey to Cheltenham. A slightly built, quiet-spoken man whom Sally guessed to be no more than ten years older than her, was waiting when she got through the protracted security procedure at GCHQ. He told her his name was John, which she knew it wasn't. She introduced herself as Sally

because her name would have been on London's notification to match her MI5 accreditation documents.

'London said you wanted some technical help with the Bennett alert from America?' he greeted looking at the encased computer as he escorted her to a small, windowless interview room on the same ground-floor level. Sally knew she was still only in the outside perimeter of the communications hub.

'I want this hard drive examined for deleted material that might connect with what came from America,' elaborated Sally, putting the computer on the table between them. From his side John placed a slim, unmarked manila folder next to it.

The man frowned. 'It wouldn't have been difficult for Bradford forensics to have done that for you without your coming all this way.'

'I want it done professionally, properly.'

'How soon?'

'Today. Bennett's dead, murdered. There's been a lot of time wasted.'

'We didn't know he'd been killed. The police didn't tell us. Our involvement was limited to intelligence traffic, nothing more.'

'Can you check everything on the hard drive today?'

'Working from the date of the known American interception?'

Sally hesitated. 'We could initially go forward from there. We might need to go backward depending upon what we find. My guess is that there was earlier traffic that wasn't intercepted.'

John opened his folder, reading aloud: "'Invite the brothers to the celebration.'" He looked up. 'It certainly reads as if there was something earlier. Let's start from the date of this transmission, see how and where we go from there.'

'The Bradford murder file had that message in unencrypted English. Was that how it was originally intercepted by NSA? Or was it encrypted?'

John went back to the file. 'It was in English, on the private link from a Facebook account. It was encrypted in what amounted to little more than a schoolboy code: figures plus one for corresponding letter in the alphabet to decipher. Bennett would have had a crib to read it. It would have provided virtually instant translation.' John smiled and looked up. 'At first we agreed with America that this encryption was something incredibly clever, something we hadn't come across before *because* it was so simple!'

'So there won't be any translation difficulties if there's more, using the same encryption?' She needed to run a passport search, Sally reminded herself. There hadn't been one among Bennett's personal belongings she'd sifted through in Bradford or in the hostel computer locker. With one realization came another. 'What did you do here, after getting that one message? Did you monitor the German sender's computer address? And Bennett's?'

John returned to his folder. 'Bennett's message was intercepted from a Cologne Internet café. The account was in the name of Mohammed, which has to be the most generic Arabic name. We installed a monitor for a month. We put Bennett's electronic address on a watch list, also for a month. After that we checked with Thames House, who said we could lift both.'

It wasn't just Bradford police who'd screwed up, Sally recognized. It might have helped if she'd

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