

a crime that could change society forever

The Timekeepers

Nick Gray

Tigroney Press Fiction

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Author's Note

All the events and characters in this book are entirely fictional. The places are real and the possibilities equally real. The staff of the familiar governments and agencies are imaginary, and any resemblance to people either living or dead is purely co-incidental.

Festor was feeling slightly claustrophobic as he sat with fifteen other people around the historic conference table that was such a feature of the Roosevelt Room in the White House. The President sat halfway along one side with the main doorway immediately behind her, allowing for a rapid and unimpeded exit directly to the Oval Office opposite. Festor, sitting at the far end of the table, had spent much of the time looking at the painting of a uniformed Theodore Roosevelt astride a wild mustang that dominated the room. He didn't like the painting but felt he needed to avoid catching the eye of any of the other committee members. The meeting was progressing slowly and Festor's eyes kept dropping to the simple wooden cased clock sat centrally on the mantelpiece below the painting. He knew that time was running out and moved uncomfortably in his chair. The windowless room was only 25 feet wide by 35 feet, and what with the heavy sideboards and the row of flags, plus the various private secretaries sat in chairs placed against the far wall, he was beginning to feel nauseous. The room had suddenly gone quiet as the President studied a document before putting her signature to it. Now was his moment. He leaned forward and took a sip of water. He looked up and spoke.

'The end of time has arrived' said Festor, 'the end is nigh.' He glanced around nervously and realized that no one was taking any notice of him. The rest of the members of the committee were either talking confidentially to each other in whispers or making notes. He glanced at his wristwatch, it was now or never. He coughed nervously and then standing up, coughed more loudly. Slowly the talking faltered and finally stopped as one by one each head around the conference table in the restored Georgian room was turned expectantly towards him. He coughed again.

'Well?' enquired a blond-haired woman pen in hand peering over half-moon reading glasses in Festor's direction. 'You have something you wish to share with us?'

'Yes...yes indeed Lady President,' he paused.

'Well!' she snapped, showing her impatience at this unwanted interruption by this...this...who in the hell was this guy anyway? CIA, FBI, Department of the Interior. No wait, she suddenly remembered...bloody NASA. Here we go again, she thought. 'Well, you have the floor.'

'The end of time has arrived,' Festor blurted out. There was an expectant pause but Festor, his confidence gone, had already sat down and the pause grew longer. There was a single self-conscious giggle from one of the private secretaries sat in an armchair against the far wall, but generally people just looked puzzled.

'Too bloody right,' someone behind the Present responded, loud enough for everyone to hear. 'How did you know that my wristwatch has stopped?' Everyone laughed. Robbie Nicholson had just entered the room smiling broadly and brimming with confidence.

The President swung around to face the voice. 'Robbie,' she said standing up and embracing the tall tanned man in his early forties. Her embrace was a bit too enthusiastic. But then again the man was exceptionally good looking with a slim athletic body. 'I think we are all finished here,' she said, one hand holding onto the arm of this handsome man. 'Come with me Robbie,' and with that the oak door was opened by a security guard, who was already announcing into his discreet mouthpiece that the President of the United States was on the move, and the couple disappeared from view.

Everyone began to hurriedly gather up their papers and disperse. 'Nice one Festor,' someone uttered and turning to the woman next to him. 'That NASA guy is crazy; why they keep him on I just don't know.' But she wasn't listening; instead she was looking intently at Festor, her head to one side taking in this embarrassed and rather forlorn figure who was still slumped in his chair with a single sheet of paper in front of him placed very precisely on the conference table. She wondered what was written on that piece of paper and what he had meant by the second statement that no one else had seemed to have heard. 'The end is nigh.'

Forty-five minutes later Rebecca Sanderson, wearing a smart grey woollen dress and high heels walked purposely into a modern open plan office where a dozen desks or work stations as they were now known were occupied by people working quietly with only the sound of keyboards being feverously tapped. 'Get me all you have on a guy called Festor, he's on the Special Internal Affairs Committee,' demanded Sanderson as she walked past one of the occupied work stations.

A tall lean man looked up from his screen which was displaying four simultaneous recordings from CCTV cameras. 'The committee you were just at?' he inquired.

'The exact same,' said Sanderson the image of the grey-haired man still in her mind. She stopped and turned around, '...and Charlie...'

'Yes Mam?'

'Find out why he is on that specific committee.' She started to walk away towards her personal office.

'When do you need this?' he called after her indicating the CCTV footage to her retreating back.

'Now. I need it right now. Get Gail onto it as well. Twenty minutes enough?' She inquired.

'I'd prefer an hour?' he stated in what he hoped sounded like a confident voice.

'Then twenty it is.' It wasn't a request, it was a direct order as her office door closed shut behind her.

Agent Charles McGeever grimaced, and swore under his breath. He cleared the screen with a single tap of his index finger. 'Okay Festor, who the fuck are you?' he said to no one in particular.

Deputy Director (Internal affairs) of the FBI, Rebecca Sanderson, was sat in a brown leather armchair in her personal glass fronted office reading through a pile of reports when there was a knock at the door and McGeever and Gail Ronson walked in carrying several buff folders.

She threw the report she had been studying back onto the pile and spun around to face the pair. 'Okay what have you got?' she demanded.

'Well Mam,' started McGeever, 'he is your standard boring scientist or I should say physicist. Works over at NASA headquarters and is one of the liaison guys as far as I can tell, although he has other specialist duties. He has the usual university background.' He glanced down at his notes. 'Princeton, followed by a PhD at MIT; then straight into a cosy job at NASA way back in the 1980's. He has worked on various projects but specializes in weather.'

'Weather?' echoed Sanderson.

'Yea, he predicts windows for rocket launches and re-entry, that sort of thing; been working recently on climate modelling for the NOESSA, but apart from that, nothing out of the ordinary. He's never been married, but is straight, doesn't go out much, pays his taxes in full, never had a traffic ticket, saves regularly, keeps himself to himself. Has maximum security clearance. He is a reliable, hardworking Government employee...just like Gail here.'

'Very funny,' retorted Ronson.

'Is that it?' asked Sanderson. 'Is that all you've been able to dig up?' She sounded more peeved than disappointed.

'What were you expecting Mam?' asked Charlie. 'If there is anything else, then he is very good at hiding it.' There was a slight pause. 'But, then again these guys are very IT savvy, so you never know...' McGeever's voice petered out.

'He has left out one interesting fact, Mam,' said Ronson stepping forward a little.

Sanderson smiled at her in anticipation. 'And what's that?'

'He is in charge of time.'

'Time?' asked Sanderson, a confused look on her face. 'How?'

'He chairs the atomic clock network here in the US,' she explained, both surprised and pleased at her boss's reaction.

Festor's voice sounded in Sanderson's head. 'The end of time has arrived.'

Deputy Director Sanderson was in her early forties and had made it to one of the most senior positions in the FBI through sheer hard work and a natural talent for unravelling complex crimes. She had her own team and specialized in Government related investigations mainly to do with corruption. In her job she mixed with some of the most influential and important people in the country, and she dressed accordingly. However, as she had often found to her cost, the only problem with influential and important people was that they often proved to be the most dangerous having the most to lose. 'Get your coats, right now,' ordered Sanderson standing up. 'We're going to pay a visit.' Ronson and McGeever looked at other enquiringly, as the Deputy Director picked up her shoulder bag off the desk and grabbing her coat marched out. They just had time to retrieve their own jackets from the backs of their office chairs before hurrying after the elegantly dressed Sanderson as she made her way towards the elevator.

It was just after 3.30 pm when the three of them stepped into the imposing entrance of NASA's Washington Headquarters, McGeever and Ronson keeping a respective distance behind their boss. However, it was McGeever who flashed his ID to the young man sat behind the reception desk in the lobby. 'Deputy Director Sanderson to see Professor Festor,' said McGeever in a no nonsense voice.

The man smiled. 'Sure thing, I just try and locate him for you.' A few minutes passed while he was busy on the phone. 'I'm sorry he does not appear to be in his office, it seems he is in the Restaurant, would you like me to page him for you?'

'That won't be necessary,' cut in Sanderson. 'Where's the Restaurant?'

'I'm sorry Deputy Director, but it's not open to visitors,' the receptionist started to explain but McGeever lent across desk, his well built 6 feet six inches enough to intimidate anyone.

'Where is it?' he demanded.

'On the third floor Sir,' replied the receptionist getting up from his seat and backing away from the desk. 'But, visitors are restricted to...'

'Thank you,' cut in McGeever, 'you have been a great help.' He tried to smile reassuringly which caused the man to recoil even further. As they marched towards the elevator the receptionist, seated once again, was urgently speaking into his phone.

When the elevator doors opened on the third floor there were two security guards waiting for them. McGeever started forward but Sanderson put out a restraining hand on his sleeve and he stopped in his tracks, but the energy was still there, ready. 'Sorry,' said one of the guards, 'this is a restricted area and visitors are not allowed up here unaccompanied or without an official visitor's badge.'

'I'm Deputy Director Sanderson, Federal Bureau of Investigation,' she held up her ID which was hanging from a blue FBI embossed ribbon that went around her neck, 'and these are

two of my agents McGeever and Ronson. I believe we don't fall into your normal visitor category gentleman. Perhaps you would get you head of security to come down here and wait for me beside the elevator until I'm finished. Now where is the Restaurant?' Sanderson's confident manner defeated the guards who simply stepped aside and let the group pass, only to follow on some distance behind.

The Restaurant itself, which was decorated with large photographs of space missions and various colourful images of planets, comets and other celestial objects, was fairly empty at that time of day and so it proved easy to spot Festor who was sitting holding a bagel and staring down at a large map spread out on the table on which coffee cups and plates were strategically placed. Either side of him was a young man each wearing a regulation short sleeve shirt. They were so engrossed in the map that the small party was almost halfway to their table before one of the young men looked up. 'Holy shit,' he said loud enough for Sanderson to just hear, 'what have you gone and done now Uncle?' Festor and the other man both looked up simultaneously to see the small official looking party striding across the carpet all three with their eyes fixed on the scientists. Behind them two very worried looking security guards were busily talking into mouthpieces.

All three men at the table stood up, Festor still holding his bagel. 'Ah perhaps we will see you later Uncle,' one of the younger men said gathering up a few sheets of loose paper and an iPad.

'Yes good idea,' agreed Sanderson who at that very moment had reached the table, 'I would like to talk to the Professor alone.' They didn't need to be told twice and scurried off looking back towards the table they had just abandoned, almost colliding with the security guards who had hung back a little. Sanderson turned to McGeever, 'Mine is a skinny latte and escort our friends back to the elevator,' she nodded towards the security guards.

Sanderson sat down and nodded at the chair in which Festor had been sitting previously. He slowly lowered himself down into his seat, his eyes never leaving those of Sanderson. 'Know who I am?' she asked. Festor nodded. 'This is Agent Ronson,' who had also sat down, 'and that is Agent McGeever over there on the coffee run. I must apologize for barging in on you like this Professor, but it's about this morning.'

'This morning?' repeated Festor innocently.

'I think you know perfectly well what I am talking about.' she paused. "The end of time has arrived" she waited and then added, "the end is nigh," take you pick?

Festor remained silent forcing Sanderson to continue. 'Was that some kind of veiled threat you made to the President this morning Professor?'

'No, No,' he was emphatic and looked anxious. 'No, no, not at all ...no nothing like that.' There was slight desperation in his voice. 'I'm not good in meetings; I was just trying to raise a point of interest that's all. No one is interested here you see and, well ... I was trying to just alert you all,' he faltered.

'Alert us that time has come to an end?'

‘Yes, exactly.’ he said slightly relieved. ‘Yes, that was all I wanted to say.’

‘Look Professor, I don’t have any idea what you are talking about and neither did anyone else at this morning’s meeting, including the President. So perhaps you would like to explain.’

McGeever had at that moment returned with a tray of paper coffee cups and handed them out to his colleagues. He wiped the chair with his silk handkerchief before sitting sat down and took a sip of his double espresso. ‘Shit,’ he said grimacing, ‘NASA, we have a problem.’ Ronson kicked him on his ankle under the table and gave him a pointed look which she hoped conveyed the vital information that he was being a dick. She was so attached to this man, had been from the first time she had met him; but he was for ever falling short, a mixture of sarcasm, stupidity and inappropriateness. Hell, she should be used to all that in the male dominated world of the FBI, but she had hoped that McGeever would be different. They had dated for a while, but had decided to give each other some space to decide where their relationship was going. It had been six months now and they were still deciding.

They all sat in silence for a while. Then Festor started to roll up what appeared to be a large map covered in thousands of small sets of numbers, carefully moving the cups and plates as he did so. ‘I don’t know if I am authorized to discuss this with the FBI,’ he said, his confidence rising a little.

‘It was you who brought this up in the Special Internal Affairs Meeting at the White House this morning Professor, so I think this does now involve my office. So, let’s start again. Can I call you by your first name?’ she smiled.

‘I would rather you called me Uncle, everyone does.’

‘Uncle?’ enquired Ronson.

‘As in the Adams family,’ said McGeever. ‘Am I right?’

Festor nodded. ‘Inevitable really,’ he added, ‘given my ridiculous surname.’

Tact and empathy were low down on the required skills for Directors and their Deputies in the FBI. ‘Okay Professor,’ persisted Sanderson ignoring the offer to call him Uncle. ‘Let’s go to your office and you can enlighten us about this time problem.’

As they left the deserted restaurant the Chief of Security along with the two guards were waiting. ‘I must object ...’ the Chief started, but Sanderson indicated to him to step aside from the group. They all watched as Sanderson spoke confidentially to the man her mouth just inches away from his ear. His eyes widened in surprise and he straightened up. ‘Of course Deputy Director.’ He indicated to his men and they all marched off with purpose.

‘That was effective,’ commented McGeever to Ronson in a whisper, as they all went up in the elevator to the eighth floor. Gail just gave McGeever a baffled shrug. Festor led the way along a seemingly endless corridor and stopped midway to unlock an identical door to all the others. It was small and airless. Festor pick up piles of papers from various chairs and

looking around helplessly for a non-existent temporary storage space on top of his already crowded desk and filing cabinets, simply let them drop onto the floor.

'Nice office,' commented McGeever with heavy sarcasm to no one in particular, sitting down.

'Is it?' replied Festor surprised and looking around as if for the first time.

'Well Professor, I think you need to explain yourself,' said Sanderson. 'Is this something to do with the atomic clock network?'

Festor, for a moment, looked shocked. 'The timekeepers, yes, but how did you find out, who told you?'

'No one told us Professor, but it doesn't take a genius to make the connection.'

'Thanks,' muttered Ronson under her breath.

'So, Professor, what exactly has happened and why did you feel that the Committee needed to know?' There was a pause. 'It must be serious because you said it to the President of the United States for God sake.' Sanderson was looking interested but also serious.

Festor sat back and rubbed his eyes with the palms of his hands which he then pushed through his hair. Suddenly he looked younger and distinguished. 'It's quite simple. We discovered just over a week ago that all the clocks in the network had apparently stopped, for thirty nanoseconds.'

'Okay the batteries need replacing,' said McGeever smiling. Ronson inwardly winced.

'Batteries?' asked Festor, staring at McGeever as though he was an ignorant undergraduate who had just asked a really stupid question in class. 'Four here in the States, one in London, another in Paris, not to mention the others. It's not official but I have checked with as many of the timekeepers as I can get hold of on the phone and they all report the same thing.' He paused and then continued, a small smile developing on his unshaven face. 'That's a lot of batteries to run out at the same time.' He looked at McGeever, meeting his unblinking eyes and continued. 'It's unfortunate for your theory that large atomic clocks don't have batteries'. McGeever look down at his hands which were wrapped around his crossed legs.

'Strike and home run,' thought Ronson and she smiled. 'Good for you Professor.'

The following morning Sanderson entered the office of the Director of the FBI Joseph Cranfield. Already seated at a large circular table was the Director himself, the Chief of Security from NASA Headquarters and a representative of the CIA. 'Becky, come on in and meet our colleagues.' The Director had risen from his seat and was indicating a vacant chair. Cranfield was a distinguished looking man in his early sixties. He had worked his way up the chain of command in the FBI over a long and distinguished career spanning over thirty years

and although was approaching retirement was as active and mentally agile as any man twenty years his junior.

Cranfield's office was much larger than Sanderson's and had been tastefully decorated with modern art and tall plants. It reminded her of an expensive psychiatrist's waiting room for although it was bright and cheerful it remained somehow sterile. She walked over to the proffered chair. 'Thanks Joe,' she replied and sat down.

'This is Ray from the other side,' he smiled at Ray Connors who held a similar post to her in the CIA, 'and you have already met Tony from NASA I believe.' Both raised their hands in acknowledgement.

'On behalf of the Administrator at NASA I just want to register our concern about the visit yesterday by your people.' Tony Diaz was addressing Cranfield directly, not looking at Sanderson as he spoke.

'Okay, Tony, you have made your point, but my agents were following up on a lead of possible national importance that may also involve the President, so I am sure that the NASA Administration would wish us to get to the bottom of this as quickly as possible as it seems to deal with one of your employees,' he glanced down at his notes, 'a Professor Fester. That's correct, isn't it Becky?'

'Uncle to his friends,' replied Sanderson in acknowledgement. They all smiled. She leaned forward and helped herself to a water from a large jug containing sliced limes and ice.

'Well I think it would be best if you briefed us as to what you think this is all about.'

'To be honest with you I am not sure that I do know what it's about.' She took a sip of water. 'But I have a hunch that a major crime has or is about to be carried out and that this may involve National Security.'

Cranfield raised his eyebrows. 'And this has something to do with this NASA employee?'

'I can assure you that we have vetted Professor Fester regularly and at the request of Deputy Director Sanderson we re-ran checks on him yesterday evening, and we even examined his offices and laboratories. I also had the IT guys do a covert analysis of his computers, that includes his PC and laptop that he has at home. We are currently monitoring all his activities online. There is nothing untoward at all. Fester is clean...' he paused and as no one spoke he added lamely, 'he is above reproach.'

'Okay Tony, thanks for that. I just want to make it clear that there is no blame game going on here, Becky hasn't even identified if a crime has been committed or even if it involves this Fester guy. But let me make this clear and I will only say this once. If Deputy Director Sanderson is concerned, then we should all be concerned, so let her put forward her case, alright.' Everyone nodded in agreement. Cranfield turned to Sanderson. 'Go ahead Becky.'

Sanderson went over the incident at the Special Internal Affairs Committee meeting with the President where Fester had made his strange outburst and then explained about the atomic clocks.

Ray Connors leaned forward in his seat and looked at Sanderson. 'So what we have is all these scientists or timekeepers reporting that their atomic clocks have all lost a tiny fraction of a single second. Have I got that right?'

'Yes, about a thirty billionth worth of a single second,' confirmed Sanderson.

'Thirty billionth worth of a single second?' repeated Connors. He smiled at Sanderson, who couldn't help returning his smile. 'Is that a problem? Could it just be a weird coincidence?' She shook her head the smile diminishing slightly. 'It has to be something physical, something with a scientific explanation, right?' he continued.

'No,' answered Sanderson emphatically. 'According to Professor Festor who is the senior timekeeper, it is simply not possible. His only, and I stress, his only explanation is that the clocks were deliberately interfered with.'

'What all of them?' asked Cranfield.

'Yes Joe, and he has no idea how or why.' She leaned back her shoulders rising slightly as she lifted both hands up as if in supplication. 'Nor does anyone else apparently.'

'What difference can thirty nanoseconds make?' enquired the Tony Diaz from NASA.

'I have to agree with Tony,' added Cranfield. 'It seems,' he hesitated looking for the right words, 'it's no time at all, not even long enough to think about blinking.'

'Well,' said Sanderson, 'I am not sure, but it has, according to Festor, a lot of possibilities when it comes to computer systems...from banks to defence.'

'What does Festor think we should do about it?' asked Cranfield.

'He thinks we should talk to a guy at MIT who is a specialist working on high speed computing,' answered Sanderson checking her notes. 'A Dr Freeman.'

'Not another academic, surely?' retorted the Director looking exasperated.

Ray Connors was looking at Sanderson abstractly. He raised his hand. 'Yes Ray?' invited Cranfield.

'I haven't any idea what can be done in thirty nanoseconds but I agree with...do you mind if I call you Becky?' Sanderson smiled agreement. '...I agree with Becky. This is too weird to be put down as a coincidence or to be ignored. I want to talk with this Festor guy myself right away.' He paused, thinking. 'It looks to me as though this may have a potential terrorist aspect to it. The fact that clocks around the world have in some way been altered suggests this is not just a sophisticated fraud. We need to know why thirty nanoseconds is so important and what window of opportunity it creates.'

Cranfield leaned back in his chair and puckered his lips in thought. 'You sure about this, Ray?'

The CIA man nodded his head.

Cranfield swung his chair around and stared out of the window and after a short pause, while still looking through the window over the Washington cityscape, he said, 'Neither Agency can afford another embarrassing situation. You guys can hide behind the external security blanket, but hell every Senator wants to reduce my budget and personally see me on permanent holiday, preferably without pay.'

'Trust me on this one Joe, this could be serious,' replied Connors standing up. 'And the more I think about it, the more nervous I'm getting. We need to mobilize on this right now and we need to start by setting up a joint operational team.'

Cranfield finally swung around to face them, and then looking at Connors, 'This is local Ray, it's FBI territory.'

'I appreciate that Joe, but the global distribution of the atomic clocks and the possibility of terrorist involvement puts this wholly in the realm of the CIA. We don't have time to argue and also, it's important that Becky and I work on this together. She has identified this potential threat and I need her on board.'

Sanderson smiled at Connors in acknowledgement. She knew that he could simply take this whole thing over himself and leave out the FBI altogether. But then again, just how much power did the CIA have within the States which was, strictly speaking, the jurisdiction of the FBI. Neither did they have the manpower that the FBI possessed.

'We need to set up a team right now,' continued Connors. 'I think the best place will be at NASA Headquarters itself, initially at any rate. Is that okay with you Tony?' Connors closed the folder in front of him into which he had put a few pages of notes he had made while Sanderson had been talking, and turned to face Diaz.

The NASA Security Chief had been slow at first to grasp the importance of what was being said, but now he saw that not only was this of possible National importance, but that NASA's reputation was also being put to the test here. 'I will have to clear it with the NASA Deputy Administrator here in Washington, but I don't envisage any problems. Everything will be organized within an hour or so.'

'We are also going to have to be able to draw on some of your scientists' expertise, Tony, especially this Professor Festor,' added Connors.

'You'll have it.' Diaz rose gathering up a notebook and an iPad. 'I will meet you in the lobby of NASA HQ in,' he looked at his watch, 'let's say in 90 minutes; is that soon enough for you?'

Connors smiled. 'Let's get to work.'

Sanderson looked at Cranfield enquiringly, he paused for a few seconds before nodding his head in agreement. 'Becky, select a team and get them over to the NASA building. Also set up an incident room with a small select team here to co-ordinate our resources. I presume the CIA will do the same Ray?'

Connors nodded. 'I'll have to run it past my boss Joe, but I think I can safely say that we will do the same over at Langley.'

'Then you guys will be at the hub and can draw down what you need. This is the highest priority I presume?' continued the Director. Connors nodded again. 'Also, the highest security clearance, so no one knows about this except the teams involved; that especially goes for the people at NASA. This is strictly on a need to know basis, right?'

'I can make out that this is some kind of routine security audit. They are pretty used to those.'

'Good idea Tony,' said Connors. He suddenly broke into a broad smile. 'Let's get to work.'

It was precisely 11.35am and twelve people were gathered in the large conference room at NASA Headquarters which had already been decked out with work stations, each with a networked PC; although everyone seemed to have brought their own laptop or iPad as well as some form of android or iPhone. The conference room was just a large empty space, with equally large colour images of space craft and astronauts fighting a losing battle to humanize the blank cream walls. There were also several white boards attached to the walls and several large computer display screens which hung down from the ceiling which were used to relay information during large gatherings. It was a dismal place to set up an office, but both sets of agents seemed unaware of the lack of amenities. Connors clapped his hands and the room went silent. The company had split naturally into two groups, one comprising FBI staff and the other CIA. In between facing the gathering stood the Deputy Administrator of NASA Headquarters' and his Chief of Security Tony Diaz. 'You have already read the brief prepared by Deputy Director Sanderson so I won't waste time telling you what you should already know. It's precious little and no more than a hunch, but it's a big hunch and we have given this maximum priority over everything else except for covert and overt anti-terrorism programmes that are on-going. You ladies and gentlemen are the operations hub and you can draw on any facilities and personnel you may need, do you understand?' There was a general mummer and nodding of heads. 'So it's our job to find out what the hell this is all about. Now Deputy Director Sanderson and I will be jointly leading this so you will take your orders from either of us or your team leaders.'

'Listen, I don't like taking orders from the FBI Ray, this is clearly a CIA...'

The burley late middle-aged man who had interrupted the briefing was cut off in midstream by an angry Connors.

'You will do as your fucking told Manson or you can get the fuck out of here and spend the rest of your career stamping folders authorizing them to be shredded. You, and every one of the rest of you, whether your CIA or FBI,' he glanced around the agents catching eyes that were quickly lowered, 'you're here because you have been personally selected either by myself or Deputy Director Sanderson.' He paused and looked at each agent in turn. 'Just because you're the best doesn't mean that you don't act as a team player, anyone who doesn't is finished here. Got it?'

This time there was a louder mummer of 'Yes Sir.' Manson however, red in the face, was staring at the floor which was covered in stained dark blue carpet tiles liberally dotted with gum and cigarette burns.

'Right, let's get to work, Becky.' Connors motioned to Sanderson who stepped forward.

'It seems that we have to revert to basics here,' she started. 'You know the routine, how was it done, who did it, and why?'

'Agreed,' affirmed Connors.

‘So what we are going to do is form three teams comprising people from each agency.’ She looked down at her list. ‘Right, so the first question is what crime has or can be committed in thirty nanoseconds? I want Agent Smith from the CIA and Agents Sanchez and Cole from the FBI. This is an international question and Ray has offered to lead this team personally. Now we also have a Dr Andrew Freeman joining your team,’ she consulted her watch, ‘in fact he should be on his way in a couple of hours. He is a world expert on high performance computing and he will be advising your team on possible leads.’ Without a word, the three agents who had each raised their hands when their names had been called moved together grinning at each other and silently shaking hands.

‘The second question is how were the clocks changed? I want Agent Gail Ronson leading this team and her team will comprise Agents Heaslip and Carr from the CIA and Agent Hoff from the FBI. Professor Festor will be advising you. I want you also to re-interview him and I want everyone to watch the video of the interview as soon as it’s ready. Okay?’ She paused looking down at the attentive faces. ‘We need to know everything he knows, anything that he suspects and everything he doesn’t know himself.’ A few people laughed, but a quick look around the room by Connors silenced everyone.

‘Finally, who is behind this?’ continued Sanderson. ‘I want Agent McGeever of the FBI and CIA Agent Manson to jointly head up this team as this involves both domestic and international aspects.’ Manson looked up from the floor surprised and looked over to where McGeever was standing with his hand raised in acknowledgement. The two men looked at each other and Ronson immediately saw a mixture of distrust fuelled by male hormones. ‘This should be interesting,’ she said quietly to herself. ‘They will be supported by CIA Agent Hammond and FBI Agent Dubois,’ continued Sanderson. ‘My role will be to coordinate the hub here and liaise with the Directors of both the FBI and the CIA.’ Sanderson paused for effect. ‘However, Deputy Director Connors will also be helping me in this role. Now we are lucky to have with us the Deputy Administrator of NASA here in Washington and his Chief of Security and they have agreed to help and facilitate this investigation in any way possible including putting NASA’s best at our disposal. These guys are doing the impossible every day, so we have the World’s best support team just next door.’ She looked sideways raising her hand towards both NASA men who looked pleased to have been acknowledged. But they were under no illusion, if this was to do with the atomic clock network, then some of the fallout could land on their doorstep.

‘Any questions?’ barked Connors. No one said anything they just looked at each other and then at Connors and Sanderson who stood side by side in front of them. ‘You have twenty minutes to get to know each other and sort yourselves out, find a space and make it your own,’ he continued. ‘Then ladies and gentlemen I want to start seeing results. This is a criminal investigation; we all have a lot of groundwork to do before we can hope to make any headway, so let’s get to it.’

Gail Ronson had requisitioned a corner of the large conference room and her team stood around looking uncomfortable. ‘Okay,’ she announced, ‘I’m Agent Ronson, Gail.’ She nodded to her FBI Colleague. ‘This is Agent Sandy Hoff and you guys are?’

A tall young man of about 26 said easily 'I'm Jamie Heaslip and this is Alan Carr.' The older and considerably larger man raised his hand in recognition. 'Glad to meet you,' responded Ronson.

'What in the hell is going on?' asked Heaslip smiling at Ronson. 'I've never been involved with anything like this before.'

'You've read the brief?' asked Ronson who had to fight the urge to smile back. She knew she had to stay slightly aloof if she was going to get the respect she needed from these guys. She needed to make a success of this opportunity if she was going to make career for herself, and as she had found out after dating McGeever, it was perhaps not the best idea to combine work and a personal life.

'Well yes,' replied Heaslip hesitantly, his smile rapidly diminishing.

'Then you know as much as anyone knows. Look,' she said a bit more softly, 'we don't know each other but you heard what the boss said. Let's get settled and get logged on. Then I'll tell you exactly what I know and we can begin to plan our next course of action. Alan, Sandy, grab some of those moveable blue screens and form a barrier from any sightseers that may be passing the corridor window. Jamie perhaps you could requisition a large white board and set it up.' He nodded and went off in search of Diaz.

Just at that moment Sanderson came across. She took Ronson by the arm and they moved away from the others out of hearing. 'Festor is pivotal Gail, we need to know everything. The interview will be streamed live to the other groups and I suspect that it is going to be vital for all the teams, so don't let me down.'

'No boss,' she said, 'I'll give it 110% and thanks.'

'Thanks?' Sanderson raised her eyebrows in surprise.

'Thanks for giving me this chance.' Ronson hesitated, 'For letting me run my own team.'

'No thanks needed,' said Sanderson. 'You are the best Agent on my team, plus it was you who made the clock connection. But Gail...'

'Yes Mam?'

'Don't let me down.'

As Sanderson walked away she suddenly felt the heavy responsibility she had been given. Just for a moment she began to panic, just like at her finals at university. She closed her eyes and took several deep breaths.

'You okay?' asked Heaslip.

She swung around, 'Absolutely,' she replied. 'If you guys have finished powdering your noses, then let's get on with it.' The three men smiled at each other and dutifully followed their leader out of the new operations room.

'I think she likes you,' the overweight Carr confided to Heaslip as they walked out into the corridor.

'Yea I get that impression as well,' agreed Heaslip turning to Agent Hoff. 'Now Andy you're an FBI man so give us the low down on Agent Ronson.'

The Interview was held in one of the smaller press offices and Festor, as he walked into the room, hesitated for a second when he saw the empty chair which had been carefully lit with two powerful lights with a video camera facing it. It looked intimidating. Opposite was a curved row of four similar chairs from which three men were staring at him with considerable interest along with Agent Ronson who he recognized from the previous day. 'Professor Festor,' said Gail Ronson smiling rising from her seat and offering her hand which Festor rather reluctantly shook. Holding onto his hand she led him into the room towards the none to inviting chair.

'This looks like an interrogation,' complained Festor, 'shouldn't I have a lawyer present or something?' He stood next to the chair not sitting down with his hand partially over his eyes so that he could scrutinize the men who were still staring at him from behind the bright light.

'No, that's not necessary,' reassured Ronson. 'This is purely voluntary Professor; we just need to find out everything you know about what has happened so that we can begin our investigations.'

'Yes, I understand that Agent Ronson, but I thought I was supposed to be helping you.'

'Absolutely, and this is where we start, and please call me Gail' she reassured him and at the same time moving just a little more closely to Festor tightening her grip on his arm. 'You are in fact assigned to our group.' She briefly explained that three teams had been set up and what their priorities were. 'So, you see our role in the investigation is to try and establish how the clocks were changed. Let me introduce you to the rest of our team before we start.'

The three men stood and shook hands with Festor, each in turn trying to be reassuring. 'But the thing is Professor, perhaps I should call you Uncle, is that okay with you?' Festor nodded suspiciously. 'The thing is,' continued Ronson, 'we need to get as much information as possible. Such as how the network operates, when and how you identified the problem, who you talked to about it, in fact everything you can tell us about the incident.'

'Okay,' agreed Festor raising his hands in mock surrender. 'But why the hot seat and camera?'

'It's routine,' replied Ronson. 'No, that is not quite correct,' she apologized. 'We need to be able to share your interview with the other teams, because they need to be familiar with what you know as well. Trying to conduct an interview in front of twelve people would be absolutely impossible. The video means they can watch it over and over again in groups or

on their own; formulate new questions; come up with new ideas,' she hesitated having run out of reasons. 'I am sure you can see that?'

Festor nodded his head and lowered himself into the seat in a manner that could only be described as reluctantly. Ronson smiled her thanks and the four agents took their seats, and each took out a large A4 note pad, just like students in a lecture, except for Ronson who picked up her iPad and began to scroll down the pages. Carr leaned past Hoff to ask Heaslip for a pen. 'If you are ready Uncle can we start?' she enquired, and as he nodded his head in agreement she pressed the start button on the cable attached to the camera.

Sanderson's voice was still in the back of her head. 'Be careful with the Professor because, after all, he is in fact a prime, if not, our only suspect...so don't give anything away and let him do the talking.' Ronson knew that Sanderson's intuition about Festor was positive and that she didn't really think he was involved, hence he was helping the team; but there was always a small chance.

In the operations room Connors, Sanderson and a representative from each team as well as the two NASA men all sat holding steaming coffee cups and looking at a head and shoulders image of Festor who was busy looking around the room. Ronson's voice suddenly came over soft but clear and Festor's attention was suddenly taken up by something to his left presumably the source of the voice. 'Are you comfortable Uncle?' Connors and Sanderson exchanged glances and smiled. 'Can I get you a glass of water or something?'

'No, I'm fine, let's get on with it,' replied Festor a little curtly. He obviously wasn't happy about the set up and started looking around him again as though expecting a trap or a two-way mirror. But the walls were painted white with large colour photographs of various Apollo craft.

'Our Professor looks rather nervous,' observed Connors to no one in particular. 'Does he have anything to hide I wonder?' Sanderson stole a glance at Connors who was studying the video link intensely. She couldn't help looking him up and down. She felt an inward tingle, 'very nice' she thought. Suddenly she corrected herself. 'Christ! Get a grip girl and focus.'

'Can you tell me about the atomic clock network and their operators, I think you called them the timekeepers?' asked Ronson smiling.

'As I said yesterday Agent Ronson...'

'No please, call me Gail, we are all team members here. It's Gail, Alan, Andy and Jamie,' she indicated the group on her right with a sweep of her hand. Again Connors and Sanderson exchanged a glance, Ronson was good. Not aggressive, reassuring, slightly intimate, in fact the perfect scenario for an interview. She was gaining his confidence, albeit slowly.

'As I said yesterday Gail, there are a number of clocks around the world which act as time regulators. They are harmonized to ensure that globally time is always precise and

harmonized. Time is to some extent variable...it depends where you are in the world so we all have to agree on what we think the correct time actually is. It's a compromise that allows global society to work closely and effectively together. It wasn't that long ago when you had to use a conversion chart to work out local times when you used a railroad timetable. Perhaps I should give you the historical context of the timekeepers, time is really a fascinating subject....'

'No not at the moment,' interrupted Ronson, 'we can come back to that later if need be. I just want to get the basic facts established first so that we can launch the investigation and start to find out how and why this has happened.' She glanced down at her iPad on which she had sketched out a series of key questions. 'I have here a list of the clocks comprising the network of timekeepers which you gave me yesterday, are there any more atomic clocks?'

'No, not who are official timekeepers,' replied Festor. 'They are the only ones that can act as National Reference Centres for those who need that level of time accuracy. But there are other clocks in University Departments and research institutes around the world, but they are definitely outside the network.'

'But would these others be harmonized with the main clocks?'

Festor shrugged. 'Not necessarily, but why have one if it's not telling the correct time.'

'Is each clock secure?'

'Well they are radioactive so there is security, but it wouldn't be up to Fort Knox standards or a Federal Bank, or even what we have here at NASA, for example. In fact most rely on normal internal building security. The vast majority of people see atomic clocks as an oddity and not really being that important...' Festor was cut off by Jamie Heaslip.

'Who would have access?' Ronson gave him a tough look which said I am asking the questions here, and he looked embarrassed. She was determined to retain control.

Festor didn't seem to notice and turned to him to answer the question. 'Well technicians, support staff, and of course the official timekeeper. There is usually a log, especially for those working on the clock, maintenance that sort of thing.' He was thinking hard. 'CCTV surveillance in some cases, but mainly just the timekeeper, possibly an assistant who would take over if the timekeeper was unable to attend to the clock for some reason.' He paused for a second. 'Then the odd Intern or visitor. They can be quite a tourist attraction, especially with school kids and undergraduates.' He dried up.

'So let's start with the one you are in charge of, who has...' persisted Heaslip but Gail cut in.

'Sorry Jamie but I don't want to get ahead of ourselves here. When did you first notice there was a problem Uncle?' Ronson made a mental note to remind Heaslip where he stood in the pecking order of life at the earliest opportunity. 'When exactly did you realize that something had gone wrong?'

'Well it was the guys in London. Some kid on a tour asked one of the technicians how he knew that the time being displayed was actually the correct time. He told him how the clocks are all harmonized and did a simple check using the US Naval Observatory Master Clock at the Stennis Space Centre in Mississippi... and hey presto there was a very small discrepancy. He didn't let on and no one on the tour suspected anything. After they had gone he began checking with a few others which he knew had been harmonized. He finally contacted me and when I ran a check on ours...well there it was. Time had stood still for thirty nanoseconds.'

'Can you just explain to us exactly what had happened?'

'Well quite a few of the clocks on the network gave the same time while the rest and those that are not networked gave a different but identical reading.'

'So, some of the clocks were giving the correct time but a significant number of official networked atomic clocks gave the same but incorrect time, thirty nanoseconds short.' Ronson was keen to clarify the situation as simply as possible.

'Well to be precise it's the agreed time,' explained Festor. 'There is no correct time as such.'

'But I thought noon was when the sun was at its highest,' interjected Ronson.

'If only it was as simple as that,' smiled Festor.

'So how did you know that it was the networked clocks that were wrong and not the others?' Ronson was smiling.

'Good question,' said Festor, 'I should have explained. All the timekeepers were alerted and they ran a diagnostic check and found that there had been a very small discrepancy recorded.'

'What was your first reaction when you realized what happened?'

'Confusion at first, then disbelief. We rang numerous checks but couldn't really identify what the cause had been.' Festor shook his head. 'The inevitable conclusion was that this was somehow deliberate.'

'Are you sure?'

'Yes, I am now. There is no way this could have happened more or less at the same time.'

'Do you mean simultaneously?'

'No not necessarily, we are still trying to find out when precisely.'

'What did you do next?'

'Well I organized a video conference with as many of the timekeepers who were available and we discussed the situation.'

'And...?' prompted Ronson.

'Well the general consensus was that no harm had been done and that it must be some form of explainable hitch that were unaware of,' replied Festor.

'So, what did you decide?'

'Well that was a bit embarrassing really.'

'Why?'

'The other timekeepers wanted to simply let it ride, it is after all a very small time difference. The general consensus was that as those outside the network looked for calibration we would simply readjust the other clocks to the current defaulted time. It would be happening at the end of the year anyway.'

'What's embarrassing about that? Seems like a sensible idea to me?' butted in Heaslip. Ronson swore almost audibly.

'It was embarrassing because I didn't agree. I wanted to know what had happened and until then I didn't want anything altered. So as the network co-ordinator I overrode the consensus and told everyone not to recalibrate any other clocks and not to make any adjustments to the clocks at all.' Festor paused. 'I don't like pulling rank; especially when the other timekeepers are my friends as well as colleagues.' Festor looked down at the floor. 'It was difficult for me to do that.'

'Sounds as though you were suspicious?' asked Ronson.

'I was beginning to get worried I admit. Because we couldn't explain it, physically I mean, I began to wonder if there was something going on.' Festor paused again, longer than before. 'This wasn't lost on the others when I overrode their consensus to do nothing. Obviously, they could see that I was concerned about the situation and that in turn made them worried.' Again another pause, and almost as an afterthought he added. 'That has created a feeling of distrust and suspicion between us, which is unhelpful in trying to sort this out.'

'You said "Going on"?' repeated Ronson. It was hot in the small room and she stood and took off her jacket and hung it on the back of her chair. Carr who had been sweating for the past ten minutes took this as permission for him to do the same.

'Well it was strange.' Festor paused. 'Look,' he said leaning forward. 'What would you do? Change the network clocks back to what we assume is the correct harmonized time thereby maintain continuity of global time, or simply change all the other unaffected clocks back. I didn't know what the knock-on effects might be. Anyway, it's not really that easy to correct for such a small time difference, so we would possibly have to make an even larger adjustment.'

'You've lost me Uncle, can you explain more fully why that was such a difficult decision?'

'A decade ago we could have change the time at this level quite easily. In fact we wouldn't have noticed the difference in all probability. These clocks very rarely need adjusting and when they do then the changes are minuscule and that is usually after some form of maintenance. So, we always have the other networked clocks to adjust to. These days if we start messing about with standard time...well it could affect anything from the GPS on your iPhone to satellite transmissions, money transactions, defence, space exploration anything.'

Festor was getting agitated. 'I don't have a clue what is at stake here, but this could be important. Really important.' Festor stood up pushing his hands through his hair. 'Oh Christ,' he said, 'we've been such bloody fools. We should have been more careful about security.'

Ronson and the other three agents remained silent. Suddenly they had realized what this could mean. Ronson stood up and stepped over to Festor touched his arm. 'Come on Uncle,' she said. 'I think we all need a shot of caffeine.'

Outside in the operations room Connors leaned back and whistled loudly. He turned to Sanderson. 'Good call Becky, this is more serious than any of us could have imagined.' She smiled back, pleased, and their eyes meet and stayed in contact for just a second longer than necessary. The power of time.

They were back in the small press Room and Festor was once more sitting in the chair ready to resume the interview. There was an expectant hush. In the operations room, the same group were still present, most taking notes, mainly onto iPads. Connors was pacing up and down behind those seated keen to be out doing something. 'Take a seat Ray,' said Sanderson turning around to look at him, 'you're making us nervous.' Connors finally took his seat just as the interview resumed.

Ronson finally looked up from her iPad at Festor, who now was leaning forward in his chair looking anxiously from one Agent to another. If his concerns hadn't been taken seriously before they certainly were now. 'Did you speak to anyone in NASA about your concerns over the clocks?'

'No, not initially. It would have been about 48 hours after I first realised we had a problem.'

'Why did you delay so long before contacting your superiors?'

'I wanted to check with the other timekeepers and get their views as I said before. Anyhow this only affects NASA in relation to their own clock.'

'But you had already made up your mind?' observed Ronson.

'Yes and no. I needed to talk it through.' Once more Festor paused as though seeking the right words. 'Scientists aren't fallible and often a problem can be very simply explained by the right expert, so I wanted to be absolutely certain I hadn't missed anything obvious.'

'But I don't understand why you didn't involve your colleagues here at NASA. Surely they would be your first port of call in an emergency?' Ronson was trying to find out Festor's apparent reluctance to involve NASA at the outset.

'I...' he hesitated, then looked down at the floor. 'I am not all that popular with the senior management team. I have made a couple of mistakes in the past.'

In the operations room alarm bells immediately began to ring in Connors' head. He leapt to his feet throwing his arms in the air like a disappointed football fan who has just witnessed a home goal. 'Oh shit!' he said out loud, 'Festor is a loony after all!' He shook his head annoyed. 'Shit!' Next to Connors, Sanderson remained sitting quietly. She had ignored Connors' outburst and hadn't outwardly reacted to this revelation but was intrigued at what Festor was going to say next.

Agent Ronson pressed on with the interview. 'Can you elaborate on why that is?'

Festor sighed audibly. 'On two recent occasions I have pulled the plug on launches and once delayed a re-entry.'

‘Sorry Uncle you’ll have to explain a bit more.’ Ronson was genuinely confused.

‘My main job is predicting weather patterns for launches and re-entries. We predict the optimum times for these. This particularly includes the movement of the jet stream as well as more localized weather patterns. A couple of years ago I got two launches delayed to the Space Station. The position of the jet stream was indicating a negative for launching the shuttle although the weather models in general were indicating positive conditions. It was a difficult call, but it was my decision so I played it safe and ordered an abort at the last minute.’ Festor had gone red in the face. It was obviously humiliating even now.

‘So?’ inquired Ronson.

‘The weather turned out fine in both cases, costing NASA a lot of money and in one case it embarrassed the administration who had invited a head of state to witness the launch of one of their satellites. I was very unpopular.’

‘But you must have had good reason to abort the missions.’

‘Oh yes. It’s all about probabilities, and the reality is that space travel, especially launches and re-entries are highly dangerous no matter how routine they look to the general public. The odds would frighten you. They are way higher than for a combat fighter pilot on active service for example. Which means that any increase in the risk factors has to be taken extremely seriously. Astronauts should not be involved in a game of Russian roulette. We have to make sure that they have the odds stacked in their favour as much as is possible. That is what everyone involved in NASA missions work towards.’

‘So that is why you ordered the abort?’

‘Well yes, I forced the issue to abort you might say.’

‘So why the problem?’

‘I am not a risk taker, especially of other people’s lives. Those astronauts and ground technicians rely on scientists like me to give them their best chance. That is not the way it was perceived by some of the senior management.’

Connors look over his shoulder at the NASA Administrator who stared back at him back and shook his head. ‘That’s bull shit. He was too cautious with his predictions and it cost the taxpayers tens of millions of dollars not to say a lot of prestige.’ Connors let it go, but his money was back on Festor.

‘Then what did you do?’ continued Ronson.

‘I told the Administrator that I thought something had happened with the atomic clock network.’

‘What was his response?’

‘He was simply not interested; he thought it was an insignificant malfunction or operator error.’

'Which it could have been?' suggested Ronson.

'No,' replied Festor, 'I made that clear to the Administrator at the time. This was no error.'

'Then what?' asked Ronson.

'I contacted all the network timekeepers and requested yet another harmonization.'

'What did this show?'

'Just as before, it confirmed that all the clocks had lost thirty nanoseconds.'

'So, if you hadn't done that first harmonization you would not have found out?'

'No not until the next harmonization study which possibly might have been as long as next December.'

'As long as that?' queried Ronson.

'Yes, we do a major study on all the clocks every four years, in the leap year, it's kind of a tradition. Of course there are loads of reasons why we might have done one before,' he explained. 'We constantly update and recheck but not at that resolution.'

There was a pause while Ronson was looking at her iPad. So Festor continued. 'Then I reported back to the Administrator two days later. His conclusion was that if no one else was worried then we should forget it. It was a busy time and we were planning several launches to the space station. His exact words were "let's focus on the important job here, we don't want any more cockups."'

'But you weren't happy, personally?' observed Ronson.

'No, I couldn't sleep. It seemed so surreal and the more I thought about it the less I liked it. I tried to raise it at several internal meetings over the next few days, but no one gave it any credence.'

'What happened next?'

'I tried to see the Defence Secretary but he refused to meet me.'

'So then?'

'I tried to raise it at the Special Internal Affairs Committee, but I kind of got cold feet.' Festor paused and again pushed his hand through his greying hair. 'What the hell more could I have done? I knew that if I got it on the record then someone would take notice...and they did because here we are.'

'But if Deputy Director Sanderson hadn't come to see you yesterday you would have dropped the whole thing. Right?'

‘What else could I do? I was already falling behind with my work, and I needed to focus on my team here at NASA. We had deadlines, launch simulations needed data...there was a lot of other things that required my attention.’

‘It seems to me that you might have been covering your back, bringing it up in that way at the Special Internal Affairs Committee?’ observed Heaslip. This time Ronson didn’t react to the intervention but simply looked at Festor waiting for a reply, and it came like a bullet.

‘The fuck I was!’ spat Festor with a force that surprised everyone in the room and as he leapt to his feet his chair went spinning across the room. ‘The fuck I was,’ he repeated more quietly, adjusting his jacket which had become twisted due to his sudden movement and then he started to walk towards the door.

‘One more thing Uncle,’ said Ronson in a calm voice, portraying none of the adrenaline that was pumping through her body from the sudden outburst. ‘Have you mentioned this to anyone else?’

Festor, red in the face, turned back to face the others who had remained impassively sitting, observing. In the operations room the others stared at the empty screen, with only the chair on its side against the far wall visible, but the voices remained clear. ‘No only the Deputy Administrator and the other timekeepers. Also at the various meetings I attend where it was raised under any other business.’

‘So, can we assume that the cat is out of the bag?’

‘I suppose so, but no one takes me or the atomic clock network seriously. We’ve both been around a long time and are taken for granted...rather like the plumbing.’

‘Well Uncle,’ said Heaslip. ‘We certainly do take this and you seriously,’ and gave him a smile that Festor didn’t return. However, he walked back across the room, picked up the chair and sat down again, a bit sheepishly thought Ronson. Had that outburst be genuine? She couldn’t tell.

The interview went on for a further hour without a break, and after Ronson had opened up questions to her colleagues they had covered everything as far as they could tell.

Ronson looked at her watch. ‘Okay thank you Uncle, I am sorry to have put you through that but your background information and insight are going to be invaluable not only to us but all the other teams. Now we have to focus on our specific task, and that is to find out how the clocks were changed. Anyone have any ideas?’ she asked hopefully. No one responded.

Festor had stood up and stretched himself slowly. He stared at them all for a moment. ‘I think the best place to start is by you seeing an atomic clock for yourselves.’

‘Do you have one here?’ asked Ronson standing up feeling her back slowly reshaping to a normal shape.

‘No, ours are at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena in California, also we have a few in space.’

'Okay,' agreed Ronson, 'that's a plan. Tomorrow too soon?'

'No, I am sure that would be fine,' he agreed. 'I'll contact them right away and arrange everything.'

With that the interview broke up and the agents made their way back to operations room, while Festor made for his office to make a call to the JPL in California.

Meanwhile in the operations room where they had been watching the live video link there had been some heated comments from the NASA Deputy Administrator after the interview with Professor Festor had finished. It had concluded with a curt, 'you know where I am if you need me,' as he stormed out of the room.

Tony Diaz, apologized. 'The Administrator took a lot of flak over those cancellations and you know how keen congress is on reducing our budget. So it was a kind of a field day, in fact days, for the anti-NASA lobby.' There was a long pause. 'Look, let me explain. Professor Festor works for NESA.'

'NESA?' queried Sanderson.

'Yes, it stands for NASA Engineering and Safety Administration and it has its base at the NASA Research Center at Langley, that's down near Hampton.'

'We all know where Langley is.'

'Of course you do, sorry.'

'No, I'm sorry Tony, go on, this is useful.'

'He also works with the Launch Services Programme at Kennedy and so is responsible to the Director there.'

'Why does he have an office here?' interrupted Sanderson.

'Well most of the staff are based at Langley which is close enough, but it is more useful for him to have his immediate team here as he is on several Federal and White House committees. I know he doesn't look much, but he is quite important and the administration here in Washington seem to like him which is a bonus. NASA has never been popular because of the cost and I suppose the perceived elitism, not helped by some of the staff who generally come over as arrogant. Festor is genuinely a nice guy and people like him. He can explain things to people without making them feel out of their depth. Senior management such as the Administrator and his or her deputies are coming and going, so Festor provides continuity within the various committees which works well for us. You know of course that the space programme is physically located at the Kennedy Space Center in Florida, although the actual launches are from Cape Canaveral Air Force Station close by. Anyway, he is due to move in 2017 when the new headquarters are finished at Kennedy, which means that he and his whole team will end up there. I have no idea who will take over from him on the committee side'

'Okay so why the row?'

'NASA is increasingly commercial. In fact, it has become seriously dependent on its commercial activities for funding. But, launches are now very competitive. For example, a

lot of the space station stuff operates out of Baikonur Cosmodrome in Kazakhstan. So any problems at Canaveral means customers lose confidence as well as a lot of money and start looking elsewhere, to the Russians, Europeans or even the Chinese to launch their cargo into space. Even India is getting in on the scene. One of those delayed flights was a commercial Pegasus XL rocket carrying a new communications satellite. They didn't stick around for another date. It cost us big time as you can't insure these things.'

'But it couldn't have been helped?' protested Sanderson.

'Missions are planned months in advance with a predetermined launch time decided 6 to 8 weeks in advance. It is important that they go at those times due to a whole range of problems, from space debris to fuel supply readiness. That is why the Deputy Administrator is so annoyed. It was a poor call, especially with it being a commercial flight as no lives were at risk. I accept the other two were linked to the Space Station, but we can't afford to lose one launch. It's basic cash flow I'm afraid.'

There was a long reflective pause after Diaz has stopped speaking. Finally Sanderson stood up and gathered up her few belongings. 'Thanks for be being so honest with us Tony. This won't affect our ability to call on NASA for help will it?'

'No not at all, I can assure you of that.' Diaz was smiling.

'If it's okay with you Ray I want to get things rolling,' continued Sanderson. 'Let's get Gail in here with the other team leaders and start organizing. What I suggest is that the other members of the team who haven't already seen the video look at it now, while we develop a strategy to move forward with this.'

Connors nodded his accent, although technically it was Sanderson's call.

'Do you need me?' asked Diaz.

'What do you think Ray?' Sanderson turned to Connors.

'Tony's contacts and knowledge in general could be useful.'

'I agree,' continued Sanderson. 'Would you mind staying on with us here Tony?'

Diaz was clearly delighted to be included and happily agreed. He was ex-military who had taken early retirement and then gone into the security business. Although he still ran a small private security company, he had taken up the job of head of security at the Washington Headquarters of NASA five years previously. Although he prided himself on his team of security guards and ran a very tight ship, he missed the action of the army and was enjoying having the joint FBI and CIA team in his building and was delighted to be involved with their investigation. But he knew he was walking a narrow tightrope and needed to stay on the right side of his boss.

In other parts of the operations room the other team members were huddled together in their makeshift areas watching the video of Festor's interview. Connors, Ronson, McGeever and Manson sat either side of a conference table with Sanderson at the top, and Diaz at the other end. A stenographer was taking notes which were automatically appearing on screens in front of them, and also on their laptops. Sanderson smiled at the group. 'Okay, let's see where we are here.'

'I don't think that our priorities have changed. We need to know how the clocks were clocked?' interposed Manson grinning broadly, everyone laughed.

'Let's say interfered with,' continued Sanderson with a false smile. God these Neanderthals, she thought. 'We need to identify and apprehend the people behind this as quickly as possible. But most importantly we need to know why they were changed?'

McGeever raised his hand. 'Yes Charlie?' invited Sanderson.

'We are going to have to establish a couple of things first,' he leaned forward looking at each face in turn. 'Has a crime already been committed or is one planned for the future? Secondly we need to establish if the crime requires one clock to be altered or all of them?'

'Another thing,' interposed Connors, 'I was under the impression that the clocks had been altered simultaneously but it now appears that they were altered at different times over an undefined period of weeks.'

'We will have to recheck with Festor's interview, but I agree that was my impression of what he had initially suggested, but that was not confirmed during the interview,' agreed Ronson.

'Okay. First I want you guys,' she indicated McGeever and Manson, 'to get hold of each of these timekeepers and I want to know about the location, security, access to the clocks and who has been close to them in the past six months. We need to start developing a profile of possible people. I want each one checked and double checked.' They both nodded. 'Ray, we need Freeman here as soon as he lands.'

'I have already sent Agent Smith to meet him at the airport, replied Connors. 'I guess he will be here around 4.30 this afternoon.'

'Okay,' acknowledged Sanderson. 'I think I would like to be on your briefing with him if that's okay?'

'What about Festor?' asked Ronson.

'Yes, good idea Gail, perhaps you and Festor should also join in. Okay with you Ray.'

Connors smiled. He had his own plan, but was happy to go along with the Deputy Director from the FBI, for now at any rate.

'I will leave your team to carry on working on how the clock was changed Gail.' Ronson nodded. 'Festor has arranged for anyone interested to have a look at an actual atomic clock. So Gail's team and anyone else who is interested will need to be at the airport at 6.00

am sharp. I have arranged transport. You will be going over to Pasadena to look at one of the actual clocks that have been altered, isn't that correct?'

'Yes Mam, that is what he said,' agreed Ronson.

'I think,' interrupted Manson, 'we should tag along as well. The JPL is as good a place to start our investigations as anywhere else.'

Sanderson nodded. 'I agree, but this is Gail's shout. Her team has to understand the clock system if they are to discover how they were physically altered.'

'Is everyone happy that Festor is involved in the investigation?' asked Connors out of the blue. 'Can we trust him?'

'There is always a chance,' answered Ronson, 'but my gut tells me he is clean.'

'No one is clean,' interjected Manson.

'I mean that he is not involved with altering the clocks. It wouldn't make sense,' said Ronson defensively.

'Could it be an elaborate cover up? I mean it was a pretty clever idea ...loony professor confronting the President with a doomed laden prophesy,' continued Manson.

'Not that she took any notice,' put in Sanderson.

'It could be a double bluff.' Manson had a smile on his face, he loved to see indecision amongst the top brass.

'It could,' agreed Sanderson,' but I'm ninety-five percent sure he is being straight with us. The key thing is that we are not going to get very far without his help.'

'So we keep him on the team?' inquired Connors looking around the room. Everyone nodded, except Manson. That missing five percent worried him.

Sanderson stood up. 'Thank you everyone. Please keep me informed so that we can keep the investigation co-ordinated. I don't want one team to be in the dark about the progress of the others. We are all working together on this, and for once I want to show that the CIA and FBI can work effectively together. Festor's video has been uploaded onto a secure link on the FBI server, which everyone can access. Please do not attempt to make a copy or allow access to another person outside our group. We have very tight security on all the material, including statements and notes, which will only be stored via this link. Understand?'

'Yes Mam,' everyone replied laughing.

'Class dismissed,' announced Sanderson and they all laughed again.

Heaslip, Carr and Hoff were all watching the video of Festor's interview again when Ronson joined them after the meeting. The operations room was an open space designed for large project meetings or design teams, although it had been used for conferences and even parties. There were centralized computer screens hanging from the ceiling which could be turned 360 degrees for PowerPoint and video presentations. Diaz had organized blue fabric wall screens and other office equipment including desks, lockable filing cabinets and lockers. The agents had created team work areas separated by the blue wall screens so they could work without being distracted. In the central area, facing the door, was a large conference table where the meeting of the team leaders had just taken place. It was not a very attractive room, but then again they weren't there for any other purpose but to work. Ronson announced that they would be leaving the airport at 6.00 am for Pasadena and that they should all be at the airport in good time. 'I don't want to have to leave anyone behind,' she announced. 'It's imperative that we get as much information about how these clocks work and how they are both operated and managed while we are there, understand?' Everyone nodded. 'Jamie a word.' Heaslip followed Ronson out of the operations room down the corridor to the small press room where they had held Festor's interview earlier that day. Heaslip had a stupid leering grin on his face.

'So?' he asked smiling when she had shut the door and turned to face him.

'You listen to me,' she snapped. 'What was all that shit during the interview?'

'What shit?' he asked still smiling.

'You listen to me and you had better remember what I am going to tell you. I have worked fucking hard to get where I am and it's not easy for a woman when every male agent looks at your body rather than seeing another agent. To put it bluntly, I don't like your attitude understand.'

'O-k-a-y,' he said he said slowly.

'No it's not okay its, Yes Mam.'

'Okay, yes Mam.'

'Also I don't expect junior agents like you to interfere and interrupt when I am conducting an Interview.'

'I just thought...'

'I don't give a fuck what you thought or think. You're here to do what I need to get done, understand?'

'Yes.'

'Yes what?' said Ronson staring him out.

'Yes Mam.'

'Right. Now we are going to start again, with your attitude where it should be. Got it?'

'Yes Mam.'

'Otherwise you're off my team.'

'You don't have...' he paused.

'What?' she snapped.

'Yes Mam.'

'Get back to work.'

Heaslip left the room shutting the door behind him. Ronson was shaking a little, but not from nerves but from anger. No one was going to take this opportunity away from her, not Heaslip, not McGeever, not anyone.

Agent Rachel Smith watched United Airlines Flight 551 land from one of the large windows of terminal D at Dulles International airport. The arrivals board had shown flight 551 from Boston's Logan Airport was on time. She checked her watch. Yes it was bang on time 4.09 pm although she was never quite sure when arrival times were actually calculated. It was a short trip of just under 500 miles from Boston to Washington taking just one and a half hours. However, it had been a difficult job for the FBI office in Boston to persuade Dr Andrew Freeman from the Centre of Computational Mathematics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology to drop everything, especially his 2.00 pm lecture that afternoon, to make the flight. But she had checked with the security at Logan and they had confirmed that he was on the flight, even though he had been the last to board.

The most important skill required to work for the CIA is not how you look in a tuxedo or how you handle a sports car at high speed, but raw intelligence. Rachel had been top of every class she had ever attended and with a master's degree in international politics plus a PhD in computational science she was typical of the modern CIA agent. Although she had been trained to use a variety of weapons she had never carried a gun; and as she rarely wore a jacket and trousers the opportunities to hide one was a bit limited, and they were far too heavy for the small shoulder bags she preferred. The truth is that CIA agents were nearly all based in Virginia and are for the most part unarmed, unlike their FBI counterparts. So, the rivalry between the FBI and the CIA was in theory heavily biased in favour of the home security agency. Having said that, Agent Smith and her CIA colleagues were all fans of James Bond, laughing uproariously, to the annoyance of other cinema goers, at the inaccuracies or impossibilities of the office and technical scenes. The outsider would not have seen any parallel between their jobs with the field operations and lifestyle of 007, especially his sex life.

When Freeman walked out from behind the security doors into the arrivals hall and looked around him he saw in the line of chauffeurs a medium height, dark haired woman of about 28 years of age, fashionably dressed in a white and red summer dress and holding a card proclaiming Dr Freeman MIT. He couldn't help noticing that she was rather attractive, wore bright red lipstick and was smiling in his direction; no, she was actually smiling directly at him. To say that she stood out against all those black and dark-blue uniforms was an understatement. He felt annoyed, what in the hell were they thinking of sending this ridiculous woman to meet him. It had not been a good trip for Freeman. He had been held up at the check-in due to his refusal to have his laptop pass through the scanner in case the hard drive was damaged. Although after a discreet word to the security officer from the FBI agent who was tailing Freeman they had let him pass. Buoyed up perhaps by this success he went on to have an argument with the flight attendant who argued about where his bag should be placed. In this case, with the FBI agent already on his way back to the Boston office, the flight attendant had won out. She also pressed home her advantage by ignoring his request for coffee during the flight and moving a rather overweight passenger to the seat next to his. Hence Freeman was not in a good mood; but then again he rarely was.

Smith knew what Freeman looked like from his file which she had been studying most of the morning. She knew everything about him from his birth, through marriage and divorce, and even had read a synopsis of his most recent papers including the abstract of his PhD on high speed computing. She knew Freeman alright, right down to his hobbies, food preferences and importantly his political views. So she had picked him out of the crowd pouring through the security doors almost immediately. What surprised her was that he had no luggage just a cumbersome overnight bag. She sighed. She knew from his student feedback which she had accessed from the MIT server illegally (could hacking by the CIA be illegal? she had often wondered) that he was fairly narrow focussed and not overly loved by students. Abrupt, conceited, arrogant, scary, these comments had been fairly frequent. But one thing they were all agreed on, Dr Freeman was brilliant at what he did. However, from her own experience of university professors, Smith knew very well that brilliance and kindness were not mutually exclusive. Those student comments said a lot about the man. But then again, students were students.

‘Dr Freeman,’ she beamed her welcoming smile at the unsmiling man. ‘I’m...’

He cut her off abruptly, ‘I haven’t got all day. I am not happy about being forced to come down here so let’s get to wherever you are driving me. At least I expected to be met by someone in authority.’ He glared at her with a mixture of distaste and disappointment and threw his bag under the barrier at her feet.

Rachel’s smile had automatically shut off. She may not carry a gun but she was a black belt fourth Dan in Taekwondo and right now she felt like placing a kick right between those small piggy eyes. ‘This way Mr Freeman’, she replied and walked off at a brisk pace leaving him to rush around the metal barrier to retrieve the bag, which she had ignored, and then to follow her. The fact that he simply didn’t retrieve his bag and make his way to the departure lounge to go back to Boston was not lost on her.

She paid for the parking ticket and then took the stairs to the car park. ‘What’s wrong with the elevator?’ enquired Freeman irritated.

‘Nothing as far as I know,’ she replied without looking back, but increasing her pace up the stairs. After four flights she walked right across the parking lot to an identical stairwell on the far side and rushed down four flights and walked across the lower parking lot to the back Ford Focus which was parked in a reserved space immediately adjacent to the exit from the arrivals hall. She clicked the key fob and the locks released with a heavy thud which to those in the know betrayed the extra security system built into the seemingly non-descript car. She opened the rear door. When Freeman finally caught up he looked and felt disorientated. He was slightly overweight and now was soaked in sweat and red in the face. ‘Ugh, isn’t that the arrivals hall. Hang on didn’t we initially come into the car park just here?’

‘Is it,’ she said innocently. ‘That’s strange but then I am not very good with directions. I am always getting lost.’

She paused holding the door. ‘Get in,’ she ordered rather than inviting, her voice having hardened.

‘I’d rather be in the front,’ complained Freeman.

‘Sorry, Government policy, get in the back.’ She slammed the door excessively hard after he had climbed in only missing Freeman’s hand by a whisker, causing him to jerk it away from the side of the door frame.

The journey to NASA HQ was largely a silent one. Freeman asked where they were going and Rachel replied as briefly as possible. ‘NASA Headquarters, 300 East Street, that’s the southwest district.’ She drove quickly and effectively and to Freeman’s surprise didn’t get lost.

Once in the building and having checked in at reception and issued with a visitor’s badge, Freeman struggling with his laptop case and overnight bag followed Rachel, again up several flights of stairs, to the operations room where Connors was sitting at a table with the other members of the team. They rose as Rachel and Freeman entered the room.

Connors stepped forward with a welcoming smile on his face.

‘Your driver here...’ started Freeman, slightly out of breath, but Connors cut across him.

‘Ah yes, you have already met Agent Smith who is one of the best IT specialists in the CIA. She has a PhD from Harvard; that’s just across the road from MIT. That’s right isn’t Rachel?’ Rachel smiled back at Connors. ‘Let me introduce you to the other members of the team.’

Freeman glowered at Smith. Not a sign of embarrassment showed in his face. She had made an enemy, and now that she was back with the team she regretted her childish behaviour back at the airport. Then again, thought Rachel, she instinctively knew that he didn’t like women very much, at least successful or confident women. She imagined, based on her own experience, that as far as the female race was concerned the feeling was mutual. Certainly his ex-wife must have thought so.

It was clear from the outset that Freeman was going to be of limited value. He spent the first ten minutes explaining how inconvenient it had been to drop everything at the last minute. Then how he expected to have first class accommodation and that he would be heading back first thing in the morning. His research was at a critical point etc. Connors was both taken aback and disappointed. Sanderson, who had joined the group in order to be introduced to Freeman was also disappointed. She took Rachel Smith aside. ‘Christ but he’s difficult.’

‘Tell me about it,’ agreed Smith. ‘Treated me like a bit a shit on the sole of his foot, then when Ray let the cat out of the bag, which I guess was inevitable, well the look he gave me. I haven’t felt so uncomfortable since I was teenager travelling alone on the subway at night.’

‘It’s not a criminal offence not to like women,’ Sanderson reminded Smith.

‘Thank goodness, because it works both ways,’ said Smith smiling.

'Let's just agree that's he's a bit of a creep, but one that we need just at the moment,' Sanderson squeezed her arm in encouragement. 'You are the only one of the team who is going to be able to keep up with him, so you are just going to have to put all that aside.'

'Absolutely, of course,' agreed Smith nodding, who was now regretting her reaction at the airport even more. The last thing she wanted was to be reassigned.

Sanderson went over to where Ronson was sitting. 'Where's Festor?' she asked.

'In his office I think,' she replied.

'Let's go,' ordered Sanderson.

They walked down the long corridor. It hardly seemed possible that she had first met Festor in his office less than 24 hours ago. They knocked on his door and walked in. 'Come in,' he shouted without looking up from his desk unaware that the two women were already standing in front of him.

'Sorry to disturb you Uncle,' apologized Ronson, 'but Deputy Director Sanderson wanted to see you.'

'I am rather busy just at the moment,' protested Festor weakly, knowing that any resistance to these two was futile. 'You did say you could spare me for an hour to catch up on some work,' he looked accusingly at Ronson who smiled disarmingly at him.

'It's about Dr Freeman,' said Sanderson.

'Oh good, so he has arrived at last,' said Festor standing up abandoning yet another strange looking map of numbers splayed across his desk. 'I must say hello.'

'How well do you know this Dr Freeman?' asked Sanderson who hadn't moved and so had effectively trapped Festor behind his desk. He slid back into his chair with a sigh.

'Well I have met him at a couple of conferences but I don't know him personally. He happens to be the best in his field that is why I recommended him. Is there a problem?'

'Yes and no,' said Sanderson vaguely. 'He has an attitude problem; especially it would seem against my female colleagues. It may be difficult for the team to work effectively with someone like that. I was wondering if he was the right person for this?'

'Is he a security risk?' asked Festor.

'No, not that we can determine so he's clear on that account; I am simply worried that he may not be a suitable collaborator.'

Festor swivelled side to side in his chair obviously thinking. 'So apart from being overly mothered and spoilt as a child, resulting in a misogynistic dick, there is nothing else you object to?'

Sanderson and Smith both laughed. 'He could be a disruptive element in the investigation, is there anyone else you could recommend?' continued Sanderson smiling.

Festor had stopped his chair swivelling and leaned forward. 'I think he is probably the best person we have close by. Also, I presume we want to keep this within US jurisdiction.' Sanderson nodded. 'So regardless of how weird Freeman is, he is the best at what he does. He could be invaluable.' He looked from one Agent to another.

Sanderson nodded in agreement again but this time more slowly, unconvinced. Festor continued. 'Occasionally mathematicians, computer scientists, even physicists as well, can come over as a bit strange, it goes with the territory. More than average, compared with other occupations, would have been diagnosed with some form of mild autism as kids who would have found their only safe outlet in numbers or computers. So it's no surprise that a few of them carry mild social issues into adulthood, but they are often incredibly intelligent and creative. Try and see it as a problem that he is trying to cope with himself and not take it personally. But I'm afraid if you want the best then you are going to find ways of working with Dr Freeman.' Festor paused. 'I'll be along in a bit and see what I can do.'

'Thanks,' said Sanderson, 'that was helpful.' She turned and opened the door to leave, behind her Ronson winked at Festor.

'Thanks Uncle.'

After they had gone Festor sat thinking for a moment and then stood up and walked over and looked at himself in a small mirror. What he saw didn't impress him and he ran his hands through his hair trying to make it look at least partially cared for. Then he did up the top button of his shirt and tightened his tie. Then he went back to his desk and bent over the incomprehensible map once more.

When Sanderson returned to the operations room she noticed that Freeman was nowhere to be seen. 'Where's our MIT expert gone?' she asked Connors.

'He's checking into his hotel. But he'll definitely be back at 6.00 for the first briefing.'

'Where have you put him?' She asked sitting down next to him.

'In the Residence Inn, just across the road. We have taken quite a few suites and rooms on the eighth floor just in case we need to stay over or someone needs to crash out for a while. We can also get meals at any time as well. He has a suite to himself and access to everything including the indoor pool which is pretty nice. So, he should be happy enough.'

Sanderson raised her eyebrows, 'I somehow doubt that Ray,' she said with feeling.

'I could always order to have him drowned in the pool if he gets too obnoxious,' he offered, 'we're good at that sort of thing in the CIA.'

She smiled, 'I might just take you up on that. Have you explained why we asked him over yet?'

'No, I told him that it was something of National importance, but nothing specific. Why?'

'You happy with him?' asked Sanderson.

'His attitude stinks and he obviously loathes Rachel which could be a problem. But no, in fact he is not unlike Manson; you know a shithead but probably good at his job.'

'What was that boss?' called Manson from the other side of the room. He was busy working at a fixed PC but had caught his name being mentioned and turned around in his fake black leather swivel office chair.

'I said you were probably good at your job,' called Connors, 'but only probably.' Manson smiled and raised his hand in a mock defensive gesture, then swung back to face the computer screen.

'Why do you ask?' inquired Connors sitting forward in his chair towards Sanderson.

'I didn't like his attitude, especially to Rachel. I just wanted to know your feelings about him before we brief him fully, that's all.'

'We can't afford any negativism within the team, this is already a hell of a complex case without personality clashes defocussing team members. Is there anyone else we could use?' asked Connors.

'Probably, but not close by or even perhaps in the States. Festor still thinks it's worth having Freeman on board.'

'Well that's good enough for me,' confirmed Connors.

'If he gets difficult...' started Sanderson

'Well he won't, trust me I'll see to that,' said Connors. 'Don't worry about Rachel she is as thick skinned as they come and a professional, she'll cope.'

Sanderson looked at Connors for a moment and their eyes met, but this time nothing happened inside her, she just thought it's so easy for a man to say that. 'Okay, but watch him Ray.'

At six o'clock Connors and his team were in the small press room just down the corridor from the operations room. 'Well Dr Freeman, I hope the hotel is okay?'

'It will have to be, I suppose,' replied Freeman who still hadn't completely relaxed.

'Let me explain why we asked you here,' continued Connors.

'That would be useful as I was ordered by the head of my faculty to come. I am not used to being told what to do,' complained Freeman.

'I find that surprising,' replied Connors smiling. 'As a public servant, I am always been told what to do, and I guess that must be the same with most employed people.' Freeman let it go. 'Okay,' continued Connors, 'it is quite straight forward, and by the way everything we discuss here is top secret.' Freeman nodded. 'Well, the reason we have asked you here is to advise us on what crime could be committed in thirty nanoseconds.'

'Thirty nanoseconds?' repeated Freeman genuinely taken about. 'Is this a joke?'

'No joke, I can assure of you of that Dr Freeman. A week or so ago it was discovered that a significant number of the clocks in the atomic clock network had lost thirty nanoseconds and that essentially global time had been altered.'

'What?' said Freeman sitting forward in disbelief. 'Say that again.'

'The majority of the timekeepers of the atomic clock network have reported the loss of thirty nanoseconds,' repeated Connors.

Freeman scratched his head. 'All of them?'

'No, but the majority of them in the USA and Europe, and just those in the official network.'

'At the same time?' enquired Freeman.

'We think at different times over a period of perhaps four to sixteen weeks but we can't be sure,' replied Connors, 'do you think that is important?'

'I have no idea, but this must have been a deliberate attack on the network,' responded Freeman.

Connors was intrigued that he had immediately come up with this conclusion. 'You don't think it could be an error with the clocks or a physical or, perhaps, an environmental factor?'

'No,' said Freeman categorically. 'The network has clearly been compromised. My God, what a strange thing to do. Do you know how it was done?' To Connors surprise Freeman's reaction was similar to that he had witnessed during Festor's interview, he was clearly shocked and deeply worried.

'That is not our concern right now, another team have that in hand,' replied Connors who was pleased that Freeman had accepted the situation so readily. 'What we need is for you to help us determine why?'

'How could I possibly know why anyone would do this? Do you suspect me in some way?' asked Freeman, his voice changing back to his whine

'No one suspects any one at present doctor, but Professor Festor suggested that as one of the world's leading researcher's in high speed computing applications you could perhaps help us to determine the motive in this case. Professor Festor has already given us some

suggestions, but he has advised us that if anyone can, you were the person who could find out what is behind this. We need to find out what is possible to achieve in this very small timeframe.' Connors look directly at Freeman.

'Mmm,' said Freeman now almost completely lost in his own thoughts, 'how very interesting.'

Manson waved a depreciating hand at his boss Ray Connors. He might be slightly overweight but there was nothing wrong with his hearing, and he had caught his name being spoken on the other side of the room. "Probably a good agent." He laughed to himself as he worked away at the keyboard. These NASA PCs were fast, he thought to himself, even if he was logged into the CIA server. He typed away with two fingers at a remarkable speed his eyes glued to the screen. He had left that jerk Mr FBI McGeever to watch the briefing who he noticed was now in deep in conversation with that cutie Ronson. Were they a couple he wondered briefly? McGeever had better watch out because he had seen the way Heaslip had looked at her when they first met. He had worked with Heaslip before and knew that he had an eye for the women, and apparently women had an eye for him. There was competition in the air and Manson began to whistle very quietly to himself. So, while McGeever was mooning over his Ronson, he was going to find out who was screwing with these atomic clocks. How hard could it be?

In truth it was proving a little more difficult than he anticipated. Manson was not probably a good agent he was one of the very best, although you would not suspect it for a moment. But he could be difficult to work with and did not have a huge opinion of the FBI as an agency and so loved baiting any FBI agent within hailing distance. Even that morning, while McGeever had run up the stairs to the fourth floor rather than wait for the elevator, Manson had remained belligerently in front of the elevator doors pounding the up button continuously. Thanks to the OTIS Corporation he was waiting for McGeever at the top of the stairs when the FBI agent appeared still running but not showing any signs of being out of breath. 'What kept you buddy? You FBI guys are always last on the scene,' Manson had quipped. McGeever had simply given him a single upright finger in salute. 'I love mime,' called Manson after the retreating figure of McGeever as he jogged down the corridor to the operations room.

Manson was the opposite of McGeever in every way. McGeever really did look like James Bond being tall, good looking and athletic. But in reality, it was Manson who had field experience while McGeever was essentially a desk man. Manson had worked undercover in South America for over nine years brushing up against some of the most dangerous drug cartels in the world who included people who were renowned for their violence and cruelty. Under the guise of a coffee exporter Manson had made his way all over the remotest parts of Columbia, his white linen suit stained and showing signs of wear, and sweat marks under the armpits. In fact, Manson believed that he never once stopped sweating during his long tours of duty in that tragic country. Unlike McGeever, Manson had killed, several times in self-defence, and frequently over-stepped the mark while trying to get information. Oh yes, Manson was undoubtedly a good agent, and once he had the scent of his quarry, then nothing would stand in his way. Yet in appearance Manson was joke. A short man, with a square bulging torso, a face like a boxer, thinning hair and a simpleton expression. You wouldn't give him a second glance unless you were a hot dog trader.

But it was proving to be an impossible task so early on without any clues or information to go on. But that wasn't going to stop Manson who had got the other two members of the team CIA Agent Hammond who he knew from Langley, was a decent happily married man; and Agent Dubois who was from New Orleans and had transferred from the famous FBI Field Office in Leon C. Simon Boulevard to Washington only six months earlier. 'Okay men,' he said addressing them in McGeever's absence, 'we're going to try to shorten the odds a little by trawling through every database available to find anyone who has a conviction or a known interest in cybercrime. Yours truly is going to focus on the States and I want you Hammond to trawl through Canada and South America. Dubois, cos you speak French, shit you even look like a Frenchie in that snappy suit, I want you to do the same through Interpol. Are we good to go on this?'

'Sure thing,' said Hammond turning back to his laptop.

Dubois only managed a muttered 'okay' as he tried to unravel the potential insults hidden away in that quick banter from the grotesque Manson whose current linen suit was liberally stained and he supposed had been cleverly pressed to look permanently crumpled. Dubois looked up to McGeever as the successful agent, if not the ideal role model of manhood. In his time at the Bureau he had never met someone like Manson, and was finding it difficult to get an angle on him. 'Is Manson okay?' he whispered to Hammond a bit later on.

'How do you mean?'

'Well. You know, is he any good?'

Hammond turned to look at Dubois. 'He's been in this business a lot longer than either of us, and I've been in the Agency for ten years. I've never worked for him before but he has one hell of a reputation, some consider him a legend, so for me it's a privilege to be working alongside him.'

Dubois looked at the honest face of Hammond and nodded then turned back to the screen of his laptop and started tapping keys in earnest.

After six hours, Manson and Hammond had made an important discovery. There were just over 1.8 million known cyber criminals in the North and South America alone. These included paedophiles, hackers, credit card fraudsters, bank hustlers, basic fraud and thefts, in fact it now seemed that the majority of crime involved the Internet to a greater or lesser degree.

'I've got even bigger figures from the Interpol database,' confirmed Dubois. 'So I reckon we could be talking in excess of 4 million suspects, assuming this person or people are known. Have we considered terrorism?' he added.

'Hell no,' confirmed Manson, 'we had better include those as well...that should take us well over the five million mark; though my gut tells me that this is nothing to do with terror, just dear old greed.'

Hammond and Dubois both looked at Manson's ample gut and wondered.

'Well done guys,' continued Manson. 'At least we have something to start with. Good job.' Manson for all his banter was a team player and gracious with his praise when it was due. 'And we haven't even started yet. Once we start to exclude improbable groups...like hell why would a paedophile want to alter time, the odds will increase in our favour. We need to start to look at potential scenarios and try to create a possible fit so we can continue to narrow the odds.'

'My money is on someone outside the known databases,' said McGeever, walking up to the table just in time to hear the last part of the conversation.

'You don't say Mac?' responded Manson. 'Nice of you to spare us the time, as well as your considered opinion. However,' Manson paused for effect, 'if this thing proves to be very technical then sure we will be looking at insiders or someone who has been planning this for a long time. This is clearly a very sophisticated crime.' He left this comment hanging for a good ten seconds, then continued. 'Okay Dubois, let's start by focusing on known sophisticated big players in cybercrime. The developers not the followers, if you get what I mean. Anyone can do a credit card scam, but someone had to think it out first. Hammond, it looks as though Dubois knows his way around the old processor so you help him out for now.' Both agents nodded and Hammond pulled his chair closer to where Dubois was sitting. 'But until we can get intel from the other teams,' continued Manson, 'were flying solo. We need to keep a paper trail here boys so keep me or my new best buddy here up to speed.' McGeever smiled at the clichés, but he could see that Manson was on the right track and that the chase had started in earnest.

Manson swivelled around in his chair and looked at McGeever. 'I guess that your girlfriend had something interesting to impart. Going to share?'

McGeever lent forward, his face in Manson's. 'You bet and by the way, anytime buddy. But let's just get one thing straight. Agent Ronson is a colleague that is all, clear.'

'No problem,' said Manson raising both hand defensively, 'but it's not my tongue that is hanging out.'

McGeever leaned back. 'What in hell is that supposed to mean?'

'You don't need to be a detective to see that Heaslip is on the inside track and is going to finish way in front in that particular derby.' Manson was smiling maliciously.

McGeever gave himself away by glancing over his shoulder and sure enough there was Heaslip bending over looking at Gail's computer his hand balancing lightly on her shoulder staring intently at the screen and then at her as she chatted away.

'Come on big boy,' grinned Manson, 'let's retire to the Bar at the Residence and have a few beers and chew all this over.' Manson had already grabbed his raincoat which he had been sitting on for most of the day and pulled it on. He looked like a crumpled sack as he walked out of the operations room with the suave McGeever reluctantly in tow.

Connors nudged Sanderson and they watched the discordant duo leave the office and they smiled at each other. 'I've got a feeling that the whole is going to be much greater than the individual parts after they have had a couple of drinks,' observed Connors. 'Good idea to put them in joint control of the team.' Sanderson turned back to her computer still smiling.

The two men had made their way across the road, having both travelled down in the elevator. They crossed the deserted road and went through the entrance of the Residence Inn and into the bar. 'Two beers,' ordered Manson, then as an afterthought he looked at McGeever. 'Okay for you or are you one of these executive winos?'

'Beer's fine,' answered McGeever looking a bit defeated with Manson's jibes no longer hitting home. He took a seat at the bar next to Manson who was looking around the empty room. 'I don't know shit about you,' said McGeever diffidently, 'you don't seem to have any accessible service record?'

'Damned if I don't at that,' agreed Manson.

'What's that meant to mean?' asked McGeever as he took a tentative sip of his beer, while Manson drank half of his in one gulp.

'Look,' said Manson turning his bulk to face the debonair McGeever. 'I'm just a CIA operative okay, been around a bit, but still at the basic salary grade. You on the other hand ... hell just look at you. You were made for senior management, Mr FBI. Me?' Manson paused. 'Well I'm just a glorified cop who is allowed to play it dirty once in a while.'

McGeever lowered his voice. 'You used the term operative, so you've been in the field?' he was suddenly interested. Not many FBI agents get to do real field work. Sure, they may do the odd bust, get to wave their gun around occasionally. But not undercover, not like the old days of the CIA. 'That still going on?'

'Well let's just say I've been around and my Spanish and Portuguese is good enough to understand when a woman tells me to fuck off.' Manson was now looking at his empty glass using his finger to scoop out the remaining froth as though it was a latté or cappuccino.

McGeever nodded. 'You got something against the FBI?'

'Hell no,' said Manson, placing his empty glass next to McGeever's which was still half full or empty depending on which of the two you were. 'But we have to keep up the tradition. Like baseball, we have to maintain a healthy rivalry or the game goes to shit...come on you feel the same. Right?'

McGeever drained his glass and allowed himself a small smile and nodding to the bartender pointed two fingers at the empty glasses.

‘Anyhow you and me have something in common,’ continued Manson.

‘What’s that,’ asked McGeever, ‘our tailor?’

‘Ouch,’ laughed Manson, ‘I meant the Corps.’

‘You were in the marines?’ asked McGeever turning to face Manson.

‘Sure was and then some, I was in the reserve until I was posted. I miss all the ordering people around shit, I really do.’

‘How did you know I was in the marines?’ asked McGeever?

‘Well I could say I cared enough to drag up your file, cos you aren’t that important to be ex-directory like me,’ Manson was smiling. He was never happier than having the craic with another agent and having the upper hand. ‘But I didn’t. I can just tell by the way you walk about. How long since you left? Can’t be all that long ago, because I can still smell the army off you. Hell, just look at those shiny shoes and the creases in your trousers!’

‘Three years,’ said McGeever.

‘Any action?’

‘Tours in Iraq then Afghanistan,’ replied McGeever, ‘you?’

‘Gulf in 91 then Somali and Haiti,’ said Manson and there was a long pause between the men as though they were reflecting on the past. ‘Aren’t those Brits weird or what?’

‘It’s the Aussies that frighten the shit out of me,’ answered McGeever and both men laughed. ‘All that crap about them being tough is really true.’

‘Yea,’ confirmed Manson, ‘hard bastards. I remember during Desert Storm pushing up through the desert towards Kuwait, it was so hot I swear to God the paint was actually melting on the transport, when we came across a small platoon of Aussies walking really fast. It was in the middle of nowhere, just sand for hundreds of miles as far as we could tell. So we stopped and offered them a ride. Weren’t interested, didn’t even want to talk to us but finally admitted they were on special duties and eventually told us to fuck off. They were on a mission all right, on course to die of dehydration. Interestingly they weren’t wearing any Australian insignia so I guess they were Special Air Service Regiment, but they weren’t British that’s for sure. Never saw any others, although I know that Australia were part of the Naval blockade.’

‘I saw a documentary about them training in the deserts in central Australia,’ added McGeever. ‘They had amazing survival skills learnt from the aborigines.’

'I reckon they were all born in the outback with a sheep for a mother,' summed up Manson, 'that's why they all seemed so at home in that shit hole. No water, blistering heat... Iraq must have been just like home.'

'Not many sheep though,' commented McGeever.

'That's true,' agreed Manson. 'Do they have camels in Australia?'

'God knows,' replied McGeever.

'Hell, that's typical of the FBI, when it comes to vital knowledge they just don't have it. That's why they have the CIA'

'Well?' asked McGeever taking final swallow.

'What Camels? No idea,' admitted Manson as he finished off his beer and ordered another round.

'Do you miss it?' asked McGeever.

'No, not really. It's the innocent people who get caught up in all of it. They still keep me awake at night. The sheer horror they must go through, it doesn't bear thinking about.' McGeever nodded. 'You Mac, what about you? Three years wasn't long.'

'It seemed like a good idea at the time, but the army wasn't for me,' said McGeever. 'I did my time, learnt a lot, but the Bureau feels more like home. I feel as though I'm part of something that is making a difference. I know that it sounds lame, but I feel as though what I do is important. Do you know what I mean?'

Manson nodded reflectively. The two men sat silently for a while. 'Okay,' said Manson holding out his hand after the refills had arrived. 'What say we cut out the crap? I'll stop making you look like a dick and you stop making me look so good.'

McGeever allowed himself to laugh. 'Deal,' he said and the two shook hands. Without either man realizing it, at that moment an extraordinary force had been created.

Eight beers and two glasses of wine later, McGeever had given up after the third beer and changed to his normal beverage, the men had exchanged everything they knew. 'So tomorrow we travel to Pasadena to check out NASA's clock with this Festor guy. Do you trust him by the way?' asked Manson.

'Guess so. My boss is usually right about these things and she thinks he's straight and that's good enough for me. You?'

'No idea,' admitted Manson, 'but you did say it was probably an inside job?'

'It's the easiest explanation,' agreed McGeever.

'Can you organize a local FBI forensics team to back us up?' enquired Manson after a short pause.

'Sure,' relied McGeever, 'but why?'

'Cos it's a crime scene that's why.'

They flew on a small private jet from Washington to Burbank Airport, a flight time of just over 5 hours, and then it was a further thirty minute drive on the bus which they boarded directly from the steps of the plane. 'No time for sightseeing or using the wash room?' observed Manson to McGeever who, to the surprise of everyone else on the flight had sat together on the plane. Festor had sat with Ronson while the rest of the party which included Heaslip, Carr and Hoff had sat on their own. Sanderson had decided at the last moment not to accompany the party when she had heard that there was a clock in Washington that she could see if she needed. Connors and his team were also in Washington working with Dr Freeman but had sent Sanchez along so he could brief the others on his return.

Manson turned around in his seat on the bus and addressed Ronson who was now seated next to McGeever and who were deep in conversation. 'I don't get why we had to fly across the continent to see this particular clock? I had a look on the Net and this isn't even one of the important ones like the NIST set up in Fort Collins.'

'It was Festor's call,' she said, 'so it's up to him to explain.' She paused for a while before continuing. 'Anyway, why are you so keen to go to this FIST outfit in Colorado when you can go to sunny California?'

'Isn't it sunny in Colorado?' asked Manson smiling. 'It's NIST, by the way, the National Institute of Standards of Technology and that is where the organization is based. Apparently, that is where the master clock for the States resides.' He raised his bulk from his chair and glanced back to where Festor was sitting who was again looking at one of his weird maps. 'Hey Festor,' he called beckoning with his hand.

The professor dutifully, but not without obvious signs of irritation at having to stop his work, made the way up the aisle to where they were sitting and sat in one of the seats opposite to Manson. 'How can I help?' he asked.

'Why have you brought us here?' asked Manson.

'To see an atomic clock,' replied Festor simply.

'Oh come on Prof,' complained Manson, 'there are more important ones than this, NIST for example and the one the Navy guys operate out of Washington.'

If Festor was surprised at Manson's question he didn't show any signs. 'Well it is the one I used to be in charge of and I didn't want to cause any alarm by going to NIST.'

'I don't believe you,' replied Manson sharply.

'Watch it Manson,' barked Ronson. 'Professor Festor is on my team and is not a suspect.'

'Then why isn't he telling us the truth? If this was a school outing then we could have stayed closer to home. Hell, we could have flown to Europe instead and had a bit of fun.'

Festor smiled. 'Okay. You're right.' Ronson looked surprised. 'It's a bit complicated but from an International security perspective this could be the most important clock of all.'

'Why?' asked Manson simply.

'The Jet Propulsion Laboratory is an important NASA Research Centre that specializes in space research. They develop satellites as well as space craft. We also have very close links with CalTech. This means that we have more than our fair share of researchers using the facility. Universities are always a security risk, as well as the fact that students come here via CalTech from around the world.'

'So?'

'Well it's rather difficult to explain.'

'Try me.'

'The science is complicated.'

'That's true,' agreed Manson, 'I looked up atomic clocks on Wikipedia and found it hard going. But you learn a lot of chemistry when you work in narcotics, so try me.'

Ronson was looking at Manson with mounting surprise as well as respect. She stole a glance at McGeever, who just smiled and winked.

'There is a project. It's not actually secret but the details are very much restricted.'

'Okay,' encouraged Manson, 'got it so far.'

Festor smiled, as well as lurching dramatically forward from the seat on which he had been sitting sideways with his legs in the aisle as the bus went around an acute bend on its way to the Centre. 'The project is known simply as the Deep Space Atomic Clock or DSAC. We have developed a miniature version of an atomic clock that can travel in space on missions or be placed circling the earth in satellites.'

'The clocks I've been reading about,' commented Manson, 'seem pretty large, so how small is this one?'

'Well, it is small enough not to cause any problems in terms of payload, even on a small sized mission. It's small but I can't tell you more than that.'

'Okay, is there anything else that you can tell us?' persisted Manson.

'It's a new idea using a mercury-ion clock that is ultra-precise which provides us with a navigational clock which is orders of magnitude more accurate. It's a huge breakthrough.'

‘So why is this important? Come on Prof help me, I’m pulling teeth here,’ complained Manson.

‘It’s a bit mundane really. Navigation depends on time, and space craft navigation relies on very precise time radio signals. So, essentially the better the signal the better the navigation. Also it is completely self-sufficient as a time piece, it doesn’t consume anything, and so can be used for very long space missions.’

‘Like to Mars?’ asked Manson like a star struck schoolboy.

‘Far beyond, and to objects that are far smaller. It allows the on-board computer to make its own fine adjustments in terms of navigation allowing us to land safely or pass by things more closely than we have ever been able to do before. The possibilities are enormous and not only restricted to space, but also here on Earth,’ confirmed Festor. ‘Also it’s so small that it is easily incorporated in other systems as well, and unlike our normal land-based clocks they are obviously mobile and comparatively robust.’

‘Are we talking submarines and long distance recon?’ asked Manson.

‘God knows what applications you could put these clocks to if you had a warped mind like your’s Manson,’ confirmed Festor.

‘Why do you boys continue to develop this crap which always ends up in the hands of the criminally insane?’ asked Manson.

‘It’s just technology, and technology gets better every day,’ explained Festor. You can’t stop progress, nor can you stop people using technology inappropriately. It seems to me that you’ve be reading to many superhero comics.’

‘Will you be able to buy one of these from Walmart eventually?’ asked Manson who was getting heated.

‘No need,’ said Festor, ‘you can already download a highly precise system free from the Internet.’

‘Fuck you can!’ said Manson, and he turned away and looked out of the window. The interview was over.

The bus passed through the entrance to the NASA facility unchallenged and there were already a number of school buses parked outside the Education Centre, but they continued on past impressive new buildings and hangars until the bus finally came to a halt immediately outside the entrance of a relatively old building. Outside waiting for them were four black vans and a small gaggle of men and women, some already wearing white disposable overalls, all identifiable by their FBI IDs, which even from this distance were clearly visible. ‘What’s going on?’ Ronson asked McGeever pointing to the FBI personnel as they stepped from the air conditioned bus into the searing heat of the concrete forecourt.

It was Manson who answered mischievously. 'Nothing to do with me mam, this is an Internal security matter being handled by the FBI.'

'I am the FBI!' she said snapped, rather too loudly.

'Sorry Mam,' lied Manson,' raising both hands in his now familiar defensive gesture. 'This is Agent McGeever's show, and I believe this is the location of a serious crime, and it is going to be treated as such.'

'Wait a minute...,' started Ronson.

'Sorry Gail,' intervened McGeever, 'our team is just doing what we were ordered to do. Our investigations are already well underway and we need to gather any potential evidence from the crime scene as our CIA colleague here says.'

'Right,' agreed Ronson, testily. 'I'm disappointed that you couldn't have shared this with the rest of us. Uncle you had better go first, but these two clowns do have a point.'

As they walked off towards the entrance Ronson pulled McGeever back slightly from the party by his sleeve. She raised her face to his and he lowered his ear close to her mouth. 'You fucking bastard. You're deliberately trying to undermine me in front of the others. If it's war that you want then that's fine by me. So let me make this as clear as possible. Play a trick like this again and I will rip your balls off.'

McGeever straightened up and smiled down at Ronson. 'So that's a date then?'

She blushed. 'Fuck you,' she said as she started to walk off towards the main door of the building. 'Take care you don't turn into Manson,' she added over her shoulder.

He continued looking at her smiling, 'I could do worse,' he shouted at the Ronson's back as she marched towards the entrance.

Tony Diaz and the Deputy NASA Administrator had already been onto the Director at the JPL, so there was no one to meet the party, except the senior team members working with the atomic clock and on the DSAC. It was a beautiful day and it was with some reluctance that they all went inside the rather shabby building.

'I'm afraid that we will need to forensically examine the laboratory area where the atomic clock is housed before we see it for ourselves,' announced McGeever apologetically. 'Could someone show them where to go and advise them on what not to touch?' So, one of the junior members of the welcoming committee was appointed to lead the forensic team up to the main laboratory and help them collect whatever evidence they were looking for. They struggled behind him, as he strolled off towards the stairs, with a large array of bags and equipment chatting happily between themselves. Meanwhile Festor introduced the other team members and they retired to a meeting room just down the main corridor on the ground floor where a buffet lunch had been laid out.

Manson, however, didn't bother with lunch as he had been eating snacks and sandwiches all the way on the flight, and so made his way to the lab to oversee the CSI team, along with the senior security manager for the site. When they arrived at the first floor laboratory which took up a corridor space of thirty metres they could see the CSI team already at work hovering the surface of the computer keyboards which they then cleaned with special swabs which were then placed in sealed plastic screw top bottles in the hope of finding any DNA evidence, of which there would prove to be plenty. There was just the single door with a reinforced window inset in the upper half, and two large observation windows from which the complex equipment in the lab was visible. The two men watched with professional interest as the team worked methodically away, the NASA technician having to repeatedly dart backwards and forwards as one of the CSI members got too close to something expensive or dangerous. Manson pointed out interesting pieces of forensic equipment and explained what they were doing. At the same time he was also quizzing the unsuspecting security manager about the staff and the security in general.

After twenty minutes and still chewing the remains of his lunch and holding a paper cup containing a double espresso, McGeever joined the two men who were watching the CSI team through a large observation window.

'We've been talking about the security of this area, including CCTV cover,' said Manson who took the cup from McGeever without comment. 'Christ that's strong,' gasped Manson who had drained the cup in one go.

McGeever smiled at the choking Manson. 'Well what have we got?' he asked.

'We have clear footage of the main corridor and also we have one of the inside of the lab,' replied Manson with some difficulty and looked at the security manager for confirmation who nodded.

'Is access restricted?' enquired McGeever.

'Well it says so on the door,' said Manson taking a step back to peer at the doorway.

'Yes, but is it kept that way?'

'You will have to check with the lab people,' replied the security manager, 'but you can see that we have a swipe card system on the door which is centrally controlled.'

'So if anyone goes into the lab they use their swipe card, which I presume is some form of authorized staff card?' persisted McGeever.

'Correct. Then the computer identifies the person and only releases the door if they are on a list of authorized personnel,' explained the manager.

'Does it retain that information?' asked Manson.

'Almost certainly,' said the manager, 'although I can't recall ever having used that particular facility. But I would be very surprised if it doesn't also log entry times and the date.'

'So, unless the card has been stolen or the perpetrator has entered with another staff member that card should identify them,' concluded McGeever.

'Correct,' confirmed the manager.

McGeever turned to Manson. 'Which means this has to be an insider job.'

'Looks that way,' agreed Manson, who suddenly changed his mind. 'Hang on, I don't buy that, it's too simple. All the clocks were tampered with so either it's an insider who visited all the clocks in the network or it's some other clever bastard who has covered their tracks somehow.'

'Sure, but is that likely?' asked McGeever. 'Is there much detail of your clock available to the public?' The question had been addressed to the security manager who had been watching the exchange between the two visitors with interest.

'Yes some,' he hesitated as he tried to think. 'On our webpage, but it's pretty vague.'

'What about building layouts etc.?' continued McGeever.

'Nope, that would be difficult to access; also a lot of the coming and goings are random. So I don't think someone could get enough information unless they visited the actual location.' Why did these two guys make him feel so uncomfortable he wondered?

'Do you have visitors to the clock?' asked Manson. It was strange to see the two agents who were so completely different in so many ways thinking and asking questions in tandem.

'Rarely, but parties, mainly school and College kids, do pay visits to the building and they do pass by and they can see the clock through the window.'

'Interesting,' said Manson taking out a black pocketbook and rapidly writing something down.

'So, the CIA still use those things,' observed McGeever.

'Nope, only me,' smiled Manson and moved to the main observation window again to watch the forensic people at work.

'Okay,' concluded McGeever. 'You happy Manson?'

'Guess so.'

'Well those ghouls in there will be finished shortly so we can get the rest of the party down here.' McGeever set off down the corridor to get them.

Manson turned to the security manager. 'What say you and me go to security control centre and see what you can do with the CCTV footage?' He turned to face the retreating figure. 'Hey, Mac!' he shouted.

McGeever had just reached the end of the corridor and was about to go down the stairs. He turned and shouted 'What?'

'Find out when the clock was changed.'

'Okay,' he called back and was gone from sight.

'I can tell you that,' replied the security manager. 'The scientists identified the problem on August 8th at 11.45 in the morning.'

'Right,' said Manson writing the time and date in his notebook, 'but that only tells us what time you identified the crime. We need to know exactly when it was done. So, we need to narrow that down.' He mused over the problem. 'Hell, it could be hours, days or even months.'

'I think I can answer that.' From the opposite direction in which McGeever had disappeared Festor had just arrived at the lab door with the rest of the party who were walking down the corridor in twos and threes. 'The last time this clock was harmonized was June 25th a Saturday. We carried out a harmonization at midday, because that was the day we set the time on our first DSAC.'

Manson was delighted. 'Great, that narrows it down to...' he took out his diary and looked at the calendar at the back and stated counting the days.

'Forty-four,' said Festor. Manson looked up surprised with his finger stuck on July 4th, 'I am a mathematician,' he smiled.

'Thanks Prof,' he said. 'I'll just hurry these guys up and went into the lab.'

Ten minutes later the people in the corridor watched with interest as the CSI team left carrying numerous plastic and paper sacks, along with their own equipment in strange looking bags.

'It's all yours,' announced Manson, who then took the arm of the security manager and steered him down the corridor, 'we good for that CCTV footage?' he asked.

'Let me get this straight,' said one of the IT technical staff who had been called down to the security control centre, where banks of security screens showing real time images from around the NASA Research Center lined one wall and was being watched by two guards. 'You want forty-four days' worth of CCTV footage of the atomic clock lab and the corridor outside?'

'No,' said Manson. 'I want the footage from June 25th to August 8th inclusive of the lab but I want footage for the corridor dating from June 25th the previous year.'

'You mean June 25th 2015 to August 8th 2016?' The technician looked away from Manson to the security manager shaking his head.

'That is correct my man' confirmed Manson smiling.

'Then you must be fucking joking or living in cloud cuckoo land. No way is that even possible.' The technician, red in the face with annoyance, began to walk for the door.

'Not only am I not joking as you so politely put it, I also want all the security details of visitor passes issued between June 25th 2015 and August 18th 2016. I've seen the kids wearing ID badges so I am guessing there must be a check-in system.' The security manager nodded. 'So I want photos, names, addresses everything you got on every visitor who came through this corridor. I also want to meet all the people who were leading those tours past that lab window during those dates. I also,' added Manson as an afterthought, 'need details of any staff who have access to the lab who have reported losing their ID card within the last eighteen months.'

'Look, we are busy people here, we don't have the manpower to do your job for you,' said the technician in a condescending manner who had halted in the doorway on his way out.

'Boy,' snarled Manson menacingly, 'you couldn't do my job even with a firecracker stuck up your arse. I'm not stupid so don't fuck me over with any of that technical problems or general crap. We don't need manpower, we have that in spades. What we do need is that data which I am willing to bet a year's salary is still on your mainframe.' He paused regarding the technician with a look of someone regarding a lump of dog shit he had just walked into the room on his shoe.

The look wasn't lost on the technician nor the sheer bulk of Manson who seemed to be growing bigger as his fuse shortened. The technician was a professional whinger and knew just how far he could push the system or somebody, and was aware that he had already pushed his luck too far. 'It's there okay, but accessing that amount of data, well it's a vast amount. Just the CCTV footage of the lab for the forty-four days alone...'

Manson interrupted him. 'Stick on one of those external hard drive things...they have loads of storage, don't they? Hell, you're the fucking expert just do it.'

The security manager nodded to the technician. 'It's really important Larry. Drop everything else and don't leave the building until you have it done.'

The technician looked at his watch. 'But my shift finishes in an hour.'

'Just get on with it Larry and don't argue with me; this is really important understand.' The tone of his boss was enough to persuade him.

'I'll have to ring my wife and...'

'You do that Larry,' said Manson giving him a meaningful stare, 'but get the fuck on with it. I will be flying out of here in a couple of hours either with that data or with you, take your pick.'

Manson shook hands with the security manager and made his way to the now empty function room where several caterers were clearing away the remains of the lunch. Although his watch was now saying 1.05 pm it was only 10.05 am local time, so in reality lunch has actually been brunch. 'Hold on here, I'm one hell of a hungry man!' He grabbed a plate and with his bare hand helped himself to whatever was left. 'Get me a beer honey,' he said to one of the women who were clearing the room as he sat down at one of the partially cleared tables.

The waitress glanced at an older woman who nodded and she left the room only to reappear a couple of minutes later with an open bottle of Budweiser.

'Thank you honey,' he said raising the bottle in salute before taking a large swing. 'I'm much obliged.'

The party had watched Manson and the security manager disappear down the corridor with interest. 'I think we can all assume it's safe to go in now,' said Festor and he pushed the identity card that hung around his neck against the red symbol next to the door handle which bleeped and turned green. He opened the door and they all moved into the large laboratory, the NASA scientists hanging back to allow the visitors to enter first.

'Well here is our atomic clock,' pronounced Festor with obvious pride in his voice. They all stared at the large cumbersome unit.

'I can see why they couldn't launch that into space,' commented Heaslip in a quiet voice to Alan Carr, 'small it isn't.'

'Pretty impressive though, don't you think?' replied Carr.

'I am going to hand over to Professor Taylor who is in charge of this section here at the JPL. Anne is also the official timekeeper for this particular location.' Festor turned to a short dark-haired woman in her early-forties.

‘Well,’ she said looking serious, ‘welcome again. I hope that you have recovered from your long haul over from Washington. We are not sure exactly why you are here, but understand that you are interested in the reported abnormality recorded on August 8th. However, I would like to stress that we feel that this abnormality is insignificant given the resolution and normal drift of the clock itself.’

Ronson raised a hand. Taylor looked at her and smiled. ‘Could you explain a little more why you feel that losing thirty nanoseconds isn’t important?’

‘I didn’t say it wasn’t important Agent Ronson rather that we feel it is not significant. That’s a big difference.’ Taylor’s smile had become fixed. ‘Of course we are intrigued that there has been this discontinuity.’

‘You are aware it has happened elsewhere Professor?’ persisted Ronson.

‘Yes, that is indeed disconcerting, but in the larger picture it may not affect our own work here at the JPL. Shall I continue?’ She allowed a short pause forcing several of the agents to nod their heads in agreement. ‘Professor Festor has asked me to explain about the network and the clock itself. So, I suspect it would be helpful to explain briefly what we are actually measuring here.’ She received several more encouraging nods, especially from Heaslip and McGeever who seem very impressed by the woman standing in front of them in her white coat. ‘The world is governed by co-ordinated universal time known commonly as UTC. So, no matter where you are in the world, the local time is checked against UTC. The role of the atomic clock network is to generate atomic time on which UTC is now based. We call this International Atomic Time or TAI. Okay?’

Everyone nodded but Heaslip asked, ‘So this co-ordinated universal time relies on the atomic clock network to be precise.’

‘That’s more or less correct yes,’ she continued giving him a more genuine smile. ‘The TAI, or the international atomic time, combines the output from 400 atomic clocks to provide the speed at which our clocks actually work.’

‘But I thought it was about day length?’ asked Heaslip.

‘You asked that before,’ interrupted Festor. ‘Universal time is also referred to as astronomical time and measures the Earth’s rotation...um the actual length of each day.’

Heaslip looked confused.

‘So the clock, like the one behind me,’ continued Taylor actually provides us with a standard working unit of time which we measure using the decay of cesium-133 to define time and it differs from the astronomical time for which we have to make adjustments.

‘So what is time?’ asked Heaslip laughing

‘Well if you remember from school there is something called the international system of units, SI units, and we have them for weight, length, speed etc. Well the SI system defines time as well, and one second is deemed to be the time it takes a cesium-133 atom at ground

state to oscillate precisely...,' she paused and then took a deliberate deep breath, 'nine billion, one hundred and ninety-two million, six hundred and thirty-one thousand, seven hundred and seventy times. Have I got that right Uncle?' asked Taylor.

'That's it,' he said smiling.

'Atomic clocks measure those oscillations to give a very precise measurement of time. In fact our clock here will only deviate by 1 second in 100 million years. Hence it's reasonably accurate.'

'Only reasonably accurate?' asked Ronson surprised.

'For some future applications we may need better resolution. In fact, the Europeans have just launched a major project to produce the next generation of clocks.' She gave Ronson another fixed smile.

'So how many clocks are used to generate the TAI?' asked Ronson.

'Well,' replied Taylor thinking, 'there are 69 national laboratories, providing data from, as I said before around 400 individual atomic clocks.'

'And you do that here?' asked Heaslip.

'Do what?' asked Taylor in return.

'Generate the TAI?' explained Heaslip.

'No, that is done by the International Bureau of Weights and Measures,' she answered.

'So what is UTC for?' asked Heaslip.

'Ah,' said Festor taking up the discussion. 'This is our problem. From a research perspective, we need accurate time, especially with the work we do here at NASA. Of course we are not the only ones, most of our modern technology is highly time sensitive and they need that level of precision as well. But we have a problem in that the Earth's rotation is slowing down.'

'Shit!' said McGeever, 'is that serious?'

'No,' laughed Professor Taylor looking appreciatively at the handsome FBI agent, 'but the rotation governs the length of the day as we perceive it. We conduct regular harmonisations not only between the clocks themselves but between TAI and UT1 which is what we technically call astronomical time. When the difference reaches a maximum of 0.9 seconds we simply add a correction to UTC by adding an extra second.' There was a long pause as the Professor and McGeever gazed at each other.

'They are called leap seconds,' added Festor eventually to break the silence that had suddenly developed. 'For most everyday purposes time plus or minus 1 second is quite accurate enough, but for modern technology a much higher resolution is required. Perhaps it would be useful to explain how this works at a more practical level Anne?'

Ronson nudged McGeever's arm and he bent slightly so she could whisper in his ear. 'Will you stop flirting and behave like a fucking professional. I don't think you are taking this seriously.' He smiled and whispered back 'I love it when you're jealous.' Ronson tried not to show her annoyance, but she couldn't dismiss the fact that she had felt slightly jealous. She noticed Heaslip looking at them. It was true, she thought, men brains were in their trousers. Ronson realized that she felt tired having only had four hours sleep before the early start that morning; and now she was feeling it, her whole body felt heavy and weak. Suddenly she was aware that Taylor was talking again.

'Professor Festor is chairperson of the Atomic Standards Group and it is their responsibility to ensure accurate time is available throughout the continent. Members supply clock data from the US to the International Bureau of Weights and Measures in Paris. This is co-ordinated from the National Institute of Standards and Technology in Fort Collins. The Institute is known to everyone as NIST, so apologies if all these abbreviations are getting confusing. The Institute has the most accurate clock in the US, probably in the world, and it is one of the new generation of caesium fountain clocks installed in 2013, although a new one is being developed which will be even more accurate again and should be on stream by 2017 or maybe later.' She paused gathering her thoughts then continued. 'An important function of NIST is to supply accurate time to everyone in the US and it does this by continuously broadcasting an extremely accurate time signal using a low frequency radio transmission. Special receivers decode the radio signal and reset the time locally wherever the signal is being picked up. However, you don't need to have your own mini atomic clock, you can also get the accurate time via the Internet. You can also buy home atomic clocks that can pick up the signal I believe.'

'How accurate is that time signal?' asked Heaslip.

Taylor paused and looked around at Festor, 'well at least to a fraction of a second.' Festor nodded his agreement. She glanced over her shoulder and said look you can see it displayed on the wall panel as four sets of two green digits. So it's 11.52.02.88 so that is 11 am 52 minutes and the seconds are the next group of figures and finally that set of two columns of rapidly changing numbers are hundredths of a second that appear to be fixed as 88 but in fact are changing too quickly to read.'

'So, the Internet system is also using one of those special receivers,' he persisted.

'Yes, that is correct. But we also use two-way satellite time and frequency transfer for harmonising the networked clocks so that TAI as well as UTC are always accurate to a much higher degree than that.'

'So anyone can get this precise time...every mobile device and every computer, fixed or otherwise,' clearly Heaslip wanted to be absolutely sure on this point.

Taylor agreed with his conclusion and looked at her watch. 'I do need to get on, is there anything else?'

'How can the clocks be altered?'

'Goodness,' she gave her dark hair a vigorous shake with her hands as though she was tired and trying to wake herself up. 'The clocks are simply agreed times harmonized by the network. But we are not talking about an alteration of the time itself in any meaningful way here. Thirty nanoseconds is just outside the normal variation of the clock, but was unexpected. What we saw was a momentary fluctuation in the rate of oscillations of the caesium atom which was detected as a loss in time which is impossible. So, if the oscillation rate was altered...which as I said is impossible,' she paused and pursed her lips in thought, 'well it should be the detector, but we have checked that and its fine. Sorry, but we have no idea how it was done. It's a complex system and there are lots of factors that could have been altered, the temperature of the chamber for example, the power rating to the six lasers, but any minor change would result in a much larger inconsistency with the microwave signal generated...' she slowed up and stopped. 'No, it can't be done. Any alterations in the environment in the chamber would cause massive inconsistencies. I haven't a clue whether this is real or just a blip, or normal inconsistencies.'

'Affecting all the clocks in the network?' asked Ronson.

'I don't know. Sorry,' she said abruptly as though suddenly bored.

Most of the scientists left with Taylor but Festor continued to field an array of questions from Ronson's team, although it was Heaslip who had the best understanding of the technology and was increasingly asking more technical questions.

'Did Jamie do science at College?' asked Ronson to his CIA colleague Carr during one of the long exchanges between Festor and Heaslip.

'No, I don't think so. It was international politics and business I think. His dad is something big in electronics though, owns a major manufacturing company, so perhaps it runs in the family?'

Manson joined the party just after 2.00 pm. He had to knock on the door and one of the remaining scientists opened it for him to enter. Festor was talking about how the network operated and Manson took the opportunity to look around the laboratory. He peered under benches looked up at the ceiling and at one stage he picked up a mop which had been left against a cabinet and went around pushing up various ceiling tiles. Festor could stand it no longer. 'For God's sake Agent Manson, can't that wait till we're finished here?'

'Don't mind me Professor,' replied Manson.

'Manson!' A woman's voice. He looked around. 'Do us all a favour and cut it out,' said Ronson.

'Yes Mam,' replied Manson. He put the mop back and joined the group and tried to look innocent as Festor continued.

Ronson as well as Heaslip, Carr and Hoff fired off question after question about the clock and how it operated. After about 20 minutes Manson raised his hand. 'Go on,' said Festor in a resigned tone of voice, 'surprise me?'

'Simple really,' replied Manson. 'Did the person or person's unknown have to be inside the lab to alter the clock?'

Festor looked at the group of scientists that had remained who briefly conferred. 'It is almost inconceivable that it could have been done from outside of the room,' said one of the white coated men.

'But not impossible then?' he concluded.

Again they conferred. 'No, we are of the opinion you would have to have had physical access to the machine or the dedicated computer which is only accessible within this room.'

'It is not networked at all?' continued Mason.

'No, its only function is with the clock and it is not accessible via another server. The time data is transmitted via another portal.'

'Thanks,' said Manson. McGeever walked behind the group to join him.

'Well?' he asked.

'I think we have the fucker,' said Manson. 'He or she has to be on the surveillance footage, if they had access or were known to one of the team.'

Professor Taylor had returned and was addressing the group again thanking them for their time and wishing the visitors a safe trip back to Washington.

'What do you propose to do?' asked McGeever. Manson smiled at him and stepped forward.

'Yes, it's been fantastic meeting you all as well,' added Manson, 'but before you leave I am afraid I will have to ask you all to give your fingerprints and a DNA sample to my forensic colleagues who have set themselves up in the function room where we ate earlier. I am afraid we will need to eliminate you from our inquiries.'

'Or incriminate us,' said a voice.

'If you are guilty then perhaps yes,' added Manson, 'but somehow I don't think it was an inside job so relax please and do your duty as American citizens. Perhaps you could inform anyone else who has access to this lab that they will also need to present themselves to forensics downstairs. Thank you.'

They were walking down the corridor back to the function room. 'Do your duty as American citizens!' repeated McGeever, giving Manson a sideways glance. 'I didn't know you had diplomatic experience?'

'Oh yes,' said Manson, 'I can be real polite when I have to,' and gave him a wink.

'Were you being honest about you not suspecting anyone here,' asked McGeever.

'Of course not, but it's a bit obvious as they may well have visited the other clocks. So we also need to look at all the US clocks and do a repeat in terms of data gathering, then we shall see who if anyone has visited all of them over the past couple of months.'

'Should be interesting,' said McGeever.

'Yea should be,' agreed Manson, 'but my money is on none of these scientists being directly involved.'

Most of the team were already on board the plane which was waiting on the tarmac just below the executive gateway. Heaslip and Carr were cross-referencing notes they had taken during the day and Hoff was working away on his laptop. Festor was still in the terminal building talking to the NASA JPL head of security. Manson was eating sandwiches and drinking coffee with his back to the window, so it was only Ronson who saw McGeever through the large plate glass windows of the terminal building walking towards the gateway. He wasn't alone. Ronson slunk down lower in her seat to shield her face in the plane's window as she watched the slim shapely body of the woman arm in arm with McGeever. She was so close to him that her body appeared to have melted into his. Ronson watched their progress, heads together as they walked. Then suddenly stopping fifty yards from the gate McGeever engulfed her in his strong arms and tilted her face up to his. He kissed her for a long time and then drew back and regarded her. Ronson could clearly see the grin on his face. 'You fucking, useless bastard, whatever did I see in you?' She said quietly to herself. The woman had taken his phone and was clearly putting in her personal contact details and handed it back to him smiling. He bent down and gave her a final kiss full on the mouth which left the woman reeling as he suddenly released her. He turned and ran to the gate flashing his ID at the security guard and through the gateway down the steps onto the tarmac. Within fifteen seconds he was running up the steep metal steps and appeared at the entrance of the plane. Ronson had to make a quick readjustment in her seat and hoped that he hadn't noticed her watching. She was determined not to say anything, although she could feel prickles of anger and hurt behind her eyes.

Manson shouted out from the rear of the small jet. 'Down here buddy.' Then added rather wickedly, 'You made quick work of the lovely Professor Taylor.' Ronson sank even lower in her seat and pretended to be looking at her iPad.

'Everyone here?' enquired Festor a few minutes later from the doorway, then turning to the male flight attendant, 'We seem to be good to go thanks,' and walked down the aisle looking for his seat. The jet engines began to rise in pitch and the plane lifted slightly as the energy built and then suddenly they were moving over the tarmac towards the runway. He had stopped halfway down the aisle just opposite to where Ronson was sitting and leaning forward studied something that had caught his interest as the plane bounced past. It was then, as he stood upright, he caught Ronson's eye and saw she was angry. He leaned over her seat. 'You okay, Gail, is there a problem?' he smiled as he spoke.

'No,' she said, 'everything is absolutely fine. In fact, I've never felt better.'

Looking up he saw McGeever and Manson sat in the final row of seats together, laughing over something. He smiled at her once more before moving two rows further on and falling rather than lowering himself into his seat.

It was some four hours after the plane had made its early morning departure from Dullas airport on route to Pasadena that Connors had arranged for the first meeting of his own team who were trying to identify what crime was possible in that tiniest fraction of a second. Paul Sanchez, a close colleague of fellow FBI agents McGeever and Ronson, had arranged a small conference table and chairs, and was carefully putting out transcripts of the video conference with Festor from the previous day. Imogen Cole, who was attached to the IT intelligence section at the Washington office of the FBI, walked into the operations room with Rachel Smith. Both were holding paper coffee cups that filled the room with a rich aroma, and were chatting away happily like any two young women on their way to the office. Smith was using her coffee cup to illustrate some point resulting in tiny splashes of coffee being launched into the space around her. 'Hey, where's mine?' complained Sanchez sniffing the air appreciatively.

'In the percolator in the corner,' Cole said pointing, 'and it's free.'

'Yea and you know why its free don't you?' complained Sanchez.

'Why don't you pop over to the Inn and see if Freeman is up and ready, then you can drop into Starbucks on the way back,' suggested Smith.

'Great idea,' replied Sanchez grabbing his jacket and looking up saw the team leader Deputy Director Connors coming over to the carefully laid out conference table. He had clearly overheard the conversation between the three agents

'Get me an Americano Paul, if you don't mind. I'm not ready to boldly go where NASA has gone in terms of its coffee station,' he said without a hint of humour.

'Yes Sir,' replied Sanchez a bit too smartly, and both women laughed.

'Ladies!' snapped Connors. 'We need to get working on an itinerary for this first meeting. So as your two heads are already together, perhaps you can map out some preliminary lines of questions for Dr Freeman.' They both looked suitably admonished, and immediately the two women were transformed back into the highly skilled agents they were.

'Well?' asked Connors after fifteen minutes, during which he had been listening to part of the Festor interview for the third time and following it on the transcript making further notes. 'What have you come up with?'

The two women looked at each other. It was Cole that answered. 'To be honest it's just too far out of our league. I suppose it depends on just how powerful the processor is. The more powerful, the more significant the time becomes. It's as simple as that as far we can gauge.'

'Or at least we think so,' added Smith a bit lamely.

'So who are using these processors?' asked Connors looking from one to the other.

'We don't know that either I'm afraid,' replied Smith, 'that sort of information would be classified for any government agency or for that matter any computer system really.'

'But I think that is the point Sir,' added Cole.

'The point?' asked Connor confused.

'Surely a crime would be against a single target, or at least a series of similar targets such as banks because they all generally buy in the same type of systems and software,' replied Cole. 'So the real question,' here Cole looked towards Smith for support and got none, 'so the point, Sir,' she hesitated again, 'is that why bother to alter the time of the atomic clocks when all you have to do is to gain access to the particular server that you are interested in?'

'It's not that easy, surely?' said Connors, seeing a large problem looming ahead, and all his preconceived ideas about this investigation about to be binned.

'Well,' said Cole apologetically, 'actually it's not that difficult. There are some very sharp minds out there with plenty of time on their hands.'

'We're not talking about a direct hack and take over,' added Smith, 'this could simply be a tick invasion and plaster job.'

'What did you call it?' Connors was laughing.

'Tick and plaster, it's a term we use sometimes,' said Smith. 'You gain access by tagging along with someone who already has access by hacking into a softer target. It's a bit like waiting for someone to punch in a code to open a door and then you simply follow them in before the door has closed behind them.'

'But in this case,' added Cole, 'you are actually attached in some way to the person who has access, rather like a tick...get it?'

'Right,' said Connors nodding doubtfully.

'Then once you're in you leave your bit of code behind which is usually malware or it's the code you use to give you full access,' continued Smith, 'and if necessary cover up any signs of you having ever been there.'

'So what you are saying is that it's comparatively easy to hack into any government computer system?' Connors was sitting back in his chair which was suspended on its back legs at a dangerous angle.

'If the server or computer is networked then it's possible yes. Cyber security is a cat and mouse game Sir. The players constantly get better and bolder so that the security has to become more and more sophisticated. Security is always playing catch up.' Smith sat looking at Connors, expecting another question.

'Some game,' said Connors.

'To some Sir it's the natural progression from their X-box,' Cole added.

'You've got to help me out here,' said Connors, sitting forward and the chair landing heavily on its front legs. 'What is it you are saying? Are we looking in the wrong place or something?'

'The key question we should be addressing Sir, is why the need to alter the clocks?' Cole had neatly summed up what Smith had been trying to say more indirectly and nodded in agreement.

Connors gave what sounded like a defeated sigh. He knew he was out of his depth in this investigation and wondered what the hell he was doing there. Terrorism was what he was really worried about and unlike Manson, that was what he personally felt was the real motivation here. The room had fallen silent and remained so, each agent deep in their own thoughts. The minutes ticked by, the electric wall clock clearly audible as the minutes clicked into place and was then replaced by the next. To say that the team was nervous as they sat around the table waiting for Sanchez and Freeman to appear was an understatement. Connors caught Rachel Smith's eye and grimaced as he looked at his watch. Just as minute hand of the clock rose to twelve Freeman and Sanchez, carrying a paper tray holding three steaming cups, walked into the operations room. Freeman sat down next to Connors and taking the cup from Sanchez started to speak.

'It is just too short a time. If it had been 300 or even just 100 nanoseconds maybe. But thirty nanoseconds! I don't get it.' Freeman paused as he tentatively tested the temperature of his coffee with his lips before resuming. 'Okay you could insert a line of two of code for a simple fraud in a bank's software or even a bounce into a defence system. But it's simply too short a period of time, also, to do it that way would be immensely complicated when there are much easier ways to do it. So it has to be down to navigation.'

The two female agents looked at each and then back towards Freeman.

From his previous experience with Freeman, Connors had been expecting complaints about the accommodation and so was surprised, but also delighted, by Freeman's direct response to the problem. Also, it had started the meeting without the need for him to smooth ruffled feathers or having to cajole people to speak. The ball was rolling at last without the need of any agenda.

'If it's possibly to do with navigation, could this be a NASA thing?' asked Smith.

'How would I know?' Came the immediate response, then after a short pause for reflection he added in a kindlier voice. 'This doesn't seem to relate to computing in the strictest sense, but I suspect it has everything to do with how we use time in navigational technology sectors, so you are possibly right Agent Smith.' His voice was slightly more edged when addressing Smith directly.

'Can you be more specific about which technologies?' asked Cole.

'Take your pick. GPS would be at the top of my list, mobile phones, defence, aviation could be anything,' he offered. But this is such a weird way of committing a crime.'

'Depends on exactly what the crime is?' is put in Connors. 'This has to be something big because of the scale of the interference with the clocks. So, it has to have a basis in either power and that means either terrorism or money on a massive scale.'

'Possibly' agreed Freeman, 'but why the clocks? Why this bizarre attack on something that has been previously been thought of having no significance in terms of security?'

'Well you have already answered your own question I suspect,' said Cole, 'because it was thought to have no significance and so was a soft target.'

'And despite what Dr Freeman says,' added Smith, 'this may have been the easiest way of achieving their goal.'

'Their Goal, where does the plural come in?' asked Connors.

'Can you see just one person devising this idea, executing it and then exploiting it for some criminal purpose?' explained Smith

'No, that's true I can't,' agreed Connors, 'So it looks as though we are dealing with a group here?' He paused thoughtfully before continuing. 'Okay that makes sense. If we assume it's a group then one of them at least has to be very specialized but that still doesn't get us any closer to what crime is about to happen or possibly has already been committed?'

'Look,' Freeman interjected, 'I don't see how you can answer that question so you need to think, as they say, outside the box.'

'Pardon me,'

'This group has created some strange time anomaly which appears to have created a scenario for them to do something which we presume is criminal. Rather than trying to guess what that is, we need to think about how to stop it happening whatever it might be.'

'How?' asked Connors bluntly.

'I have no idea, but I suspect that you will have to contain this whole thing anyhow, so why not do that first and then see if you can identify if anything has been done already?' explained Freeman.

Sanderson walked across the room and leaned over Connors shoulder, acknowledging Freeman with her hand. 'How's it going?' She enquired.

'Well Becky,' said Connors leaning sideways so he could look up at her. 'We have just discovered another chink, or should I say gaping hole, in national security.'

'Oh!' She looked disappointed. 'What's that?'

'Those damned clocks are a soft target for anyone interested in carrying out almost any type of crime you can imagine,' he explained.

'What do you suggest?'

'Well Dr Freeman here suggests that we should bolt the stable door even though the horse has bolted. We close it up as soon as possible and then encase it in a very thick layer of security.'

'It's that serious?' she asked Freeman.

'The truth is that as technology has progressed we have assumed time to be like any other unit of measurement, except time is different, we directly control how it is measured and periodically adjust it for some purposes where UTC is used,' explained Freeman. 'What we have here is a massive security problem that we were unaware of previously that is going to be increasingly used for every conceivable crime.'

Sanderson looked at Connors. 'So?' She asked.

Connors sat back and thought for a while his eyes only half focussed on Sanderson who was now perched on the side of the desk facing him. 'Okay,' he said finally turning to Freeman. 'I take everything you have said on board. But I think we need to be sure that we aren't just dealing with some very large-scale fraud here or something to do with these things,' he held up his iPhone. 'Apple, Microsoft and the like; these companies are worth more than most countries put together. There still could be an old fashion reason for this, extortion or theft for example. So, before we declare a state of emergency or whatever, let's just run through the possibilities.'

Robbie Nicholson was a fine looking man, which was something that he was fully aware of. He used his good looks to his own ends, and his relationship with the President of the United States was just one such example. Officially he was her Science and Defence Advisor, but it went much further than that. Over the three years that she had been in office Nicholson had used all his influence, tact and anything else available to him to get as close as possible to this vulnerable woman. Vulnerable? The President of the largest democracy on earth? Absolutely. Surrounded by people who resented her, who hated Washington and its administration, who scrutinized every word she spoke or wrote, and more so criticised the way she looked and dressed. She and her husband, an extremely ambitious industrialist, were hardly on speaking terms after her refusal to support his companies by ensuring lucrative government contracts didn't come his way. 'It is a matter of conflict of interest,' she had pleaded. In contrast, her husband just saw her failure to support him in his business and took it personally. What really angered him was allowing those very same contracts to be awarded to his competitors. Which is why after 18 months of the Washington circus he had decamped back to their Connecticut home; so that now he was rarely seen either at the White House or by her side. He had a string of discreet mistresses who filled any possible gaps in his life and who were, at present, happy to remain discreet so long as the monthly cheque was paid into their equally discreet bank accounts. A shrewd and clever woman, the President had been aware of his infidelity for over a decade and now she was in the White House she couldn't care less, especially as it kept him out of her bed. The agreement was that as long as he didn't embarrass her or damage her Presidency, he could "go wherever and do whatever the hell he liked," as she repeatedly told him. Her grown up daughter also didn't speak to her since she had married a Democratic Senator a year ago, except she noticed that they were always ready to exploit their status as the daughter and son-in-law of the President. So not only was she alone in terms of family, she was isolated in her presidential box making her a very lonely and yes, a vulnerable, woman; and Nicholson was exploiting that as much as he could. Let's be clear. The President was an astute and clever woman who valued her independence and who had worked hard for over two decades in the shark invested waters of politics, so she knew what people like Nicholson were like and what they were after. But you don't become a successful politician without being able to manipulate those who think they are manipulating you.

Nicholson swaggered around the White House, constantly extending his authority by gate crashing meetings, speaking on behalf of the President (both officially but more often unofficially), and increasingly organizing private functions and client meetings for his company at the White House. Even when White House staff mentioned this, either to her private Secretary, or occasionally and very tactfully to the President herself, she refused to take any action to curb or rebuke him. He became untouchable and as a result his power and prestige increased daily. As a result, he was not popular with any of the White House staff, especially the men, and already rumours were spreading about the amount of time the President and Nicholson were spending alone together and the influence he had over

her. So far none of the press agencies had really made the connection between them although this was now only a matter of time as his behaviour towards her, even in public, was increasingly intimate and possessive. In short everyone from the other aides to the household staff were sure they were having an affair. So, when he walked into the Special Internal Affairs Committee meeting of which he was neither a member or authorized attendee and making a gibe at Festor thereby bringing the meeting to a premature and rather abrupt end, well, no one was surprised.

‘Robbie you’ve been ignoring me!’ admonished the President as they made their way from the large committee Room towards her private quarters. She had wrapped her arm around his and pulled him closer. ‘Who was that odious NASA guy?’ she asked. ‘Do you know him?’

‘Yes, I do as a matter of fact,’ replied Nicholson seeing an opportunity to further his cause. ‘He is one of the Staff on NASA’s Engineering and Safety Administration.’

‘What was he giving out about? I didn’t understand what he was saying, something about time. Do you have any idea?’ she squeezed his arm.

‘No, he’s your typical nerdy scientist; they are all in a world of their own importance. I strongly suggest you replace him on that committee, and come to that I don’t think it’s a good idea that he remains on any Government committees. He showed absolutely no respect to either you or your office in there. It’s typical of NASA. I’ve told you before that I’m pretty sure that NASA is trying to undermine you.’ Nicholson gave the President’s arm a reassuring squeeze.

‘NASA, NASA, NASA!’ she snapped letting go of his arm abruptly and stopping to glare at him, her anger just below the surface as always. ‘That’s all you go on about these days.’ It was tight rope that Nicholson was walking on when trying to influence her thinking. He knew he had to be careful, especially with the presidential election looming.

He smiled as he stepped towards her. ‘I’m only trying to help, you know that.’ He rubbed her shoulder, his fingers pushing on the tight muscles that led up to her neck so that she relaxed to his touch. ‘Their budget exceeds nearly everything else except for defence. If you want to be re-elected for a second term you will need to do something that will get the average voter behind you. People are bored with pictures from space or foreigners floating around in what should be our space station. The average Joe wants to see their budget slashed and that money going to create jobs, healthcare maybe.’ He was still massaging her shoulder and her eyes were shut her head moving slightly as his fingers worked on the tight muscles. ‘I sent you that...’

Suddenly she came alive again and shook off his hand by pulling her shoulder sharply back. ‘Yes, I read your report. You want to cut their satellite research and development work as well as their launch programme. But you can’t have a space programme without it, that’s plain for everyone to see.’

‘Of course you can,’ he objected, as he ran a few steps to catch up with her as she marched away along the corridor towards her private apartment. ‘The private sector has invested

billions of dollars on their own satellite R&D and launch programme. It's time there was a level playing field, otherwise we will lose out to the Russians or worse the Chinese. NASA will never be cost effective. It has no idea how to commercialize. So why not let it do what it does best, and let the private sector do what it does best, creating jobs and making money.'

'Christ!' she said angrily stopping to face him again, 'you sound like my fucking husband. He was for ever going on about support for the private sector. But he didn't mean any private sector, just his bit. What about you Robbie?'

Nicolson shook his head sadly at the reproof. 'But you must see,' he continued, his voice conciliatory and soft. He moved towards her again and replaced his hand on her shoulder. 'Surely you understand that it is a win-win situation, especially for you.'

'For me?'

'Sure, why else would I be suggesting this? Your ratings are rock bottom and they fell again this month.'

'Oh God,' she almost wailed, 'it would all be so much easier if I was a man.'

'Well this is one voter who is glad you're not.'

She looked up at him and smiled, then looking back along the corridor to check it was deserted, she pulled his face down to hers with both hands and kissed him firmly on the lips. 'Let's not fight. Thanks to your gate crashing that meeting I am now free for a whole thirty minutes, so let's not waste it.'

Connors sat back in his chair and rubbed his eyes. The whole team was exhausted as they had been talking and looking at demonstrations relayed onto the large display screens, mainly by Freeman, who seemed to have an endless ability to conjure up examples of time related crime. 'So you think that the most serious threat would be something to do with navigation, have I got that right?'

'Yes, I think so,' confirmed Freeman. 'We have been through everything else, more or less. It gives us so many more important and mind blowing possibilities.'

'You sure this isn't just a sophisticated bank robbery, the Federal Reserve maybe or the Brits crown Jewels?'

'It appears to me,' continued Freeman, 'that ignoring the point made by Agent Smith earlier that to effectively alter so many clocks individually suggests something very large indeed, even something long term can't be ignored. We have no idea what they are thinking to do or when. It's as simple as that.'

'But you said at the outset that thirty nanoseconds wasn't enough time to realistically do anything,' Connors reminded Freeman.

'I don't think so, no, but then again I have no idea what they are planning. In terms of a navigation signal for example, well it could be highly significant.'

'But how would they use it? They must have known it would be eventually detected and corrected.'

'But it hasn't been corrected, has it? Maybe that's what they wanted,' said Freeman.

'What, for it to be corrected?'

'Why not?'

'I'm lost, sorry Dr Freeman,' apologized Connors shaking his head. 'This seems to be a waste of time. Our only chance to find out what crime will be committed is to catch the bastards, and that's down to Manson and McGeever.'

'I agree,' said Freeman, 'we have to accept that we have no idea how it was done or why. Right now, we have absolutely no idea what's going on. What we can do, however, is to minimize the potential damage and to do that we need to respond in a way they will not expect.'

'Well there only seems to be two options,' said Smith who had been quietly listening to the two men. 'Either change it back or leave it and realign all the other clocks.'

'I'm not so sure,' said Freeman frowning, 'we are coming up to a leap second at the end of the year and that could hold the key to all this.'

'What are suggesting?' asked Smith.

'Do nothing. That would be my advice,' concluded Freeman.

'But you still think it's down to navigation and to navigation satellites in particular?' enquired Connors.

'Yes, I do,' agreed Freeman. 'I'm not sure how but that is where the most potential harm lies in terms of time at this level of resolution.'

Connors picked up his iPhone and called Manson, but his phone must have been switched off as it went straight to voicemail. He hung up without leaving a message and tried McGeever, who answered immediately. 'Charlie can you come over, I think we have narrowed down the crime and it may be useful for your part of the investigation.'

Smith waited till Connors had finished making his call and then addressed Freeman. 'So your advice is to do nothing. How can you justify that?'

'I couldn't justify doing anything else, especially the two options you proposed.' He leaned forward and addressed Smith as though in a student tutorial. 'Of course, the obvious thing

is to try and make a correction. But why bother. Look at the precision of the clocks that are currently networked. The thirty nanoseconds are irrelevant as the time shift almost falls in to the normal variability of the clocks, and when the average of all the clocks are taken in Paris then those tiniest of fractions of seconds imaginable are lost anyhow. Thirty nanoseconds are probably irrelevant to any crime. The crime here is the vulnerability of time itself and in how it is measured. The offense here is what could be done with time and what has been demonstrated to us so clearly is that it can be manipulated. You wanted my advice, well here it is. Take time seriously, put a water-tight security screen around every atomic clock networked. It could be the most precious thing we have if future technology is going to continue to develop the way it has up to now. That is what we should be doing. Whatever has been done or could be done, well it's too late. What we have to do is prevent this from ever happening again.'

McGeever had left Connors and his team and gone in search for Tony Diaz, head of security at NASA headquarters. Within ten minutes Diaz had rounded up three NASA scientists, who were now sat at a small conference table in one of the press rooms. In the corner sat a young female stenographer who was already writing down a verbal commentary of what was being said. Looking more nervous than intrigued at being literally dragged from their offices to this meeting they kept stealing glances at the stenographer and Diaz in turn. Instinct told them that the safest option was to remain silent. They knew about the security audit that was on-going and wondered if they were in some kind of trouble. Diaz had said nothing to them about why their presence was required and when McGeever came in with Ronson, they all sat upright like schoolchildren when the head teacher comes into the classroom unexpectedly. They felt they were in trouble.

Both agents sat down without speaking with Ronson sitting slightly to one side. McGeever introduced himself and Agent Ronson and proceeded to explain that the FBI urgently required their assistance in a matter of national security.

'Were not in trouble then?' asked the youngest man who had been visibly worried and was sweating even though the air conditioner made the room feel comfortable but distinctly cool.

'Trouble?' echoed McGeever, 'why what have you done?'

'N-nothing,' stuttered the young man urgently, 'I just thought...' his words petered out.

McGeever tried his smile on the man. It didn't help. 'So,' he continued, 'we really appreciate your help. So, can you tell me about satellites?'

The oldest of the three men who had seemed the least intimidated by the summons and who was looking bored offered: 'They are lumps of technology circulating the Earth which eventually become space junk. If that is all you need to know?' and stood up to leave.

McGeever, looked at him and leaned back in his chair, his legs spread wide. He nodded menacingly towards the recently vacated chair. The scientist sat down again a little red in the face.

‘Okay, my fault. Let me rephrase the question. Why would someone be interested in interfering with a satellite?’

‘Depends which ones we are talking about, defence, research, telescopes, telecommunications, GPS, which in particular?’ The older man looked straight at McGeever, but finally lowered his eyes when he realized that McGeever wasn’t going to blink.

‘I don’t know,’ admitted McGeever. ‘Where’s the money in satellites?’

‘Manufacture, launch, operations, it’s all money,’ said the younger scientist.

‘If I wanted to make a lot of money out of a satellite what would I do?’ McGeever was finding this hard work and was hoping that Gail Ronson would come to his rescue. She wasn’t.

‘No idea,’ said the man still in confrontational mode.

‘Well, ‘said the scientist who hadn’t spoken previously, ‘as far as I can see it’s the private space companies that are making all the money.’

McGeever changed focus to the new speaker. ‘Who are the main players?’

‘Well apart from the Government agencies, and they make up most of the action in Europe and Asia, there are an increasing number of private satellites being launched, especially in communications.’

‘But there is increasing interest in navigation,’ interrupted the younger scientist, ‘because at present most GPS system rely on defence satellites, so...’ he was interrupted by the older man with attitude. ‘The two are mutually exclusive.’

‘Meaning?’ asked McGeever,

‘Telecommunications use GPS anyhow, or at least the whole thing relies on time related signals.’

‘Why do you mention time related signals, no one has mentioned anything about time?’ said McGeever sitting upright for the first time.

‘Well no, but that is how they work,’ persisted the older man

‘The fuck they do,’ agreed McGeever.

‘There are so many smart devices now that we need more and better satellites to cope with the demand otherwise the system will simply melt down,’ added the youngest scientist. ‘The current system was never meant to support this degree of traffic.’

'Melt down?' asked Ronson speaking for the first time.

'I mean the system would either stall or collapse,' explained the young man.

Agent Rachel Smith parked the official car directly outside the departures entrance to Dulles International Airport. The 26 mile drive from the Residence Hotel had taken just 40 minutes and during that time Freeman, who had sat next to Smith in the front passenger seat had not said a single word. She got out and opening the boot took out both bags and placed them at Freeman's feet as he hauled himself out of the car.

'You took the direct route this evening Agent Smith,' he observed.

'Yes Sir,' she replied smartly.

He glanced around him as though he was hesitant to enter the airport building. 'I thought you weren't good with directions?' he said offhandedly.

'No Sir. That was a lie.' There was a long pause and Smith felt she should say something. 'You were very helpful to our investigation, we are all very grateful to you.'

'Well,' said Freeman still looking around him undecided what to do next. 'Well you know where I am if you need me.'

'We sure do,' she replied looking at him the sun in her face so she had to raise her hand to shade her eyes as she looked up at him.

'You're good with computers,' he said simply.

'Thanks,' she said, her eyes screwed up to block out the setting sun as she looked at him. 'That's real praise coming from you.'

He looked at her for the first time in the face since they had met.

'Better go,' he said simply.

'Sure,' she said, still peering up at him with semi-blinded eyes. He picked up his bags and walked through the entrance doors which automatically slid open and closing after him as he passed through and suddenly he was gone. Smith got back into the car and smiled, and pushing the auto-start, joined the line of cars leaving the airport back to Washington.

It was after ten when Deputy Director Sanderson walked into the restaurant where she had arranged to meet the Directors of the FBI and CIA, Joe Cranfield and Martin Kaymer. Both men stood up as she approached their discreetly placed table led by the maître d' who pulled out one of the two vacant chairs and she sat down in one elegant movement. 'I'm

sorry Becky, I'm afraid we finished our meal some time ago, but would you like to order something?'

The maître d' took out a notepad. 'Would Madam like to see a menu?'

'No thank you, it's a bit late to eat,' replied Sanderson who was in fact starving, not having eaten since lunch, but who did not relish the idea of giving her report on how the investigation was going and trying to eat at the same time.

'Perhaps the chef could prepare something light for you, an omelette or perhaps a sweet from the trolley?' he persisted.

'No, thank you, but coffee would be welcome,' and she smiled dismissively and turned to face the two men who were both drinking what looked like whiskey and soda, but she couldn't be certain, they were also both smoking thick Cuban cigars.

'Well Becky, it's been two days now, so how's it going.'

'Well sir we've only been working on this for 36 hours to be precise and to be frank with you it's going to be difficult. One of our teams is flying back from the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, and Dr Freeman has been very helpful in assisting us but has gone back to MIT this evening.'

'Already?' asked Cranfield in surprise.

'Well Sir there seemed no point in his staying any longer. He was in fact a great help and has steered us in the right direction. From the team working with him led by Deputy Director Connors,' she glanced at the morose looking Martin Kaymer who nodded at the mention of Connors' name, 'one important thing has emerged.'

'Well?' prompted Kaymer.

'We need to immediately ring fence every atomic clock that is part of the global network, especially the national co-ordinating labs. Technology has developed so quickly and so far in the past decade that we have completely forgotten the importance that accurate time plays in its use.' She went on to outline some of the possibilities for terrorism and crime by altering time at this resolution and the general vulnerability of the network. 'So the recommendation of Dr Freeman and Deputy Director Connors, which I wholly support, is that we initiate immediate and intense security of the clocks.'

The two men looked at each other. 'This isn't just a US problem Ms Sanderson,' said Kramer, 'it has significant international implications. Our ability to do as you say is hampered by the fact that we are unable to instigate security outside the country.' Sanderson understood this only too well and nodded in agreement. 'I think it's best that I talk to the Vice President about this first thing in the morning, but there is nothing to stop us putting a security screen down at home straight away. Is that not correct Joe?'

He looked at Cranfield whose turn it was to nod his head in agreement. But before he could offer his thoughts Sanderson continued. 'There is just one thing, Sir.'

'What's that?' asked Kaymer.

'I think it's imperative that we do this very discreetly given that the network and many of the individual clocks have already been compromised.'

'Why, surely, we need to make it clear that we are onto these people, send a strong message,' objected Kaymer. Cranfield remained silent and seemed busy trying to relight his cigar leaving the two to argue it out between them.

'No, I don't think that is wise Sir as we have no idea what the motive is, nor what the timeframe for the crime might be. The first step is to increase surveillance and security. Then we have to decide what we are going to do about the current time variation. Also, this is a criminal investigation and we have to try and apprehend those who are behind it. I gather from Agent Manson that they already have some ideas and are following a up on a possible lead, plus Agent Ronson and her team are convinced that in order to alter the clocks then you have to gain access to the atomic clock itself or its dedicated computers.'

'I would have thought it's kind of obvious that we need to correct the clocks back to the correct time,' said Kaymer looking at Cranfield for support. 'Get everything back to normal.'

'That is something we are not sure about Sir. If we simply correct the clocks, this may be exactly what the perpetrators want and we could trigger whatever it is they have planned. So we need to consider very carefully how to proceed.'

'Of course, and it may be too late already,' added Cranfield.

'Exactly Sir. We have to tread carefully. The investigation is only starting to gain momentum...' her voice faltered. They all sat in silence deep in their own thoughts as the men finished their cigars and night cap, and Sanderson sipped her thick Turkish coffee wondering what the hell she had got herself into.

It was the next morning back at NASA headquarters and the twelve agents had reassembled in the operations room except for Manson who was at CIA headquarters at Langley. 'So does this sound right?' Ronson had assembled her own team and with McGeever, they were discussing what the three NASA scientists had said. Sanderson had joined them and was listening to Ronson with interest. 'As a possible motive for the crime it does make sense.' Festor sat quietly for a long time, not really listening to Heaslip who was now asking endless questions about the interview which neither Ronson nor McGeever could answer satisfactorily. Suddenly he spoke forcing Heaslip to stop talking, his persistent voice slowly and reluctantly fading away.

'I've never really thought about it before but the DSAC will give NASA a large advantage in navigation satellite technology as well as in deep space research, there is absolutely no doubt about it. It is probably the most important single technological advance for a decade. In terms of Earth-based satellites, this will be a massive advantage, so clearly the private sector is very unhappy about it.' He paused thinking to himself while the others sat waiting for him to continue. 'The funny thing is, I was sent a report from the President's Office last week or so ago detailing the need to open up the programme or even commercialize the whole Earth-based satellite programme.'

'What did you do?' asked Ronson.

'Sent it up the management line. Politics and finance are nothing to do with me, I'm just one of the scientists.'

'The DSAC could cost private investors a lot of money?' asked Heaslip.

'Guess so, it certainly gives NASA a huge advantage in the market place,' said Festor simply who still seemed to be thinking his own thoughts.

'Will they have access to the technology?' continued Heaslip.

'Not immediately, no. Maybe never. It may be deemed too strategic,' replied Festor. 'So if I was an investor in a space company who are developing and launching private telecommunications satellites or an alternative to our current global GPS system, I wouldn't be too happy with NASA.' He had already reached the conclusion that Heaslip was looking for. 'They hate us already especially for not sharing our R&D which has been paid for out of taxes.'

'They do kind of have a point,' said Heaslip.

'What they really want is a greater relaxation in the controls relating to launching material into space and where satellites are allowed to orbit; the DSAC is not the only issue they have with NASA. But then again in the short term...' Festor left the sentence unfinished.

'Okay, so who are the key players in the private sector?' asked Ronson.

'In the US, probably just three. Space Corp., InterStellar and Vogel Space Technologies,' replied Festor.

Just then Diaz came into the room. He held out his personal iPhone towards Festor. 'Apologies for the interruption everyone. Festor you need to take this call,' handing him the phone.

'Who is it?' mouthed Festor placing his hand over what he hoped was the mouthpiece.

'It's the Administrator,' he replied and walked back a discrete distance towards the doorway.

'Festor here Sir.' The rest of the team sat silently and watched Festor's reaction to the call. They could hear a voice in the distance from the phone. The tone was not friendly. 'Yes, that's right.' 'No Nothing.' ... 'No, I can assure you I have done absolutely nothing.' ... 'The President Sir?' ... 'No of course not.'

Sanderson's phone also rang and she looked to see who was calling, it was her boss. 'Yes Joe,' she answered standing up and walking a few paces away from the table at which they were all sat.

'Your guy Festor has just been sacked from all the committees he is a member of at the White House,' said Cranfield, who sounded concerned. 'He was NASA's main man as far as I can ascertain. The order has come directly from the President's Office. Everyone is genuinely surprised as he is generally liked and respected. Find out what's going on and get back to me. I don't like that this has happened right at the start of this investigation...' there was a pause. 'Becky, I don't like coincidences find out all you can.'

All the time Cranfield had been speaking Sanderson had been watching Festor, whose face was ashen. 'Yes Joe,' she confirmed but he had already hung up.

Festor, who looked shaken, had placed the phone down on the table and Diaz came over and picked it up. 'You okay?' asked Diaz. But Festor didn't reply. Everyone was looking at him.

'I must inform you all,' said Sanderson coming back to the table 'that I have just been informed that Uncle has been personally sacked by the President herself from all the committees he was on. He was, as you all know, NASA's main representative in the White House and was hugely respected by everyone. We have no idea why the President has done this and no reasons have been given. I guess that phone call was from the NASA Administrator to inform him personally.'

Everyone was very quiet. Finally Festor spoke. 'This has come as a bit of a shock to me, especially at this time. I wonder if you would mind excusing me for a moment.' He left the room without another word his head slightly bowed as though in defeat.

They all sat there in silence after Festor had left the operations room and had, presumably, gone back to his office.

Sanderson looked around the table. 'Something is going on here,' she said simply, 'this can't be a mere coincidence. Gail, go and see if Festor is alright and if you can, get him back in here.'

Ronson got up immediately and went after the scientist.

'I want the low down on those three companies Festor mentioned just before the call. Can anyone remember what they were called?'

Carr checked his notes. 'I have it here,' he moved a few sheets around on the table before reading off, 'Space Corp., Interstellar and Vogel Space Industries.'

'Okay,' she said. 'I want everyone to start checking these companies out. Forget everything else for the moment.'

'What are we looking for?' asked Heaslip.

'Anything that may be relevant.' She clenched her fist resolutely and stood up taking a few steps from the desk, her mind racing. 'A connection to atomic clocks, current and future R&D, are they solvent? Who's in trouble or overstretched financially? Their relations with NASA?' She stopped abruptly. Christ how do I know,' she said angrily, 'you represent two of the greatest Security Agencies on the planet. Find out if there is a motive, reasons for changing the clocks, god-damn-it anything. But,' she hesitated, the emphasis on the word lingering for a second, 'I want to eliminate these companies, if I can, from the investigation.'

Ronson came back in. 'He's pretty upset I think he needs a bit of ...'

'I don't give a shit,' said Sanderson angrily, 'if he won't come back take Heaslip and Carr with you and drag him back. We need him here right now.'

'I'll go,' said McGeever who stood up and followed Ronson back to Festor's Room.

Festor was sitting in his chair looking very sorry for himself. For once he wasn't looking at one of his weird maps, but just sitting. Ronson knocked, but McGeever pushed past her and opening the door wide went in.

'Uncle we need your help back at the operations room.'

'For God's sake can't you just leave me alone for half an hour?'

'No,' said McGeever simply. 'Let's get some of your crappy coffee and something to eat in the restaurant and then...'

'No, everyone will know by now and will be inventing all sorts of things. I can't face them.'

'Look you have been seconded by the FBI and CIA. You work will a load of agents, no one is going to say or do or think anything. Let's get that coffee and get back to work,' McGeever was leaning on his desk staring down at the sad scientist. Festor didn't move. 'Look Gail and I have worked for Deputy Director Sanderson for three years now, trust us you don't want her coming down here. Not at the moment as she is really pissed off about the way you have been treated. She cares about her team and the way you are behaving right now doesn't give her confidence. Come on,' he held out his hand and took hold of Festor's arm.

Just for a second as Festor looked down at McGeever's hand Ronson thought Festor was going to throw a punch. But she was wrong. He simply got up and said, 'I'd rather have a stiff drink.'

'The hell she has!' said Manson that evening when McGeever brought him up to speed on the events of the day in the Residence Bar. 'I didn't think much of the satellite thing, but now Festor's been sacked, well it makes me think again. I suppose the poor bastard took it bad, right?'

'He was clearly shaken,' confirmed McGeever.

'Look Mac, I'm in deep with this surveillance stuff and I am getting an excited feeling that we might just nail the people who fixed the clocks. He has to be working for someone with money and power. So why don't you help the others look at those three companies and leave me to carry on. What you say?'

'Sounds like a plan alright,' agreed McGeever, who didn't really see the point carrying on the surveillance analysis now they had a lead to the source of the crime itself.

'Then it's a deal,' said Manson holding out his hand for McGeever to clinch the deal. 'Want another beer?'

'I'm drinking white wine,' McGeever reminded him.

'Never too late to change to a real beverage.'

'No,' smiled McGeever, 'I've had enough anyhow. First thing in the morning I'm going to have a close look at those companies, so I'll get myself off.'

'But it's early!' protested Manson.

McGeever smiled, 'I'm busy tonight Joe, thanks all the same.'

'You sneaky bastard, it's the Taylor woman isn't it?' Manson was grinning like a Cheshire cat.

'As a matter of fact it is Anne Taylor, how did you guess?'

'You keep forgetting Mac, I'm a detective and we have our ways.'

'So how did you find out?' prompted McGeever.

'Okay, you talk far too loudly on that phone of yours; a man would have to be deaf not to hear what you are saying.'

'You've been listening to my private phone calls?'

'Someone has to cover your back buddy.'

McGeever shook his head. 'It's okay dad, I'm all grown up.'

'Well you make sure you're careful son,' said Manson ordering another beer, 'it's a cruel world out there.'

McGeever looked over his shoulder as he walked out of the bar. Manson was slumped over the bar, glass in hand. What had he meant by that last statement he wondered?

Manson waited ten minutes as he sipped his beer thoughtfully before pulling his mobile from his jacket pocket. He selected the number for his boss Deputy Director Connors.

'I'm about to leave what do you want?' offered Connors unhelpfully.

'Is Becky with you?' asked Manson

'Yea, Deputy Director Sanderson is still here, why?'

'Can you both come over, I'm in the bar at the Residence,' Manson glanced over his shoulder, the bar was almost empty apart from a few business men chatting over pre-dinner drinks.

'You lonely or something?'

'I need you to be quick.' He hung up.

Five minutes later Manson saw Connors and Sanderson walk into the bar. They looked like a couple and he suspected they would be in real life soon, if not already. They strolled over to where he was sitting. 'A bourbon and' he looked at Sanderson and hesitated for a second, 'a white wine spritzer, and whatever this creep is drinking.'

Manson had stood as Connors had ordered the drinks. 'Bring them over will you,' he called to the bartender. 'Let's sit over there in that nice quiet corner.'

They waited sat on deep fake leather chairs around a low white wood table until the barman had dispensed the drinks in front of them, Sanderson first, then Connors and finally Manson, and then he returned back to the bar. 'Okay spill it,' said Connors. 'What's up?'

'It's McGeever,' said Manson.

'If this is about some personal grief between you, I don't want to know,' replied Connors annoyed.

'No, it's a bit delicate,' he responded seriously.

'What about him?' asked Sanderson, aware that one of her personal team was going to be the source of this conversation.

'He's got a hot date,' confided Manson

'Oh, for fucks sake,' said Connors leaning back in his chair. 'What is this, a mid-life crisis? You jealous or something? I'm not here to...'

'Just hang on a minute,' said Manson waving his hand dismissively at Connors and addressing Sanderson.

'I know he's a charmer, but he has a date with one of the NASA scientists we met the other day at Pasadena.'

'So,' asked Sanderson. She tried to sound unconcerned, but even she could see that it was pretty fast work even for McGeever.

'Well apart from it being irregular,' said Manson, 'it's with a Professor Anne Taylor. She is the official timekeeper of the clock at the JPL. This is one of the clocks that has been compromised. Don't get me wrong, she's hot, they make a perfect couple, especially for a cheap porn movie or something, but...well... I don't like it.'

'You're jealous,' said Connors taking a sip of his bourbon.

'She's made all the running, she hot footed over to Washington within a couple of days to see him. I don't know. I have this instinctive feeling that he's being set up,' Manson looked worried.

'What?' asked Connors, 'how exactly? You must have more than just a gut instinct based on jealousy?'

Manson didn't rise to the bait. 'I don't know, okay,' he admitted. 'Maybe I am jealous, but I wouldn't mind having an ear to the door when they are alone or having dinner, that's all.' Connors snorted with incredulity.

Sanderson hadn't touched her drink. 'You think she may be checking out what he knows?'

'Well, as I said, perhaps it's nothing. But I think there is a possibility. Agent Ronson told me that we should be looking for a link to the DSAC apparently, where there is one hell of a link about to seduce a senior member of the team.'

'Put like that,' said Sanderson. 'Can't we just ask him?'

'I have a sneaky suspicion he thinks he's a gentleman,' said Manson with a slight smile. 'I'll doubt he will tell you anything about his evening with this woman.'

'Your suggesting some form of surveillance, is that it? On a fellow agent?' asked Connors. 'Shit if this gets out it will play hell with morale.' He turned to Sanderson. 'Is it possible? It's short notice and we have nowhere to start.'

'She is staying at the Hay-Adams, Room 214,' said Manson. 'They are having dinner in the restaurant.'

'That's the posh hotel that looks like a palace in Lafayette Square that overlooks the White House. How do you know?' asked Sanderson.

'He talks loud on the phone and writes things down on those yellow note things he sticks everywhere,' said Manson.

'That hotel must be expensive,' commented Connors, 'they obviously pay well at NASA.'

'I don't like spying on a colleague, but I agree with Manson here, I don't like it,' concluded Sanderson. 'At best, its unprofessional behaviour on McGeever's part.'

'I don't like any of this but do we have a choice?' asked Connors.

'No, we don't. You want to be involved in this?' Sanderson asked Manson.

'No, I busy with my own stuff, I'd rather leave this with you. Anyway, were kind of buddies, I feel bad enough about this already.'

'Buddies?' echoed Connors in surprise.

Sanderson stood up, 'I'll see what I can do.' Connors, began to get up as well. 'No Ray, I'll see you tomorrow,' and left.

Connors looked at Manson and rose slowly to his feet. 'Fuck you,' he said.

'Sorry boss,' apologised Manson.

'And take that bloody smirk off your face,' said Connors walking out leaving Manson on his own.

Manson sat quietly for a while reflecting on what had just happened. Then seeing the glass on the table bent forward and picked up Sanderson's untouched drink and took a tentative sip. 'Christ,' he said aloud. Taking out his handkerchief he wiped his mouth. 'Who drinks this stuff? Barman, another beer here when you're ready.'

All the agents had been recalled back to the operations centre except for McGeever and his team, which included Manson. It wasn't long before information about the three main players in the private space sector came pouring in. Utilizing smaller teams set up to help in the investigation back at both the FBI and CIA headquarters, the amount of material quickly became overwhelming. In the operations room at NASA the teams led by Connors and Ronson were working together so there were eight people, nine if you included Festor, analysing the endless stream of material. Sanderson was overseeing the collation of information as it built up, shifting carefully through the summaries that the agents continued to produce during the rest of the day and late into the evening. Connors went from one agent to another discussing points and advising, developing sub-strategies and always in dialogue with Sanderson.

The companies were all large and highly competitive, and because of the constant need for inward investment they made no secret of what they were doing, except that the precise science and technology details were limited as you would expect. Interestingly, as Heaslip observed quite early on, companies did not directly or aggressively compete with one another. Each company seemed to have its own focus and that they had carved up the various opportunities between them. This non-competitive strategy had been developed by Dr Ronald Nicholson the owner and CEO of Vogel Space Technologies, by far the largest of the three, creating a united and powerful front against foreign competition of which there was plenty. In fact he had become the main spokesperson for the private space industry and Chairman of the US Space Technology Industries Association, who represented all those companies both large and small in the country. It was clear that as an industrial sector they were very organized.

The USSTIA spent a lot of time, paper, web space, lobbying and so money on their collective demand for a level playing field in space technology; an area dominated globally by NASA. In a nutshell, they wanted access to public funded facilities and in particular new technologies. While all three of the big players had their own labs and manufacturing sites, Vogel Space Technologies was much bigger than the other two combined, and so was far more active in the development and manufacture of private Earth orbiting satellites. They also had an impressive and successful launch record, mainly, but not exclusively, from overseas launch sites.

It was 10.30 that evening when things began to fall into place with Connors reading the document that had been prepared by the USSTIA and submitted by their chairman to the President herself, a copy of which had ended up in Festor's in tray and hence supplied upon request to Connors. Dr Ronald Nicholson was well known to everyone in the room as the presidential aide on science and defence, and a phone call to Joe Cranfield via Sanderson, who in turn had called up a few contacts in the White House was able to confirm that in all likelihood the sacking of Festor was linked to Nicholson's extraordinary influence with the President. The cards quickly fell into place and by 2.00 am in the morning Nicholson had

become the focus of all their attention. At 3.32 am Alan Carr made the link that proved conclusively that he was a confirmed suspect in the investigation. He discovered that Nicholson personally knew an employee of NASA who was working on the DSAC and the focus of the investigation changed to this person.

It was just before 4.00 am when Ronson walked into Festor's office. He looked bleary eyed and was packing some papers into a battered leather briefcase.

'God I'm shattered,' he said, almost rambling. 'I don't know why I am taking all this paperwork home with me as I'm due back here in four hours. Habit I suppose. Hardly worth going home, but I really need to sleep.'

'Before you go,' asked Ronson innocently, 'when we were at the JPL at Pasadena there was a scientist there who did most of the talking.'

'Professor Taylor. What about her?' He was ineffectually trying to buckle up the two straps of the bulging briefcase.

'What is she like?'

'Anne?' he said in surprise looking up from his futile task and yawned showing Ronson a remarkably well preserved set of teeth. 'Sorry,' apologized Festor, stifling yet another yawn. 'Anne Taylor? Remarkable scientist in many ways, dedicated to her work on the DSAC. Yes, a good scientist.'

'What she like personally?'

Festor looked a bit surprised. 'I've no idea, she...' he hesitated... 'She's a lovely person. Always pleasant and helpful, yes and a good scientist. Umm,' he hesitated again before speaking. 'Is this about her and Charlie at the airport the other day?'

'No,' said Ronson bluntly.

'You sure?' he asked peering down at her through his half-closed eyes.

'Go home Uncle,' said Ronson forcing a smile. 'I'll escort you to the elevator,' and taking the unfastened briefcase from him she put it back on his desk. 'It will still be here in four hours time.' Almost pushing him out of his own office door, she walked arm in arm with him down the long corridor to the elevator.

'Well?' asked Sanderson when Ronson returned.

'She's a lovely person and an exceptional scientist; as well as being major player on the DSAC project by all accounts,' replied Ronson who was also looking tired.

'He's too good to be true that guy,' said Sanderson. 'I'm surprised that he isn't married to a hippy from his student days with six kids. He's so laid back he's almost horizontal.'

‘So we have no idea if we can prove that she’s Nicholson’s link with the atomic clocks?’ asked Connors looking up from a computer screen.

‘No but we have shown that Nicholson and Taylor knew each intimately,’ confirmed Sanderson. Imogen Cole had identified that they had booked into a New York hotel five months previously under their own names and had shared the single but spacious suite for a long weekend. Since then they had found other information, including dates and some photographs showing that the two had spent time together going back over two years. ‘What time is her flight from Dulles?’ asked Sanderson.

‘She’s booked on the 6.20 am flight,’ she said looking at her watch, ‘so she might even be up by now.’

‘In that case we should start getting the Intel as she leaves the hotel, my guess around 5.00 am,’ continued Sanderson.

‘What Intel?’ asked Ronson?’

‘Nothing of importance,’ replied Sanderson. ‘Look everyone. It’s time to wind up here,’ she had turned to face the rest of the agents still working on the computers. ‘Well done each and every one of you. It’s has been a long shift, so thanks. Now go home and get some sleep. No need to get back here until the afternoon. We will be having a briefing at 3.00pm sharp. It’s going to be another long night I’m afraid.’

Everyone except Connors and Sanderson collected their coats and bags, and raising tired hands to their bosses in farewell, they left the operations room in ones and two’s making their way down in the elevators and out into the early and silent Washington morning. Connors went over to Sanderson. ‘I think we’ve cracked it,’ he said simply.

‘I’m sure we have,’ she agreed and smiled. He stepped closer and put his arms around her and they stayed together like that for a long time, alone in the empty office.

Manson thought that Sanderson and Connors must have been in early as they were in deep conversation with two FBI men who he hadn’t seen before. It was 6.30 am and he went over to his work station and began the day’s work. He felt a little hung over. He missed his own office and chair, and felt that he had been stuck at NASA headquarters for months instead of just the four days the investigation had been going on for. He noticed during the first hour that Connors, his head close to Sanderson’s, had been listening intently to the recordings left by the two FBI agents. At 7.30 am Sanderson made a call.

Tony Diaz came in and drifted over to Manson. ‘Any idea what’s going over there?’ he asked quietly.

‘No. Why do you ask?’ said Manson glancing over his shoulder.

'Most of the teams except yours have been here overnight. They finally went home around 5.00 am according to my staff, including Festor.'

'Really?' replied Manson. 'Looks as though they've got some form of a lead.'

'Yea looks that way,' agreed Diaz as he moved his weight off Manson's desk where he had been perched during their short conversation. 'Let's hope NASA isn't involved, that's all I worry about.'

'Right,' said Manson, 'I'll keep my fingers crossed for you.' However, deep down he knew that this had to somehow involve NASA and it probably wasn't going to be nice.

When McGeever finally turned up, looking pretty pleased with himself. It was Connors who called him over to where Sanderson was sitting. Manson didn't look over his shoulder, but tried to slip deeper into his seat and hope that no one would notice him. Suddenly he heard the raised voice of McGeever, and then a sharp reply from Connors, and then just the sound of rapid exchange of conversation. Dubois came in and sat next to Manson. 'You look like shit,' he observed, 'heavy night?'

'No, just a long one,' replied Manson, with one ear still on the far side of the room, 'this is my natural persona.'

'Seems a bit heated over there,' observed Dubois stealing a glance at the group at the far side of the room. 'Wonder what's happening?'

'No idea,' replied Manson pretending disinterest.

He heard the door slam as McGeever left the operations room, and gave a single whistle to himself. He had felt McGeever's anger as he had gone out. Then, just as suddenly as he had left, McGeever rushed back into the room and dived over the desk taking Manson by the shoulders pulling him to the floor. Before Manson could react, McGeever landed a straight blow with his fist into Manson's face. Manson gasped for air winded and blood gushed from his already flattened nose. McGeever's fist was raised again for a second blow. 'You fucking shit, I know it was you...' There was a sudden shout as Hammond who had just arrived grabbed McGeever's raised arm and Dubois, who had been sitting close enough to Manson to also have been knocked to the floor, managed to grab McGeever around the waste.

Connors came rushing over as the three men rose, each struggling with the other with Manson still on the floor. He had pulled a revolver out of his shoulder holster and was pointing it McGeever's upper thigh. 'Do you want six months off the payroll on sick leave?' he asked, giving the leg a deep prod with the hard metal barrel. McGeever looked at him bewildered. 'Then cut this out.' He bent down to help Manson up. His shirt was soaked in blood.

'Sorry,' muttered Manson, 'I bleed rather freely.' He took out a grubby handkerchief and held it to his nose.

'You need medical assistance? A doctor maybe?' asked Connors.

'Hell no,' said Manson, waving him away. 'Just a misunderstanding. Mac here was just letting off some steam, no problem. I'd have done the same. No problem here.' Manson looked a bit dazed and flopped down heavily in to his swivel chair and turned his bleeding nose back towards the screen, holding his handkerchief against the diminishing flow.

The party broke up and McGeever stood silent and alone in the middle of the room unsure what to do next. Sanderson eventually came over with Connors. 'Right Charlie, you're coming with us right now,' and they left the room and walked down the corridor to the elevator. Once inside the Sanderson gave him a sad look.

'This is the end for me I guess,' said McGeever.

'You've been a fool Charlie, I don't deny it, but something positive has come out of it. So we have decided to let you sit in on the interview with Professor Taylor.'

'You've arrested her?'

'Yes at the airport an hour ago. She is on her way under escort to FBI headquarters, and that is where we're headed.'

'I can't be in the same room as her when you interview her about last night.'

'You don't question an order from your superior,' snapped Connors. 'If I had my way you would be on your way home carrying your personal effects in a cardboard box, got it?'

Reluctantly McGeever nodded.

Sanderson was glad to be back in her own office once more and for a moment leaned back into her comfortable chair that over the years had moulded into the perfect support for her back. She loved the large windows which not only gave her an enviable view of the City but allowed the natural light to fill the room and nourish the various deep green potted plants that lived with her. She pushed the buzzer on her desk. 'Bring in Professor Taylor please,' she asked. McGeever and Connors were sat in upright chairs to one side of her desk facing a similar chair opposite waiting for the suspect.

The men rose as Taylor entered and Sanderson greeted her respectfully indicating the chair. She sat down and smiled. 'Am I under arrest for something?' she asked smiling.

'Thank you for coming back with our agents Professor. We just wanted to clarify a few things with you,' said Sanderson without smiling.

'I thought you had all the clarification you required when you sent a party down to the JPL?' Taylor countered.

'It's about your meeting with one of my agents last night.'

She smiled, 'So? No crime in mutual attraction surely.'

'Was it mutual?' asked Sanderson. 'I got the impression that you did the running here?'

Taylor turned to look at McGeever. 'You thought you were picking me up?' She laughed and pushed her glossy luxuriant black hair backwards away from her face. 'Sorry, I was doing the picking up, but we had fun, didn't we? So, what's the problem?' She looked back at Sanderson amused.

'What did you and Agent McGeever talk about?' asked Sanderson.

'We didn't meet up to talk; we are both adults and did some very adult things together. Do you really need details, or is this some kind of threesome? I should warn you, you're an attractive woman and I could be interested, but not as a threesome. I like my relationships one on one if you know what I mean.' She bent down and took a packet of cigarettes and lighter from her bag.

'You're not allowed to smoke in a Government Building,' observed Sanderson.

'That's your problem,' replied Taylor. 'If I am free to go I can smoke outside your precious building.'

'No, I am afraid you are not free to leave, just at present,' said Sanderson. She studied this obviously highly intelligent and successful NASA scientist and wondered why she was acting so tough. Taylor placed the cigarette between her lips but had trouble steadying her hand to light it. Taking a deep pull and then, provocatively, blowing smoke towards McGeever, who was squirming in his seat with embarrassment.

'Anne, please, just tell my boss the truth. You ask me why we were interested in the DSAC?'

'I was just interested that's all. You all come to the lab making a big deal over nothing...well I just wondered what the real reason was, that was all.'

'And you flew all the way to Washington the next day just to find out?' asked Sanderson.

'I come to Washington all the time. I thought I could have a very pleasant evening.' She leaned forward to Sanderson. 'And he didn't disappoint.' She smiled and sat back.

Sanderson was reminded of an expensive call girl. Was she putting on an act? Why she wondered, what had she to hide?

'Do you always stay at the Hay-Adams?'

'Sometimes.'

'Isn't it rather expensive?'

'Yes, but sometimes I enjoy being extravagant, don't you?'

'Did you pay for the hotel room last night?'

Taylor hesitated. 'It's none of your business what I do with my money or my time.'

'Do you know Robbie Nicholson?' asked Sanderson.

'No.'

Sanderson placed a photograph of her in Nicholson's arms. She was wearing a swimsuit and the couple were lying on a beach. 'Greece isn't?' asked Sanderson. McGeever was looking at the clock on the wall above Taylor's head.

'Lesbos to be precise,' she replied.

'So you do know Robbie Nicholson?' persisted Sanderson.

'Why ask if you already know?' Her voice suddenly sounded sharp and rough.

'What is your relationship with Nicholson?'

'The same as with Charlie. I like powerful, strong, attractive men. Shoot me if that's unusual.' She stubbed out her cigarette on the floor with the tip of her dark blue high heel shoes.

'Are you in a relationship with Mr Nicholson,' asked Sanderson.

'No.'

'The why does he pay two thousand euro every month into a Paris bank account held in your name?' Sanderson was getting annoyed but felt she was getting closer to where she hoped this might be leading.

'I like Paris,' Taylor looked at McGeever and he had to look away.

'That isn't what I asked,'

Taylor sighed as if bored. 'We have a mutual agreement,' she continued. 'I advise his company sometimes, he pays me a small consultancy fee.'

'But you don't have a relationship?'

'No. We have holidays together sometimes, or he might invite me to an overnight at some country club.' Taylor was staring at Sanderson, who to her credit didn't look away. 'I'm a woman, I am not married, I don't have children and now never will, no one gives a shit what I do. I enjoy men's company, it's as simple as that.' She paused before leaning forward and in a more forthright manner continued. 'Is there a constitutional problem here or something? I thought in a democracy I was allowed to have sex with whomever I wanted,

or has the law been changed during the 12 hours while I was in bed with your colleague here?’

McGeever made a small noise like a suppressed groan.

‘Oh grow up Charlie,’ challenged Taylor, leaning back in her chair. ‘I didn’t realize you were a virgin fresh out of College; you certainly didn’t give that impression last night.’ She stood up and gathered up her few belongings that had become scattered on the table. ‘I’m getting out of here.’

‘I don’t think so,’ said Sanderson simply. She pressed the buzzer on her desk again and Agent Ronson came into the office. ‘Ms Taylor is under arrest for tax evasion. I want her processed and kept in custody until further notice pending continuing investigations.’

Taylor had been bending down stuffing her things into her handbag as Sanderson had been speaking and suddenly straightened up when she heard the word arrest, and falling sideways as one of her heels snapped due to the sudden movement. ‘You can’t do that. I might have paid tax for all you know.’

‘We just have. Grow up Ms Taylor, and that is your phrase not mine, were not interested in you tax affairs, although I suspect another agency will be. We are interested in industrial espionage of top secret NASA projects. Projects in which you are specifically involved such as the DSAC.’ Taylor collapsed rather than sat back into the chair. She put her head in her hand and McGeever looked at her with huge sadness. After a short while she looked up at him her mascara already smudged, leaving tell-tale marks down her cheeks.

‘I just had to find out what you knew that was all. You’ve got to believe me Charlie.’ Ronson picked up Taylor’s left hand which hung loosely by her side and roughly clasped the cuff over her wrist making her face flinch with pain. Ronson pulled her up from the chair with a well practiced action and taking the right wrist and pulling it behind her back and fastened the second cuff.

‘Okay,’ said Ronson, ‘You’re coming with me.’ She pushed Taylor forward who all the time was looking at McGeever.

‘We were good together weren’t we? I know you like me,’ she managed a forced smile. ‘He made me ask those questions, Nicholson, I’m sorry Charlie, I really did like you.’

McGeever looked away from her as Ronson steered the now ungainly figure as she tried to walk with one broken heel out of the interview room to the detention area to be processed.

‘You fucking prick,’ hissed Sanderson to McGeever once they were alone. He was still looking at the opposite wall his face flushed with embarrassment. ‘For two pins I would have you off this case and out of the Agency, Ray’s right you’re a bloody liability.’ She paused, then looking at Connors. ‘You do realize Ray that none of this is going to be admissible as evidence in court.’ Connors shook his head sadly.

‘Sorry,’ said McGeever.

'It's not me you have to say sorry to it's the rest of the team, especially Gail.' He turned around.

'Gail?' he repeated.

'You really are an arrogant arsehole,' said Sanderson. 'Get back to NASA and update the rest of the team. Ray you had better come with me if you don't mind, I need to update the Director. Charlie, meet us at his office with Gail in an hour, okay.'

'Yes Mam,' McGeever was heading to the door.

'Would Manson have got himself in that position?' asked Sanderson as she gathered up her things from the table. 'You could learn a lot from him. I've been really impressed by his professionalism. Let's hope some of it rubs off. And by the way, he saved your career today.' McGeever's embarrassment only allowed him a single nod in acknowledgement as he left the room closing the door quietly behind him.

A few moments later Sanderson walked out of the room in McGeever's wake, with Connors close behind.

As McGeever stood in the empty elevator he wondered if Manson would have got himself in that position? He thought of Anne Taylor. What a stupid question. He thought.

Nicholson leapt from the black official limousine full of confidence without waiting for the chauffeur to open the door. The fact that he used a car from the White House vehicle pool rather than one of his numerous expensive sports cars or even one of his company cars was deliberate. Every action that he took was calculatingly designed to reinforce his status. As he walked up the few steps towards the entrance of the J. Edgar Hoover Building, carefully adjusting his suit and tie, he thought to himself that perhaps it was a perfect time to start thinking about a career in politics. With his extensive power base throughout his own State, especially in the major cities he could easily swing a place in the Senate. That would be the first step. With his own personal wealth and the support of his own companies and the many industrialists that depended on him, he could get nominated for the Presidency within a couple of years. Could even be the next but one President. Hell he could even get divorced and marry that stupid bitch and do a Clinton in reverse, it was common knowledge that her marriage was over. They would be the new American couple. Learn on the job so to speak, although he had already gained enough working experience of every facet of the job, at least where power and money counted. If Trump could be considered a contender, he could walk it. His thoughts came to an abrupt halt when a very attractive young woman stepped forward from the doorway

‘Welcome to FBI Headquarters Mr Nicholson,’ she said, shaking his hand, holding onto it for just a second longer than was necessary ensuring he made proper eye contact with her; and for several seconds his attention was fully focused. ‘My name is Agent Rachel Smith, perhaps I should give you my card.’ He looked down and took the proffered card. FBI Agent Rachel Smith and noticed that her official printed number had been crossed out and her mobile number was written a bright blue ink. ‘It’s a real personal pleasure for me to meet you Sir, I have been such an admirer of yours.’ She took his arm and led him towards the reception area. Nicholson was hooked and was already planning his seduction of this clearly easily impressionable young woman.

‘God, she’s good,’ said Connors, ‘we should get her out into field operations as she’s a natural actress.’ He was watching the bank of CCTV cameras with Sanderson and McGeever, including the footage being relayed from the tiny camera and microphone hidden inside the enamelled FBI badge Smith wore on the lapel of her dark blue jacket that contrasted well with her white blouse which was unbuttoned to just to what might have been considered decent for a night out at a club.

The senior receptionist already had Nicholson’s visitor’s pass ready attached to an official FBI lanyard which he gave to Smith, who in turn reached up placing the lanyard over Nicholson’s bent head, her hair brushing his face. His eyes looked down appreciatively.

‘Some people would call that entrapment,’ said McGeever, ‘I don’t think we should be exploiting Rachel like that.’

‘That’s ripe coming from you!’ snapped Sanderson. McGeever made a mental note to keep his mouth shut unless addressed directly. ‘I don’t like these games any more than you, but

with a creep like Nicholson we have to boost his ego to breaking point if we are going to get anywhere,' continued Sanderson. 'Sure were setting him up, but we need him to feel confident so that when the time comes he will give himself away.'

'All interrogations are a game,' agreed Connors as they watched the elevator open and Joseph Cranfield, Director of the FBI stepped out into the lobby. 'We can't beat the truth out of him so we have to wind him up so that he voluntarily gives us the truth. Look at the arrogant bastard, he's wound up alright, he's so full of his self-importance.'

Joe Cranfield held out his hand as he approached Nicholson and Smith. 'It is a pleasure and an honour to have you here Mr Nicholson. We know how much the President relies on you on all defence and science matters and we are delighted that you could step in for her at our meeting at such short notice.'

'Don't overdo it Joe,' muttered Sanderson who was amazed at how obsequious her boss was being, but the beaming smile on Nicholson's face showed that he had hit his mark. Nicholson was hooked.

'My pleasure Joe,' he said as he carefully adjusted the FBI ID he had just been given underneath his own White House Staff ID which hung from a wide lanyard with repeated presidential logos along its length effectively hiding the blue FBI ribbon and card.

'God, he won't like Nicholson calling him Joe,' observed Sanderson. 'He'll be inviting him for a round of golf next.'

McGeever couldn't help himself. 'Does the Director play golf?' he asked.

'No, but he's a pretty mean tennis player. Enough of the chat we had better take up our positions, you okay here Ray.'

Connors nodded. 'Good luck guys, don't let him get away.'

They went up in the elevator accompanied by Smith who stood unnecessarily close to Nicholson, who was aroused by her closeness and leaned against her slightly. She discreetly placed her arm behind his back and ran her hand slowly and tantalizingly downwards and over his butt. He turned and smiled. He was hooked 100% and as he walked in Cranfield's office he was on fire with power. This is what it must be like to be President he thought and for once in his life money was no longer foremost in his mind. It was a different kind of power he now sought, the ultimate power that was beyond wealth alone.

Smith left them at the doorway and smiling squeezed Nicholson's hand. 'Don't forget Sir I am only at the end of the phone if you need anything.'

'Thank you Rachel, I will certainly remember that.' His smile followed her as she made her exit from the room. Distracted for a moment, Nicholson corrected his tie before turning back to where Cranfield had been, but who was now standing next to a small conference table. He noticed for the first time two other people in the room.

'May I introduce you to Deputy Director Sanderson and Agent McGeever. Also we also have Miss Robertson our stenographer.'

'A stenographer?' echoed Nicholson.

'We always make verbatim copies of all our important meetings, a bit old fashioned these days, but we are primarily a law enforcement agency, so we retain some of the traditional ways,' explained Cranfield.

'I was expecting a larger gathering Joe? The President said that this was a very important meeting. I know she wanted to attend personally but...' Nicholson's voice petered out.

'In my experience, really important meeting are usually just two people,' countered Cranfield. 'The more people generally the less need for secrecy, and what we are discussing here this morning is of major National and International significance. We had hoped that the President would be available but she felt given the complexity of the problem you, as her special advisor and personal aid, would be better placed to advise or perhaps decide the proper course of action.'

Connors smiled as he watched and listened. 'If his ego is inflated any more he is either going to smell a rat or he will leap up or rip off his shirt to show his Superman vest underneath!' he said out loud. He suddenly looked around and realized that he was on his own and that there was no one to share his joke.

Cranfield addressed Nicholson from across the table. 'We have been carrying out a joint FBI-CIA investigation at NASA. Oh would you like coffee? Agent McGeever do the honours will you.' Nicholson had made a sudden start when Cranfield had mentioned NASA, which Sanderson noted with gratification, but he quickly regained his composure and looked with a concerned face at Cranfield.

'No, I was not aware of that. I'm on all the security and defence committees and I don't recollect that being discussed or sanctioned?' he was talking more slowly and carefully.

'No I don't suppose you would have heard anything about this,' said Cranfield. 'It has been on-going for the best part of six months now he lied. We have a large team of agents at NASA headquarters here in Washington carrying out the investigation under the guise of a security audit. The reality is that we have identified a potential spy.'

'A spy?' echoed Nicholson in genuine amazement.

'Well it's an old fashioned term these days, but when you sell your country's secrets for cash then in my books that is betraying your country and I consider that treason, don't you?'

'Yes,' agreed Nicholson his mind racing. 'The President hasn't mentioned this to me at all. I haven't been briefed on any of this; I was totally unaware.' He paused reflectively, 'It comes as a complete shock.'

'The President is unaware of the specific nature of this particular investigation; it is purely a security issue, nothing to do with the White House,' explained Cranfield.

'Hell, you can't do that without informing the President,' complained Nicholson.

'Actually we can, especially when it may involve her,' he countered.

'What the hell are you suggesting Cranfield. This is the President of the United States you are talking about. You can't go around suggesting that she is in some way involved in spying.' Nicholson was suddenly angry.

Connors watching wondered if this was genuine anger or concern that the last three years of his grooming the woman was to come to nothing.

Cranfield waved his hands up and down in a calming gesture. 'Your loyalty to the President is laudable and well placed. One of the reasons why we have not involved the President is that we first identified the main suspect of this conspiracy during one of her meetings.'

'During a meeting? Which meeting?' asked Nicholson.

'The Special Internal Affairs Committee meeting on the 9th August. The perpetrator made their first move to involve the current administration by threatening the President and also indirectly opening up a possibility of extracting money to stop them passing on classified information. Typical double agent stuff, get paid twice, that's why we have been working closely with the CIA on this.'

'You know who she is?' asked Nicholson.

'She?' enquired Cranfield looking interested.

'Sorry, my mind wandered for a moment, he or she. You know who this person is?' Nicholson corrected himself.

'Oh yes,' said Cranfield confidently.

Nicholson tried hard to cover up his nervousness. 'Perhaps I could do with some coffee after all. An Americano if possible?' he looked towards McGeever who got up and walked over to the sophisticated coffee machine in the corner of the Director's office.

There was a pause while the coffee was made and McGeever served it out in delicate coffee cups.

'Fancy cups,' observed Nicholson appreciatively, stalling for time while his mind worked overtime.

'Yes, there are nice. They were a present from the head of MI5 in London. They were over here last year when we were comparing notes on home security. We are trying to link our intelligence to combat the internal terrorist threat arising from our joint military operations overseas.'

'Well they know how to make nice china,' said Nicholson dismissively making his view on the role or need for the Brits or Europeans in US military actions totally unnecessary without actually saying so. However, he was desperate to know how far the investigation had gone

and who this suspect was. Instead he had to sit and listen to Cranfield talking about his recent visit to Wimbledon in July and his views about the prospects for the forthcoming US Open Championships.

‘Apart from Serena and Venus where are our tennis stars now. The Europeans dominate tennis at the moment; it takes away so much of the enjoyment for me. We just don’t seem to be able to produce quality male players at the moment either, except of course for Sam Querrey.’ But Cranfield was cut off by Nicholson.

‘I’m not a fan of tennis myself Joe,’ Nicholson was relaxing as he felt that he was now more in control, ‘perhaps we could get back to business.’

‘Of course, sorry, tennis is such an important part of my life. Where were we? Oh yes, we had one of the teams visit the Jet Propulsion Laboratory at Pasadena a few days ago and arising from that visit we were able to finally make an arrest.’ Nicholson placed the china cup down very carefully into the matching saucer as though it was an irreplaceable artefact and then with difficulty replaced both on the table. His hand was trembling ever so slightly. ‘When was this precisely?’ he asked, he felt as though his heart had stopped beating.

‘At 11.30 pm Washington time.’

‘What day would that have been?’ asked Nicholson very slowly.

Cranfield smiled and he looked at Nicholson who was visibly sweating. Plastic men like Nicholson never sweated. ‘That was the evening of the 14th.’ Nicholson’s mind was racing the 14th. Yes that’s right. Anne Taylor had rung him that evening with the news of the official visit, but had then come to Washington two days later and rung him early yesterday morning with an update on what she had got out of her tame agent. She hadn’t mentioned any names and he was unaware that the very same hapless agent had just made him an Americano.

‘Why weren’t we informed at once?’ he asked, his confidence returning like lightening, but he was clearly looking strained. Unknown to him he had already confirmed everything that they needed to know through his reactions.

‘It’s an on-going investigation and this suspect, although there is no doubt in our minds that they are guilty, has to remain anonymous to protect the good name of NASA. Although if you ask me that’s one organization that could do with shaking up a bit.’ Cranfield threw more verbal fuel onto the already burning Nicholson.

‘Get the private investors involved,’ suggested Nicholson, whose mind was spinning but his business instincts were telling him he was on a home run. The Director of the FBI could be a useful ally in the future, once they realize where power was headed. ‘That is what I have suggested to the President. NASA is too large to protect its own technology as we have seen by this incident.’

‘Was this man or woman working alone?’ asked Nicholson carefully trying to cover up his previous gaffe.

‘Absolutely. Our investigation is winding up, we have our man; you may know him.’

‘Not unless you tell me his name Joe?’

‘Can’t you guess?’ teased Cranfield.

‘I haven’t a clue,’ he looked at Sanderson and McGeever innocently, ‘how could I possibly know?’

‘That’s what we wondered? After all you clocked him straight away didn’t you? Deputy Director Sanderson here was also at that meeting,’ offered Cranfield.

‘Yes,’ added Sanderson, ‘we were very impressed as you personally intervened and removed the President to safety. You played a major part in protecting her good name and alerting us to this man. Your comment about you own watch stopping is what alerted us. We are very grateful to you.’ Cranfield nodded in approval.

‘Of course, you must have had your concerns, after suggesting to the President that he was immediately removed from all committees and the White House.’ Cranfield continued.

Nicholson’s head was spinning but he was rapidly putting two and two together and was now seeing, with some relief what had happened.

‘Yes,’ agreed Sanderson, ‘it was that which really made us focus on Festor.’

Nicholson, leaned back and pushed his hands through his perfectly cut hair which bounced back almost unnaturally into place after this attack. ‘I’m only too glad to have been of some help in this matter.’

‘Yes. We are grateful,’ said Cranfield. ‘But tell us, why did you have Festor removed from all the committees?’

‘Well, what you said,’ said Nicholson confused. One minute they were congratulating him the next they were asking awkward questions, what was going on?

‘You knew he was a spy?’ asked Sanderson.

‘Well no,’ admitted Nicholson.

‘So why?’

The congratulatory mood and feeling of wellbeing was suddenly altered by this rapid questioning and Nicholson was clearly ruffled.

‘You own a company, Vogel Space Industries?’ continued Sanderson who seemed to now be asking all the questions.

‘Yes, it’s well known. It’s one of the top US independent space companies,’ acknowledged Nicholson. ‘It is not a secret; you would have seen my face on the front of all the major

financial papers and magazines. It was because of my involvement in the independent space industry that I was appointed as a Presidential aide.'

'I believe that your company is in direct competition with NASA in relation to the development and supply of satellite based technology?' she persisted with the questions.

'So?' answered Nicholson somewhat defensively. He couldn't see where this was going.

'That is why you have such a keen interest in giving private enterprise more access to NASA and its technology as well as supplying your own technology.'

'Yes, but what has this...' Nicholson was interrupted by Sanderson who continued to pile on the questions. She was now leaning forward on the table aggressively speaking directly at Nicholson in quick harsh sentences. Both McGeever and Cranfield were also leaning towards him staring intently and he felt unsettled.

'You are particularly interested in telecommunications and especially the new GPS network which will eventually be independent of the defence satellites. Sanderson hadn't asked a question but stated a fact.

'Hang on here, what's this...'

'So you are particularly interested in the DSAC being developed by NASA?' she had reached the breaking point.

'Hell I am,' he stuttered.

'You know what the DSAC is then?' confronted Cranfield.

'Of course, but...'

'That is why you were interested in getting control of the atomic clock network?' concluded Sanderson.

'The Deep Space Atomic Clock is ground breaking technology that makes other satellite systems obsolete, it should be shared,' Nicholson was almost shouting.

'With China and Russia?' asked Cranfield.

'Jesus no,' said Nicholson getting confused, 'that is just the sort of thing NASA would do. The private space sector employs hundreds of thousands of skilled scientists and engineers and we need to keep them in the US.'

'Is that why you offered a top NASA scientist money to get access to the atomic clock network and the DSAC?' asked Sanderson.

'I swear I have had nothing to do with Festor, ask him,' said Nicholson defensively.

'We weren't alluding to Professor Festor but to Professor Anne Taylor.'

Nicholson almost recoiled at the simple statement and got to his feet.

Cranfield pressed a button and two agents came into the office carrying automatic rifles and wearing bullet proof vests, a strategy aimed to intimidate Nicholson, which worked.

'I don't know what you are talking about; how dare you make such allegations.' Nicholson fiddled with his tie. 'I don't even know this bitch.' McGeever was itching to dive over the table and pummel the shit out of Nicholson.

'I should tell you that Professor Taylor was arrested this morning and is being held in custody,' explained Cranfield.

'I don't know this woman!' he protested rising to his feet and buttoning his jacket.

'Let's not go down this road,' said Cranfield a little sadly. 'We have photos of you and her on holiday and at several hotels. Is that just a coincidence? I don't think so. Do you usually make love to unknown women on beaches in Lesbos?'

'Why not,' said Nicholson some of his arrogance returning, as he started for the door but the agents didn't move.

'Get these fucking goons out of my way'. He held up his White House pass. 'I'll destroy you for this. You have no authority to hold me. I'm going back to the White House and see what the President has to say about these libellous allegations and then I am going to sue you personally for slander.'

'Are you saying you were doing this with the knowledge of the President?'

'What?' asked Nicholson surprised.

'Are you colluding with the President? Is that why you think she is going to protect you?'

'I don't have to stay here. You can't touch me. I am a member of the White House Staff and I am protected from this shit by the authority given me by the President herself. She is going to love it when I tell her that, you arrogant piece of dispensable garbage has made such a suggestion against her integrity.' He turned to the two agents at the door again. 'Let me through, I have White House immunity.'

'No you don't,' said Cranfield, almost apologetically. Nicholson turned around and stared at him in disbelief.

'I spoke with the President this morning and from the moment you left the grounds of the White House your passes were revoked and you will not be allowed back, all the documents and computers in your office and personal rooms have been seized and are being investigated right now by our specialist IT staff. We are also in the process of raiding your private residences here in Washington and elsewhere. Europol are conducting a search of your ski lodge as we speak in Switzerland. We also have transcripts from the phone calls made between you, Professor Taylor and others. I think were done here.'

Nicholson had sat back down in his chair.

'Bye the way,' continued Cranfield just for the record. You should be aware that your best friend, the President, just for good measure has had authorized a Special Arrest Warrant on charges that include intent to destabilize a government agency, that being NASA, and industrial espionage. You will be retained in custody until one of your fancy lawyers attempts to get you bail, although I personally will be contesting that which I suspect will carry a lot more influence than your lawyers, especially with this in my hand,' he waved the warrant.

'Escort Mr Nicholson to the detention center,' ordered Cranfield as he slammed the open folder on his desk shut.

Hand cuffed, a subdued and frightened Nicholson was led from the Director's office. Outside Agent Rachel Smith smiled as Nicholson was pulled past, unable it seemed to be able to walk as he was in shock at what had just happen. 'I guess you won't be calling any time soon,' called Smith, 'and that suits me fine.'

Sanderson came out of the Office, and saw Smith watching the party making their way to the elevator. 'Well done Rachel, I don't suppose you want to keep that FBI badge do you?' Smith was smiling at someone behind her and Sanderson turned to see Ray Connors come up from behind.

'I never thought it would be that easy,' he said and gave Sanderson a hug. Then holding her at arm's length he said, 'You did a great job Becky. But just for the record Agent Smith is remaining in the CIA. Isn't that right Rachel?' He turned to her and grinned broadly.

'Yes Sir,' she said returning his smile.

McGeever flopped back in his chair in annoyance. 'What are you on about?'

Manson had been watching the tapes of the interviews with Taylor and Nicholson, including the follow up interviews. 'It doesn't add up that's all?'

'It's a closed case you must see that, we have them, and in record time as well. It was a simple case of industrial espionage,' explained McGeever getting up and grabbing his coat. 'Everyone is over at the Residence Inn having a party to celebrate except us. It's done, Manson, it's over. You can wash your hands of the FBI at last.'

'Well I'm not coming nor are my loyal friends here,' confirmed Manson and turned back to face his computer screen; Hammond and Dubois looked at each other dejectedly. They both felt they were missing out being stuck here with Manson who refused to admit that the case was closed. They also felt that they had been given the short straw and while everyone else had been rushing about catching the co-conspirators they had been stuck behind computer screens manually trying to find matches to names. Suddenly Manson swung around again and addressed McGeever angrily. 'You show me, go on. Just show me some fucking evidence. I've studied those tapes over and over. You tell me Mac where they admit to altering the clocks?' There was a long pause. 'Saying nothing eh, you bet, because they don't. They don't even mention the fucking atomic clock network. Taylor was never at the other sites during the past two years I've checked and Nicholson has never set foot in any of the installations. Never,' he repeated for emphasis. 'We haven't got any accomplices because there weren't any. She supplied plans and technical data, she even let some of Nicholson's technical people from Vogel Space Technologies have a look at an actual DSAC over a weekend. But they never mentioned the atomic clocks.'

'They don't want to incriminate themselves,' said McGeever defensively.

'Think straight for fucks sake,' pleaded Manson. 'Just because she shafted you instead of the other way around, you are making a lot of unsubstantiated assumptions that will not hold up in court.'

'Fuck you ... you miserable sad bastard,' McGeever was smarting from Manson remark and his face had gone a dangerous shade of red. 'You coming Dubois? You don't have to listen to this CIA crap.' He looked at Hammond. 'Guess you have to stay with him? You CIA people!' he shook his head sadly and walked out. Dubois followed.

Manson sat for a while and then said quietly. 'Shit, course you can go if you want Hammond.'

'No boss I'll stay here if it's all the same with you thanks.'

'So will I,' said a voice as Dubois came back into the room. 'We both know your right. What do you want us to do?'

Manson stood up and gave each man a hearty slap on the back, Dubois was taken a bit by surprise and fell into a chair. 'You boys,' he hesitated beaming at both of them in turn, 'you're real fucking agents, the real thing I tell you. Let's keep on with this surveillance stuff. I promise you it will deliver. Trust me.'

Twenty minutes later Sanderson, Connors and McGeever came back into the operations room. Manson looked up. 'Why do you always have to spoil everything?' asked Connors.

'Cos you know I'm right boss.'

'Sure. Come on, run it past us,' said Connors taking a seat and leaning back against a filing cabinet. 'You are probably a good agent, Manson, and that is the only reason why I am going to listen to what you have to say, but we've just left a very happy bunch of colleagues over the road, so this had better be good.'

Manson explained his misgivings. While he acknowledged that they had stumbled across a piece of industrial espionage, plus exposed a real piece of shit in the name of Nicholson, that this had simply been a side show. The real investigation was no further on except that in his view two potential suspects had been eliminated from their enquiries.

'I do think he has a point Sir,' agreed McGeever after Manson had finished, 'and I must admit he's been on the money all the way through this investigation.'

'What do you suggest Manson?' asked Sanderson who had sat next to Connors.

'Simple. We have millions of bits of data from all the US atomic clock locations now. We all stop what we have been doing and concentrate on this. We will get this bastard; it's just a case of putting these bits of intel together.' He raised his hands in a gesture that suggested it was easy.

Connors took Sanderson by the arm and they walked over to Sanderson's area and sat down and talked. After about twenty minutes they came back to the four men. 'We have decided to let you four run this on your own. You will still report to Deputy Director Sanderson, and the rest of the teams will stand down and report back to normal duties.'

'No,' said Manson decisively.

'No?' echoed Connors looking annoyed. 'Have you forgotten who makes the decisions around here?'

'No Sir, I haven't, but you're wrong and it's my duty to point that out to you. So far we have not answered any of Becky's three questions; we don't know how the crime was committed, we don't know what the crime is designed to achieve, hell we haven't ruled out a possible terrorist connection, and neither do we know who did it. One thing we can do is find out

who did it, that's our team, but the other two teams must resolve their questions. If we can find out who did this we can start to unravel this whole weird scenario.'

Manson was agitated, but Connors was smiling. He had never heard Manson so fired up.

'Great, so you have made a hugely successful bust, saved the Presidency. These are all positives and clearly absolve us from our rapidly increasing spend on this investigation,' continued Manson. 'But we were called in on Becky's intuition which proved right. We can't just give up now. We still have our organized gang out there and we don't know who, why, or how.'

Sanderson shook her head. 'He's right of course. McGeever go get the teams back, sober if possible. We have to refocus. That okay with you Ray?'

Connors nodded. 'Okay, refocus and regroup I think the term is. Are you going to tell Joe Cranfield or shall I?'

'I think it will come better from me,' said Sanderson and slowly went over to her desk and picked up her mobile and called him up with the news.

She came back after five minutes. 'Well?' asked Connors. 'He agrees with Manson's analysis of the case. So the investigation continues.'

Manson smacked his hands together delighted. 'We are going to get these bastards I can guarantee you that.' He turned back to his screen. 'Come on boys we have work to do.'

McGeever gave Sanderson a sad smile and went out of the room to pass on the bad news over at the Residence Inn.

The following morning a taxi drove down Pennsylvania Avenue and Manson looked out at the window surveying the sunlit street.

'You a tourist?' asked the driver in a strong Mexican accent. 'Sure you want the J Edgar?'

'Yep, house number 935, think you can find it?' replied Manson.

The huge off white edifice glared down at them as they approached.

'Don't think anyone could miss the headquarters of the Federal Bureau of Investigations whatever the street number,' said the driver. He looked in the mirror at Manson who was obviously sweating and had his jacket splayed open. 'You a Fed?'

'No, I'm giving myself up for mass murder,' replied Manson, 'you've probably seen me on the most wanted list or the TV news.' He craned his head as he past another monumental building.

'You're fucking kidding me,' said the driver looking over his shoulder at Manson without any sign of horror, rather with the look of someone who had just found themselves driving a Hollywood star.

'Who did you kill, anyone famous?' asked the driver adjusting his overhead mirror for a better look.

'No, just crap who had it coming, including a couple of taxi drivers, so you're lucky I've retired,' said Manson as the cab drew up at its destination.

'You sure about this, I can drive on, take you to the airport?' enquired the driver. 'It's not too late.'

'They're expecting me,' said Manson and he clambered out.

He offered a twenty dollar bill. 'No way,' said the driver shaking his head and looking earnestly at Manson. 'Wow it's been an honour. I'll be watching the news tonight.' The driver pulled away slotting effortlessly into the steady stream of traffic. Manson shook his head. People never ceased to amaze him, never.

It was Gail Ronson who was there to meet him. 'I've arranged the interview just as requested, do you want anyone else in with you?'

'Hell no, I don't want to make it too formal. I just need to clarify a few things that's all.' The air conditioning was cooling him down but he still felt hot.

'Okay,' she said shrugging her shoulders and she led him to the elevators on route to the detention area. In the basement, they walked along a drab corridor and she stopped outside a small oppressive interview room. 'Bleak enough?' she asked.

'Perfect,' he replied glancing inside at the sparsely furnished room.

'Well we did everything you asked and removed the posters and everything. She will be along in five. You know where I am if you need me. Give me a shout when you're finished and I drive you back to NASA headquarters,' and with that Ronson went back to her large sunny open plan office which she shared with the other agents that made up Sanderson's personal team.

Manson walked along the corridor to the men's room and by the time he returned there were three people waiting in the interview room.

Professor Anne Taylor was sat wearing a red jump suit that was not made by any of the fashion houses she normally frequented. 'Take the cuffs off the lady Professor,' Manson ordered one of the guards.

'Our orders are to keep the prisoner restrained at all times,' replied a mean looking armed guard.

'Give me the key.' Manson held out his hand and after a short hesitation and a worried glance at his colleague the guard unclipped the screw like device.

‘Sorry Mam,’ apologized Manson, ‘Is that more comfortable.’

‘Thanks,’ she said rubbing her wrists and examining the red marks left by the steel bands. Anne Taylor had aged a good ten years in looks and both her energy and resistance had simply evaporated.

‘Why did you do it? Was it political or something?’ he asked sitting down opposite her in the empty interview room which had no windows just a bare metal table a few upright chairs. The bare fluorescent tubes flickered slightly and buzzed. The guards had retreated to the closed steel door and stood facing the back of the prisoner. He offered her a cigarette and she accepted it gracefully and he leaned across the table for him to light it for her.

‘No,’ she said after a minute or so of silence while they both smoked. She looked at the light blue gloss paint of the bare walls and noticed a curved dark brown smear low down across the wall in the far corner. She shuddered. She looked up and stared at Manson for a few seconds before flicking the ash off the end of the cigarette into the already overfilled plain metal ashtray.

‘What then?’ encouraged Manson concentrating on his cigarette, creating a bond between them. They might have been in a smoky down at heel bar somewhere downtown in Chicago or Detroit or in Manson’s case in Manila.

‘It’s simple really,’ she said in a defeated tone, looking down from Manson’s face to study the contents of the ashtray. ‘You’ll find it a pathetically simple story,’ she hesitated and Manson detected a tone of self pity. ‘I have spent my entire life becoming a world expert in my chosen field; at a cost.’ She looked up and faced Manson again. ‘My parents sacrificed an awful lot to put me through College, then years on poorly paid internships and research fellowships and finally a job at a world class research facility.’

She had paused again. ‘NASA?’ offered Manson.

Her eyes never left Manson’s as she explained, leaning a little forward as she did. ‘Working at NASA, just about paid for a small combo and a middle range car. Perhaps, if I was lucky, a trip to the glades once a year, or a cheap package holiday to the islands with a bunch of other losers just like me. I wanted more. Women are in a minority in NASA; in physical sciences research generally. Promotion and recognition is not really going to happen so I was trapped in a great job with no prospects. I met Nicholson at a conference and we had an affair. He took me to expensive restaurants. He showed me a world I had only seen in the movies or in magazines.’ She laughed suddenly in remembrance, a harsh bitter laugh. ‘One day he took me shopping in some expensive fashion house in New York, and brought me a pair of Jimmy Choo shoes ... Christ,’ she laughed again tilting her head back and letting the smoke escape from her slightly parted lips and watched it rise towards the stained ceiling. ‘Those shoes would have cost three months of my salary. He just said he wanted to buy the most beautiful shoes for the most beautiful woman.’ She looked at Manson. ‘I just got a taste for it, for luxury, for being appreciated as a woman. It’s a strange thing luxury, it’s addictive. You know that twenty dollar lingerie from Primark is the same as lingerie from a French fashion house costing a thousand dollars. But when it’s close to your skin it feels like a thousand dollars, know what I mean?’

He nodded. 'Yea, been there myself.'

She laughed and leaned forward again. 'Guess your back at Primark now?'

He smiled. 'I can see why McGeever fell for you.'

Taylor sat back and shook her head sadly. 'God, I feel bad about that. I really did like him and that night, well ...'

'Enough already!' interrupted Manson smiling, 'I am still trying to live down the Primark jibe, leave with me something lady.' She laughed. 'Look,' he said leaning forward. 'You are a great scientist and I am really sorry this has happened to you. Really, I am. It's such a fucking waste.'

'I almost believe you,' she said, stubbing the cigarette in the ashtray which was already precariously full so that the butt fell into the table shedding ash everywhere. She started to push the ash into a little pile with her finger as she listened to Manson.

'I just need you to answer a couple of questions and I know that you are going to tell me the truth because you are a scientist and believe in what you do.'

'After what I did?' tears welling up in her eyes, 'you really think that? That's bull shit.'

'Anne, I know you are going to be honest with me. But there are some things I do need to know, it's a matter of National security.'

'Are you offering me some sort of a deal?' she asked hopefully.

'That only happens in the movies I'm afraid, but because of Nicholson's former position in the White House, I have no idea how this will pan out for you. You might be lucky, I have no idea.'

There was a silence. 'Thanks for being straight with me,' she said smiling weakly at Manson.

'Were you involved in altering the atomic clocks?'

'What?' she looked up at him sharply. 'Is this what it's all about?'

'Yes,' said Manson, 'It's those thirty nanoseconds. That is all I want to know about. If I could have swapped that fucking piece of space junk for a decent suit I probably would have done the same, especially if it had been you doing the asking.'

She smiled broadly, although she was crying softly and tried to wipe the tears away with the finger she had been moving the cigarette ash with and so left soft grey smear around her eyes that made her look even more of a tragic figure. 'No, I have no idea who altered the clocks or why; or how they did it?' she hesitated in thought then shook her head. 'I just don't know. It could be something to do with the laser settings maybe. But I don't know. I would be surprised if it was the hardware.'

'Was Nicholson involved in altering the clocks?'

'No, he never came to Pasadena at all. He's just a money man he has no technical skills himself. He never showed any interest in anything other than the DSAC.' Manson stood up and picked up the cuffs from the table and stuffed them in his pocket.

'Hey!' objected the guard, 'we don't have a spare set.'

'The lady doesn't need cuffs,' said Manson, 'she'll come quietly.' He looked at Taylor, 'Thanks Professor,' and he walked around the table and held out his hand.

She stepped forward and took his hand, and instead of shaking it she pulled him towards her slightly and kissed him lightly on the mouth. 'I wish I had met you before Nicholson had come into my life.'

'I've always dreamed of a small condo in Pasadena,' he retorted smiling at her. She laughed and walked out between the guards, still smiling.

'Analysis of the visitor data from Pasadena and two other sites shows no comparisons of interest. We have even checked local hotels, everything, there is nothing that doesn't seem okay,' explained Dubois.

'Have you cross checked everyone,' asked Manson the disappointment clear in his voice.

'As far as it's feasible, yes,' said Dubois feeling sorry for his boss.

'So, what next?' Manson was looking at his three colleagues who had stuck with him throughout the wild goose chase.

'Well.' It was Hammond who spoke, 'I persuaded Langley to run some face recognition analysis on the people in the corridor outside the atomic clock laboratory at Pasadena, with all tourists and visitors over the previous 12 months. This proved a lot of work, so there may be some awkward questions coming our way.'

'Let me handle those, okay,' said Manson. 'Tell me, what did it throw up?'

'Well a lot of matches of greater than 85% similarities as you would expect. Most of these are easily explained. But the system highlighted these two which are rather interesting. Have a look.' Hammond pushed the screen of his PC sideways so both Manson and Dubois could see, while McGeever moved around and stood directly behind Hammond. 'The image on the right is Thomas Mann a student from a College tour on June 29th.' The grainy image showed a full frontal of a face with a juvenile beard which poorly hide the face. He was also wearing spectacles and a Rastafarian hat.

'Aren't they supposed to take off glasses and hats for the security IDs?' asked Manson.

'I don't think they worry too much with College students,' suggested Dubois. 'Probably too much hassle.'

'This other image alongside,' continued Hammond, 'is a contract cleaner coming out of the housekeeper storeroom on the same floor as the atomic clock.' This image was so obscure it was difficult to make out any similarities, as only the clean shaven chin, mouth and cheek bones were visible as he was wearing a hoody under his overalls.

'So the kid got a summer job cleaning,' suggested Dubois.

'Ah there you are, a very reasonable assumption although I say it myself.' Hammond was smiling. 'The reality is that no one from the contract cleaning company or from that building has seen him before or since. That has to be of interest, doesn't it?'

Manson leaned closer to the screen interested. 'The guys are definite there is a close correlation between those two faces?' He asked.

'Really?' said McGeever incredulously staring hard. 'What is there to compare?'

'The eyes and the area around the cheek bones are quite diagnostic or so I am told. Especially for lady visitors from the East. But you can see from all the red dots, there are a lot of features that the computer has been able to compare,' explained Hammond in defence of his colleagues back at CIA headquarters in Virginia.

'Do we have any other CCTV footage?' asked Manson. 'Did the students come on a bus, there must be footage of that somewhere.'

'They checked for us and there is, but what is also thought provoking is that apparently he joined the group after they had arrived,' Hammond was leaning back enjoying being the centre of attention. 'Interesting eh?'

'God, if this is our man then he is one cool customer,' observed McGeever. Manson was still quietly looking at the images closely.

'Did you check out this Thomas Mann?' Manson asked Hammond.

'He doesn't exist, there are no matches at any of the schools and colleges that visited that year according to the local Feds.' He confirmed.

'That's suspicious alright,' agreed Manson. 'So there is nothing else?'

'Not that we can find, except there is a side shot of someone who could be him coming into the building.' Hammond pulled up the third image of someone wearing the same hoody.

'Unusual clothes for California,' observed Dubois.

'Are they?' asked Manson staring closely at the side profile. 'Can you blow this up a bit?'

'Yes, the jacket is, definitely a bit niche I would say,' confirmed Dubois.

Manson stared at the image for a while longer. 'Can't see it myself,' he said suddenly making a decision. 'Dubois, I you need to get over to forensics at FBI headquarters with every little bit of CCTV and photo ID material you have gathered and I want them to build us up a composite of this guy. We need to get his face out there to all the agencies including Interpol and Europol but under strictest security. I don't want him to see his face on the Internet under the most wanted. Okay with you Mac?'

'Good idea,' agreed McGeever,' but we had better clear it with either Sanderson or Connors first.'

'Even if it's not a perfect likeness we may be able to track this bastard down. Hammond, I need you to organize manpower to get over to a few more of the clocks and see if you can identify him from any of the footage. Good work by the way.' Hammond grinned and reached for his landline phone.

'How did this guy do all this?' asked McGeever.

'He must be either a foreign agent or a specialist criminal.'

'Doesn't look like one to me,' said McGeever, 'just look at him.'

'How do you mean,' asked Manson who was looking at the short video clip of him walking down the corridor from the storeroom towards the lab.

'He's, well look at him, he's all over the place, nervous as hell,' observed McGeever his face next to Manson's as they watched the stilted progress of the time framed recording. 'Then again, he must be a professional, perhaps it's part of his cover?'

'He looks like any other student to me,' added Dubois who was packing images and a pen drive into his briefcase.

'Just any other student,' repeated Manson staring at the pictures. There was a pause as he stared at the screen. For no reason both McGeever and Dubois stared at Manson who was lost in his own thoughts. They could feel that he was onto something, some train of thought was unfolding.

'He's a fucking hacker,' shouted Manson suddenly leaning back in his chair and slapping the top of his head with the flat of his hand. 'How fucking stupid have we've been. He has to be a hacker to get access and alter times, right. He's changes the rota for the cleaners and simply walks in carrying a fucking mop and bucket. That gives him access to the dedicated computer for the clock. Where is the video footage of him doing his cleaning?'

'Whoa, hang on in there that is one hell of a leap in logic. How can you come to that conclusion, someone else could have changed those things,' suggested McGeever reasonably.

'Also,' added Dubois, who was looking on from the side, 'the mainframe system hasn't been hacked according to the IT security check. So, if we don't have CCTV footage of him in the actual lab we have no hard evidence to place him at the scene.'

'I know that. But how else does he get into all those labs. How does he get physical access to all those clocks? Think about it.'

'We have been,' complained Dubois, 'and my brain can't keep up.'

'Come on!' encouraged Manson. 'What we need is a profile to go with the composite.'

'He has technical abilities in that area, right? Therefore he has to have some connection to the atomic clock network system in some capacity,' offered Dubois

'No...well yes that's kind of a given isn't it. You can't just fuck around with these things we've all seen them,' said Manson, 'it needs to be broader.'

'He has technical skills with some aspect of the clock system, he is a hacker so has exceptional IT skills,' summarized Hammond.

'The last bit could apply to just about every 15 year old in the country,' complained Dubois,

'Yes, but we know this dude isn't a kid, he's young but not a teenager,' added McGeever.

‘So what kind of guy is he...come on its staring us in the face,’ complained Manson. ‘Imagine this is a specification for a job application.’

‘Okay,’ said Hammond, who had finished making his phone calls, ‘this is how I see it.’ He looked down at a notepad where he had been writing some notes. ‘Male. Maths or physics major, perhaps computing.’

‘Yea, but his age?’ said Dubois frustrated.

‘Could be a graduate student,’ said McGeever.

‘Is he that old?’ asked Hammond.

‘Yea, I think he is in his early to mid-twenties,’ said Dubois.

‘Okay then, there we have it,’ said Manson rubbing his hands. ‘We have a bad photo ID of a graduate student in one of those disciplines who has some interest or connection with these clocks. Also,’ he paused for emphasis, ‘someone who hacks.’

They all sat around for a while thinking. ‘Certainly narrows down the field from 7 billion to a couple of thousands or tens of thousands,’ mused Hammond.

‘Right,’ said Manson. ‘McGeever I need you to go and find me a really good hacker. Someone with a credible record, you know the type someone who has broken into the defence network or something like that or better still has tried to start a war by attempting to launch a missile. Preferably someone who hasn’t been to court yet.’

‘What?’ asked McGeever confused. ‘How in the hell can I do that?’

‘Hell Mac, you’re in the FBI aren’t you and this is right up their street. There are probably loads of your guys ready to arrest these creeps as we speak. Ask Imogen or Rachel, between them they are sure to know who to contact. In fact, this is right up their street as well, we need them on board right now.’ He paused for breath as his mind raced along this new route of inquiry. ‘Ask Ray if the CIA have anyone under surveillance. We need co-operation from an expert, so we need an angle to bargain with.’ Manson was on a roll and in full cry. He could not only smell his quarry he could almost see him running in the distance.

‘Perhaps a good place to start is to check if there is someone already in custody facing a million year jail sentence. So the idea is to get him over here, then squeeze some help out of him,’ concluded Hammond.

‘Exactly,’ agreed Manson and turned to McGeever who had already turned to his laptop and was furiously punching the keyboard.

Manson’s enthusiasm was infectious, and unbeknown to him all the team enjoyed his leadership and style, including McGeever.

The J. Edgar Hoover Building is an impressive high rise white stone edifice located on Pennsylvania Avenue. It is said to be a monumental structure, but it is also meant and does intimidate all those who enter through its doors, especially the guilty.

The black people carrier with heavily tinted windows drove past the line of flags, showing the development of the stars and stripes that is a worldwide symbol of power, and pulled up discretely at an armed side entrance. Handcuffed to two agents a scruffy young man in his early twenties wearing dusty pink overalls made an undignified exit from the rear of the car. Impeded by the silver chain that was locked onto both of his ankles, he waddled towards the door which buzzed and then nosily slid open without any action required by the small group. Slowly they moved along the sanitized and bare corridor lit by too many florescent lamps, some of which buzzed annoyingly, to the elevator. The two agents remained silent as one pressed the third floor button and the doors closed.

‘Will my lawyer be there?’ asked the young man. ‘I know my rights, you just can’t take me anywhere.’

‘You aren’t anywhere boy,’ said the taller of the two agents who were both dressed in identical dark suits. ‘You’re at the FBI Headquarters, so shut the fuck up about rights because you don’t have any, or deserve any for what you’ve done.’

He opened his mouth to protest again, but the smaller agent pulled him backwards with a single quick movement so that he fell clumsily against the panelling of the metal elevator with a thud. He went very silent and the colour in his face began to drain away. ‘You can’t just...’ he almost whispered, trying to convince himself that he wasn’t here at this moment hidden away from his family and friends in this hell. For the first time in his life he began to realize that what he had done might have been unacceptable. ‘Oh Jesus,’ he whispered.

The smaller agent looked at him. ‘What?’ he barked. The young man closed his eyes and tried to pray, to pray for forgiveness, for help, just to turn the clock back before this stupid nightmare had begun.

They marched the young man down the corridor past open plan offices and official looking doors. Occasionally someone would stop and stare and wonder what the young man had done, but mainly they just ignored him. He was finding it difficult to keep up with the two agents either side of him who each held one of his elbows forcing him to take quick small mincing steps like a performer of some weird choreographed dance. They finally arrived at a door marked Deputy Director Sanderson, knocked and walked in. In a large outer office containing a number of desks, some with agents quietly working, a secretary pointed to a door and they dragged the man towards the second doorway.

McGeever was enjoying himself swinging backwards and forwards on Sanderson’s chair and had already buzzed her secretary several times. ‘Any chance of some coffee in her honey?’ he had asked.

‘No,’ she had said shortly, ‘and I am not your honey,’ and clicked the connection angrily off.

There was a knock on the outer door. ‘Come in,’ called McGeever, adjusting his suit and readjusting the chair so that he was facing the small party as they entered.

'Here is our little friend,' said one of the agents while the other pulled up a chair and pushed the prisoner down into it. The agents unlocked the cuffs on their own wrists, each connected to a wrist of the prisoner, and then re-secured them to the arms of the chair. 'Want us to stay?'

'No, you guys go to the restaurant and get yourself something. I'll call you when I am finished,' said McGeever.

'What am I...' the man young started.

'Shut up,' said McGeever, simply. 'I ask questions you answer them, got it.'

The man started to protest but McGeever cut him short, his voice full of menace. 'Sorry I didn't hear you say that you understood me?'

The man nodded.

'What was that?'

'Yes, I get it,' said the young man.

'Get what?' persisted McGeever.

'I'm here to answer your questions.'

'Good,' smiled McGeever, 'now we understand each other.'

He opened up a huge file that he had placed strategically on the desk so that the man didn't have to strain forward to see what it was. He recognized his face straight away on the large mug shoot on the first page. 'Well, well, well...what have you been up to then?' said McGeever flicking through the pages. 'A traitor. A man who shafted the very country that gave him everything. Your parents must be very proud.'

'No!' said the man instantly. 'That's not true.'

'Someone who wanted to betray their country to an enemy. A terrorist as well as a traitor?'

'No!' repeated the man. 'You've got it all wrong.'

'Sell out to the highest bidder eh...all those defence documents you downloaded. You must have made a shit load of money. Which makes you a common thief as well. Hell, is there no law you haven't broken?' asked McGeever as he causally flipped through the numerous pages of the file.

'No, I just want to see how good the security was...'

'Oh yes that's what you said in your sworn statement, but the arresting detective has written a note here saying, and I quote verbatim, 'it's just a lot of fucking bullshit' and he also says, 'there is no doubt that he was deliberately undermining the security of the country to aid a terrorist organization.'"

'No! That's not true you've got to believe me.'

'Do you love your country Mr Dylan?'

'Yes of course...' but McGeever interrupted him.

'Then again Mr Dylan where exactly are you from eh?'

'What, what do you mean?'

'Dylan is an Irish name, isn't it?'

He paused before answering suddenly seeing what was coming. 'Yes my parents are originally from Cork, but...'

'So, you're a member of one of the Irish terrorist groups Mr Dylan, which one?'

'No, no that's...'

'Or were you trying to extort funds for them?' McGeever had leaned back in his chair and was looking at the young man without any mercy in his eyes.

'No, no, please I have no connections to any organization, I'm just... '

'Just what are you Mr Dylan?'

Lamely he answered. 'I'm just a student that's all...'

'Oh no you're not Mr Dylan, you're a hacker aren't you, someone who enjoys looking into other people's personal lives, and when that gets boring you start hacking into government agencies. Pays well does it?'

'No! That's not true...' he protested.

'How in the hell do we know who you really are, Mr Dylan originally from Cork?'

'That's my...'

'Or what you are. Are you a student? If you are, and that's unlikely, did you get the grades it says here in your transcript? No of course not, because nothing you do or have done is real, it's all virtual. You've changed everything, your identity, everything.'

'No! No! That's not true, I am who I say I am, honestly.'

'We know you're not honest, Mr Dylan or Smith or Aziz or whatever your real name is. The thing is you are dangerous criminal; dangerous not only to your country but to every citizen you come into contact with.' McGeever stood up. 'It's my job to make sure that you never leave a secure cell again Mr Dylan. You will never again have access to anything electronic, no computers or smart devices, not even an electric tooth brush.' He paused. 'In fact it would be easier if you were just erased from the system...you could do that Mr Dylan, erase every trace of whoever you are. Then we don't have to waste all that public money.'

The young man tried to get up from the chair but he was stuck fast, he screamed out. 'NO! No, you can't do this, this is fucking madness no! Please.' Tears were pouring down his face and he slumped into the chair. 'No you can't do this, you can't. I just hack for fun. I'm so sorry, please help me,' he sobbed.

McGeever pressed the buzzer, 'What!' snapped Sanderson's private secretary.

'Miss Humboldt will you send in the armed escort to return the prisoner back to jail please,' said McGeever with a smile, knowing he was getting his own back on his boss's tough secretary.

'What?' she snapped again, confused, 'Miss who?' But he had already disconnected the intercom.

'There is no evidence, you can't prove for sure it was me,' stuttered the man who looked extremely upset and was pulling at the arms of the chair in desperation.

'Evidence?' replied McGeever in a sour tone. 'We have our own computer experts creating that evidence online right now. You were caught red handed, evidence on your computer. So just like you, we will be hacking in here and there changing that date creating a new email record there. We have to make sure you get life. Keep society safe. So a bit of extra evidence to make sure, eh. I thought you would approve, the hacker being hacked.' He laughed.

'Oh Jesus,' the young man was sobbing again now and wriggling in his chair frantically. 'Is there nothing I can do to show that I'm innocent?'

'Innocent?' repeated McGeever sounding genuinely surprised that the man in front of him could possibly be innocent. 'No, I don't think so.' He paused dramatically and leaning forward again asked almost confidentially. 'You did hack into the defence server, didn't you?'

'Yes, but...' admitted the young man.

'And you did download those classified documents?'

'Yes, but I never...'

'Never what?' said McGeever, still leaning over the desk facing the young man who was pleading now.

'I'm just a hacker, yea, that's all. I really am Francis Dylan, I'm a final year computer science student at Brownes. Honestly, I only did it...,' he hesitated.

'Why did you do it?'

'Just to show my friends that it could be done. That's all. Honestly.'

There was silence as McGeever regarded the young man sadly.

'Honestly that's all. Those files were just left on my hard drive, I never used them honest. I don't even know what they are about. It didn't matter as long as they came off the Defence server.'

'Are you telling me the truth Mr Dylan?' McGeever tried to look concerned offering a chink of hope to the man.

'Yes Sir. Honestly, I am Sir, really, please you have got to believe me.'

Dylan sounded like a boy who had been caught stealing from another kid's desk at high school pleading with the school's principal. McGeever, pressed the intercom. 'Cancel my last order Miss Humboldt.'

'What!' She almost screamed down at the machine but he had cut off the machine again.

He picked up his iPhone from the desk. 'Okay Peters come back up. Is the car still there?' He hung up. 'I am going to give you a chance Mr Dylan. If you can help us I am going to make some alterations to this file and put in a good word for you.'

'You mean if I help you, you'll let me go?' the young man looked pathetically hopeful.

'No, you will have to stand trial I'm afraid, but if you help us then perhaps we can get these charges reduced somewhat. Do we have a deal?'

Dylan nodded desperately.

While McGeever had been interviewing Dylan all of the available team members were sat around a conference table in the temporary operations room at NASA headquarters on the other side of the city. Manson was explaining his theory about the person they had identified could also be a hacker. Sanderson was impressed that he had actually fitted a face to a potential suspect in this impossible case. 'You have done an amazing job,' she told Manson smiling, 'we're impressed.' Connors agreed and some of the other agents, including Ronson, said well done. 'However,' Sanderson continued cautiously. 'What we don't know is how this man fits into the larger picture. It feels like a bigger conspiracy than just one person. What do you think Ray?'

'Well we were wrong about Nicholson, so it's all down to this one lead now. But this certainly looks promising. One line of enquiry has to be if we can establish whether the same person altered any of the other or even, as Manson is suggesting, all the clocks.' Connors looked at Manson. 'There must be a number of these people surely, the sites are too dispersed and there are just too many of them. The real question is who is he working for?'

Sanderson continued. 'Of course, we are still confronted with the three original questions that all still to be answered. But I agree, if we can get just one of them, well, that's our best shot at finding out what this is all about. So how do we proceed?'

'We have a prisoner coming over from FBI headquarters,' replied Manson. 'Mac found him. He is going through pre-trial at the moment and so was in custody. Mac interviewed him earlier today and thinks he could help us with getting onto this hacker. He wasn't granted bail and has only just started his remand in custody, so he's shit scared and very co-operative. At least that's what Mac has just told me over the phone. By all accounts this guy is an exceptionally talented hacker. He managed to compromise the most secure area of the Defence Department by hacking into their server and downloading some highly classified material.'

'Is there a possibility he has links to a terrorist organization?' asked Ronson concerned.

'The CIA have crawled all over him, and everyone including the FBI are convinced that he's just a stupid kid who wanted to compromise a Government Agency to show off to his friends, but it backfired on him,' answered Manson.

'Well he can't be that good if someone caught him,' observed Smith.

'That was purely accidental, the IT guys never knew he was there, they just caught him online when they were doing some security screening. Initially the IT guys thought it was an exercise. They went fishing for a dogfish and caught a shark, I don't know who was more surprised?' Manson laughed at his own joke, although the others only smiled out of politeness.

'So, what are you suggesting?' persisted Sanderson, who had already received several angry texts from her private secretary about McGeever and so was fully aware about what had been going on at FBI headquarters. In fact she had authorized the use of her office and sorted the paperwork to get Daly released from prison into the hands of the FBI 'pending further enquiries.'

'Well,' explained Manson. 'According to our two angels of cyberspace here.' Smith and Cole glanced at each other and grimaced. 'Hackers often leave a signature or marker, rather like an artist. It's proof to other hackers that they have been where they shouldn't have been.'

'Just like graffiti artists,' offered Sanchez.

'Exactly Paul, but it's more like planting your flag on top of a mountain,' responded Manson continuing. 'They can't help themselves, it's pure vanity. We need to send Imelda and Rachel here to Fort Collins and Pasadena to interrogate their computer systems. Not the main server, but the server operating the clocks which apparently are always isolated from the main server and are not networked for security reasons.'

'So, he didn't hack into them because they were isolated from the Internet?' Connors was looking for help in understanding the rationale behind Manson's theory.

'Oh yes he did,' persisted Manson. 'Gail and her team have only found ways to mess with the clocks that involve altering the system itself. Most of us have seen those things. You can't directly interfere with them, not quickly anyhow, and certainly not without causing a massive problem with the time output. Taylor herself made a suggestion as to how it was done. The easiest way to do that is via the computer and not to alter the time directly but to cause an abnormality in the measuring system.' Ronson and Carr both nodded, although Heaslip sat quietly.

'You think this guy physically hacked into the isolated and dedicated computers for the clocks?' asked Connors.

Manson nodded. 'Yes, I do. Gail also agrees it is the easiest way and Festor thinks it's feasible, and as it's the only working hypothesis we have at the moment?' He shrugged.

'You're sure about this?' asked Connor.

'No, of course I'm not a 100% sure,' said Manson defensively, 'but we can't see any other way. So, I want to look for his signature, logo, bit of coding or whatever it's supposed to be, while we also try and identify this guy with the evidence we have already got.'

'We might even get lucky,' added Cole 'and actually find other evidence hidden away on the hard drive showing that he has accessed the computers.'

Connors looked at Sanderson who nodded, then back at Manson. 'Okay.' He said simply.

Manson rubbed his hands together eagerly. His team were used to this gesture by now and looked at each other and smiled, knowing that something was about to happen. 'So it's okay for Rachel and Imogen to get going tonight?'

Sanderson nodded in agreement.

‘Meanwhile I will have our tame hacker here first thing tomorrow morning and we will start to track this guy down.’

‘Tomorrow morning at what time?’ asked Cole.

‘Would 9.00 Washington time be okay? It will mean getting to the airport this evening and getting a very early start in the morning to set everything up?’ asked Manson hopefully. ‘Gail and Mac have already organized access to the clocks at JPL and NICS, so once there all we need is a secure video link back here and our little friend is going to help us to find out who he is.’ Manson smiled at the two agents who were as ever sat next to each other. ‘Of course, you may not even need his help, I know your pretty hot with the old IT.’

Cole smiled at the intended complement. ‘Don’t you think we should hand this over to the National Cyber Security Agency?’

Sanderson shook her head. ‘No, I’m afraid this is just too serious to involve another agency with the investigation at the moment.’

‘Look,’ interrupted Smith a bit embarrassed, ‘I think you have got this all wrong.’

‘How do you make that out?’ asked Manson a little disappointed.

‘Whoever this person is, he or she had to hack into the main frame to alter any records of them being there. There is only the video clip of your mystery cleaner outside the atomic clock laboratory at the JPL, the CCTV footage inside the laboratory shows nothing at all. So if he was actually in there he must have doctored the tapes. So he may not have touched the dedicated computers for the clocks at all. So shouldn’t we be looking at the main server instead?’

‘No, I don’t think so,’ responded Manson. ‘I agree that the CCTV shows nothing but we have been unable to prove that they have been tampered with either internally or externally. But I think that’s irrelevant anyway. Want to explain it to her Gail?’

Ronson smiled. ‘I hate to admit it Rachel but I think he’s right. The clocks are pressurized and kept at an unimaginable low temperature and are totally sealed. It would take far too long to get access, so it seems that whatever he did must have involved the dedicated computer somehow. We know the perpetrator is IT savvy, so it makes sense. Looking at the dedicated computers has to be our best bet of finding evidence that he had been there.’

‘Okay,’ she smiled. ‘Makes sense to me when you put it like that,’ She gave Manson a conciliatory smile. Manson was enjoying himself.

‘But he is not invisible so at some time he must have changed the CCTV footage,’ said Cole.

‘Well there is no evidence, and as we don’t know the precise time he was in the lab it is impossible to determine if he did,’ replied Ronson. ‘Agent Hammond has been trawling

through the tapes from the JPL manually, looking for discontinuities and has found nothing so far.'

'That's correct I'm afraid,' confirmed Hammond, 'but I am still working on them.'

'Why didn't he get rid of the piece of him dressed as a cleaner as well?' persisted Cole.

'It could have been a dummy run.' said Manson still smiling knowing that he was going to get his chance.

Connors sat back in his chair and put his hands behind his head. 'See Becky didn't I tell you that ugly bastard was probably a good agent.'

'You're killing me with praise boss, but it doesn't pay the alimony. If we catch this guy I'm expecting a raise.'

'If you catch this guy Manson I will pay your alimony myself,' laughed Connors.

'Let's go everyone,' said Sanderson. 'Good luck you two,' she added to Smith and Cole. 'Tomorrow is going to be an interesting one.'

Heaslip, Carr and Hoff were having a quick drink on the way home. They avoided anywhere that their superiors would be likely to be hanging out, including the Residence opposite where Manson and McGeever were almost permanent fixtures in the evenings, and had chosen a club in the City centre. They sat together in a discrete corner trying not to shout but finding it difficult to talk over the loud music. Heaslip was watching some women at the bar, who threw him the odd glance now and then, resulting in the women bursting into giggles each time. They were clearly drunk, and Heaslip was not too far behind.

'What's up Jamie, you were unusually quiet back there,' inquired his CIA colleague Alan Carr.

'It's Manson,' he said taking another large swig of his German larger.

'What about him?' enquired Carr casually.

'Yea, I thought you liked him?' added Hoff, who never felt truly at home with the CIA guys, especially when outnumbered like tonight. 'He is one of your own after all.'

'The bastard has taken over the entire investigation,' he complained. 'Never listens to anyone else.' He emptied his glass and then added for good measure. 'He's up himself, big time. Do you see the way Connors and Sanderson just agree with him all the time.'

'You think he's on the wrong track then?' Carr knew he was winding him up and didn't care. He thought if anyone was up themselves it was Jamie Heaslip himself.

'Possibly,' admitted Heaslip, then after a slight pause as he glanced around the bar from their vantage point in the corner, 'fuck, who knows. But the way everyone just lets him get on with it ... well it makes me sick.'

'Well in my book he comes out of this as a credit to the Agency. He's old school, real CIA, know what I mean. All the Latin American stuff they say he was involved with, it's what we all dream about.' Carr felt Manson needed and deserved defending.

'Probably all bullshit,' said Heaslip. 'You've just got to look at the guy to know he's a full time loser.' There was an embarrassed silence before Heaslip continued, his words just slightly slurred. 'All I know is that anyone who makes handwritten notes in a fucking black pocket book ... hell, he's like some provincial sheriff.'

'So what would you do?' asked Hoff.

'Me?' said Heaslip. 'I would pump Nicholson and that bitch Taylor some more. They are involved in this up to their necks for definite.'

Carr and Hoff exchanged glances. 'Time I was home gentlemen,' said Hoff getting up.

'Yea me too,' said Carr. 'You want a lift Jamie?'

'No, I think I'll hang around here for a bit,' and nodded towards the women at the bar who were still staring occasionally in their direction.

'Well good luck, and don't forget what happened to McGeever,' said Sandy Hoff smiling.

'What's that supposed to mean Hoff,' said Heaslip angrily.

Carr lent his significant bulk over the table towards Heaslip, knocking his empty glass over. 'Keep your mouth shut about the investigation, that's what he means.'

'What do you take me for?' asked Heaslip full of indignation.

'Someone who has a lot less sense than Manson and who is currently drunk.' He straightened up and slapping Hoff on the shoulder. 'Come on buddy let's get back to where we belong.'

Earlier that evening, Dylan had been taken down to the waiting car outside FBI headquarters and driven to the First District Police Station. It was a small attractive tradition police station built out of red brick with a neat lawn and flower border outside. The officers were expecting his arrival. After the inevitable paperwork and search, he was placed in a cell on his own. A police officer removed his cuffs and leg chain and handed him a parcel which contained a new shirt, jeans and a thick blue sweat shirt with the logo "We Love the Washington Metropolitan Police Department" in gold letters. He was given a meal and coffee and then the same officer fixed a cable to the large TV which was recessed into the wall behind unbreakable glass and switched it on. 'What channel do you want?' asked the officer.

'CNN?' suggested Daly.

'Sport it is then,' said the officer who adjusted the channel and left Daly sat holding the cup of hot coffee staring at a baseball match and wondering just what was going on. What he didn't realize was the FBI had him under close surveillance and that upstairs a small team of agents would be taking it in turns to watch their prisoner in 30 minute shifts for the next 12 hours while the others relaxed and watched the same endless games of baseball.

It was nearly 9.30 pm that same evening and Manson had been thinking about getting a couple of beers at the Residence when an agitated Hammond came into the operations room. 'Thank God you are still here!' he said. 'You had better take a look at this.'

The middle age CIA agent set up his laptop and carefully connected it to the large screen TV they used for blowing up images. 'What's all this, videos of the family holiday?' asked Manson, bemused by the excitement of his colleague.

'Much better than anything you've watched for a while,' he replied. 'Just watch this will you.'

After ten minutes of staring at the footage and going back and forwards, Manson leaned back in chair, took out a handkerchief, and mopped his brow thoughtfully.

'Good God how did you spot it?' he asked.

'I didn't, it was my 8 year old son. I had been watching the surveillance tapes on and off all day and because there was so much I decided to take them home. You know do a bit every evening.'

'Your wife must love you,' observed Manson.

'So he, my son that is, keeps coming into my study asking what I'm doing. I explain that I'm looking for something unusual. Like what? He asks. I say I don't really know. Something or someone strange I guess. So he sits down and watches with me, just the two of us. After about half an hour I go out to get some coffee for myself and a soda for him, and when I come back he is stood in front of the screen, really close, running the tape at high speed. What you doing? I say, you haven't lost where we were have you because I don't want to have to watch this crap twice. He just says. Shut up Dad, I'm concentrating. He's a great kid, but he is a bit, well you know at that age they can be a bit intense. The School says he might have slight autism, but I think he's fine.'

'No disrespect to your son, but can you get on with it, I'm dying for a drink,' interjected Manson.

'Yea, sorry. So rather than get into a scene I think to myself I'll just leave him to it and go and catch up with the wife. Ten minutes later I hear him shouting all agitated, so I think oh fuck he's wiped the tape or something bad like that and I'm shitting myself. So I rush into the room and he's pointing at the screen. Well it's an empty lab, nothing, and so I stare at

it, nothing, not even a spider as far as I can tell. I look at him and say, so what? So he replays the section again. See it now he asks. You bet the fuck I did so here we all are.' Hammond flopped back in his chair, seemingly exhausted after such a long explanation.

'That's some smart kid you have there,' said Manson just as McGeever came through the door and saw the two men in front of a large image of the JPL atomic clock laboratory.

'What all this about?' he asked looking up at the screen. 'I got fed up waiting for you.'

'Shall we see if he can see it?' asked Manson, and Hammond smiled delighted.

'Remember Mac, we CIA boys are smarter than the FBI so it may not be obvious.'

They played the tape. 'Nope,' admitted McGeever. 'No one came in.'

'Try again,' said Manson simply.

'What for?' he asked. 'There's nothing there.'

'Well let me give you a clue...look at anything that's moving,' and then pressed the replay button.

McGeever looked hard at the apparent completely still image. 'But there is nothing ... okay ... fuck, I can see it's the time on the clock display. It just went back an hour!'

'Not only that, but after fifty minutes,' confirmed Hammond, 'it jumps forward an hour back to the correct time.'

'So the video had been tampered with as Rachel suggested, and what is interesting is he has also replaced the section when he left, had you noticed?' observed McGeever. 'The great thing is that we now have a precise time for the crime. Oh boy!' McGeever grabbed Hammond and gave him a hug. 'Shit, I will never say anything bad about the CIA again.'

'Well,' admitted Hammond, 'it wasn't me it was my youngest.'

'You do realize, don't you Mac, that this isn't just a clue it opens the entire case,' said Manson with a huge smile on his face. 'We are so close to this bastard I can hear him breathing. Let's get this evidence locked up and it's over to the Residence. I think we need to celebrate and I'll be doing the buying.' For Hammond, although he was a very competent agent, this was one of those very special moments in his career he would never forget.

'So how does he get in?' asked Connors when he had heard the good news later that evening and had joined them for a late drink at the Residence.

'It's simple. The time approximately co-ordinates with that image with have of the unknown cleaner. He hacks into the cleaning networks and reallocates staff so he can be the cleaner for that day. We know that's a fact because one of the local Feds interviewed the

supervisor. Apparently it is always the same person, in this case a Mrs Mendosa who cleans that lab.' Manson had been looking at his black pocket book.

'Yea I know,' confirmed Hammond, 'she crops up each day on the tapes regular as clockwork.'

'So why didn't she make a fuss that day when she is relocated?' asked Connors.

'Apparently every now and then they bring in a specialist deep cleaner who cleans the surfaces of the more delicate equipment,' explained Manson. 'So that's what she thought. But when we checked with the main office the company confirmed that the schedule had not been altered by them and that they had no idea that a special clean had been requested by NASA management, authorized or timetabled, which of course it hadn't. It was all done on the QT by the hackers using their own computer system. They had to show someone going along the corridor about the same time as Mrs Mendosa and also cleaning the other rooms or it might have been picked up by security.'

McGeever was back on white wine. 'At least,' he observed, 'we now have real evidence that a crime has been committed and we can finally rule out any possible malfunction of the clock itself.' The others nodded in agreement. 'We also know that we have one massive security issue with these clocks.'

Connors agreed. 'If nothing else comes from this, at least we can do something about that.'

'Bolting the door...' started McGeever.

'Yea, but the horse is still out there and its down to you guys to round him up.'

'And we will boss,' said Manson who was looking very happy, 'I promise you, we will.'

It didn't seem appropriate to hold the interview with the hacker Daly in the operations room which had been used by the investigation team for the past week; so it remained empty and locked with a single NASA security officer outside the door. Whether the various NASA employees had ever wondered much about the so called security audit was unknown, but it was now clear that the team of agents had been absorbed into the routine of the building. With a large and rapidly changing staff at NASA, the agents were becoming established faces receiving nods and smiles of acknowledgement from the permanent staff.

Hence the whole team with the exception of Cole and Smith were at the J. Edgar Hoover Building, awaiting the start of the investigation into the dedicated computers used for the atomic clocks with excited interest. Everyone that is except for Heaslip, who had yet to arrive. Connors and Sanchez had been there from very early on establishing the video links with Fort Collins and the Jet Propulsion Lab. Where Cole and Smith respectively had each arrived in the very early hours to deserted airports to be whisked off in local FBI vehicles and assisted both by the IT staff of both institutions and local Feds.

The first to come on line was Rachel Smith, radiant and smiling her red lips revealing white teeth. 'Wow,' said Sanchez, you look great, I was expecting you to be wrecked after the all nighter.'

She laughed. 'If you could see further down,' she admitted, 'I'm still wearing pyjamas.'

'Really?' asked Sanchez a bit too eagerly.

'Nooo,' she teased, 'it was a joke dumb head.'

Sanchez smiled, a little hurt, but he smiled a genuine happy smile and looked at the face of the lovely Rachel Smith on a very large screen and felt happy.

A few moments later Imogen Cole appeared on screen from Fort Collins. She looked tired by comparison, but this did not affect her enthusiasm for the job in hand.

Everyone had made themselves comfortable in chairs which had small tables that swung over the lap that could be used as a mini desk. They sat in their teams Sanderson noticed not as on previous occasions, FBI on one side and CIA on the other. Whatever happens with this investigation, she thought, the two agencies had gelled well for once.

This was Connors' show and he started off by getting an update from each of their IT specialists.

'Okay,' Imogen how has it gone.

'Well the IT people here in Boulder have been checking their mainframe after your email late last night for any possible hacks and so far have come up with nothing out of the ordinary. We gained access to the lab here about 5.00 am your time and I have spent

some time with them looking at their system. I am pretty familiar with everything now and have full access on the strict orders I don't interfere with the software operating the various pieces of machinery, especially the main clock.'

'Well done, Imogen. Thank everyone for me, will you? We are very grateful for them agreeing to this very early start. But then I think you should now ask the rest of the people in the lab to leave; we have to retain as much security around this as possible. After all it is a possibility that one of them may be directly involved.' They saw Cole move away from the camera and then voices and Cole's voice calm but authoritative and after a few minutes she was back.

'Now what?' she asked.

'We wait until our tame hacker arrives,' informed Connors looking at his watch. 'He should be here any minute.'

'I don't think there is anything here to be found to be honest with you,' she said. 'I don't want to dampen your hopes, but it's a very simple Linux operated standalone PC linked to a whole bunch of equipment that controls the clocks. There isn't even a separate server.'

The mood in the room was slightly quashed as they listened to her overview. Cole was a very clever IT specialist and they took her opinion very seriously. If she said there was nothing, well that was probably going to mean that this whole thing was going to be a wash out.

'Well there is no harm in going through with this, after all the effort McGeever and Manson have gone to in setting it up.' In the bottom, right hand corner in the reduced screen Smith was waiting and Sanchez clicked her image on his laptop screen and she suddenly replaced the tired face of Cole on the large screen who had now been reduced to the corner where seconds before Smith had been.

'What about you Rachel. Everything okay?'

'Almost a carbon copy of Imogen,' she replied. 'Yes, everything is set up and I asked everyone to leave when you were talking with Imogen. I gained access about the same time. We have found nothing yet, even with your precise time, there is simply nothing to be found on the dedicated PC. We have found absolutely nothing to show that CCTV footage has been altered on the mainframe, except when you watch it then you can clearly see that it has been changed. It's absolutely seamless and for all intent and purposes it is the original recording, this guy is very good.'

'Is that really possible?' asked Connors.

'No, there has to be something if another IP address gained access to the system, it's just a case of finding where. The only other explanation would be that it is an insider who is an account holder.'

'So, what's the set up like there?'

'I have exactly the same set up as Imogen in front of me, except their PC is linked to a small server, and each piece of lab equipment has its own dedicated PC or laptop and they are linked to it.' She turned the camera and pointed, her finger eerily seeming to come from the screen itself, to a surprisingly small box on top of a cabinet which had rows of green lights most of which were flashing, although a few lines were sadly reduced to a single red light. 'As I said, the IT people are carrying out an audit to see if the main frame has been compromised, but I am told that is not unusual as they get hundreds of attempts every day. This machine is clean as far as I can tell, it's a simple Linux system again, highly customized in terms of its operation, but that's not unusual. That's why they use this particular operating system after all. I'm afraid I am at a loss, just like Imogen. I hope this wasn't a waste of time.'

McGeever and Manson gave each other an equally worried look.

At 8.30 am that same morning at the First District Police Station, Dylan had just finished a hearty breakfast. Although not at all interested in sport he had watched the TV most of the night and was still watching an ice hockey game when a police officer and two men in dark suits arrived at his cell.

'Big day today,' observed the officer, 'you good to go?'

With a last look at the TV screen Dylan allowed himself to be handcuffed with the indifference that was common with those who had been in custody for more than just a few days. 'You better have this,' said the Officer and placed a dark blue baseball cap on his head and pulled it slightly downwards to obscure his face. The cap had gold oak leaves emblazoned on the peak below the embroidered badge of the Washington Metropolitan Police Department. 'Yea, you look like a regular off duty cop,' said the officer standing back admiring his work.

'Except for the cuffs,' said Dylan looking down.

'No one will notice those,' the officer said in a friendly almost apologetic tone.

They went down the steps past the manicured lawn and pretty border full of flowers and climbed into the waiting people carrier with its windows smoked to an intense darkness. One dark suited man got out of the rear seat and the police officer helped Daly into the back next to him. 'Thanks,' said Daly.

'Sure,' said the cop handing him a plastic carrier bag containing his prison uniform, 'just remember to dump the sweat shirt and cap before you get back home.'

Daly smiled. 'Yea, good advice, I'll remember.' The conversation was cut off as a second FBI agent clambered in to the rear seat with him. With one man either side of him in the rear seat it was a bit of a squash, as they sped towards the centre of the city, with a second car behind providing an armed escort.

It was just after 9.10 when the black people carrier drew up at the forecourt in front of FBI headquarters. The two agents with Daly in between walked slowly into the building through the front entrance without anyone taking any notice of the off duty cop and the two agents who blended right in. They went up to the third floor where the computer link up had been arranged in the conference room which had been commandeered for the day. The three of them stood in the entrance to the room a little uncertain what to do next. McGeever stood up and went over to the two agents and took custody of Daly, removing his cuffs.

‘Okay,’ he said, ‘it’s as simple as this. You help us and we will help you. Okay?’

‘Okay,’ replied Daly.

‘You want coffee or anything?’

‘No I’m fine. What do you want me to do?’

‘Listen up everyone this is our friend who has agreed to help us. He is still in custody but I’ve allowed him a bit of freedom, but if you see him heading for the door what do you do?’

‘Shoot first and asked questions later!’ shouted all the FBI agents in unison, while those from the CIA roared with laughter. Daly took the hint and managed a weak smile.

So Daly was found a chair amongst the others and sat facing the large screen where only a few minutes before Smith had been giving details of the system they were using.

‘Imogen, Rachel. This is Daly and he has a very special skill,’ introduced McGeever. ‘Mr Daly is a professional hacker.’ Daly was about to protest about the use of the word professional but thought better of it.

‘So,’ continued McGeever addressing Daly directly, ‘our problem is that we have a number of standalone computers that have been interfered with and we want to know how and who by.’

Daly was a bit taken aback. ‘How the hell would I know that? It wasn’t me if that is what you think!’ he protested.

‘I will admit Daly you are a pretty good fit for our man, but we are pretty sure it’s not you, so relax,’ continued McGeever. ‘Although if it was it would save everyone a lot of time and trouble if you just gave yourself up?’ He hesitated but Daly didn’t respond.

Ronson leaned over to Connors and whispered. ‘Are we sure this isn’t our man, he certainly fits the profile?’

Connors smiled, ‘It would be helpful to our investigation if he was, but I don’t think so, this isn’t his style as far as we can tell and he doesn’t match that crazy image that Manson has plastered everywhere. I’ve had checks run against all known hackers and come up blank.’

‘So, how would you know if a system had been hacked?’ McGeever asked Daly.

‘If they were good you would never know.’

‘Even if they made changes to the code somewhere?’

Daly smiled, ‘Yea but somewhere isn’t going to be obvious is it. We are not talking about a galloping horse suddenly appearing on your screen or a fire starting in one side of the screen and gradually burning up the home page as it wipes out your hard drive.’

There was silence

‘Jes,’ he said, ‘you were, weren’t you?’

‘Go on,’ said McGeever resignedly.

‘Well most hacks are just in and out. You book your flight via an alias using someone else’s IP and then pay using a bogus credit card or their online account. Off you fly.’

‘That’s theft,’ said Manson simply.

‘Or you gain access and download the details you want. Like Yahoo in 2014, yea.’

‘But those are simple cybercrimes’, said McGeever. ‘What about the next layer.’

‘You mean the dark web and all that shit,’ asked Daly.

‘I mean really sophisticated hackers. Do they have a different approach or what?’

‘Look,’ said Daly, ‘this theft thing. I don’t agree that the last examples are just theft because in many ways we are just exploiting poor security so we are doing the consumer a service in the long run.’

Manson snorted.

‘People give away their identities and bank details numerous times each day without ever thinking who is at the other end of all this or how secure it is. You can bet the companies selling stuff don’t give a shit about your details as long as they get your money. There have been cases of the companies selling these details to shady...’ McGeever cut him short.

‘What about other types of hackers?’ he persisted.

‘Well, let me think. I don’t know about these large criminal organizations or governments that do the same sort of thing, I stay clear of them. They are not nice, know what I mean. But most Colleges have computer societies or hacker clubs.’

‘Really?’ enquired Manson.

‘Yea, it’s just a bit of fun really. They set you challenges that sort of thing, and give advice. Most kids know how to get free Internet access to changing a credit rating all that simple stuff. But it’s a bit harder when you are up against more aggressive security. So, you start off doing simple things like creating a new identity to accessing a document or personal file. Shit,’ he laughed, ‘you can’t believe how Colleges have spent millions of dollars going from paper to fully computerized systems. It’s a waste of money. You can squeeze into those

things so easily, alter grades, and pay fees. They're delusional about it all. Guess when you spend all that cash you have to stick with it. The result is they have ended up paranoid so they have paper plus a useless online system.' He laughed and Manson guessed that College had changed a whole lot since had spent a disappointing year there before joining the army.

'Okay,' said McGeever. 'Imagine I'm in your club, how do I prove that I have done what I claim to have done. How do you know that document from the IIRS is genuine?'

'Well every file document and image has a lot of embedded data attached to it, but for the big stuff you leave a marker.'

'A marker?' asked Manson.

'Usually it's very discrete, otherwise the authorities get hacked off.' He smiled at the joke, but no one seemed to have appreciated it. They were all looking at this innocent looking guy and wondering just how many more like him there were out there.

'So if in our case the computer has been infiltrated by a hacker how can we tell?' McGeever felt as though he was a dentist pulling reluctant teeth one by one.

'Well he may have left his mark, but if its terrorism or something they won't leave anything behind unless it's intentional.'

'Intentional?'

'Yes, they may have intended to leave an extra bit of coding or something.'

'How can you tell?'

'Well modern coding is complex but it's simply a case of comparing what should be there with what is actually there, line by line. Of course, there is software you can use to help you, but they are mostly compromised and so of limited value to the security guys.'

'But that is how it is done?'

'Sort of, but every change, every mistaken accidental return in the coding will be there as well, so it could take a long time,' Daly sat back feeling pleased that everyone seemed so interested in what he had to say, which in his opinion wasn't much.

'Thanks,' said Connors who felt that there was a lot more to squeeze from Daly without putting the screws on him which wasn't the plan. Keep it friendly was how Manson wanted it. Looking at Cole who was now taking up the main screen again he asked, 'how do you suggest we do this Imogen?'

Daly butt in. 'Just link me into the machine and I'll have a look.'

'No way,' said Smith from the smaller screen below. 'These guys type faster than the speed of light Ray. In twenty seconds he could order a missile attack on the building. Under no circumstances let him near anything that has a keyboard or touch screen, and that includes the coffee machine.'

Daly looked disappointed. Cole spoke and the image of the PC screen in her laboratory at Fort Collins came up. 'Recognize this?' she asked.

'Yes, it a standard Linux set up,' said Daly.

'If a hacker left a mark where would it be?'

'Anywhere,' answered Daly simply.

'Come on,' Cole persisted. 'I'm that student who's just left my mark to get into the top class in your club where would you look for it.'

'They would tell me where it was.'

'Okay, so imagine that I was another hacker and wanted to check if someone else had been there, how would you go about it?'

'Well,' thought Daly, 'it's a bit unrealistic. But I suppose I would blow up the screen and look for anomalies.'

'Anomalies?' repeated Cole.

'Yes, small discrepancies.'

'Why?'

'Well unless he wants you to know he's been there, then he is not going to stick up a photo of himself... is he?'

'So?' asked Cole

'He'd hide his mark somewhere obvious, prestigious.'

'Like where?' The frustration in Cole's voice was mixed with disappointment. She felt this was a waste of time and was beginning to feel very tired after the long night.

'In the eye of the presidential eagle for example?' suggested Manson.

'Yea, something like that,' agreed Daly, 'but that's a little too obvious.'

'Imogen,' said Connors, 'can you do what he says and blow up the screen and we can all look while you scroll over the area. Let's get a second screen set up then perhaps we can get two groups each looking at a screen.'

'CIA verses FBI?' said Heaslip walking in.

'No,' said Connors looking at Heaslip with annoyance. 'Let's break the teams up a bit and get to know each other. Where the fuck have you been?'

'I overslept,' said Heaslip meekly.

'The shit you did, that just cost you a day's pay.' Everyone averted their eyes from Heaslip. In one stroke he had become a temporary pariah. Just then Festor came in and Ronson indicated for him to sit next to her. The screen shots were blown up until just pixelated on the large screens in the room, she explained to him what had been going on. He raised his eyebrows and sat back like the others staring at the screen.

Two hours later, everyone was feeling pretty depressed. 'This is a waste of time, and my eyes hurt,' complained Carr to no one in particular.

Hoff agreed, 'This is awful. I hate computers.'

'I still think it's that chessmen icon,' said Manson, none of his enthusiasm diminished.

'I've told you several times already there is nothing there, and it's just a link to some fucking chess software the technician uses,' Cole's voice had risen angrily, exposing the fatigue and frustration she was under.

'There was an awful lot of shit on those desktops,' agreed Sanchez and he turned to Daly. 'Come on,' he said. 'What's next?'

Daly thought for a while. 'The programs I suppose,' he said. 'Wouldn't this be a lot easier if you just let me take control?'

Somewhere, a long way away in California Smith's voice emphatically filled the room with 'No!'

Both screens changed and were replaced by a long list of files and a few icons. The screens zoomed into the top of the list and slowly they scrolled down, each folder the size of a suitcase on the large screen. McGeever was bored and had stopped looking at the screen and was observing the others. Manson, sucking a cheap pen, was staring like a child at one screen then another, his enthusiasm never waning. Gail Ronson sat close to Festor who was constantly pointing at the screen and explaining each item as it appeared. Sanderson, on Festor's other side was half listening, looking at the screen and taking sips from her personal coffee flask which was silver and showed an Apollo launch with the word NASA in blue down one side. He wondered where she had picked it up. Connors was making notes on his iPad, looking up and occasionally asking questions, first Smith then Cole, trying to keep the momentum going. The other agents in groups chatting quietly but never taking their eyes off the screen, occasionally making suggestions. Good agents he thought, each one of them. Heaslip, was sitting slightly apart, shunned by the others after Connors had given him the run in. Most of the time though McGeever watched Daly, who glanced at one screen then another never bored at what he was looking at. Occasionally he looked at the others, but McGeever was sat slightly to one side and behind his field of vision, so that he would have had to turn around to see McGeever's constant vigil.

After ten minutes while looking at the screen from Pasadena, McGeever noted a transient smile suddenly pass over Daly's face. McGeever reacted at once causing several of the team members to jump in surprise including Daly himself. 'You saw something,' he said to Daly accusingly.

'No I didn't,' he remonstrated.

'Rachel can you slowly go back about 10 or 20 seconds as you were scrolling down that section of the page.' They all look at the screen as files and icons slowly passed by as Smith worked her way slowly up the list of programmes on the JPL computer.

'He saw something Rachel I am sure of it?' he turned to Daly.

'You're wrong man. I didn't see anything,' protested Daly.

'Imogen can you have a look at those programme listings on your screen as well. 'I think there must be something there.'

'What is it,' hissed McGeever getting up and leaning over Daly in frustration.

'I can't give away another hacker, not like this one. Whoever they are they must be pretty powerful if you are so interested. They would destroy me if they found out I helped you,' he pleaded.

'We had a deal,' said McGeever, his voice hardening, his fixed smile intensifying.

'At least give us a clue,' interjected Manson reasonably. 'No one will know.'

'Someone will. Someone even them, may be watching right now.'

'I doubt it,' said Manson. 'No one knows you are here. Everything we have done has not been recorded on any device. In fact, ... show him Paul.' Dubois turned to his computer and a small picture came up in the centre of the large screen covering the enlarged picture they had been studying previously. It showed apparent real time CCTV footage of Daly in Cell B231 at the State penitentiary. 'See, no one knows you're helping us, you are where you should be in jail. There is no CCTV in this room either, so you're invisible.' reassured Manson. 'You made an agreement with my partner here and we will honour our part of it if you help us.'

'It's Tux,' said Daly. 'I can tell its Tux. It's just the smart thing to do.'

'Tux?' said Manson standing up raising his hands in confusion, 'What's Tux?'

'I'm on it!' said Smith and suddenly she started to enlarge one of the icons.

'You sure?' McGeever asked Daly, still leaning over him.

'No,' said Daly, 'not 100%, how could I be, but it would be kind of obvious.'

'Will someone tell us what Tux is?' asked Connors, the question left in the air.

'Tux is this penguin,' explained Smith. 'That's the software logo.' A comic penguin had appeared on her screen which was relayed instantly onto the large screen in the conference room where they all sat.

'How did we miss it?' asked Connors.

'You don't quite understand Sir,' said Smith. 'This is not the hackers mark, it's the actual company logo for this software, but if I understand what is being suggested, this is possibly where the signature or mark is hidden.'

'On a penguin?' asked Manson clearly not taking it in. He starred at it. 'Where?'

'Rachel, I don't follow this,' said Sanderson.

'Linux is an operating system widely used by engineers and scientists,' she began to explain. 'It's a freebee operating system and can be modified quite easily by anyone who is IT savvy. Scientists and engineers never really used windows preferring this more malleable software. Also, it's used so little that it's hardly ever bothered by viruses. The core of the system is something called the Linux kernel. It is universally recognized by its mascot which is also used as the default icon. Meet Tux the penguin.'

One of the team said, 'Hello Tux.'

'If you operate Linux you will generally find it somewhere on the system being used as an icon.'

Everyone starred at the black body and white chest of a smiling cartoon penguin sat on its backside, its yellow beak and two yellow soles facing them. He seemed to be laughing at them. The left hand wing was behind the left foot while the wing on the right side was holding the top of the foot.

'Can you see any obvious changes or additions?' asked Connors.

'Let me just pull one up using Google. Here we are,' said Cole. The two images were now side by side.

Manson glanced at Daly who was smiling broadly. McGeever was now standing by his side looking at the screens. It took Smith and Cole five minutes of careful comparing then suddenly Cole said. 'I think I've found it. If we blow this up there is a grey area on part of the front wing, its hand if you like, and if you look very closely you can see the cross made up of five pixels.'

'The fuck it has!' said McGeever. 'Is that it?'

'I think it must be,' said Smith. 'Not much of a signature, but it's on my Tux as well.' There was a pause as her massively enlarged cursor clumsily moved over the pixels. 'Hang on a minute, the central three pixels are inactive while the rest of the area of the icon can all be left clicked on to activate Tux.'

Both Cole and Smith were clicking the various three squares nothing.

'This doesn't make sense,' protested Cole. 'If you accidentally clicked this part of the Tux then it would activate whatever these pixels give access to, so they can't be anything other than discoloured pixels. Can this really be his mark?'

Daly, suddenly excited by the prospect of finding out who this was said. 'Try right and left clicks on the two active pixels.'

They all watched fascinated as the cursor moved up and down with clicking noises clearly audible.

'It isn't working!' said Smith disappointed.

'Use your heads,' said Daly in disgust. 'It's simple. Right click the top the repeat the same on the lower using the shift key as well on the lower pixel. It will be a combination like that.' For a few seconds nothing, then suddenly the computer screen that Cole was working on in Colorado suddenly turned into a mass of blue pixels.

'What did you do?' shouted Smith to Cole.

'Shift right click top and shift left click bottom.' Suddenly Smith's the screen looked just like the one at Fort Collins.

'For god's sake zoom out,' cried Ronson, and almost simultaneously another icon contracted into view, not of a penguin but a weird blue box with a small lump on top.

Daly laughed and continued to laugh until, with tears in his eyes, he stopped abruptly as McGeever grabbed him by his official Washington District Police sweat shirt just below his throat.

'You know who this is don't you?' he hissed.

'No,' said Daly, shaking his head a little sadly. 'But it's pretty dam cool.'

Connors called everyone to shut up. 'Okay Rachel or Imogen I need you to hold my hand and just talk me through what happened there.'

Cole obliged. 'The penguin Linus kernel is the programme that connects application software to the hardware of the computer, so any system using Linux will have it as part of their programme suite. The penguin icon is universally used to access this programme. Normally you wouldn't touch it. The hacker has left his mark, this blue icon thing which is just an image, his logo I suppose, on the tux as a small link you access via the two protected pixels you saw.'

'What does all this mean?' asked Connors.

'What it means,' said Cole, 'is that he's been in this computer and he had to be in this room to do it.'

'Yep, same here,' says Smith. 'So, all we have to do is have every computer attached to an atomic clock checked to see if he has tampered with it.'

'Well done,' said Festor smiling.

'Yes, Yes, Yes,' Manson shouted and danced around the room and everyone laughed and clapped. Even Daly smiled, tentatively, looking at McGeever, who hadn't joined in the applause.

He turned to Daly again. 'Do you recognize the logo at all?'

'No,' said Daly. 'I don't know the hacker, but then again few of us are even aware of one another let alone get in contact.'

'But you do know other hackers?'

'Yes, but I don't know this guy. It seems from what I gather he not like a normal hacker. Sure we get free travel and holidays, even money, buzz the government agencies, download crap which seems to cause a lot of hassle. But this guy seems in a league of his own. Man, he actually pays house visits...' he hesitated, '...in person man, that's awesome.'

Manson walked across and showed the composite of who they thought may be the Hacker to Daly. 'Ever seen him before?'

'No.' replied Daly.

'Take your time have a good look, you sure you haven't seen him before?' Manson asked

'No I don't think so,' Daly shook his head.

'Do you have any ideas about what this guy may be up to or what his next move might be,' asked Connors.

'No. I have no idea who he is or what he does or what he hopes to do.'

'Could you hazard a guess?'

'He is obviously interested in Linux kernel for some reason and these two particular machines but apart from that I have no idea. Sorry man.' Daly looked as though he really was sorry that he couldn't help.

'Thanks,' said Connors. 'I give you my word that we will keep our side of the bargain and no one, not even this toad,' he pointed to the blue box image, 'will know you helped us.' Daly nodded. 'Charlie can you take Mr Daly back.'

Daly raised a sad hand in farewell as McGeever escorted him to the door. He turned and sadly looked for a last time at the team who were already busy working on the new lead. 'Come on,' said McGeever. 'Time to go.'

Once Daly was safely out of earshot Connors turned to the two screens again and addressed the agents. 'What do you suggest we do next?' he asked Cole and Smith who were now back on screen filling the office with their two broad smiles.

‘Explore the effect of this protected software, I suppose, see if there is any hidden code,’ said Smith.

‘I agree,’ added Cole, ‘it seems most likely that what they want to do eventually is use this hack to ultimately control the clocks in some way. Perhaps the loss of the thirty nanoseconds was an unavoidable consequence of that.’

‘By controlling the dedicated PCs?’ asked Connors.

‘Yes, exactly,’ confirmed Cole.

‘So this is a job for Gail and her team?’ Connors turned to Ronson and Festor.

‘Well that is easy to solve,’ intervened Festor. ‘I will order all timekeepers to completely replace the computer systems as soon as possible with new machines. In the meantime, we can revert back to an earlier version by sanitizing the hard drives and the RAM and reload the existing backups that predate all this. Then we can hand over the old copies of everything and you can compare the saved copies with the replacements and see what there is. We can help and advise on the technical aspects of course, if help is needed,’ he added cautiously.

‘Thanks,’ said Connors. ‘Okay, so we have effectively stopped whatever might be happening on those PCs, plus the increased security. All we have to deal with is the question of the thirty nanoseconds, but I like Imogen’s idea, it makes sense given what Freeman concluded. However, we still need to find our hacker so he or she can lead us to whoever is the mastermind behind this. Anything else?’ he asked the two female agents who were still smiling but now looking very tired.

‘Back to Washington?’ suggested Smith.

‘Okay as soon as you are finished pack up and get home,’ agreed Connors. ‘Stay overnight and catch up with your sleep if you want. Imogen get the local forensics to check if there is any possibility of getting DNA evidence from that keyboard. Well done both of you.’ There was a round of applause from the other agents and a couple of wolf whistles as well.

Connors was speaking some hours later after the celebrations had calmed down. They had been eating pizzas, and empty boxes, coffee cups and soda bottles were all over the main conference table. 'Okay,' he shouted above the din. 'Let's get some order here. Some you guys clear up this mess and then let's sit down.' There was a frenzy of clearing and moving of tables and very quickly order had been restored. 'Right then. First of all well done Manson. You stuck to it and even though we felt we had our home run with Nicholson and the DSAC, you were right.' Everyone cheered and Manson raised a depreciating hand in acknowledgement. 'Okay,' shouted Connors, 'enough! Let's get back to our normal boring professional selves here.' The grins were still on faces but they were coming back to ground very quickly. 'We have NOT, and I stress, have NOT solved this case. Do you understand me?'

'Yes Sir,' they all murmured. 'What we now have are some clues, a possible profile, a possible composite image of our suspect, and now we have more. So let's recap some.' Connors turned to look at the creased suit next to him. 'Manson, you son of the bitch, the floor is yours.'

'Thanks Ray. First just a small thing. The thanks here should be going to Mac and the boys, and to all of you. We make a formidable team.' Everyone grinned. 'Okay. Here is a photo ID of our suspect.' The image of a rather complied face appeared on the large screens above Manson's head. 'We have been lucky, for apart from our own two poor shots we now have three other equally poor shots. One from Paris and two from London. Those from London are interesting as they are both from within a restricted area but over quite a wide time scale, remind me Paul?'

Dubois briefly looked at his notes on his iPad. 'March 23rd this year, that's a Wednesday and again on June 22nd that was a Wednesday as well.'

'That is a very wide period of time and the British police and MI5 are looking into that for us. Likewise, the Gendarmerie in Paris and the DGSI are following up their end,' went on Manson.

'Who are the DGSI?' asked Hoff.

'The Direction Générale de la Sécurité Intérieure,' relied Manson with perfect French pronunciation, 'or if you prefer homeboy the General Directorate for Internal Security.'

'I presume they have no idea why we want to know?' asked Hammond.

'Absolutely not,' agreed Connors. 'This is strictly needs only at present. But the FBI does work closely with both the DGSI and MI5, just as we in the CIA work closely with the DGSE and MI6. They have strict orders not to alert or arrest this person. Also the intel including the composite is to be transferred on paper only once it leaves our server, I'm told old fax machines are safe.'

‘So we have combined all of those images together,’ continued Manson, ‘and now have a pretty good likeness. Here is the person we want to interview in relation to being where he shouldn’t have been around the time of the crimes at four different confirmed locations both here in the US and in Europe.’ Everyone looked at the composite image of a young man in his early to mid-twenties on the large display screen. The quality was amazing and using computer enhancement it looked like a normal image. ‘We are in the process of checking with all the timekeepers and immediate staff to see if they recognize this man.’

‘Who’s doing that?’ asked Heaslip.

‘Local FBI and CIA personnel, whoever is best positioned. But they have to co-operate with the local police departments for obvious reasons once we’re out of our own direct area of jurisdiction. We are hoping to start getting results back in the next 12 hours.’ Manson looked around and continued. ‘Our profile is a Male. Maths or physics major, perhaps computing, aged approximately 21-25. We believe that he either works with or in areas allied to atomic clocks or some other key component such as lasers, and that he has a known interest in them. I personally believe he is a graduate or postdoctoral student.’

‘Could he have been an intern and so got access that way?’ asked Hoff.

‘I don’t believe so. He moves around very quickly but often the key dates are centred around a Wednesday, mid week for sure.’

‘Could be a religious freak?’ suggested Heaslip.

‘It’s not Sunday or Saturday,’ said Connors, ‘so that is unhelpful. There are no faith issues identified here. So let’s keep focused.’ Heaslip was fast losing ground and his pariah status went up another couple of notches.

‘We have no DNA as far as we know, one composite ID of him which would not be a strong item in court and could even be excluded by the defence so our evidence is all circumstantial,’ said Manson. There were some murmurs of disappointment. ‘However,’ he continued brightly, ‘we have now proved he is an accomplished hacker. We also now have evidence that he has been at two of the computers here in the US and I believe with Festor’s assistance we will find out where else he has been, thanks to his mark, then change the software on the affected PCs to neutralize any possible coding he has hidden. Thanks to Hammond’s youngest we now know exactly when the JPL clock was tampered with and we are again looking for similar substitutions of video at other centres. We will also try and examine the mainframes to see if we can find any clues about how and from where that was done. But if you remember what Daly said I think this will be unlikely.’

Manson reached down and took a swig of cold coffee. ‘He gets into the building posing we think as a specialist cleaner, altering the work shifts for the normal cleaner by again hacking into the cleaning company computers. None of these companies have any real cyber security. However, not all the atomic clock network centres employ contract cleaners so we must presume he has other ways of gaining entry.’

‘Each one of these is a separate investigation,’ added Connors, ‘and our own IT specialists have suggested that we focus on just the most promising areas of investigation so as not to scare this guy into hiding. What else?’ Connors looked at Manson.

‘We have this,’ he put up the image of the hacker’s mark or logo. ‘We have sent this to forensics and see if they can come up with anything.’ He paused and looked around to see where Paul Dubois was sitting. ‘Finally, there is a snappy dresser here who has been doing his own extra curricula investigation. Paul?’ Manson sat down.

Dubois stood up and showed the video clip of cleaner at the JPL walking down the corridor wearing a hoodie. ‘I have been looking into this hoodie as it seemed to me to be rather unusual. I have been trawling the internet without much success. Agent Rachel Smith finally suggested I should contact some fashion distributors and although they ended up dead ends, one woman suggested it looked European and suggested I should contact a couple of Fashion Editors of magazines in London and Paris.’

‘They were able to tell me exactly what it was and you are going to be surprised.’ He looked around expectantly and was not disappointed. ‘It’s an exclusive coat made by a fashion house in France and only sold through their own retail outlets in Paris, Brussels and London.’

‘Not in New York or Los Angeles?’ asked Sanderson.

‘No only in Europe,’ replied Dubois.

‘So what?’ asked Heaslip.

‘It costs three thousand, four hundred and ninety nine euro and wait for this, only forty seven have been sold.’

‘Since when?’ asked Carr.

‘Since it was released in April this year.’

‘Go on,’ said Sanderson on the edge of her seat.

‘Sorry boss,’ said Dubois. ‘I am trying to get details of who purchased these coats, but because they are so high end all their customers are either celebrities or extremely wealthy the retailers aren’t saying anything.’

‘That’s not going to be a problem,’ commented Connors, ‘well done Paul excellent work.’

‘Well we can add to his profile an expensive taste in clothes and wealthy,’ summed up Manson.

‘Who are these people?’ asked Connors frustrated.

‘Well, we won’t know until we get hold of this man and grill it out of him,’ said McGeever.

‘Okay. Manson here has prepared a list of tasks for us, and I suggest that we get on with them first thing in the morning. Well done everyone, but let’s have an early finish for once

and start afresh tomorrow.’ Connors had risen and was gathering up a few papers, his iPhone and laptop.

‘I wonder?’ started Heaslip

‘What!’ Connors was so abrupt that several of the team jumped including Heaslip himself. ‘This had better be good; I’m not very impressed with your input so far today.’

Heaslip went red in the face but persisted. ‘I just wondered that if we want a really good image of this guy we might just as well use his passport.’

‘Passport?’ said McGeever in surprise. Connors raised his eyebrows a little. But Manson was smiling.

‘Yea,’ said Heaslip, some of his old confidence returning. ‘Unless this guy is a really good swimmer, my guess is that he has been on a plane close to some of those dates.’

‘Of course,’ agreed Mason.

‘Well seeing as you were late,’ said Connors, ‘I suggest you start right now contacting the security at all the obvious airports and see if you can get a match.’ Connors, his stuff now in his briefcase made a direct route to the door and without a backward glance left the room.

‘Good call,’ Manson said to Heaslip, who pretended not to hear. As if by magic Heaslip’s pariah status was gone and he was back in the team again, although not everyone was that forgiving.

The following day Sanderson and Connors had been reporting back to their respective directors updating them on progress or the lack of it depending on your point of view. All day the team of agents had been hard at work so it was late afternoon before Connors took the chair of the meeting of the entire team to assess progress in the past twenty four hours. He looked tired as he sat waiting as the other agents took their places around the large conference table in the operations room in NASA headquarters.

He called the meeting to order. ‘Agent Manson gave each of us, including myself and Deputy Director Sanderson, specific jobs to do. So let’s hear what progress has been made.’ He paused looking at the list of agents and their allocated tasks, then continued. ‘I want to stress to you all that this is not a race, and although we are in this for the long haul we do need to neutralize these people as soon as possible. So,’ he looked down at a sheet of paper again. ‘Let’s start with you Heaslip. How did your idea work out?’

Heaslip looked tired and a little defeated. Tony Diaz had told Connors that Heaslip had been in the office all night, so he decided to cut him a little slack.

‘Not too well so far,’ he said simply. ‘There are no matches for the periods we now know for certain he was active at any of the key commercial airports between London and the US. But we do have a lot of near matches, but nothing close enough.’

There was a general air of disappointment. However, it was Manson who came to the rescue. 'There are lots of reasons for that,' he said. 'The two obvious one's are that he's good at disguise or that he didn't use the passport of his known alias.'

'Couldn't he have used false passports?' enquired one of the other agents.

'Unlikely as there would be a high probability of detection. Technology is too good now with all this embedded stuff thanks to the terrorist threat. My money is on him using a stolen passport of someone who looks enough like him to get him through.'

'The face recognition systems are just too good now,' Heaslip admitted sadly.

'Not if it was an older type passport,' said Manson.

'Does it really matter,' suggested McGeever. 'We have all been through the new system. You know the drill they make you move your face this way and that, don't smile, readjust your hair away from your face, put on your spectacles or take them off. Eventually what happens? With the system's alarm still bleeping away, the guard resignedly overrides the system and lets you through. If he didn't, not a single plane would ever take off.'

'That's true enough,' agreed Manson, 'but just because you haven't got a match from the passport control images because he's using a look alike passport, he can't hide his ugly mug from airport surveillance cameras can he. So that's the next step.'

'It may also be worth analysing the look alikes as well?' suggested Connors looking at Heaslip. 'The idea is a sound one, and as you said, he didn't swim.'

There was general discussion for a few minutes as the agents chatted away suggesting various angles and ideas. Connors called the meeting to order. 'Okay, so there is still plenty of life left in that line of enquiry, so keep with that Jamie. What's next?' He looked at his list again. 'Any feedback from the timekeepers who were shown the composite of our suspect?'

Hammond stood up to address the table rather than sitting down as was normally the practice and this caused a gentle stir of anticipation amongst the others. 'Well, we created a sort of photo ID line up and slotted our man randomly with four similar faces. We have produced a number of different sets with the faces in different orders to ensure there is no statistical bias.' The four sets of similar faces appeared on the screen. 'We sent that out last night and just over 40 timekeepers and technicians have been interviewed so far and were asked to identify anyone that seems either familiar or whom they recognize.'

'How was that done?' asked Sanderson.

'We got the local agencies to do it for us.'

'Well?' asked Connors.

'We had the best result from London where 36% of the people picked him out as someone they think they might have seen before. That's almost double the expected 20% if the

responses had been random. When we combine the data and account for the 'don't knows' we still get a strong trend towards our man.'

'That's real interesting,' said Connors, 'but again it's circumstantial, not hard evidence.' Sanchez raised his hand. 'Yes Paul?'

'It's curious that the highest positive identification has come from London.'

'Yes, I agree with you, very interesting indeed. It looks as though he could be close to that location and ties in with Dubois' coat theory. Well done, I presume that you will be interviewing more people?'

'That's the plan yes,' concluded Hammond.

'So what about that coat?' asked Connors.

'Well I managed to get 23 names and addresses so far, the rest are A-listed celebrities and retailers say they want to protect their privacy,' started Dubois before being immediately interrupted by Connors.

'From the FBI and CIA, are they for real?' Most of the team smiled in agreement.

'It is unlikely anyway that a celeb would be our suspect, Sir,' answered Dubois, 'so I don't think we need lose any sleep over that.'

'These other 23 names will need to be checked out,' said Connors who seemed determined not to let Dubois just give his report.

'That's exactly what I have been doing,' said Dubois unperturbed, 'but I am not too sure where this is leading us.'

'Stay with it as it's our only real lead at the moment; and give those names to Heaslip so he can do some cross referencing with his near misses, you never know.'

Again there was a slight pause and the team of agents spoke softly to each other about the implications of what Dubois had said.

'That leaves us with the hacker's mark. What can you tell us Imogen?'

'Cole looked at Smith who nodded. 'We've have had a bit more success Sir, but I don't think you are going to be too happy.'

'Try me,' said Connors looking from one to the other expectantly.

'Forensics came back almost at once with a digitally enhanced image.' She popped it up on the Screen. 'It is a tall blue box with a blue globe on top. The box has a door and frosted windows. At the top of the box are some letters which appear highlighted. The lettering above the box is not clear Sir, but the image has been clearly identified as a police box used in the major cities in the UK, especially London, from about 1925 to as late as 1980. It was before two-way radio and the idea was when you wanted to contact the nearest beat officer

at any location you rang the box which activated the blue light on top alerting the officer on duty who then answered it. They all carried a special key so they could go inside for shelter but the phone was normally in a small box accessible from outside.'

'So,' asked Connors, 'why am I pissed off?'

'Hey!' said Hammond suddenly, 'That looks familiar looking at an image of a police box on the overhead display screen which had been projected from Smith's laptop.'

'Could do,' said Smith. 'It is used in a TV Sci fi drama series in the UK. It is very popular and has a huge and dedicated following. It's been going for decades.'

'So?' asked Connors.

'The thing is Sir the main character after which the series is named,' she hesitated, waiting for the explosion to come. 'He's a time traveller and uses the box as his space craft or time machine. He's a time lord.'

'A what?'

'A time lord, Sir, someone who travels backwards and forwards in time and space...' her voice had gone quieter as the sentence had progressed and finally petered out.

The explosion came. 'Oh fuck,' cried Connors. 'This guy has just put up two fingers not only to the United States of America, to the CIA and the FBI; but to every Government in the damned world. I want this fucker and I want him now right this fucking minute. No one, do you hear, no one leaves this room until we get him. Understand!' He banged the table with fury and stormed out.

'Obviously that didn't include the Deputy Director himself,' said Smith to Hammond who grinned.

'I think we need to pass this on up,' said Sanderson and stood up and walked a discrete distance from the conference table before using her phone to call Cranfield.

Later in the Residence a few of the agents were having quick drink on their way home, although Manson was already at home as he had been living in one of the smaller rooms in the hotel for the past few weeks. 'It's just the sort of thing a hacker would chose as his mark,' commented McGeever.

'Yea, it also gives a bit more insight into the guy. This TV show is British, right?' asked Manson.

'So?'

'In which case I think our boy is based in the UK and most likely in or around London. Also it ties in with his age. Like Daly said about College societies and clubs. I think this young man is still involved in education.'

'In what way exactly?' asked Smith, who like McGeever was sitting in front of a large glass of Chardonnay.

'No idea, but I think he must have a high level of freedom in terms of how he operates his job, if he has a job at all, because he travels so much. I think he is either a post doctoral researcher or possibly an older than normal graduate student.' Manson was already on his second beer.

'By my reckoning he is more likely to be an IT consultant, probably in security, just having left College, something like that,' suggested Smith. 'He could of course just be an old fashioned full time professional criminal.'

'I think Manson's right though and we should concentrate on the UK,' said McGeever.

'Well Mac it's as good a location as any other,' agreed Manson.

The three of them sat in companionable silence for a while and then to Manson's surprise Smith turned to McGeever. 'So, tell me what was it with you and the Taylor woman?'

Manson choked on his iced beer, while McGeever slowly and thoughtfully picked up his wine glass and emptied it in one gulp. Carefully placing the glass back onto the paper coaster, he bent forward so that he could look at Smith square in the face. 'Mind your own dammed business,' he snarled and standing up took a long look at her and then marched out into the Washington night.

'Something I said?' ask Smith with a perplexed smile.

'Guess it was at that,' spluttered Manson, still coughing.

'Thanks for the dink,' she said finally and gave Manson a kiss on his check and then ruffled his hair. 'Thank goodness we have one regular guy on the team.' Manson turned to watch her leave the bar and go out into the street and when she had disappeared from view he shook his head sadly. 'Barman another beer here,' he called.

At 12.30 pm the following day Heaslip went to see Connors who was sitting alongside Sanderson. 'I have a match for an Edward Arnold,' he said simply.

Sanderson and Connors both looked up. 'Go on,' said Sanderson.

'Edward Arnold flew from Heathrow London on a direct flight to Boston the day before we captured our man on video pretending to be a cleaner at the JPL. But interestingly he has not yet flown back from any of the airports that offer direct routes back to London.'

'Gatwick?' enquired Connors,

'I've checked them all, all those in the UK with a direct flight from any airport in the US. I also extended that to Shannon and Dublin in Ireland. Edward Arnold is still in the States wearing his fancy coat,' concluded Heaslip.

Manson was called over and they filled him in on what Heaslip had discovered. 'My guess it's probably an alias, but you had better do a background check on this guy.'

'We have an address in the UK,' said Heaslip, 'and MI5 has already sent some basic info on him, he seems to be who he says he is.'

'I'll get on to our embassy in London,' said Sanderson. 'We can get one of our agents to liaise with MI5 and the local police to interview him.'

Manson gave Heaslip a congratulatory slap on his back. 'We need to keep on cross referencing our composite,' he said.

'You don't give me orders,' said Heaslip testily.

'But I do!' snapped Connors. 'You've done some good footwork here but you're still on probation. From now on if Manson tells you to shit, you shit, right.' Heaslip was fuming. 'Got it?' repeated Connors. Heaslip nodded briefly, and walked off to his desk at the other side of the room. 'Little prick,' said Connors. Then looking at Sanderson he went a little red, 'Sorry Becky, out of order.'

'No,' she said, 'that would also be my assessment; shame though, he's an intelligent and clever agent, god knows what's eating him.' Connors just smiled.

A senior plain clothes detective from Thames Valley Police, one MI5 officer and an FBI agent attached to the US Embassy in London, knocked on the door of the ground floor flat in a large detached Victorian house in Banbury Road in Oxford, currently the home of Mr Edward Arnold. The door was opened by a young man of about 25 years of age. It was early evening and the three men huddled over the ornate porch as the rain fell.

'Hi,' he said smiling, 'can I help you?'

'Sorry to bother you Sir,' said the older man. 'I am Detective Inspector Harrison,' holding out his warrant card for inspection, 'and these are my colleagues. I am trying locate a Mr Edward Arnold.'

'Oh my God!' said the young man opening door completely open. 'What has happened?' Then adding, 'Look you had better all come in.'

The three men followed the young man down a long corridor with two doors on either side. One of the doors on the left was opened slightly and a young woman peered cautiously out. 'Everything okay?' she asked in a low concerned voice.

'I think there's been an accident Polly, the police are here. We are going into the kitchen, okay?' She nodded and closed the door.

They entered a large untidy kitchen which had a glass panelled ceiling so that the evening daylight poured in making a sudden contrast to the rather dimly lit hallway, the rain creating a soft but homely patter on the glass.

'Look, please everyone sit down. Christ what am I saying?' he pushed his hand through his hair. 'I would offer you coffee or something but I think you had better get this over with.'

'Over with Sir?' enquired the Inspector. 'You mentioned an accident. Do you suspect that Mr Arnold has had an accident?'

'Mr Arnold?' queried the man. 'No of course not, why would I think my Dad has had an accident, that's ridiculous. Look,' he said, 'I think we should start again. I am Edward Arnold how can I help you?'

The Chef Inspector smiled. 'I think Sir, if that offer of coffee is still open we could all do with one.'

Sitting around the large wooden table sat in matching stripped pine stick back chairs, the officers from the various agencies, now with their coats off and all drinking coffee had explained very briefly why they had called. Polly came in carrying a large paper bag, her coat wet and an umbrella which was discharging a small trickle of water which she placed in

the old fashioned square sink. 'Hi,' she said, 'I thought you might need something, there is never anything in the house.' She placed the large brown paper bag on the table and ripped it open. It was full of scones and pastries.

'This is Polly,' explained Arnold, 'my girlfriend.'

'Partner,' she corrected.

'Yea, my partner.' He smiled up at her. 'I would like her to sit in on this. She will be able to back me up.'

'Fine,' said the FBI man who was now doing most of the talking and who Arnold had quickly recognized was most likely in charge. Polly busied herself by turning on the lights and with placing plates, napkins, knives butter and jam on the table. Then turned on the kettle and made herself a mug of green tea using a tea bag, all the time listening intrigued to what was being said before sitting down at the end of the table to quietly follow what was going on.

After listening to the policemen, the other two hadn't actually identified themselves and had allowed Arnold to continue in his belief that they were also from Thames Valley Police, Arnold asked; 'So from what you are saying it appears I have been subject to identify theft and this person has committed a crime using my name as an alias.'

'Exactly,' said the FBI agent. 'We just want to do two things. One is to completely eliminate you from our enquires, and the second is to try and identify, if at all possible, why he chose you?'

Arnold sat back. 'Well I have nothing to hide do I Poll?' she smiled at him a warm and trusting look. 'I am only too happy to help in any way possible.'

'That is very kind you and we really appreciate your co-operation in this,' said the Inspector. 'I am going to be frank with you Sir. We don't have a search warrant but would it be possible for my colleague and I to have a brief look around your flat while you answer some more questions?'

'Well we just have the two rooms on the right,' he indicated the corridor with his hand, still sitting at the table, 'another couple have the other two rooms opposite on this floor.'

'We could never afford a place like this,' explained Polly, 'not in Oxford on what Ed and I earn. We share this kitchen, the back garden and the bathroom on this floor of course.'

'That's fine,' said the Inspector rising along with the MI5 officer, 'so would it be possible to quickly look over your two rooms and the communal areas?'

'Of course,' said Polly, 'I'll show you.'

'Could you also find us Mr Arnold's passport?' asked the FBI agent who had remained sitting with Arnold.

'Just the passport, or do you need Ed's birth certificate as well?' asked Polly.

‘Yes, that would be very useful.’

‘Better bring out the box with those old photos mum and dad gave us last Christmas Poll,’ said Arnold. ‘My parents gave us a small family album with pictures of my grandparents, them and of me growing up. They wanted to make sure we had a copy of the family history to add to when we finally have our own kids.’ Harrison smiled remembering his wife doing something similar a few years previously for his eldest daughter.

Polly returned at once with the box and the MI5 man spent a few minutes looking at the pile of documents including driving licence and birth certificate, gas and other utility bills, and of course Arnold’s passport. He made a few notes. After he had finished he passed the box with its contents over to the FBI agent who also looked through them and taking out his iPhone he took a photo of the open passport, the driving licence and birth certificate and seemed to email mail them off immediately. Arnold had sat watching fascinated. Finally the agent carefully put all the items back into the box and handed it back to Arnold. ‘Thanks,’ he said smiling. ‘Can I ask you a couple more questions?’ He had retained the passport and was flicking through the pristine and blank pages. Polly had gone out with the Inspector and the MI5 officer had gone in search of them.

‘Sure, go ahead.’ Arnold was completely relaxed.

‘This passport is eighteen months old, correct?’

‘Yes, that’s right.’

‘Had your last passport expired?’

‘No, I lost it somewhere when I was a student in London.’

‘Can you remember how you lost it?’

‘No, actually it’s a bit of a mystery. I kept it in a shoebox, the same shoebox in fact,’ pointing to the box on the table, ‘along with other important stuff and one day when we were going to France for a holiday I couldn’t find it.’

‘So you replaced it?’

‘No, not at first, there wasn’t time so I got one of those temporary things from the Post Office but I did eventually get around to it.’

‘I don’t see any visas for the US?’

‘Now there is a very good reason for that,’ said Arnold smiling.

‘And what’s that Sir?’

‘I’ve never been? I don’t like flying, so if we do go abroad we go by train, via Eurostar. It’s a better way to travel anyhow,’ he argued.

‘What happens if you need to go to the States?’

'Well,' he replied hesitantly, 'I would have to cross that particular bridge if and when it came along, but I probably wouldn't go.'

'You've never been to the US?' persisted the agent

'No never.'

At that moment Polly came back into the kitchen. 'Excuse me Mam, but have you ever been to the US?'

'No, not yet,' she said. 'But when I do it won't be with Ed, he can't bear flying.'

'Okay,' said Harrison. 'We have had a look around, everything is in order. You don't seem to have a computer?'

'No, we tend to use our mobiles, but Polly has a laptop somewhere.'

'Do you have a coat like this?' asked the FBI agent showing both of them the image of the hoody.

'No, not my style really,' said Arnold who was hardly a snappy dresser.

'No,' agreed Polly, 'not our style at all.' Harrison smiled.

The interview was drawing to a natural close. 'I wonder if you wouldn't mind sitting down again and both looking at these photographs?' asked the FBI official.

'Wow,' said Polly excitedly, 'are these all actual criminals?'

'No,' said Harrison smiling. 'This is a kind of informal identity parade.'

The FBI man laid out the five photographs on the table in front of Arnold and explained, 'I want you to look at each of these faces quietly for ten to fifteen seconds then close your eyes and think. Do the same for all them. Arnold did exactly what he was told.

'Do you recognize any of these men?' The Fed asked.

'No, No I don't think so. They all look vaguely familiar,' confessed Arnold.

Polly laughed. 'That's because they all have a passing resemblance to that face you see in the bathroom mirror every morning Ed.'

'Mam, would you mind doing the same.'

She did exactly what her partner had done until she came to the middle face and then said in a matter of fact tone. 'Oh, I've seen him before.'

The hairs stood up on the back of the necks of all three men, and Harrison spoke quietly carefully controlling the excitement in his voice. 'Oh yes Miss? Would you like to tell us about it?'

In reality there was very little to tell. She had been at Imperial College in London studying computer science and remembers seeing the guy a couple of times in the student union bar. 'He was always with the same group of lads. They were very quiet, a bit nerdy. Not my type,' she reassured her partner, 'not like you, Ed.'

'Why are you so certain that this is him?' asked Harrison.

'Well my friend and I were rather impressed with them. They all dressed in old fashioned tweed coats. Bit silly really, bit 70's. But it kind of looked cool. They were older than us and well, you know, they were sort of superior, mysterious, exclusive...'

'Did you or your friends speak to them?'

'No, they didn't seem interested so we didn't lower ourselves. They were a bit too nerdy to be worth the effort really.' She suddenly sounded very young.

'Do you know what they studied?' persisted Harrison who seemed to have taken over the questioning with the other two making notes.

'No idea, there are so many students in the University of London. But hang on a minute; it must have been something to do with computing because it was at a departmental do of some kind.'

'Was Mr Arnold at Imperial as well?'

'Oh no, my Eddy is a real scholar. He was doing classics and archaeology at UCL.' She looked at him admiringly. 'He was doing a PhD when we met in my final year and then got a research job as a Post Doc here in Oxford.'

'What was your subject at university?'

'I did computer science, that is why I think the man you are interested in might have also been doing something similar, because I do remember him clearly at the Christmas departmental party, him and his friends.'

'What are you doing now?' asked Harrison smiling.

'Nothing exciting like Ed, I work out at the science park as an IT consultant for a small pharmaceutical company.'

Harrison thought that it may not be so exciting or glamorous but that she probably was earning a lot more than Arnold himself and was probably paying most of the rent.

'You have never seen this man since?'

'No, not that I can remember, no.'

You haven't come across him through work, at a conference maybe, or even here in Oxford?'

'No, sorry,' she apologized shaking her head.

The three officers had spent over two hours interviewing Arnold and finally they stood to go. Harrison gave him a receipt for his passport which they insisted they had to take but promising that he would be contacted shortly about being issued with a new one at no cost to himself and quickly. 'One last thing,' said the MI5 officer, as he pulled on his coat. 'I would change everything you have. Banks, gas supplier, passwords everything, understand.'

'Why?' asked Arnold.

'This is something you don't want to be involved in, in any way possible. So try and rebuild your identity from scratch. Especially anything that involves computers okay.' Polly nodded knowingly, she had already guessed this was some form of cybercrime, but then again, she was an IT specialist.

As they began to file out of the kitchen into the corridor towards the front door, the FBI agent asked Polly. 'Is the photo I showed you a good likeness of the man you identified?'

'Yes, it's clearly him, but it's not him either if that makes sense,' she said.

'Not really,' he replied looking at the composite of the suspect.

'Look,' she said, 'let me show you what I mean. Just sit down again for a second while I get my laptop.' She pushed past Harrison, who was coming back towards the Kitchen having reached the front door, and not knowing what had just transpired between the two. She went to the bedroom only to reappear a few seconds later holding her laptop. She put it on the table and booted it up. The three men and Arnold gathered around Polly who had sat down and was moving the cursor around. She went into numerous folders and subfolders and suddenly a whole screen of small images appeared. Then she pressed the slide show icon and speeding up the rate of change the images shot past the screen one after another.

'Hey,' said Arnold, 'that's my old digs in Hammersmith when I was doing my PhD.'

'This is where I first met you, don't you remember,' she said, 'I came along with Rosie, that girl you fancied from my course. She had helped out collating stuff from a summer archaeological dig you were involved in.' Arnold went red. She scrolled on.

'God!' he said, 'Just how many people were crammed into that small house?'

'There,' she said triumphantly.

'Who's that?' asked Arnold.

'Obviously one of your house mates must have invited him.' There in the centre of the screen with red eyes from the flash was a tall man with a passing resemblance to Arnold

himself, wearing a long tweed coat and holding a can of beer. 'Now see what I mean,' she said looking at the Fed.

There was silence. It was Harrison who reacted first and simply laughed out aloud.

'Excuse me Mam,' said the FBI agent addressing Polly, 'could you take a few days off work?'

'Yes, I suppose I could if I had to, why?'

'I think it's time you visited the States. How would you like to spend a few days in Washington?'

Two hours later the whole team were reassembled in the NASA operations room and were listening to the video conference between Sanderson the FBI agent stationed in the US Embassy in London. There was a general air of disbelief. 'So you see Mam, I thought it prudent that Arnold's partner should meet your team. She flew out of London Heathrow a few minutes ago. We have shipped her laptop via a diplomatic bag so it isn't scanned and can't get tampered with or damaged. She is being accompanied by a female army marine sergeant who was due to return home on leave after a tour of duty at the embassy in any case. They are flying first class.'

'Thank you so much Agent Johnson, you and your colleagues have done a superb job, we are all very grateful,' replied Sanderson. 'Your initiative in getting Arnold's partner over was an excellent idea. We can use her to help us focus in on this man.'

'Inspector Harrison of Thames Valley Police wanted to know if you wanted him to continue enquiries in order to locate our suspect?'

'I don't think so, not at this moment. This will be a joint operation between the FBI and MI5, but please thank him.' They signed off and she turned around to face her colleagues, she was grinning like someone who has just won an Olympic medal. Everyone cheered, a few patted Heaslip on the back.

'So, he is using borrowed identities as we suspected, and in this case he stole the passport somehow,' said Connors to the team leaders a few minutes later.

'My guess is that when he attended a party at Arnold's house and saw the resemblance and by chance came across Arnold's passport, he just took it in case it came in useful one day,' said Manson.

'That makes sense because as a hacker he would have been travelling all the time for free if Daly can be believed. So perhaps the alias was one way of not drawing too much attention to himself,' added Ronson.

'You don't think he managed to dupe the system into issuing a new passport?' asked Sanderson.

'No, I don't think so because in that case he would have played safe and used his own image,' said Manson.

'Also, to ask for a replacement passport twice within a period of a couple of months would surely have raised alarm bells and the authorities would have investigated,' said McGeever. 'If that had happened then Arnold would have been alerted to the fact that his passport had been stolen and an alert would have gone out.'

'Do you trust Arnold as a witness?' asked Ronson.

'I think we have to,' said Connors, 'certainly everyone who was at the interview was convinced he was just a fall guy. No, I don't think we have to worry there at all.'

'It looks as though the link with London is now more or less positively established,' concluded Manson.

'We now know he was hanging around computer nerds at this Imperial College in London, and was possibly a student there,' agreed McGeever, 'so we need to focus on London, that's for certain.'

Heaslip came over, rather subdued. 'Just thought you ought to know but four of these names we have shortlisted from the airport security records were also students in London about the same time.'

'Thanks,' said Connor, 'you know what to do?' Heaslip nodded and walked back to his desk.

'We have him,' said Connors.

'It's just a matter of time,' agreed Sanderson, 'and I have a feeling Arnold's partner is going to help us fast track him.'

Connors nodded. 'Yea, but even without her, we have this new image of him, we know where he was until recently so it is not going to prove too difficult getting an actual ID. But it's imperative we don't frighten this guy. One sniff of us closing in and he will disappear into the ether, mark my words. So, let's prepare for Polly, what's her surname?'

'Winston, Ms Polly Winston,' explained Sanderson.

'Rachel!' he called out, and Smith came over. 'We need you to pick up a woman who is flying in from London later on today. I want both you and Imogen to work with her, and don't frighten her okay?' Smith nodded. 'Use one of the younger male agents, Sanchez or Dubois as well if you need to. I want you to track this guy down. Find out who Ms Winston's friends were, do they have any images of the guy. Contact them if necessary via Jonson at the embassy in London. Or better still get Ms Winston to phone them from here. We need to trace this guy and my feeling is that one of her friends may know him.'

'Yes Sir,' she replied and went off to brief the other three agents.

'Hammond, Hoff!' he shouted.

They came over, 'Yes Sir?' asked Hoff clearly excited at the sudden change in the pace of the investigation.

'I want you to contact Imperial College in London and try and trace this guy. Then I need you both to fly to London tonight and make a start straight away. Don't come back until I tell you. I suspect that our investigation is going to switch to London in a few days anyway. Liaise with the Embassy, they know the drill with MI5. Remember the CIA or FBI have no jurisdiction in the UK so behave and keep a low profile. Use the local enforcement. Can you organize that Becky? You are the one with the power here when it comes to internal security.'

'I'm on it,' she said. 'If we can't get a scheduled flight, we will try the military or as a last resort I will authorize a private jet.' Hammond and Hoff looked at each other excited.

'Guys, no guns okay, check them in before you go. Oh yes one last thing, Rachel.'

'Yes Sir?'

'We owe Ms Winston, so make sure she has a good time as well. Use your expense account.'

'Really Sir?'

'But don't push it okay.'

Smith smiled, in her head she was already shopping.

United Airlines flight 924 pulled away from Gate C1 at Dulles International Airport exactly on time at 10.10 pm that evening bound for Terminal 2 at Heathrow Airport, fifteen miles West of Central London. As the huge Boeing 777 taxied to the head of the runway Hammond was looking out of the window. 'Hell, my kid would love this. Ever been to England before?' he asked Hoff.

'No, it's my first time, you?'

'Yea I was at the embassy for 18 months, five years ago. Fantastic posting.'

'How long is the flight?' asked Hoff

'Seven and a half hours or about that so it said at the gate.'

'What are we going to do, get some sleep?' asked Hoff

'Hell no!' replied Hammond turning away from the window. 'This is the closet I have ever been to five star luxury and I am going to enjoy every second of it.'

'Yea, shame the only available seats were in in first class,' observed Hoff.

'That's what comes of booking your seats at the last minute,' complained Hammond. Both men laughed and settled back as the engines roared into life and the monster accelerated down the runway like a cheetah after its prey.

If the men had realized, Polly Winston had been up half of the night getting ready for her trip. An unmarked police car had arrived to take her to the airport where she was to meet her escort. The FBI agent had already taken away her laptop reassuring her that it would be reunited with her when she arrived in Washington; so all she had was one small bag which could just pass as hand luggage. It was very early that morning, less than 6 hours since the officers had left, and a car had arrived to take her to the airport. There was a discreet knock at the door.

'This is so exciting,' she said hugging her partner. 'I wish you were coming with me Ed.'

'Right,' he said morosely, 'you know that isn't possible, not with my fear of flying. Anyhow, I wasn't asked.'

'I know, I'm sorry,' she said giving him another hug and kiss on his lips, 'but I wish you were, that's all.' They opened the door and saw the parked car gleaming in the soft rain illuminated by the street lamp. Someone was standing at the gate.

'Have a great time Polly and send me a postcard, yea?' He gave her a final hug. She ran down the short path to the waiting car where the female traffic officer took her bag and

opened the front passenger door for her to get in. As the car sped off Polly was waving and blowing kisses leaving Arnold shivering on the door step in his blue flannel dressing gown staring at the red lights that rapidly disappeared into the early morning darkness.

As the police car pulled onto the M40 it accelerated away into the fast lane with discrete blue lights flashing from behind the radiator grill. 'How long will it take us,' she asked the driver.

'It's about 43 miles so normally you should allow a minimum of 50 minutes, but we should only take just over half an hour and there is very little traffic and we don't have to obey the speed limit.'

Polly smiled broadly. 'This is all so exciting,' she said leaning slightly forward. 'I've never been in a police car before.' The driver glanced at her briefly and smiled.

'Would you like me to put the siren on?'

'Could you? That would be so exciting.'

The driver laughed. 'Let's have some fun and so with sirens and flashing lights they drove towards London at 110 mph, both women enjoying themselves.'

Although it was still very early the airport was busy and heads turned as the police car came to a halt in front of the Departures Hall. Two men and a woman immediately came over to the car. Polly recognized one of the men as the American who had been at the house that evening, and he introduced the woman as Master Sergeant Eleanor Moran. She was carrying a diplomatic case which she assured Polly contained her laptop. They were escorted past the queues of people waiting to book in and walked past security where they were subject to the slightest swish of the metal detector and then on to the first class lounge. In fact, if Polly had been a regular flier she would have been astounded that the time it had taken from passing through the entrance to Terminal 2 to being sat down in the first class departure lounge with a latte in her hand had only taken eight minutes, and much of that had been taken up with walking and waiting for the barista to make her coffee.

At 7.30 am United Airlines flight UA123 left Heathrow for Dulles carrying Polly Winston and her escort. The flight took 8 hours and 35minutes, a normal working day thought Polly who enjoyed the sheer luxury of first class travel, as the plane finally touched down at 10.49 am local time. It would be an experience that would for the rest of her life taint the pleasure of flying as in the future she would join the ranks of frustrated economy passengers wrestling for seats on budget flights...but that was the future.

Waiting at Gate C6 at Dulles on a warm sunny Washington morning were Agents Rachel Smith and Imogen Cole. With only hand luggage Polly Winston had no need to go through

the normal arrivals procedure, and saying goodbye to Eleanor Moran, who handed over the diplomatic case containing the vital laptop to Agent Cole, Polly left with the two agents and clambered into Smith's own car, an old Cherokee Jeep. Cole and Smith had immediately liked Polly and to the outsider they just seemed like three happy young women on their way for a day out, no one would have suspected that the jeep contained a CIA and FBI agent plus a very important witness in an investigation which had massive international significance. Their first destination would be the NASA headquarters, via the Residence Inn, to get Polly booked in and give her a chance to freshen up.

Flight UA924 from Dulles International Airport touched down on the runway at Heathrow the following day exactly 7 hours and twenty minutes from departing from Washington. It was 10.30 in the morning local time and both men were wide awake anxious to start the investigation, although that was due entirely to adrenalin. They had repeatedly ignored the advice of the stewardess that it would be sensible to get some sleep, and unlike their seasoned passengers around them cocooned up in the reclining seats, they had opted to watch a series of films, eaten far too much rich food and drank too much alcohol.

They were met at the arrivals gate by FBI Agent Johnston who simply had their names on a card he was holding. He introduced himself and they chatted about the flight as Johnston paid the parking fee and led the men to the embassy car with its CD plates. Once in the car Johnston became more serious. 'We have arranged a number of meetings at Imperial College, both with the department you wanted and the alumni office. That's in two hours time. You are both staying at the embassy's own residence, so I will drive you over there and you can stow your gear and have a shower if you need one. Anything else I can do for you?' he asked.

'Transport?' asked Hoff.

'Better that I drive you okay, London traffic is a bit difficult especially when you've been flying through the night. Also, we need to be accompanied by a chaperone. So rather than have MI5 tagging along, I have arranged for a senior police officer to go with us. We will brief him as fully as possible and then allow him to do the questioning. You don't have any jurisdiction here, just remember that okay?'

'Yea, we were sort of expecting that. But if at all possible we do need to guide the questions closely,' said Hoff.

'Well we will just have to hope it works out,' said Johnston, but Hammond, who knew how the system worked in the UK and wasn't too optimistic.

As it turned out turned out it wasn't just any policeman that turned up it was Chief Superintendent Robinson of the Anti-Terrorist Unit. They met in a small room in the embassy. 'Coffee, Chief Superintendent?' asked Johnston.

'No thanks, tea if you have it.' He bent forward and took a bourbon biscuit from one of the two plates on the table. Hoff and Hammond had cautiously looked at the assortment of cookies and decided to decline the selection of ginger nut, garibaldi, rich tea and other British staples.

'Your tea Chief Superintendent,' said Johnston handing over the cup and saucer and sitting down next to Robinson.

'This is just routine,' started Hoff. 'We are trying to trace a past student from the University of London, Imperial College.'

'Bollocks,' said Robinson taking a rich tea biscuit and dunking it into his steaming tea and looking disappointed as he raised it from the cup to see the now saturated half wobble slightly and then fall with a plop back into the cup. 'Bollocks,' repeated Robinson, although whether about Hoff's opening gambit or the loss of half of his biscuit was unclear. They watched in silence as he retrieved the now fragmented bits with his teaspoon. He took a sip and looked up. 'I saw your request and thought I would come along myself. When does it take two security agents to fly over to London and within 2 hours of landing start their investigation?' He took another slip.

'Your meaning Sir?' asked Hammond.

'My meaning young man is that your embassy is full of FBI, CIA, military and diplomatic personnel like Johnston here. Also, you normally simply pass over such simple requests to MI5 or the Metropolitan Police. So, my meaning is, what is all this about?'

Hoff and Hammond looked at each other. Suddenly the long flight and the loss of a whole night's sleep seemed to affect them and their minds went blank. They stared back at Robinson nonplussed. Johnston came to the rescue. 'Can I be frank with you Chief Superintendent?'

'I thought we were being frank, or at least I was. If you mean you are going to tell me why these gentlemen are here and why you want to trace this man, then yes, please go ahead.'

'There has been a massive security breach in the US. It is top secret. I have no idea what it is I only know that it's incredibly important and has global implications. These guys can't say anything due to a tight security blanket, they're just simple agents like me. But we need to find this guy as a matter of urgency. He has been placed at the very top of the most wanted person list in the United States by both the FBI and CIA, and that includes all the terrorists and mass murders, and god knows there are a lot of those. That's all I know and I am hoping that we can keep this between ourselves.'

There was a long pause while Robinson finished his tea and took another bourbon biscuit. 'Okay,' he said simply, 'let's go.' The men all stood up. 'My car I think and we won't need you Johnson, unless these goons really have lost the power of speech.' And with that he thrust the biscuit into his mouth and marched out where his Inspector was waiting in the driver's seat of the car parked immediately outside the main entrance.

As they drove through the dense traffic of central London he turned to the two men in the back of the car. 'I think we will drop into my office first.'

'But we have appointments in less than thirty minutes,' protested Hoff.

'No you haven't,' said the Chief Superintendent, 'Inspector Langton here put them back until the afternoon, 3.00 isn't?' he asked.

'Yes Sir, that is correct.'

They drove through Mayfair to Westminster and into the underground car park at New Scotland Yard and parked next to a row of police vehicles gleaming white under the banks of fluorescent lights that covered the bare concrete ceiling. They made their way via the plain steel elevator up to a large open plan office similar to their own offices in Washington. Both men felt uneasy, as though they had been abducted or arrested. They kept close to each other as they walked past the busy desks and into a glass fronted office with Robinson's name on the glass door in gold letters.

'Take a seat,' he said indicating several chairs of different vintages and comfort. He sat down at his desk and glanced through a pile of messages, grunting a couple of times as he read, and once gave a resounding 'Yes!' Finally, he settled back in his chair and scrutinized the two men like a headmaster about to admonish a couple of erstwhile sixth formers who had forgotten their place in the pecking order of school life. 'Right?' he said. 'Are you armed?'

'No,' said both men simultaneously.

'Any objections to Langton checking?' The both stood up and the Inspector patted them down with practiced efficiency.

He nodded at the Chief Superintendent.

'Good. I don't want anything which could be embarrassing. You carry diplomatic status and I am not going to allow anything illegal or undiplomatic to happen, understood?'

They both nodded not sure where this was going.

'So, what is it we need to find out?'

They produced the photographs of the man including the composite and explained how he had been identified and how they suspected either graduate student or post graduate student in the Department of Computer Science at Imperial College. They needed a name to go with the image and find out his current whereabouts.

'It is imperative that he is not alerted to the fact they were on to him, absolutely imperative, Chief Superintendent,' stressed Hoff. 'Also, we want to keep any details of this investigation off-line for now. This guy is pretty IT savvy and may be monitoring you server here at New Scotland Yard.'

Robinson raised an eyebrow. 'What about mobiles?' he asked.

'Fine so long as it's not a text or an email,' responded Hoff.

'He must be taken alive at all costs,' added Hammond.

'This isn't America,' observed Robinson. 'We try not to shoot suspects; they may after all be innocent, like our friend here.'

'I can assure you,' said Hoff a little peeved, 'this man is dangerous and may be desperate as well. We need to know who he is working for, it is imperative both for the US and Europe.'

'Okay,' he said, 'I get the picture. This is what we are going to do. First Langton is going to drop you off at your hotel and you are going to stay there until I contact you.' Hoff protested.

'Understand?' asked Robinson. Hoff didn't respond, but glared at the Chief Superintendent.

'Next I am going to brief one of my sergeants and he is going to go along with a plain clothes armed officer. They are going to make some very low key enquires about this man, based on the fact that he was witness to a serious assault outside a pub. That way no one is going to be reluctant to tell us the truth and we won't frighten our man off. We will use the composite as that supports the story. Understood?' Both Hoff and Hammond could see the sense in what was being proposed, and they both agreed.

'If I turn up with Langton plus two Americans...every student in the place will be tweeting it. So, it's softly, softly, little monkey.' The Agents had no idea what the hell Robinson was talking about but got the gist. 'Langton will take you back. Now get some sleep because you both look wrecked. And I will be in touch this evening, okay.'

Hoff and Hammond were very unhappy and once dropped back at the guest rooms at the Embassy residence they rang Johnson. 'He is probably right of course and we have no jurisdiction here you must remember that,' he explained. 'Just wait and see what transpires. If there is a problem I'll get back to Washington and get guidance okay. Just relax and wait for Robinson, he's a good man. If he said he would call, he will.'

Although Hammond would have preferred to have sent an email to Connors, due to the high level of security around the case he was forced to ring him. If Connors was disappointed with the two agents, he didn't say so. 'Look I'm going to talk to Deputy Director Sanderson and see if we can't get MI5 to take the lead, regardless of Johnson's misgivings. But we have no option at the moment but to wait and see what the local Sheriff comes up with,' and with that the line went dead. Hoff was already asleep, so Hammond lay down on the other twin bed and loosened his tie. He was staring at the ceiling thinking about Robinson, but before he had gone very far with his analysis he was also fast asleep.

'Is this really NASA Headquarters?' asked Polly as she walked up the steps into the main reception area. She was looking at the visitor pass and the special NASA lanyard delighted.

All the way from the airport she had been pointing to one building after another, and Smith was delighted at her response as she imparted her merger and often inaccurate information about the city. Cole in the back seat was smiling less at Polly's amazement at everything American than at Smith's frequent bloomers in both history and geography. Although Polly's constant: 'We don't have anything like that in the UK!' was beginning to pall. But there was something about the unpretentiousness of Polly Winston that you couldn't help responding to. They had set up a small office for the three of them in the IT centre in the building and they settled down and opened up her laptop and listened as Polly repeated about the party and how she had met her Edward and so on. Of course, everything that was being said in the room was being relayed back to the main operations Room where Sanderson, Ronson, Manson, McGeever and Connors all sat listening. Also, the current screen view of her laptop was also on display so that could follow developments fully. But after about half an hour everyone except Manson had drifted away, as the girls chatted informally.

'Okay, Polly. As you have guessed we are very interested in this guy and need to get a name at least for him,' explained Smith.

'An address would be nice,' added Cole.

'I'm afraid I don't know either I'm terribly sorry,' apologized Polly.

'No, that's fine, we know you don't. Imogen and I are both IT experts like you, but what you have is all that insider knowledge about that time, things and connections, other people, friends, lots of simple things that only you know. So together we are going to try and find out as much as possible okay.'

'Okay,' she smiled.

'Let's make a start. We need dates, locations, places where you saw him, as much detail as possible. You had an iPhone yes?'

'An early one yes, but it wasn't like it is now back then. Most people were using compact cameras,' she explained.

'Okay,' said Imogen. Let's start with the two occasions you remember seeing him. Who else was with you and could they have taken photos?'

'Possibly.'

'Can you give us details of the Department where you studied and where this guy was hanging out? One of us can be surfing the net for old images, reports, news items that sort of thing.'

'Okay,' said Polly, 'I'm beginning to understand exactly what you need.'

So together the three women started work. All the time Manson was making notes in his black notebook, listening intently. He wished he could have been there in the room but it had been agreed that Ms Winston should not meet the team, simply work with agents

Smith and Cole, with Sanchez and Dubois as backup if required. Smith would then take a few days off to give their helper a small holiday as a thank you.

Four hours later. Polly was ringing a list of old girlfriends.

'Hi Sally, its Polly.' Smith and Cole listened to the one sided conversation.

'Polly Winston.'

'Yea I know it's such a long time.'

'I'm great, yes.'

'Yes, I'm still with Ed. Impossible, but true.'

'You've got to believe it.'

'Listen, Sally. Do you remember that party we were at that Christmas in our final year?'

'Yes that's the one. Did you take any photos?'

'Yea I know it's a long time ago, but could you check.'

'Err actually, I know it's a bit weird, but it's kind of very important so could you check for me right away.'

'Well it is serious, Ed had his identity stolen and we were asked to check out old photos where he might have lost his passport that's all.'

'No, I know, I wasn't going out with him then, but he was actually there that night.'

'Yes I know, isn't that weird.'

'Yea.'

She looked at the two agents and winced, and they gave her encouraging signs. 'No you can't ring me back.'

'No.'

'No, um. Well the truth is I am at a conference in Washington.'

'Washington USA, yea I know, yea it's fantastic.'

'Look its costing me a fortune, so could I ring you back in twenty minutes.'

'Okay, do you have my email?' she spelt out her email address.

'Yea if you can.'

'Love you.'

'Yes we must. Love you, Kiss Kiss.' She put down the phone. 'Ooh I hate lying, but it seems she may have some photos.'

An hour later she had an email with a link to a dropbox account. They opened it up and there were twenty or so images, not all of them square indicating that Sally had not been that sober when she had taken them. Most of them were of young women, slightly red in the face and highly made up laughing into the camera or dancing. There were none of the other party goers. Sorry said Polly, we all look a bit stupid and drunk.

'Go back to the picture of the girl in yellow dancing,' asked Cole and they all stared at it. 'What's the size of this image?'

'It says 780 KB why?' asked Polly.

Cole opened up the jpeg image in Photoshop and resaved as a png file to stop it losing any further information. 'Let's blow it up,' she said.

'Oh my goodness there they are!' exclaimed Polly. In the background was a group of about five young men all wearing long tweed coats looking at the dancers. Their faces although not sharply in focus gave a very good impression of each one. 'That's them!' cried Polly delighted.

It was about five that evening when Agent Smith decided that they had done enough and decided that they should hit the town, get something to eat and go to a bar or a club. In the meanwhile, the image had been photo enhanced as much as was possible and sent heavily encrypted to the US embassy in London and thirty minutes later still it was finally in the hands of Chief Superintendent Robinson.

The interview at Imperial College had not gone well. None of the administrative staff recognized the young man and they had accessed all the photos of undergraduates, postgraduates and postdocs dating back six years. The sergeant had insisted on having copies which were downloaded onto a small pen drive. The meeting at the alumni office proved fruitless, but once again the addresses of students who felt that they wanted to keep in touch with their alma mater, past and where possible current, were reluctantly given for all past students and researchers for the past six years .

It was nearly 11.00 that night before the phone rang in the room that Hoff and Hammond had decided that they would share rather than occupy two double rooms on their own. They had eaten a meal and now felt strangely awake. Hammond picked up the old fashioned receiver. 'Hello, it's Robinson here' said the voice on the other end of the line. 'Inspector Langton's outside, he'll wait for ten minutes, so if you want an update be quick about it.' The two men rushed about tying laces and putting on ties, and seven minutes later they

were leaving the building smartly dressed ready for another dose of Chief Superintendent Robinson.

'If you want to know the time ask a policeman.' Robinson declared as the two agents sat down in his office in New Scotland Yard, with Langton sitting slight separately, also like his boss, facing the agents.

'Sorry?' apologized Hoff, 'What is that about time?'

'It's an old saying,' said Robinson smiling. 'The police are often criticised for being a bit slow but invariably they get there. Indeed, you will be delighted to know we have concluded our enquiries on your behalf.' He leaned back and smiled, 'and no shots were fired in the line of duty, isn't that right Inspector.'

'Apparently not Sir,' although there was an element of disappointment in his reply.

'So shall we wield in our trusty Sergeant in to give us his report?'

A few minutes later the Detective Sergeant came into the room and after a few preliminary introductions sat next to the Inspector. 'We have your written report Sergeant, I was just wondering if you could run over the interviews this afternoon for the benefit of our colleagues here. They may wish to ask questions.' With that Robinson leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes in contemplation his hands together as in prayer with his chin resting on top.

'Well Sir,' he began addressing the Chief Superintendent. 'As ordered I visited the Department of Computer Science at Imperial College and interviewed their Administrator and also some of the longer serving executive officers. I showed them the photographs that you supplied but no one recognized him. I also happened to meet four of the academic staff who had taught the first year courses where all the students would have been present, rather than those doing elective courses. I drew a blank again I'm afraid.'

'So,' asked Hammond, 'no one recognized him at all.'

'No Sir.'

'What did you do then?' asked Hammond.

'In case it would be helpful to you I insisted that all the photographs of each year of the undergraduate courses and all the post graduate, doctoral and other research staff, including the academic and ancillary staff as well for the past six years were supplied.'

'That was real smart of you Sergeant, thanks,' congratulated Hammond.

'I also have on file all the contact addresses as well.'

'Great, that will save us a lot of time.'

'I did go to the alumni office and they were unable to help as I didn't have a name. But they have given me a lot of images of reunions where alumni in computer science may be present.'

'That's great. Will that be available to us?' asked Hoff.

'Absolutely,' said the Chief Superintendent opening his eyes, 'I believe it is already on this plastic thing and he picked up the blue plastic memory stick and handed it over.'

'Just in case added the Sergeant, I also checked with the Physics and Mathematics Departments, but I am afraid I drew a blank in each case, but all the data is there on your memory stick.'

Hammond beamed. 'Well thanks Sergeant, but I guess the conclusion is that our man was never at Imperial.'

'Thank you, Sergeant you can go, sorry to keep you from home for so long,' Robinson was back in control again.

'Happy to help Sir, and with a friendly nod to the Inspector and the two agents he left.'

'Sorry about that chaps,' said the Chief Superintendent. 'I suspect you were pinning a lot on him being at Imperial.'

'Yes Sir, we were. It's going to be a blow for the team back in the States,' said Hoff rising, 'but we are still sure our man is in London or at least in your jurisdiction.' Hammond stood up as well and held out his hand to Robinson who looked bemused.

'Goodness you Americans give up easily don't you,' said Robinson. 'I thought the Mounties always got their man.'

'That's the Royal Canadian Police I believe Sir, but the FBI does try to follow their example,' replied Hoff. The two men sat down again exchanging a glance at each other in confusion.

'Did you get a copy of the group image sent over from your people a few hours ago?' They both nodded.

'Well I appreciate you haven't had time to peruse the images my Sergeant has supplied but I have and there is something rather interesting.'

Hammond lent forward.

'One of the faces in that group image is very much like a new academic in the Mathematics Department at Imperial. I know it's late but I wonder if you would be interested in paying Dr Andrew Wilson a visit?'

'You bet!' said Hoff. Hammond was grinning so much Robinson thought his head would split into two.

'I thought you would be pleased. Shall we Langton?'

'The cars are waiting Sir, including an armed response unit.'

'Just one thing?' asked Hoff as they put on their coats. 'Are you sure it's him.'

'Oh yes,' said Robinson. 'It's him alright, everything ties in and also because he has a rather distinctive scar on his right eyebrow.'

Dr Andrew Wilson was watching a late night movie on TV when he thought he heard something outside the door of his second floor flat in Hammersmith. There was a soft knock and then the doorbell rang. He went to the door and looked through the security peephole and saw a respectably dressed middle aged man, in his mid-fifties. Assuming it was a neighbour he took off the chain and opened the door. Before he could open his mouth, Robinson had stepped back and two armed policemen rushed in, one pushing Wilson against the wall holding him there with one hand and pointing an automatic pistol close to his head shouting loudly 'Armed Police!' The other officer in his black bullet proof vest and matching black combat uniform rushed past, rifle held at eye height, the bulky vest making progress slightly cumbersome in the small flat. Another armed officer followed him in and together they began their search.

'Mr Wilson? I am very sorry about this, I will explain in due course. Are you alone in the flat?' asked Robinson.

'Yes,' replied Wilson weakly, and breathing very heavily from the shock of this surprised entry by armed police. He was still being held against the wall by the armed police man.

'One suspect only,' an armed officer shouted out, the search of the small one bedroomed flat having already been completed.

'Thank you officer,' said Robinson. The armed policeman stood back releasing Wilson who leaned heavily against the rather dated floral wallpaper of the hallway. 'Would you mind if I just check you for weapons please. That's it hands up and legs apart, just like the movies Sir, that's right.' Robinson padded the young man down.

'What's all this about?' asked Wilson his tone surprisingly conciliatory.

'Can we go through to the lounge?' They went in to the small room. 'Ah,' said Robinson apologetically, 'we seem to have disturbed you in the middle of a film. Langton?' he pointed to the remote and the Inspector picked it up and with an expertise of which Robinson was envious, turned it off immediately. 'Never can get my head around those things,' Robinson chatted away happily to no one in particular. 'My video,' he shook his head sadly 'have to ring up my daughter every time I want to use it. Mind if I sit down?' Robinson sat and indicated a chair inviting Wilson to sit down in one of his own chairs. 'Live alone?' Wilson nodded. 'If you don't mind me saying so Sir, you don't seem surprised to see me.'

'I think I'm in shock,' said Wilson eventually. 'What have I supposed to have done?'

Robinson raised his eyebrows in apparent disappointment. 'Now not let's waste each other's time. Langton?' His inspector showed the image of the tweed coated students at the party. 'Is that you sir?' Wilson nodded. Robinson stood up and in a rather sad voice said. 'Dr Andrew Wilson, I am arresting you under Section 5 of the 2006 Terrorism Act, I must caution you that anything you may say will be taken down and may be used against

you in a court of law. Do you have anything to say?’ he asked raising his eyebrows again in expectation.

‘Section 5?’ repeated Wilson who was surprised.

‘Section 5 covers the preparation of an act of terrorism within the United Kingdom, and I suspect that you are guilty of such an offence,’ explained Robinson.

‘I’m not a terrorist, that’s madness. Okay so I have hacked a bit may have bent a few rules, but it’s kid’s stuff...nothing that warrants having a gun thrust at my head,’ at last Wilson seemed to have grasped the situation and was fighting his ground.

‘I will take that as an admission of gaining unlawful access into private computers with the intent to defraud. I am afraid, that you will be remanded in custody, so before we leave is there anything you need to turn off, washing machine or TV perhaps?’ said Robinson smiling. ‘Do you have any pets you need to have looked after in your absence?’

Wilson shook his head. ‘Just the telly I suppose.’

‘Right, you will just need a coat and your toothbrush, nothing else I’m afraid. No not your phone Sir, all that is now evidence. It would be helpful if you could give my Inspector here your keys, hate to have to break the door down when the forensic people arrive.’

‘Thank you Sir.’ He tossed the keys to his Inspector. ‘All yours Langton.’

The armed policemen had been stood down and they trooped disappointedly down the stairs to their inconspicuous black people carrier with the windows heavily smoked. ‘I want this flat sealed off for forensics, okay? I also want a policeman at the door and another outside. No one is to go in until it’s been checked.’ Langton nodded and got to work.

The two agents had been standing discreetly to one side as Robinson had done his job in a quiet and efficient way. Then Hoff spoke. ‘Do you mind if we have a quick look at his clothes?’

‘By all means,’ said Robinson, ‘what are you looking for?’

‘A very expensive hoody,’ replied Hoff and with Hammond disappeared into the bedroom. But all the clothes were fairly standard and reasonably cheap brands.

‘Oh well,’ said Hoff it was only an outside chance.

‘Are we going back to the Station now?’ Hoff asked the Chief Superintendent.

‘No I’m going to bed and Mr Wilson will be processed and spend the night in secure detention back at the Yard. Then after a good night’s rest and breakfast we will hear what he has to say for himself.’ He walked to the door, but then turned back. ‘I suppose you two will want to sit in on the interview?’ They both nodded. ‘Okay, Langton will call for you at 8.30,’ and he was gone.

They spent a short while looking around being careful not to touch or move anything. Hammond took some pictures with his iPhone. By the time they had reached the outside of the building all the cars had gone and there was just a single policeman on duty. 'Where's everyone?' asked Hammond.

'Gone, Sir.'

'How are we going to get back to the embassy?' he asked.

'I would suggest you hail a taxi Sir. You will have better luck at the end of the road.' The policeman gave them a half hearted salute and then walked back to the doorway of the block of flats.

The two agents began the short walk to the main street. 'Hang on Andy, you got any local money?'

'No, haven't you?'

'Oh shit,' he said as they began the long walk back to the embassy, unaware that most cabbies were happy to take plastic or even dollars.

Manson was just coming into the Office and noticed Connors and Sanderson listening to a video. Try as he could, he couldn't make out any sense of the one sided conversation as neither Sanderson nor Connors spoke. A little later when McGeever had finally put in an appearance Connors came over. 'We've have had a breakthrough.'

'Tell us,' said Manson eagerly.

'We had a report from Hoff. He sent a heavily encrypted video last night via the Embassy secure link and we were just listening to it a few minutes ago. They have identified one of the group in that photo Polly Winston managed to get from one of her friends.'

'Really?' asked Manson excited.

'But they didn't find the guy we were looking for,' added Connors.

'No, but this one is the connection to him. So what did this guy give us?'

'Nothing so far. Just that the police were to start interviewing him at 9.00 am British Standard Time, so that was three hours ago. They expect to interview him all of today, but he has been remanded for 48 hours in custody, but that he will be charged anyhow for computer fraud and theft.'

'Well, well, well,' said Manson reflectively.

'We will be able to watch a recording of the interview, won't we?' asked McGeever.

'Apparently not, something to do with the British Justice system,' explained Connors.

'Can you believe they still believe a man is innocent until proven guilty over there?' commented Manson.

'Very funny,' said McGeever, 'so we will have to wait for Hoff or Hammond to report back?'

'Yea, they are going to allow one of them into the interview room as an observer, so one of them will record it on the quiet and send it to us when they can.'

'Is that strictly legal boss?' asked Manson.

'Hell, who gives a big one, we've got this far and I am not going to be squeezed out at this point in the investigation. We are supposed to be agents, so they expect us to do all that covert stuff.'

Manson nodded resignedly. 'Be worth listening to that's for sure. What time is the interview taking place again?'

'Nine am their time so that started at 4.00 am this morning, so...' he looked at his watch, 'so its 8.30 am now Eastern Daylight time so its lunchtime over there. So, we should be hearing from them pretty soon.'

At 9.00 am EDT and 1.00 pm British Standard time. Jonson sent a heavily encrypted copy of the first recoding via the secure link from the US Embassy in Grosvenor Square in London. The team had gathered to listen and at 10.00 am EDT they started listening to what was to be a marathon nine hours of interviews with their suspect.

'For the record, my name is Chief Superintendent Robinson and in the room with me is Inspector Langton also of New Scotland Yard, and Mr Hoff an Agent with the Federal Bureau of Investigation in America. Opposite me is Dr Andrew Wilson and his solicitor Mr Graham. Mr Wilson, you understand that you have been cautioned.'

'Yes.'

'Before I start is there anything you want to say.'

'Yes,' interjected the solicitor, 'my client has made a statement which I will read out.'

'Okay,' replied Robinson simply. 'But before you do that can I just establish a few basics. Your full name?'

'Andrew John Wilson.'

'Address?'

'Flat 2, Liffey Mansions, Hammersmith, London.'

'Occupation?'

'Lecturer in computational mathematics at Imperial College London.'

'Where are you from originally?'

'Stroud in Gloucestershire.'

'Where did you attend College?'

'I studied maths at Kings College London, then I did a PhD at the same place.'

'Then you went to Imperial?'

'No, I did a post doc at CalTech in the States for a year then I joined Imperial as a junior lecturer.'

Connors pushed the stop button when Heaslip put up his hand. 'Remember what Festor told us when we were in the JPL at Pasadena, about their close links with students from CalTech? Is that a coincidence?'

'A big co-incidence,' agreed McGeever. Connors started the recording again.

'Are you married? '

'No.'

'Divorced?'

'No.'

'Kids?'

'No.'

'Are you gay?'

'Why because I'm not married and don't have kids?'

'Just answer the question please Sir.'

'No.'

'Any health problems?'

'Why? What are you trying to insinuate?'

'Just in case you collapse during our interview. What I am asking is are you fit to continue?'

'No, I am fit enough for this.'

‘Okay,’ said Robinson. ‘I just want to inform you that we have searched your flat and have removed a number of items belonging to you including your passport, two PCs, three laptops, an iPhone, iPad and an old mobile phone.’

He nodded.

‘Right then Mr Wilson, let’s hear what you have to tell us.’

Wilson’s solicitor read out a long and carefully worded statement in which Wilson admitted to hacking into computers in order to obtain free travel and holidays and also on occasions to download personal material, especially of female postgraduates and two staff members. He went into some detail.

Finally, at the end, Robinson asked Wilson to sign the statement. He formally arrested him again, then cautioned him a second time and then charged him. It was all very proper and very boring.

‘So, I am afraid,’ said Robinson, ‘you will have to remain in custody for the time being.’ The solicitor objected and said that as his client had made a full and frank statement and admitted his wrongdoings then he should be released on police bail. Then came the bombshell for both the solicitor and his client.

‘I should make it clear Mr Graham that we were totally unaware of these offences to which you client has admitted and for which he has just been charged. Dr Wilson, you have been arrested, if you recall, under Section 5 of the Terrorism Act and it is under that legislation you are currently being held and will now be interviewed.’ Wilson looked at the solicitor who shrugged his shoulders. ‘I think a break is called for, Interview suspended at 10.15am.’

‘Look,’ said Robinson, ‘I don’t give a monkey’s if you’ve been stalking your colleagues or getting free flights from whomever. So, I am going to do a deal with you. If you don’t mess me around son and help me out with my investigation, then I will see what we can do about this statement of yours, who knows? Your help will be a great assistance to us, so if these other charges do come to court then I will make sure the court knows just how helpful you have been.’ The carrot had been offered and Wilson grabbed it like a drowning man grabbing hold of a thrown life belt.

‘Interview resumed at 10.25,’ said Robinson. ‘I want you to look at this photograph which has been logged as item F4367.’

‘You showed me this in my flat.’

‘I want you to tell me about the others in the photograph.’

‘Why? Why is that important?’

‘Just tell me son.’

Wilson hesitated looking all the time at the photograph. He looked up at Robinson. ‘Look perhaps I should tell you about the club.’

'Club?' repeated Robinson,

'Yea that's how I started hacking as well as learning to be an exceptionally good programmer. I was delighted to get a place on the mathematics and computing course at Kings, but when I got to university, well, I was a bit well overwhelmed. London is a busy place compared to a small provincial town in the Cotswolds. I didn't know anyone. I stayed in a Hall of Residence and I found it difficult at first. Huge classes no one really talking to each other. Then I saw this poster for the Computer Science Society. I had always been really good at computing, gifted my teacher had said. I thought it would be a good way of making some friends. So, I went along, and yea, it was okay. Lots of beer, demonstrations of software and things to do with computers. Talks, even some trips. For the first few months it was okay, I made a few friends, but there were no girls unfortunately, just nerdy blokes like me. A bit later on I was in the student bar one evening after one of the talks when I saw Trev.'

'Can you give me this man's full name,' asked Robinson, 'for the record.'

'Trevor Stanley. He was also in the club and I had sat next to him on the bus on a trip to Oxford for a lecture by some guy from Apple, can't remember who it was now. It wasn't Steve Jobs or anyone really high up, but the talk was really interesting. Trev was slightly older than me and anyway that night he was talking to a couple of girls. He saw me and beckoned me over. He introduced me as a friend of his who worked for one of the high street fashion chains and said that I could get them huge discounts. I didn't really know what he was on about, but he had winked at me and so I just went along with it. We had a great evening and the bottom line was I was to get them some clothes they wanted. Afterwards I had told Trev, that it was all crap and that I didn't work at this place, I forget where now. He just laughed. We went back to his place and he simply went on line to this company's online store and ordered the stuff in my name and then in the checkout well I couldn't understand what he did but it went through without a payment having been made. That's how it all started.'

'What?'

'Trev explained that the Computer Sciences Society was pathetic and was not for real computer nerds like us and he invited me to join his own club.' Wilson fell silent.

'Well?' prompted Robinson.

'It's a bit stupid but it was called the Time Lords. We were a group of six guys who essentially honed our skills under Trev's guidance. We all had different IT skills and abilities, but Trev was by far the best of the group. It was just a lark and we wore these really expensive coats that gave us a sort of distinctive look and the girls loved us. It was amazing.'

'Go on.'

'Well to become a member you had to hack into the really exclusive store in New York and order a bespoke tweed coat. It was really difficult as the security was awesome. But that was the test, and once you passed then you sort of became a full member rather than just a hanger on.' Wilson appeared increasingly reluctant to continue.

'So what happened?'

'I sort of got bored with using my computing skills to pull women who just wanted expensive stuff or flights. I met someone really nice outside the university and also started getting really into my course. Then I started a PhD and here I am.'

'But you still hack.'

'Yea, but it's just a bit of fun, I don't do anything expensive or illegal, just silly stuff really.'

'There are five of you in the photo can you recall where it was taken?'

'No, we went out together three or four nights a week.'

'Who are the people in the photo?'

'I don't really want to get them into trouble.'

'Son, this group has landed you in very serious trouble, the life imprisonment type of trouble, perhaps something worse.'

'What! That's crap you're being ridiculous.'

'Who are they?'

He reeled off the names.

'Are you still in touch with them?'

'No. I met this guy,' he pointed to one of the figures in the photograph, 'a couple of years ago who was also a member and he told me that the club had disbanded soon after I had left because of something Trevor was trying to do.'

'What was that?'

'It was stupid, it's nothing.'

'I won't ask a second time?' Robinson's voice had hardened. 'There was this prize put up by some stupid organization offering ten million dollars to anyone who could travel in time or space. We had all grown up with stupid TV programmes and sci fi movies, you know, that's where the name of the club came from. Christ that tells you how juvenile we all were.'

'Go on,' snapped Robinson.

'Well Trev. Was obsessed with getting the prize and had become boring about it.'

'What do you mean boring?'

'He was always trying to get the others to hack into security agencies, track down restricted research that sort of thing. In the end they just broke up.'

'Do you know where any of the members are now?'

'No idea.'

'Right,' said Robinson, 'you had better give me those names again starting from the guy on the far left.'

'Get Johnson on the phone right now!' snapped Connors as the tape finished.

Five minutes later he was on the line. 'Connors here, what is happening over there?'

'I have no idea Sir.'

'Can you contact Hoff or Hammond?'

'No Sir. I am afraid that their phones are off, I tried them earlier.'

'Get them to call in immediately they are able, got it.'

'Yes Sir,' the line went dead as Connors disconnected the call.

'Manson, try Hammond's phone and Charlie keep trying Hoff leave them messages. We must know what is happening. I should have gone over there myself or sent you guys.'

'From the sound of it Trevor Stanley is our man,' said Sanderson.

'We don't know that for sure,' said Connors, 'Robinson never confirmed that and we couldn't see which person was being pointed out in the group photograph. Shit!' shouted Connors. 'Let's get over there. Manson, you and Charlie get your bags packed. Becky, I think you need to come as well as you're the senior person as far as MI5 is concerned. Hire a private jet if necessary, I want to be in London as soon as possible. Dubois, I need you to cover here with Sanchez.' They both nodded disappointed. 'Gail, I need you to round up Festor and follow on with Imogen and Rachel in a day or two at the latest. You can fill Rachel in on the details when she gets back from that shopping spree with Polly Winston or whatever they're up to.'

'What about me?' asked Heaslip.

'You can start collating the key information from the tapes,' said Connors simply. Heaslip looked crushed but the one consolation was that at least he was still on the team.

In London two detectives arrived at the Department of Computer Science at Kings College London. In a matter of minutes there were able to find the last known addresses and the old

home addresses for several hundred students including for the six members of the Time Lords Club, one of which was already in custody.

Back at Scotland Yard that evening Chief Superintendent Robinson, The Commissioner, the US Ambassador, and agents Johnson, Hoff and Hammond were all seated in the main conference room. 'The plan is to locate Trevor Stanley and to arrest him Sir,' said Robinson.

'I understand that you are keen to proceed Chief Superintendent,' said the Ambassador, 'but we have had a communication from the head of the FBI who requests that we wait at least 24 hours until the key members of their Investigation Team arrive.'

'With respect,' said Robinson. 'This is a job for the Metropolitan Police.'

'No one is suggesting otherwise Chief Superintendent,' said the Ambassador, 'but I have been told that the President will be speaking to your Prime Minister about this later this evening.' Robinson stole a glance at the Commissioner. 'Yes,' continued the Ambassador, 'it's that important. So, I think it is imperative that we don't act until after that meeting.'

The Commissioner, no doubt with one eye on his possible future in the House of Lords readily agreed. 'Look Charles, get everything in place. We will need surveillance, and even a specialist assault group, so get onto the army. I don't want our own men directly involved if this is political. I am going to request that MI5 set up surveillance on all these characters. Then we will arrest them, all of them, at the same time when they are all fast asleep.'

'If you say so, Sir.'

'I think it is a wise move, and Charles no one will be left in any doubt of the excellent work you have done in the past couple of days. Well done to you and your team.'

'Thank you Sir,'

'I think it is important,' added Hoff, 'given the nature of these five people that nothing is put on computer records at this stage and that no emails or phone messages are used which might alert them to our investigation.'

Robinson, was surprised. 'You really think that is necessary?'

'Trust me,' said Hoff, 'this Stanley guy is a mixture of Houdini and Superman. So we have to be extra cautious.'

'He has everything to lose,' added Hammond, 'he and the people he is working with are potentially dangerous to everyone, you must understand that Chief Superintendent. Stanley himself may not be violent, we just don't know, but what he has been doing is potentially catastrophic.'

Robinson nodded slowly but whether in agreement or as part of his thought processes wasn't clear. 'Are we all agreed?' asked the Ambassador. 'We leave this until we get the all clear from our superiors and the joint CIA and FBI team arrives.'

The commissioner nodded while Robinson sat gloomily looking at the table. The function of a policeman is to hunt down criminals and bring them to justice. He was being denied what all his instincts were telling him was the correct thing to do and he didn't like it one little bit.

At 3.55 am precisely and in almost total silence the small army of police vehicles moved into position ready to cordon off all the roads within six hundred yards of number 34 Ardmore Road. Two police helicopters with infra-red cameras hovered overhead just outside the area ready to position themselves when the order was given. Across the road in house number 35 a surveillance team had been watching the house for 48 hours feeding back detailed information about the occupants of number 34 and their movements. Just around the corner a camper van which had been parked in a driveway for several days monitored the telephone lines and the internet. Everything was absolutely still.

A small team of SAS soldiers completely clothed in black and wearing gas masks ran silently along both sides of Ardmore Road from either directions and merged into the privet hedges and railings as best as they could. A fox trotted out of the entrance to number 36 next door and sniffed at the trash can. Then it jumped sideways its hair rising as it tried to focus on the dark shape. 'Pisst,' the hardly audible noise the soldier made was meant to scare away the unwanted visitor. The fox took the hint and scampered across to the other side of the road, where it encountered another black shape forcing it to speed off up the road to disappear into an unoccupied house entrance. The soldier smiled under his mask. If that fox had knocked off that metal trash can lid ... well it didn't and no one was woken up by a sudden clattering.

Number 34 was in complete darkness and at 3.55 am the soldiers ran forward to the house, four of them running along the side wall to the rear garden while the six crouched by the front door. Others stayed back covering the windows with automatic rifles. At the rear one soldier noticed what appeared to be a blue sticker on the window of an old fashioned police box, he undid the safety catch of his rifle and took aim and, smiling, waited.

The five minutes they had to wait seemed interminable, but at 4.00 am the second order was noiselessly given and suddenly the air was filled with noise. The two helicopters suddenly appeared overhead panning powerful search lights onto the area in front and behind of Number 34. Road blocks were being hastily set up with metal stingers deployed across the road to burst the tyres of anyone who was foolish enough to try and escape the area. Armed police took up positions at all the road junctions and uniformed police officers, all wearing stab jackets under fluorescent tabards began making their way along the roads towards the centre of operations to reassure any inquisitive civilians and insist that they return to their houses and lock their doors and windows until further notice.

At the house two soldiers simultaneously rammed the front door with such accuracy and force that it and the door frame went hurtling into the house. Stepping back hugging the dull black metal rammers to their chests armed soldiers poured into the house like a swarm of angry wasps, powerful beams from their head torches sending shafts of penetrating light winging wildly to and fro. In the top of the house at the rear a light came on beautifully illuminating the blue police box transfer on the window like a stained glass window, shining brightly into the darkness. Instantaneously the soldier in the rear garden, who had been aiming silently and diligently at the window, fired a single round. The window shattered

simultaneously with the frightening sound of the retort and the room fell into darkness as the single overhead lightbulb shattered. Then came a second retort from another position in the rear garden, this time softer as another soldier fired a small tear gas cylinder into the room through the shattered remains of the window, hissing furiously as it whizzed through the air like a disappointing firework. Powerful beams pencil sharp could be seen dancing through the curtained windows on the ground floor as the soldiers searched the house, there was a single scream and then silence. The din of the helicopter increased as it moved in closer and then suddenly all the lights in the house were being turned on.

‘House and occupants secure.’ The message was clear but curt. Manson and McGeever got out of the camper van where they had been following the operation and rushed towards the house. By some magic all the street lights had come on, and in nearly every window lining the road lights were also being turned on showing anxious faces peering through parted curtains into the darkness. There was no need for the black slim powerful touches that each man carried, there was light everywhere. Manson in his crumpled light grey suit puffing away trying to keep up with McGeever who like a professional athlete was bounding ahead, the white letters of FBI emblazoned on his black bullet proof jacket.

A black hand reached out of nowhere and grabbed McGeever by the jacket, almost bringing him to the ground. A blackened combat dressed soldier, his gas mask hanging loosely around his neck, his face and hands covered in dull matt black camouflage paste spoke harshly. ‘Identify!’ McGeever was disorientated for a second and glowered at the eyes which were the only part of this creature that shone in the dim light.

It was Manson who spoke, as he arrived out of breath. ‘American Embassy Officials; where is Captain Martin?’

‘Johnny is on the first floor,’ said the soldier. ‘We are expecting you. Go slowly,’ he suggested, ‘it’s a bit of a mess in there.’

McGeever looked at the man who, for a fraction of a second, seemed reluctant to release his hold and when he finally did McGeever saw that the compact automatic assault rifle, which had been hidden from view under the soldier’s extended arm that had restrained him was actually touching his FBI vest, just where his heart would be. At that close range his jacket would have been little protection against such a powerful weapon. Not being able to stifle the involuntary shudder McGeever fell away from the man as the grip was finally released but not without a hint of menace.

In all the excitement Manson hadn’t really been aware of the helicopter. Suddenly, with the adrenalin level in his blood stream falling, he realized how deafening the noise was. He stepped into the intense light that illuminated the front of the house being beamed down from above, and tried to resist the temptation to look up. A soldier stood guard at the front of the house and nodded at the two men. McGeever hung back a little unsure and let Manson take the lead. ‘Johnny?’ He shouted to the soldier above the din. The man nodded and pointed to the corridor. They went in and immediately there was a reduction in the noise but the chaos of the forced entry and search was very evident with the broken door

littering the hallway. A soldier was on one knee holding an oxygen mask over the face of an old man sitting at the bottom of the stairs in stripped pyjamas, who was clearly in shock. His eyes were still streaming from the tear gas. Cruelly his genitals were hanging through the gap of his pyjama pants, adding to the hellish scenario which could have been a suitable subject for the artist Hieronymus Bosch. They made their way to the first door on the right and there sat on the sofa was a grey haired woman, who also had an oxygen mask on and who was also visibly shaken. 'Christ!' exclaimed McGeever, but Manson moved on to a soldier who was identically dressed to the others.

'Johnny?' he asked. The soldier saluted Manson.

'Major Manson, Sir.' responded the Captain. 'Successful operation. We have the suspect upstairs. These two are his parents. The house is cleared. We've made a preliminary search and there are no explosives or weapons, just usual household kitchenware. The area is neutralized. Excuse me.' He turned away and spoke into a mouth piece and turned back to Manson. 'We're done here Sir, we're handing over to the civilian police now.' He saluted and identically clad soldiers appeared from different parts of the house and rapidly made their way out of the wrecked entrance. There was suddenly a momentary silence as the helicopter disappeared off the scene, to be replaced almost at once by sirens which filled the air, becoming increasingly louder. McGeever took a few steps back along the corridor and looked out of the door. The last of the soldiers were jumping into the back of a large black van and drove off to be replaced immediately by the flashing lights of white police cars and then several ambulances.

For no more than thirty seconds Manson and McGeever just stood there alone, with the old man and elderly woman who both sat silently breathing through oxygen masks. Then suddenly police officers were entering the house. Two ambulance men were suddenly attending to the man sat on the stairs speaking reassuringly. He had raised his hands and was clutching desperately to one of the men in fluorescent jackets. Another crew were already helping the woman into a wheel chair and propelling her past the two Agents out into the early morning to the waiting ambulance.

There was a clatter as police officers, men and women, several armed, rushed up the stairs. Unlike the soldiers' cool discipline, the police officers were noisier, random in their actions, somehow more human, more caring.

'You're the gentlemen from the American Embassy, right?' The two agents turned around and there was a plain clothes officer, grey haired wearing a suit as well cut as McGeever's. 'I'm Detective Chief Superintendent Robinson Anti-Terrorism Unit.' Manson was about to speak as he held out his hand to shake the policeman's hand. 'I know who you both are, I have been working with your colleagues Hoff and Hammond. We've been fully briefed by the Commissioner and the Home Secretary and I want to assure you that we will co-operate fully with both the FBI and the CIA. However, you are on British soil and as such this is a primarily a British operation.'

'Of course, Chief Superintendent,' it was McGeever who spoke.

'But we do understand the importance of this man to you. What I suggest is that you tag along as observers for now.'

McGeever nodded as he also shook Robinson's hand. Manson just looked around. They had no choice. The truth was both men were a little in shock, witnessing the appalling aftermath of the operation without being directly involved.

'Want to meet your man?' Robinson asked the two agents, smiling.

The three of them went up the narrow staircase. Although it was just someone's home, with curtains at the windows, pictures on the walls and pretty carpets, as Manson walked up the narrow staircase it all felt so alien. The stairs opened up into a landing and there were four doors each open wide, all the lights blazing. The first door led into the bathroom where a pool of vomit had been walked through and onto the carpet. Next the old couple's bedroom, the bedclothes pushed back either side of the double bed. Then an empty bedroom, sparsely furnished with just a single bed that was just a bare mattress, obviously the spare room. Finally, as they approached the last door through the entrance they could see the bare legs of their suspect lying on the floor strapped together with grey duct tape. They entered the room that was disappointingly just a boy's room, fixed in time to when he would have been there last as a permanent resident, probably when he was 17 or 18 years of age. Glass shards broke under their feet from the broken lightbulb which had been replaced by a stronger bulb which flooded the room with light.

'Get him up for God's sake,' said Robinson to one of the two armed police that stood over him.

Lying on the floor was a man of about 26 or 27 years of age. He was naked except for a pair of black underpants. His hands were taped behind his back and he lay chest down with his face turned to the side. He too was wearing an oxygen mask which had been fixed in place by duct tape. His eyes were wide open, tears falling down either side of his face.

'Come on old son,' said Robinson kindly, helping one of the officers to get him upright so he could sit on the edge of the bed. 'It's all over now, everyone is safe.' Robinson looked the man in the face for the first time. 'You okay?' he asked. The man nodded, his eyes unbelievably wide with his pupils fully dilated. He looked like a cornered animal. 'Find something to get this bloody tape off,' ordered Robinson. One of the other detectives who had accompanied them into the room which was now packed full of people, went downstairs with a clatter.

Manson and McGeever looked around the room fascinated. The little blue box appeared several times on the wall. There were several laptops plus two large expensive mac desktop computers. 'He has plenty of hardware,' muttered Manson to McGeever who nodded.

The Chief Superintendent carefully cut off the duct tape from around the mask so that it fell to the ground where it was still attached to the small black cylinder with a white top. The man was breathing fast trying to catch his breath. Robinson put his hand on his shoulder, 'Take it steady now. Take your time; everything is going to be fine.'

'They ...they...' he tried to speak but couldn't get the words to come. McGeever and Manson just stared at him. Here at last was the actual face that matched that poor composite they had worked so hard to put together. Here was the most wanted man in America and Europe. They had him, and now the investigation could start in earnest.

'Get the medics up her Langton and we'll get him checked over.' Then he turned back to the young man. 'I'm going to leave the duct tape on the back of the head.' he smiled reassuringly. 'If I try and get it off you will have a bold patch, also it will hurt like hell.' The man nodded still breathing deeply.

Robinson looked up at McGeever. 'Was all this really necessary?' he asked.

It was Manson who spoke. 'It was your operation. But don't underestimate this man, Superintendent; he may be the most dangerous man you will ever meet.'

Robinson looked down at the poor semi-naked figure perched on the bed. 'I doubt that Sir, and its Chief Superintendent if you don't mind.'

Two members of the London Ambulance Service came into the room carrying large emergency bags. They knelt down and gave the young man a quick check over. 'He is in shock,' a medic said putting away her stethoscope.

'Right,' said Robinson with purpose, 'let's get his hands and legs free of that duct tape. Find him some clothes Langton and put something on his feet, there is glass everywhere. Then I want him cuffed and cautioned.'

'He needs to get to hospital,' objected the woman.

'I understand that,' he acknowledged. 'I'll be as quick as I can. Langton, we will need an armed escort for the ambulance to take him to hospital.' He looked at McGeever and Manson, 'The Commissioner's orders not mine, if he's not fit he goes to hospital. This operation has been planned down to every last eventuality. But don't worry he will be under very tight guard while he is there.'

'That's already been arranged Sir,' said Inspector Langton, regarding the clothes in the wardrobe with some distaste. He had in his hand a hoodie.

'Do you mind if you leave that for forensics?' asked Manson. 'Sure,' said Langton and selected instead a blue jumper which looked homemade and sported a snowman.

'Can you help him to dress?' Robinson asked the ambulance crew and they obliged without dissent realizing that this was something extraordinary. In a few minutes he was standing in his Christmas jumper and blue jeans, he looked remarkably young.

'How are you feeling?' asked Robinson.

'Okay,' said the young man nodding, but even to Manson he seemed genuinely unsteady.

'Now I need you to listen to me carefully. Can you do that?'

The young man nodded, and one of the ambulance men put a red blanket around his shoulders and held onto his arm to support him.

'Is your name Trevor Stanley?'

'Yes.'

'Is this your permanent address?'

'No, it's my parent's house.'

'Right. Trevor Stanley, I am arresting you under Section 5 of the 2006 Terrorism Act. I am going to caution you that anything you say will be recorded and may be used as evidence against you in a court of law. Do you understand why you have been arrested and that you have been cautioned?'

The man nodded.

'I need you to respond verbally?'

'Yes.'

'Right. Langton can you go with him and make sure we do have maximum security. No stops for lights, I need outriders to clear a path. The full works.'

'Shouldn't be any holdup this time of the morning?' observed Langton.

'I don't know about that,' said Robinson, 'the rush will be starting any time now.' The party moved slowly down the stairs. With Stanley being helped by the ambulance crew.

'I will be seeing you gentlemen later I presume?'

'Yes, thanks Chief Superintendent. Do you know what time the interview will start?' asked McGeever.

'Probably about two o'clock this afternoon once we get him out of the grips of the medics. They can be quite bolshie lot the medical fraternity. Well I'm off for some breakfast, need a lift?'

'No thanks,' said McGeever, 'we have to wait for our boss, he'll need an update about how the operation went.'

'Ah a burden we all share. Reporting to our superiors,' he glanced at his watch. 'Exactly what I shall be doing, in an hour's time. Oh well, I suspect he will be pleased that you have finally got your man,' he smiled at them.

'To be correct,' replied Manson, 'it's you who has our man.'

'Now that is very true,' he agreed with a mischievous grin. With that he gave them a wave and left the room. They stood in silence and listened to his heavy footsteps as he

negotiated his way down the narrow staircase, shouting out orders to a uniformed policeman on the lower floor.

Trevor Stanley and most of the police officers, including Robinson, had gone leaving McGeever and Manson alone in the bedroom. Using their phones they took as many images of the room as possible. Manson put on a pair of blue nitrile gloves and opened up the hoodie that lay on the unmade bed and took several shots. 'Dubois will love this one,' he said. 'Pity I can't send it straight away, but I suppose we had carry on using the secure link via the embassy.'

'Excuse me,' said a woman's voice and Manson turned to see a person completely decked out in a white disposable boiler suit, with white paper covers over her shoes, a white hat and a white facemask. Behind her were four or five similarly clad figures. 'We need you to leave now,' she said. Her voice was pleasant and Manson wondered if she was smiling. As he pondered this thought she said in a much more authoritative voice, 'I mean now, out.'

They stood in the corridor for ten minutes as the photographers took hundreds of images as well as video footage of the bedroom. The white clad technicians had already bagged the laptops into sealed and labelled plastic bags. 'What are you taking?' asked Manson as one of them went past. The young woman stopped and Manson looked into her sad brown eyes.

'My orders are to take absolutely everything.'

'Everything?' Repeated Manson.

'Yes, the carpets will also be coming off and perhaps the floorboards as well. There won't be much left of the house by the time we've finished.' And, as though on cue, a large truck drew up outside.

'I think were done here,' said Manson heading for the top of the stairs which at that moment were clear of activity.

'Yea, guess you're right. Think it'll be okay to use the bathroom?' asked McGeever. 'It's been a long night.'

'Can't do any harm,' Manson answered as he made his way down the stairs, 'just don't slip on the puke.'

McGeever and Manson were stood outside the house watching boxes and bags being taken out to the lorry. McGeever was smoking a cigarette and shivering slightly in the cold of the early morning. The area had been cordoned off with innumerable miles of blue and white plastic tape. Someone was searching the gardens, another emptying the trash into several bags. His white overalls and mask just as incongruous as the soldier's uniforms had been less than an hour ago. Another was walking up and down the rear lawn with a metal detector. 'They're thorough, you have to give them that,' observed McGeever.

'Yea,' said Manson in a surly tone. 'Aren't they just.'

'Guys!' The American accent cut through the air like a welcome breeze of warm summer air. It was Connors who waved his hand perfunctorily to the men as he approached. He showed his ID to an armed policewoman on duty at the outer cordon and walked up the concrete path to join them in their vigil.

'For Christ's sake Charlie take off the FBI jacket. We're supposed to be low key.' These were the first words from Connors, and showed he was under strain.

'No chance of that,' said Manson. 'Several of the woman police officers have been quizzing him about being a Fed. Always popular is Mac. Although I get the impression we are as welcome as a load of pork chops at a Jewish wedding.'

'I'm Jewish,' said Connors defensively taking a cigarette from the packet being proffered by McGeever.

'Then you know exactly what I mean,' retorted Manson without any sense of embarrassment.

It was 9.00 pm that evening and they had just finished dinner, and were now sat around a large conference table in the US Embassy in Grosvenor Square right in the heart of London. Nearly all the team were present, including Ronson and Festor, who had just arrived with Smith and Cole. They had all flown back with Polly Winston but not first or even business class, so they were looking tired.

'Once we had a positive ID on him we should have waited till he came to the States again then nabbed him,' said Hoff.

'That's not helpful,' said Connors. 'We had to move in and neutralize him as soon as we had a positive ID and we've done that, so it's been a success. Anyway, whatever you think about the police, Robinson certainly did a good job, I'll give him that.'

'I think he appreciated the seriousness of the situation from the outset,' agreed Hammond. 'He certainly pulled out all the stops for us.'

'Yea without him we would probably still be looking at the photographs. He was pretty cute,' agreed Hoff.

'In more ways than one,' added Manson. 'Is he a sarcastic bastard or what?'

Hammond laughed. 'He's just British I think.'

A silence fell as they drank coffee, although some of them were drinking something harder. The Ambassador was making polite conversation with Sanderson and people were half listening, but the general atmosphere in the room was reflective if not gloomy. Manson was looking particularly depressed.

'Okay Manson, share the gripe,' ordered Connors.

'It's not a gripe Ray, it's just that now we've hit a brick wall. We haven't got access to his computers, we haven't been able to see the forensics; shit we haven't even talked to him.'

'You have copies of the interviews from the Metropolitan Police,' said Ronson. 'That must tell us something about Stanley.'

Manson bent down and retrieved a copy of the interview transcript from his briefcase that lay at his feet and threw it onto the table in disgust. 'I've been through it fairly closely Gail and they aren't worth shit. They haven't asked any of the right questions, because we can't brief them without giving the game away; it seems we are no further to getting these people. He's just the hacker, so let's not forget they are still out there!' He thumped the table in annoyance and everyone stared at him; the Ambassador gave him a withering look.

Ronson had picked up the transcript. Although she had glanced through it she hadn't really studied it carefully. She opened it randomly and glanced down the page. 'It seems they have mainly focussed their investigations on his activities as a hacker to commit fraud.'

'Yea,' agreed Manson, 'it's all local stuff.'

'So, what do we do?' asked Sanderson.

'Sit tight and wait,' said Connors. 'The US Secretary of Defence is meeting with the Home Secretary tomorrow and he will be raising this with her.'

'Don't the Brits understand how important this is?' asked Manson.

'I suspect they do, but they have to follow their own procedures. Which includes an application for bail that was made this evening on Stanley's behalf by his solicitor,' replied Connors.

'We can stop that happening I'm sure,' suggested Sanderson. 'It's also imperative he doesn't get his hands on a computer or smart device.'

'We have to be given access to him; we've got to interview him,' persisted Manson.

'Is there any chance we could gain access to his computers?' asked, Cole. 'If we could just get into one of his machines, we may start finding out what he's been getting up to.'

'I suspect he uses cloud computing a lot. He has to be able to access his stuff when he is physically on another machine,' added Smith. 'We definitely need access if we are to find out who is working with.'

McGeever was quiet, then he took out two small pieces of green electronics board covered in soldered spots and black squares and placed it on the table. 'What's that?' asked Sanderson who was sitting next to him and was peering down at the items.

'Looks like pieces of a computer's motherboard?' observed the Ambassador who was sat the other side of Sanderson.

'It is just something that I found in the house,' he said.

'You shouldn't have removed anything from the house, Charlie. You know better than that!' said Sanderson angrily. 'This could be evidence. What happens if it's picked up on the videos taken by the helmet cameras of the soldiers? They will notice a discrepancy between that and the footage or the inventory taken by forensics.'

'I doubt that,' said McGeever. 'I used the bathroom. When I went inside and lifted the lid there they were in the bottom of the pan. So, I carefully retrieved them, dried them off with toilet paper and here we are.'

'We should really hand them over to Robinson,' said Manson, picking a piece up. 'We can't afford to alienate him any more than we already have done. Anyhow, it just looks like a bit of broken electronics crap to me.' He passed it over to Cole. 'What do you reckon Imogen? A bit of computer, a processor or something?'

'Oh well,' said McGeever, 'I was hoping it was a hard drive or something useful. I presumed it was important as he had tried to flush it.'

'Shit,' said Manson in exasperation. 'Even I know what a hard drive looks like, they are much bigger and usually in a plastic or metal box. This is a bit of junk. Becky's right you should have left it where it was. I'm surprised the soldiers didn't check the toilet pan when they did their search? Our friend Robinson is going to go mad when he hears about this.'

Smith had stood up and walked over to it and whistled. She picked it up and held it towards Agent Cole. 'Now that is very interesting don't you think Imogen?' Cole nodded.

'Will one of you IT nerds tell us what it is,' ordered Connors.

Smith looked at him and smiled. 'It's a Raspberry.'

'Don't piss me off,' said Connors. The Ambassador winced, he was unused to the open frankness in which agents of the US security forces so freely expressed themselves.

She smiled. 'I'm telling you exactly what it is.' She passed it back to Cole who added, 'It's a Raspberry Pi3 to be precise. So it's not a piece of computer junk, nor a hard drive, it is actually a complete and by the looks of it a functioning computer or it will be when we reconnect the two pieces. What we need is a soldering iron and some superglue.'

Everyone went quiet and stared and the pieces of green plastic which was covered with tiny transistors. 'How can that be a computer it's so small,' asked McGeever.

'All the same,' she said, 'that is exactly what it is. You're android or iPhone is a computer and that's pretty small isn't it. But this particular baby is much more interesting. They are used a lot by schools and universities for teaching IT skills and for experiments. In fact they are remarkably easy to use and fun.'

'It's a toy?' suggested Connors.

'No, far from it, it's a proper and quite powerful computer in its own right,' replied Cole. The two women stood up. 'Excuse us we have some work to do,' and talking busily together they left the room carefully carrying their prize.

Hammond had been looking up Raspberry Pi3 on the Internet. 'They're right; they are essentially just small motherboards which can be used to build all sorts of things including iPads and stuff. So you were right Sir,' he said looking up at the Ambassador.

'Just a guess I'm afraid,' he acknowledged, but pleased by the compliment.

'Does that mean we have actually found one of Stanley's computers?' asked Connors.

'I doubt it,' replied Hammond still reading the Wikipedia entry, 'they don't have a hard drive, you seem to have to connect that separately as far as I can tell along with all the peripherals.'

'Just as I said, it's just a piece of computer crap,' added Manson.

'Then why was it in the toilet,' asked McGeever confused.

'Perhaps our man is actually a robot and needed the bathroom during the night,' said Manson stifling a yawn.

Everyone smiled, but it didn't rate a laugh.

After the excitement of the Raspberry, Connors returned to the investigation and the interview with Stanley. 'We appear to be in agreement, that we have a new problem in this investigation; the Metropolitan Police and their idea of justice. What about MI5?' He turned to Sanderson.

She thought for a moment. 'I'll get onto Joe Cranfield and see if he can use his official as well as his personal connections, perhaps we could get MI5 to take over the investigation just long enough for us to find out what we need to know.'

'Meanwhile?' asked Manson.

'We'll meet tomorrow when we know the outcome of the meeting with the Home Secretary. Until then there is nothing else we can do,' said Sanderson. She stood up. 'I'll make that phone call now.' She was pleased to get out of the room and the collective air of depression.

'Well, we could...' said Manson brightening up slightly.

'What?' asked Connors smiling for the first time that evening.

'Well we could start by making a list of all the questions we want answering and get it over to Chief Superintendent Robinson. We have our own images of Stanley's bedroom which need to be analysed and collated. Also need to get the images of the hoodie over to Dubois and see what he has to say.'

'Positive thinking,' agreed Connors. 'Meanwhile we must have an extradition treaty with this damned country, let's get it rolling. Perhaps you could help us with that Ambassador.'

It was with a renewed feeling of purpose the team began once again to get to work to solve the puzzle of the missing thirty nanoseconds.

They set up a small incident room in the Embassy, and working on personal laptops they began the tedious task of following up on every detail that they had. They began to piece together in some details, the movements of Trevor Stanley, compiling evidence both actual and circumstantial.

Connors called a meeting at 10.00 am the following morning to hear a report from Smith and Cole, who had arrived with smiles on their faces half an hour before after working late into the night.

'Well,' Cole said. 'We glued the board back together and repaired the broken connections. Remarkably none of the resistors or the processor was damaged; and it worked straight away when we finally got power into it.'

'How good is that piece of computer junk?' asked Manson.

'It's surprisingly powerful. It has a single gigabyte of RAM as standard but storage is via a microSD card, which if you look here you can see is still in. So, this is where we have hit the jackpot, we have a memory device still attached. She was grinning so much that tears formed in her eyes. I have never seen one before, but I have heard of it. It came out last year. It's a 200GB SanDisk Ultra microSDXC card. Meaning we have a very large memory card which is almost full and there isn't a movie or game listed at all as far as I can tell, so it is all data, lists, documents and details of transactions. It is a vast repository of information that he carried around with him.'

'Are you suggesting that he took the raspberry everywhere,' asked Connors.

'Perhaps, but my guess is that he just took the memory card. He could hide it anywhere on his person in his clothes anywhere. The scanner at the airport wouldn't detect it, so I suspect it was kept in the band of his trousers somewhere like that. Maybe even behind a metal button or stud, just in case the scanner is powerful enough to pick up the tiny amount of metal in the card making up the connection tabs, or even damage the information on the card itself, but I'm just guessing.'

'The card looks so small compared to the one in my phone' observed Sanderson.

'It is the size of a fingernail, that's all,' agreed Smith.

'Isn't the card ruined by being in the water?' asked Hammond.

'No, its fine and we have already been looking at the contents. They are fairly watertight, but even if it had got wet we most likely could have dried it out.'

'But why would he drag that about with him, wouldn't it attract attention?' asked Manson

'You didn't know what it was did you?'

'True.'

'So why was it important to repair the broken motherboard?' asked Ronson. 'Couldn't you have just taken out the card?'

'We were keen not to remove the card from the Raspberry in case there was something built in like a bit of code that we were unaware of that may have made the card unreadable?' answered Smith.

'Can you actually do that?' asked Ronson.

'No idea, but we didn't want to underestimate this guy, he is way out of our league,' admitted Smith.

'Anyway, he probably didn't always take it with him. As I said I suspect he just carried the card and when he needed to, he probably just brought a card reader and used any available computer or just brought a new Raspberry,' said Cole.

'You can pick up Raspberry for \$35 or less, so he could always get hold of one cheaply and then discard it by snapping into pieces and flushing them down the loo,' added Smith. 'All he needed to do was keep the microSD card.'

'I still don't understand why he just didn't use a card adapter that fitted into the USB slot, or the cloud?' asked Hoff.

'Possibly, but he must have a reason for doing this way, maybe he connected the Raspberry directly to PCs and run them in parallel, I have no idea. They are so small they are easy to conceal on your person, unlike a laptop. Hell, we will have to ask him. But by using a new Raspberry each time and destroying it when he was done, he left no possible trace of his activities at all,' said Cole. 'The cloud isn't that secure, so the micro card was much safer. But what I do know is that we are going to need help. There is so much material here that Rachel and I don't know how to deal with it.'

'That's easy,' said Connors. 'Download everything and then make an inventory of all the folders or if they are loose documents collate them into new folders then we need everyone to start reading and create a chart of what is in which folder. Okay?'

'Do you think this information is on his other hardware that the Metropolitan Police has,' asked Sanderson.

'I expect so, this was his mobile office and we suspect this is what he connected to computers when he broke into the labs to hack the isolated PCs. He could have downloaded material as well as uploaded material using this. But at home he would have used one of his beautiful macs. They don't come cheap and the graphics...Smith blew a kiss into the air.'

'We get the message,' agreed Connors.

They went to work and this time really with renewed vigour. Almost immediately they began to find material. Hundreds of research papers mainly dealing with lasers and time measurement. Festor was kept busy explaining and categorizing the material. Very quickly a picture began to emerge of someone who was fascinated with time. Ronson discovered a draft of his PhD thesis, and both her and Festor printed it off and spent several hours going through it. There were hundreds of restricted documents from around the world dealing with largely hopeless ideas about time travel. There was a significant amount of material on 3D printing, especially those related to biomaterials. It was Cole who found a file dealing with the cleaning company which supplied the personnel at NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, with images of the normal cleaning staff, names of supervisors, line managers. Stanley was meticulous. Hammond discovered a clip of CCTV footage which was obviously used to replace a missing section at the laboratory in London. The evidence was overwhelming that Stanley was their man. The material was so exciting and revealing that

the agents had sent out for sandwiches and coffee and were all so totally engaged, that no one had bothered to answer the phone that had been ringing on and off for the past twenty minutes. Without realizing it everyone had either switched off their own mobiles or had them on silent, so when the phone in the office began ringing again Connors shouted out, 'For God's sake will someone answer that?'

Manson picked up the receiver of the black telephone. 'Manson here,' he said simply.

'Ah Mr Manson, I thought perhaps you had left the country. It's Robinson here.'

'Hello Chief Superintendent.'

'I was surprised not to have you bothering me all day, it has shown great restraint on your part.'

'Thank you Sir, we try not to disappoint.'

'I thought you might like to know that we have more or less completed our own interrogation of Mr Stanley.'

'Really?' said Manson.

'Yes.' For the first time Robinson sounded a little disconcerted. 'We also have a great deal of forensic material as well, including eight passports which he has been using for his numerous travels abroad. Interestingly he hasn't used his own for several years. The last time was to the US when he was an exchange student at the Californian Institute of Technology.'

'Really?' said Manson. 'Is Stanley still in custody?'

'Ah yes, indeed he is. He has been charged with numerous offences including impersonation, travelling on a false passport, identity theft, serious fraud charges and more, so he isn't going anywhere nor will he get bail. He will be transferred to a secure prison first thing tomorrow.'

'Right,' said Manson. There was an embarrassed silence.

'I was expecting you to want to speak to him yourselves?' said Robinson.

'I am afraid that request has been passed onto MI5, Chief Superintendent. But thank you for calling and letting us know the situation. We are very grateful for everything you have done.' Manson put the phone down. He turned and there behind him was Connors.

'I hope you didn't piss him off too much?' he asked. 'He might have rattled your cage, but he has been very helpful and we may need him again.' Manson smiled weakly and went back to his laptop.

At the request of the Home Secretary after her meeting with the US Secretary of Defence, and after a late night call from the Prime Minister following a personal call from the President, who would have ordered a missile attack on London if Cranfield had asked her after he had helped her over the Nicholson affair; MI5 was requested to work with the Metropolitan Police on the Stanley case as it involved National Security. MI6 are also to be kept in the loop. An interview with Mr Trevor Stanley has been scheduled for 10.00 am the following morning at which the US Embassy were asked to send representatives to question him in relation to serious crimes committed in the US that may have important ramifications for British as well as NATO security. An MI5 officer would be present all the time.

At the end of a long evening they had enough evidence to prosecute Stanley for numerous counts of illegal access to Government buildings in the US and within Europe, of tampering with Government property including the International Atomic Clock Network, stealing restricted and top secret documents and more.

‘What I don’t understand...’ said Hoff, as everyone was eating fish and chips and drinking coffee, although several of the team had expressed a preference for burgers, yet the notion “when in London do what the locals do” had prevailed. ‘...is that there is no mention, email, message or any indication of a third party. Nothing.’

‘We managed to get into his numerous cloud accounts,’ said Smith, ‘and we found nothing there either. He didn’t consider them secure as there is very little on them. If he is working with someone else then he has hidden his tracks amazingly well.’

‘That doesn’t make sense,’ continued Ronson, ‘because he has documented everything else in great detail.’

‘So, what are you all saying?’ asked Connors.

‘It seems to some of us,’ continued Hoff, ‘that he might have been working alone. That he might just be a sad son of a bitch, who really does have some cracked pot idea about time travel.’

‘Do you really expect us to believe that?’ asked Sanderson.

It was Fester who spoke. ‘I’m sorry Becky, he won’t be the first. It all points to a very intelligent and gifted young man who simply is obsessed with an idea which, who knows, may sound less fanciful in fifty or a hundred years’ time.’ Ronson who was sat next to him smiled. ‘His childhood obsession with a fictional time traveller. His person mark, which we have all found in the documents we have been searching through.’

‘Another mathematician then?’ Ronson summed up.

Fester grinned. ‘I wished I had never said that all those weeks ago. It was unfair because I’m a mathematician as well. But in this case, yes looks that way. He clearly has some issues and that has meant that he has focussed so much on this one idea and has focussed his considerable intellect on it.’

Ronson spoke. 'His PhD was very enlightening and I think it shows us how he might have altered the clocks. Don't you agree Uncle?' Festor nodded.

'You think you know how he altered the clocks?' asked Sanderson. 'Yes, we think so,' Ronson glanced at Festor.

'It was his PhD that gave it away,' explained Festor. 'The frequency of an atomic clock is controlled by electrons jumping from one orbit to another and that is achieved by using a magnetic field and stabilized beams of blue light from lasers focused on the strontium atoms. What he was working on was the precision of the laser frequency; he had worked out a way of making the laser light frequency even more precise. It will take time to confirm it, but I think that is how it was done. But to what end, well only Stanley can answer that.'

'So, Taylor was right,' said Sanderson.

'Yes, she was,' smiled Festor. 'Anne is not a bad person, just a misled one.' Ronson remained silent, she wasn't so sure.

McGeever, Manson and the MI5 officer that had worked with Hoff and Hammond previously were sat quietly waiting for Stanley to arrive from the remand centre. The meeting was taking place at MI5 headquarters on the Southbank. Chief Superintendent Robinson had not been invited. 'This is your call gentleman and nothing will leave this room,' said the MI5 officer who had not introduced himself.

'Will he have his solicitor present?' asked McGeever.

'No, he will be on his own.'

At that moment, the door opened and in walked Trevor Stanley, unshaven, wearing the jeans and blue Christmas jumper, although the snowman was now looking a bit worse for wear. He was escorted by two burley prison officers who guided him to the single vacant chair. No words were exchanged and the guards simply left their charge with the agents and closed the door after them.

McGeever and Manson stared at the man who they had seen only briefly trussed up with duct tape two days previously. He looked like a student who had been out all night. He looked disappointedly normal. Without a word of introduction McGeever placed a Raspberry Pi3, which they had brought from the Science Museum that morning, onto the table. Stanley looked at it with surprise.

'Fun aren't they?' said Manson. 'It comes with a whole gigabyte of RAM as well or so I am told.'

'Very flexible too,' said McGeever, opening up the box and taking the motherboard out.

'So simple,' continued Manson, 'you just attach a key board.'

'And a screen,' added McGeever.

'Don't forget the mouse,' said Manson, 'but only if you need one.'

'Then, hey presto,' concluded McGeever.

'What about memory though?' asked Manson seriously.

'You need a microSD card,' offered McGeever.

That doesn't have much of a memory though does it?'

'Oh yea, these days they can be huge 125GB or even 200Gb, what is it called?' McGeever paused. 'Oh yes, a SanDisk Ultra microSDXC card.'

'Of course, I've heard of those and guess what? You will never believe this,' said Manson.

'What?' asked McGeever.

'They're waterproof.'

'No-way?'

'Yea, they really are,' said Manson.

McGeever suddenly snapped the Raspberry into two.

Stanley jumped.

'Oh Shit, I've ruined it.'

Manson took the two pieces. 'Naw, a kid could mend that. A bit of superglue and a soldering iron and you'll be back in business.'

Stanley had been watching the two men turning first to one then the other as the banter went to and fro between the two agents.

Manson leaned forward. 'You know Trev, don't mind if I call you Trev, do you? The problem with modern flush toilets Trev is that it is all about saving water. You just can't get the flush these days. Shame your parents had the old one replaced. Nice people your parents.'

Stanley bit his lower lip and looked down at the table. There was a long silence. Finally he asked, 'Was the card readable?'

'Apparently so,' said Manson. 'Guess this is where I say it's all over kid, time to come clean or some bullshit like that.'

'Shame,' said McGeever. 'I was hoping we could have gotten a bit physical after all the crap we've been through old buddy.'

'Yea, but Trev.... come on. He doesn't look the sort to respond to violence. You're not are you Trev?'

He shook his head eyes down cast.

'Let's start at the beginning and you can talk us through it.'

'How much do you know?'

'Most of it we worked out beforehand, we know how you been hacking you way around the globe and more recently how you been making house calls and hacking into the dedicated computers for the atomic clock network,' explained Manson.

'Thirty nanoseconds, I ask you?' added McGeever.

'The thing is Trev we want to know who you are working for and why you are doing this?' Manson's voice was harder than before.

Stanley looked up. 'You don't actually know do you?' he said, a smile coming over his face.

'Who are you working for?' repeated McGeever menacingly.

'I don't have to say anything.'

'What is the reason for altering the clocks?'

He simply grinned. 'No comment.'

'Look Trev,' said Manson. 'Just tell us from the beginning. I mean you are pretty amazing the way you changed the clocks without anyone knowing.'

He smiled, pleased with himself.

'We know all about your PhD on trying to create an ultra-precise laser light frequency. That is when you spent six weeks at CalTech wasn't it.'

He nodded.

'Come on tell us.'

He shook his head.

'Okay,' said Manson. 'Here is what I think happened. It was while at CalTech that you paid a visit to the JPL at Pasadena and you were so desperate to see their atomic clocks. It was then, when you saw how little security there was that the idea came to you that perhaps you could take control of time.'

He shrugged his shoulders. 'No comment.'

'We found on your computer an email account at NASA and also access details for the main system. When you were there you actually were employed for three weeks working on a small project as an intern and they made a big mistake. They gave you access to their mainframe. Am I right?'

He smiled and looked away. 'No comment.'

'We have video footage of you at the JPL plus your DNA from the keyboard attached to the dedicated PC for the atomic clock. We have plenty of evidence Trev. So come on, tell us; who are you working with?'

He still looked away

'What did you hope to achieve?'

'I'm saying nothing.'

The MI5 offer rose. 'I'm going for a fag, so the interview is terminated.' He walked to the door and turned around and looked at Stanley. 'You poor sod,' he said. Then looking back from the doorway just as he was about to shut the door, 'Let me give you some advice.'

Don't fuck with the FBI and CIA. They want you dead. You can't shit on these people and get away with it; you have hurt their pride, abused them. We can't protect you if you won't cooperate.'

He left the room and the three men sat regarding each other.

'We have your parents in custody. Did you know that?' said McGeever 'Your Dad looks really ill. They will probably never recover from the fact that their son is a traitor.'

'Of course,' added Manson. 'They're not innocent, just stupidly naive putting all their trust in their talented son. They are so proud of their Trev, it makes me weep. They have agreed to come over to the States to help us with our enquiries and when they land. Well let's just say they'll spend the rest of their lives in a penitentiary somewhere in the States all because of their wonderful son.'

'You're lying.'

'I don't give a fuck what you believe. We have to eradicate you and anyone you were associated with. The five other members of your stupid little club, what's it called?' McGeever looked at Manson who grinned.

'The Time Lords.'

'Ha, what a joke. They've all dropped you in it. They will get 5 to 10 years each for doing comparatively nothing. You my friend, well, when we get you State-side were talking lethal injection if you're lucky. Doesn't matter if you talk or not. But if you tell us who you are working for, and why, well we may drop the extradition request and at least you can serve a 25 year sentence here.

'My parents?'

'Dunno?' asked Manson looking at McGeever.

'Perhaps we could just let them go, they are so old what's the point. We both know that they are innocent, but Mr and Mrs Public needs to be satisfied that justice has been done.' McGeever paused for effect. 'What's in it for us?'

'No one,' said Stanley.

'No one what?' asked Manson

'No one else is involved.'

'There has to be'

'Why?'

'You mean this whole thing was your idea?'

'Yes.'

'You were the only one involved?'

'Yes.'

'How did you change all those clocks?'

'I worked weekends at University and Mondays. I then worked at home the rest of the week. In reality I was travelling. I was able to access a lot of restricted material and that helped me to focus on the correct areas of my research. Changing the clocks, that was just a bit of fun.'

'Fun?' repeated Manson surprised.

'It started as an idea when I was at Kings. I saw this article in a magazine about a prize for anyone who could prove that they could travel in time or space. It was worth 10 million dollars. A safe bet. It meant the company got lots of good ideas for free from loads of researchers. But then I hit on the idea, that I could actually change time thereby in essence travel in time. It was a simple as that.'

'How did you do it?' asked McGeever.

'It was simple.'

'How?'

'That is my secret.'

'What were you going to do?'

'Reverse the leap second.'

'Pardon me?' interposed Manson.

'When they added the leap second at the end of the year I was going to reverse it at a specific time and claim the prize. It's quite neat really.'

'Wouldn't that have caused a lot of problems to computer systems around the world?' asked McGeever.

Stanley hesitated. 'I never really thought about it, possibly. I hadn't considered it.'

'Someone in the know could use that lost leap second to cause a lot of problems, commit a serious crime,' suggested Manson.

'I was only interested in the prize and the kudos.'

'How can we be sure?' asked McGeever.

'Because that side of it is unimportant, that's why.'

'Why thirty nanoseconds?'

'Because it was irrelevant, but significant enough for me to demonstrate that I had the necessary control and precision. I also had to make sure I could activate the time shift remotely on the key clocks if I had to.'

Manson and McGeever looked at each other. Then McGeever asked, 'Would you be prepared to take a lie detector test?'

'Only if you release my parents and all the members of the Time Lords.'

'Will you make a full statement with time and dates?' McGeever persisted.

He nodded. 'But only on condition that you release my parents and my friends.' He sat there in silence for a while then added. 'You will find it out eventually anyhow if you really have my Raspberry. I kept a precise diary in one of the folders, but it won't be easy to decipher.'

'Can it really be true Becky?' asked Joe Cranfield at his office in Washington a week later. 'That this whole thing was some sort of game?'

'Yes Joe,' said Sanderson, 'I'm afraid so. The damage he would have done by altering the clocks by a second unexpectedly may have caused global chaos. Most navigation systems would have failed, lives certainly would have been lost.'

'Hell, this investigation has cost us a small fortune,' he complained. 'That kid needs to be serving life here in the States.'

'Look Joe, I think this was money well spent and I think you know that,' said Connors who had just arrived back in Washington that morning after briefing his own boss Martin Keymer, Director of the CIA. 'We have identified a major weakness in the global security of one of the most important things we all depend on every day, and that is the accuracy of time. The potential for criminality or terror is unbounded here. We have identified those weaknesses and closed out any possibility of infiltration completely. It was a lesson we were always going to learn the hard way, so all in all I think we got away with it lightly.'

Cranfield nodded.

'Also, we stopped a dangerous and possibly mad man who could have done untold damage to essentially win a bet. He really just wanted to fulfil a childhood dream of being a Time Lord,' continued Connors. 'We stopped Nicholson in his tracks, as well as stabilized the Presidency. I even saw her with her husband and daughter at a reception together last night on CNN. No matter how much all this has cost. It has been worth every penny.' Connors paused reflectively. 'One last thing, Joe. I think it was a remarkable team effort between the FBI and CIA, and that in itself was a huge step forward for both agencies.'

Cranfield nodded. 'Okay,' he agreed, 'point taken.'

‘What’s happening with Nicholson?’ asked Sanderson. ‘I haven’t seen anything in the newspapers or on the TV news?’

‘Well as you would expect both he and Taylor were eventually given bail, and to be honest now that the damage has been neutralized I can’t see either of them ending up in some high profile court case. That is going to do no one any good, especially the Presidency,’ answered Cranfield. ‘So, I need you both to stand down both teams of agents from today and hand everything over to a special team of prosecutors we have set up and they will take it from here. It will take years to build this case and collate all this stuff. Meanwhile Stanley’s extradition hearing will go ahead, but I suspect the actual charges will be more to do with his hacking of Government documents and secrets rather than anything to do with the atomic clocks.’

‘Do you think the Courts in Britain will extradite him?’

‘I doubt it, but we will try our best.’

‘Manson and McGeever made him a deal Joe,’ said Sanderson. ‘He’s going to serve the best part of 20 to 25 years in prison in the UK anyhow. He has agreed not to mention anything about the attempt on the atomic clock network, and even if he tries it’s now covered by their Official Secrets Act so it’s unpublishable.’

‘I know they made an agreement with the little shit, but not with the US Government’s approval. I for one would be happier if he was locked up for life over here.’ Cranfield stood up and shook their hands. ‘Anyhow, our job is done, so well done, all of you. Now let me get on with clearing up this mess of evidence.’ He sat back down in his large black swivel chair and swung away from them to face the window, phone in hand. ‘Get me the Chief of Staff at the White House,’ he ordered and at the same time waved a dismissive hand at them. The interview was over.

They drove back to NASA headquarters where the rest of the team were packing up and waiting for Connors and Sanderson to return with orders.

It was over and everyone had been given extended leave and the joint operation team was being disbanded. There were the usual goodbyes and slaps on the back, both sets of agents knew that they would simply be assimilated back into the FBI or CIA as though nothing had happened. While it had been exasperating at times and exhausting, the team had succeeded, and that had left a feeling of achievement and pride. Overall, it had been fun.

McGeever went into the bar at the Residence later that afternoon. There at the bar was the stained crumpled suit that characterized Manson. His thin gabardine coat initially placed carefully on the bar stool was now crushed under his bulk. ‘Beer?’ invited McGeever.

‘No thanks Mac,’ said Manson who was drinking coffee, ‘I have a plane to catch.’

‘Holiday?’

‘Yea, kind of.’

'You really a Major?' asked McGeever.

'Major,' enquired Manson a sly grin creeping over his face. Looking up for the first time at the well groomed McGeever.

'That soldier back in London addressed you as Major?'

'You remember that?'

'Well?'

'Yea, it was a long time ago.' Manson stood up and held out his hand. 'Goodbye Mac, you take care now.'

'You to.'

Manson winked and putting on his coat walked out of the bar. McGeever watched him through the plate glass window as he disappeared into the crowd carrying a small holdall.

'Barman,' called McGeever still looking out of the window.

'Yes Sir?'

'Beer here when you're ready.'

'Yes Sir.'

Connors was giving Sanderson a lift back to her office, their personal stuff crammed into cardboard boxes that filled the boot of his car. He started the engine and after a few moments turned it off again. 'What's wrong?' she asked.

'I'm taking a month off. I've taken a house in the Cayman Islands, want to come?' He looked at Sanderson and she reached out and touched his cheek. Then leant forward and kissed him.

'Sure,' she said. 'We have the time.'

Definition: Leap Second. Solar time is measured by the rotation of the Earth, but due to irregularities in the rate of rotation it drifts slowly away from co-ordinated Universal Time (UTC) measured by atomic clocks which remains constant. In order to adjust UTC to match solar time it is necessary to occasionally add an extra second known as a leap second. Correcting UTC to match solar time started in 1972 and since then there have been 27 leap seconds added. The next addition of a leap second will be on December 31, 2016 at 23:59:60 UTC.



While millions of people were celebrating the start of 2017, at the precise moment the clock struck twelve an extra second, a leap second, was added to co-ordinated universal time. In that one second two billion dollars was transferred from the US Federal Reserve to twenty different bank deposit accounts in amounts of exactly 100 million dollars each. The total transaction time was precisely one thousand nanoseconds or a millisecond, for each transaction to be completed. This was duly logged by the computer system at the Federal Reserve but would remain unnoticed by anyone who wasn't a computer for a further nine days.



The phone rang in Sanderson's office at 9.30 am on the morning of the 9th January, 2017. 'Becky, it's Joe. Get up here right now and bring Agent Ronson.' The line went dead and Sanderson stared at the receiver in surprise. Joe Cranfield could be abrupt, but this was really unlike him.

Five minutes later Sanderson and Ronson walked into the outer part of the Director's Office, his PA simply indicated his door and grimaced. With a soft knock Sanderson opened the thick mahogany door and looked inside. 'Get in here!' ordered Cranfield who looked pale and unwell.

'Hope the holidays went well?' ventured Sanderson.

'To hell with the holidays,' he barked and handed her a single sheet of paper. 'Let Agent Ronson read it as well.' The two women looked down at the short, printed statement. The

facts were few and to the point it simply read. "TOP SECRET From: Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System. Date: 05.00 01.09.2017. Message: At 23:59:60 precisely on December 31st 2016 twenty sequential unauthorized withdraws from the Federal Reserve Central Account were made of 100 million dollars each. It is clear to us that we have been the subject of a cyber attack that has removed 2 billion dollars in total from our accounts."

'I don't understand,' said Sanderson looking up.

'Money that was being held centrally having been collected from the 12 Reserve Banks for onward payment to the US Treasury has been stolen. Is that clear enough for you?' replied Cranfield. He was staring out of the window and the white flakes of snow which swirled and danced in front of the huge picture window that made up one side of his office.

'What does 23:59:60 mean?' asked Ronson.

'What?' snapped Sanderson who was confused and worried by her boss's anger that seemed to be aimed at her for some reason?

'Surely it should be 23:59:59?' continued Ronson, she paused and then with a sudden realization she thought that she might faint and so she grabbed Sanderson's arm. 'Oh my God...it's the leap second.'

'Those fucking atomic clocks,' said Cranfield turning around to face them, 'that bloody time business we thought we had wrapped up back in September.'

'It can't be related?' protested Sanderson.

'Then it's one big bloody co-incidence, isn't it?' Cranfield almost snarled. 'I thought you had cleared all that up Becky? Instead we now have the largest bank hold up in history!'

'Yes, we cleared it up,' said Sanderson defensively, 'or at least as far as the attacks on the clocks were concerned. The case is definitely closed.' She paused looking again at the statement. 'This has to be unrelated.'

'You reckon it's unrelated, do you?' said Cranfield doubtfully. 'Well, I think you and your team missed something.' His face had changed colour to a deep red colour and Sanderson began to worry about the condition of his heart; he was near retirement after all.

'Sir?'

'Look I'm not blaming you or your team but you must have missed something.' He took a deep breath consciously trying to calm himself down. 'You need to get over to London and re-interview Trevor Stanley.'

'Do we know how this was done?' asked Ronson. 'What about the receiving banks, there must be IP addresses or IBAN codes for where the money was transferred? Are these details available?'

'How in the hell do I know!' shouted Cranfield, immediately forgetting his blood pressure. 'Get out of my office and get that money back, plus the bodies of whoever has made us look like fools; dead or alive, understand?'

'Yes Sir,' replied Ronson, while Sanderson, who was just as perplexed as Cranfield, just nodded still looking at the brief note from the Federal Reserve in disbelief.

Sanderson was finding it hard to believe what she had just been told as she entered her own office with a worried Ronson in her wake. She called out to McGeever who was busy at his work station looking as usual at CCTV footage on the screen of his PC. He looked up and immediately could see that something serious had happened and made his way through the other rows of partially manned work stations and filing cabinets, and followed them into her office. 'What's up?' he asked concerned.

'Shut the door,' ordered Sanderson. McGeever swung the glass door which quietly clicked into place. 'This is what the fuck is up,' she said thrusting the brief note from the Federal Reserve System at him. 'It's that atomic clock business. It has come back and bitten us right in our collective arses. Someone has stolen two billion dollars in a cyber attack during the leap second on New Year's Eve at midnight. Its, its, it's incredible.' She literally fell into a chair. The two agents looked down at their boss with worried expressions on their faces. 'For God's sake sit down,' she ordered. 'What are we going to do...Joe Cranfield all but accused us of incompetence.'

'We can't just assume that these two cases are connected,' said McGeever reassuringly. 'There could have been a number of different people out there with the same idea...I don't think it's our fault; clearly this is a completely new investigation.'

'So, you don't think it's that odious little toad Stanley?' she continued.

'No, I don't,' replied McGeever. 'He's locked up without access to any sort of electronic equipment.'

'Could he have set this up beforehand and it was just triggered automatically?' asked Ronson.

'He didn't fail the lie detector test, and his story was completely sound. It's not him. I am 110% sure. Manson and I grilled him for hours and he never wavered in his story, not once. It all stacked up. All that stuff on his computer, everything backed up his story. There is simply nothing to support the hypothesis that he was involved in this. Also, all the software on those PCs was changed.'

'Well Joe wants us to double check. Charlie, I want you to get the next available flight to London and interview him again. Gail, I want you to reassemble the original FBI team on the case.' Sanderson was starting to formulate a plan of action.

'Will the CIA team be reconstituted as well?' asked McGeever. 'I know that Manson is on a six month sabbatical.'

‘No, this is purely a Federal matter it’s going to be just the original FBI people.’

‘There is one good thing about this,’ said McGeever with a slight smile.

‘Hell, there’s a good side to this?’ wailed Sanderson her frustration coming to the surface again.

‘Yea. It’s a real crime, a crime that has been committed using a system we know something about,’ he explained. ‘We’ve already got more than just a head start; and investigating fraud is something we do every day. It’s just another crime that’s all, and this time we know what the crime is and we have some clues to work with.’ He sounded almost cheerful.

Sanderson smiled for the first time that day. ‘Guess you have a point there. So, let’s get onto it and see if we can get the people of America their money back.’

‘Everyone is here,’ reported Ronson two hours later, indicating the group of four agents who were pulling desks together to form a small private area in Sanderson’s large outer office which housed her personal staff. McGeever was already at the airport boarding a domestic flight to London Heathrow. ‘I couldn’t get hold of Festor as he has gone off on annual leave for three weeks. I could try and get a message to him?’

‘No, I don’t think that’s necessary Gail,’ replied Sanderson. ‘We know how this was done it’s a matter of following the trail, although it’s over a week old, so I suspect the money has been moved several times by now and has disappeared for ever. I want you, Cole as our IT specialist and also Dubois to go over to the Federal Reserve System Headquarters as quickly as possible, before lunch if you can. I want you three to liaise with their own IT specialists to try and trace those money transfers. The sooner we start the better chance we have of tracing at least some of the money.’

‘It was clever to create so many different transfers, it’s going to make our work far more difficult,’ observed Ronson.

‘It could work against them as well Gail,’ replied Sanderson, ‘with so many different routes they are more likely to make mistakes and leave traces behind.’ Sanderson heard herself speaking positively but anyone who could pull off a stunt of this complexity was not going to make any mistakes. In her heart she knew that the money was gone along with the people behind it.

The Eccles Building in the centre of Washington looked more like an old fashioned university library than the headquarters of the Federal Reserve System. The white stone edifice looked every bit a government building, but was understated as to its important function. The three agents were immediately ushered into a small conference room where waiting for them was the Director of IT, chief of security and a number of other officials and IT specialists. Ronson introduced Cole and Dubois and the Director of IT Services Alex Murray went around the table introducing the various people present. As he was doing this Murray

indicated the three empty seats to the FBI agents and as they sat down and made themselves comfortable the others were leaning forward, expectantly. 'Before we start,' said Murray, 'there have been some developments.'

'Developments?' echoed Ronson.

'Yes.' He said, smiling. 'To put it simply, we have the money back.'

'Back?' Repeated Ronson perplexed. 'How?'

'It's weird really. We began to trace the transactions this morning and were surprised that there was no cover up, no attempt to hide their tracks at all. It was as though they were just standard transactions which in fact they were, albeit unauthorized. We traced a series of IBAN numbers, each one indicating a separate account. In all there were five banks involved and four accounts in each bank that received money, all in Europe. We contacted each bank immediately and each one told us exactly the same thing.'

'Which is?' asked Ronson keen to get to the punch line.

'That there must have been a mistake and that they were fully authorized to return the money immediately, which they did, without exception.'

'Did they give any explanations, or details of the account holders?' she asked.

'No, these private banks don't offer details like that. Their whole business success is based on client confidentiality.'

'So all the money is back?' asked Dubois.

'Yes exactly 2 billion dollars.' Confirmed Murray. 'We are very relieved.'

There was a long silence. Dubois and Cole both looked at Ronson, who was uncertain how to proceed. Finally she asked, 'Do you have any idea how this happened?'

'No, none,' replied Murray, 'generally speaking our security is excellent.'

'Was it a cyber attack from outside the bank?' asked Cole.

'We don't know,' admitted Murray.

'Could it have been a mistake?' asked Dubois.

'It could have been, but to be honest with you we just don't know. But the format of the transactions, four accounts per bank, it doesn't seem right.'

'Could the transactions have been made to embarrass someone or another banking house even? Could it be political?' asked Ronson.

'Look I am sorry, but at this moment in time we just don't know. We will continue to investigate internally, but we now have the money back and that is all we are concerned about at present.' Murray sat back in his chair.

One of the other officials added. 'It is important that we minimize the damage to the Reserve System, and keep this possible cyber attack as low key as possible. If the papers got hold of this...well,' he shook his head.

'It is all about public confidence,' added Murray.

'Well the first step is to try and see how this was done. There is nothing at all on the mainframe I gather?' said Ronson. 'You are telling us it just appears as a series of standard transactions.' She looked at Cole who continued the questions.

'So, we are assuming that the authorization was overridden due to it happening at a time, well at a time the computer did not recognize? During the leap second.'

'Pardon me?' said Murray looking at Cole

'Nothing of importance,' dismissed Ronson and changed the subject. 'What you are telling us is that the money has been returned without argument and there is no evidence on the computer to show that there was anything dodgy about these transactions except that they were not authorized?'

'That's correct,' confirmed Murray for a second time.

'Okay,' said Ronson. 'You have reported this to us and we are duty bound to investigate. So, can we start by actually seeing the transactions as they appeared on your system?'

Of course, but I will have to leave you with my colleagues who are already working out what happened, and with that he rose shook each agent by the hand and left, leaving Ronson to get on with her investigation.

McGeever was sat in the front of a US Embassy car being driven just within the speed limit along the M25 from Heathrow Airport. 'How long is it going to take?' he asked.

'Depends,' replied the driver without either much interest or enthusiasm. 'It's about 65 miles so you are talking an hour and 20 minutes if we're lucky, but don't be surprised if it takes a whole lot longer. These small motorways are always at bursting point except in the early hours of the morning.'

'Where exactly is it?' asked McGeever looking out of the tinted windows at a nondescript landscape.

'Between Woolwich and Thamesmead in south-east London.' It meant nothing to McGeever and he said so. 'From central London, you would go to Camblewell, Peckham, through Greenwich Park along the A2 then through the residential areas of Woolwich to the

prison itself.’ McGeever regretted the question as the driver spent ten minutes trying to explain where these places were in relation to key tourist attractions.

McGeever had never visited a British prison before. He knew Her Majesty’s Prison Belmarsh was a category A prison and home to just under a thousand prisoners, some not very agreeable, so in the back of his mind he had some Victorian penitentiary with high dark walls. So, he was surprised when they arrived at the relatively new set of buildings although there was very high security everywhere. He was met at reception by the Governor who led him into her office where coffee and rolls were laid out. She indicated a comfortable chair and he sat down and waited for the inevitable questions by someone used to making their own rules having to comply with those from even higher up. ‘You’ve come directly from the airport I gather?’ she enquired as she poured and then handed McGeever a cup of black coffee. ‘Milk, sugar?’

He shook his head. ‘No thanks.’

‘Something to eat?’

‘Thanks,’ he lent forward and took a roll from the proffered plate.

He took a bite. ‘Just help yourself,’ she said smiling and sat down opposite him. ‘You have come to see Mr Trevor Stanley?’ He nodded, his mouth full as he chewed on the chicken and bacon roll. ‘We had a request to set up an interview room for you, tape machine everything you specified.’ He didn’t respond, so she continued, fishing for clues. ‘The request came from MI5, so I gather this is something to do with National Security?’

McGeever knew she was curious and was desperate for information. ‘It is part of an ongoing investigation Mam,’ he replied. ‘I am afraid...’

She raised her hand and stopped him. ‘No need to explain, strictly confidential, I totally understand.’ She smiled at McGeever and he knew that she hadn’t finished yet. ‘There is no one else to be present I understand?’ He nodded. ‘That is a bit irregular,’ she observed.

‘I appreciate that Mam, but I’m afraid it’s imperative that no one overhears what transpires between us. As I said before it’s all about National Security.’

‘I understand that, and I do sympathize Agent McGeever, but one of my officers must be able to see Mr Stanley at all times.’

‘I am not going to beat him up or anything,’ said McGeever defensively.

‘I am not suggesting otherwise, but he does have rights. There is a window and one of my officers will be keeping an eye on things from outside.’ McGeever shrugged then stood up.

‘Thank you for your hospitality Mam but I need to see the prisoner now.’

Stanley was sat in a clean and nicely decorated room normally used for family visits to prisoners. He looked surprised when McGeever entered. 'Hi Trevor, fancy meeting you here?' he said in greeting and sat down opposite him with a large rectangular table between them. McGeever glanced up and saw the prison officer, his back turned to the window. 'How are you getting on?' he asked placing his own mini recorder on the table and ignoring the large and cumbersome recorder set up by the prison authorities.

'What do you care?' asked Stanley.

'Not a shit,' agreed McGeever. 'I am only here because I need to clarify a few things and I need you to be straight with me. You still in solitary?' Stanley nodded. 'Okay. What do you know about transferring money from a bank in the US?'

'What?' replied Stanley, 'you accusing me of robbing a bank or something?' He smiled at the agent. 'You do realize that I have a water tight alibi, don't you? I was here all the time.' This seemed to amuse Stanley enormously and he laughed uproariously causing the prison officer to turn around to look at the pair sitting opposite each other, one of which seemed to have just been told a joke. McGeever wondered what Stanley's mental state was like.

'You don't know when the money was stolen so it could easily have been you,' said McGeever coolly. Stanley looked a bit more subdued.

'Not my scene. I am not a thief,' he observed.

'Really?' asked McGeever.

'No, not in that way.' Stanley was defensive but showed no signs of guilt. 'So who got robbed and how much?' he asked.

'Not your business, but I need to go over some parts of your statement.' McGeever bent down and retrieved a bundle of notes he had made on the flight.

Three hours later McGeever was convinced that Stanley had no idea what he was talking about and came to the conclusion that this was nothing to do with him. He had been convinced all along, but he had not let that influence him, and his questioning had been thorough, cunning and relentless. He stopped by the Governor's office on his way out and thanked her for all the co-operation and during the drive back to the embassy in London he phoned Sanderson and left a very simple message on her answering service. 'As suspected, he's clean.'

It was the following day and the team was gathered in Sanderson's Office. 'Nothing,' said Ronson. 'Sorry.'

'Was it unusual for so much money to be in that account?' Sanderson asked. It was Cole who answered.

‘Apparently not. The money was being held centrally having been collected from the 12 Reserve Banks for onward payment to the US Treasury. It is a normal procedure; but what is interesting is that you would have had to know that the money would be in that account for a few days while the transfer was being organized.’

‘What about the operating system?’ persisted Sanderson who strongly suspected this was an inside job.

‘It’s a mixture of simple Windows and Linux systems. There are loads of researchers, mainly economists, and they also use the same high performance computer servers as the banking side uses.’

Sanderson was convinced. ‘So, it is probably an inside job.’

‘Could have been,’ agreed Cole. ‘But there is no evidence one way or the other.’

‘I presume their security is rock solid?’ Sanderson’s question was trying to get Cole to agree to her insider theory.

‘You would think so, but there have been more than fifty identified attempts to hack into the system in the past four years, many successful.’ Cole smiled apologetically realizing that the answer was not the one her boss had been hoping for.

‘Okay so it’s not so secure. But it’s as good as any US agency,’ observed Dubois. The FBI is also a major target for hackers from around the world. These are trophy targets for hackers globally.’

They fell silent for a while. ‘Someone hacks into the system transfers two billion dollars, doesn’t make any attempt to hide what has happened then returns the money instantly the transfers are identified,’ summarized Sanderson.

‘That’s about it,’ agreed Ronson, ‘and I get the feeling that the Federal Reserve people want to hush it up so they aren’t going to pursue it.’

‘But why?’ mused Sanderson. ‘There has to be a motive? Could it be some disgruntled employee wanting to embarrass the Reserve?’

Ronson shrugged.

‘Well there has been a crime committed here,’ said Sanchez who had been quiet up to now. ‘Whatever the motive it’s still a very serious crime, and we shouldn’t be party to hushing it up just because they don’t want any adverse publicity.’

‘Or copy cat attacks from other hackers,’ suggested Ronson.

‘What about the interest?’ asked Hoff innocently, but he was smiling broadly.

‘The interest?’ repeated Sanderson nodding her head. ‘How much interest would 2 billion dollars earn over 9 days?’

‘Possibly a lot of money,’ said Hoff turning to Dubois. ‘What you reckon Paul?’

‘I have no idea but it wouldn’t be your normal interest rate; also, it’s very short term. The best rates would be over periods of 5 to 7 years, or if you put them into bonds or something like that. Let’s guess at 1.5% maximum per year. So that would that be?’ Dubois tapped away on his calculator function on his phone. ‘Seven hundred and thirty nine thousand seven hundred and twenty six dollars,’ he said simply.

‘A lot of money,’ observed Ronson to no one in particular.

‘Not compared to two billion,’ said Sanchez. ‘Once you had successfully stolen that sort of cash what criminal in their right mind would give it back for a miserly three quarters of a million?’

‘There would also be the bank charges on that,’ continued Dubois. ‘I don’t know precisely, but a Private Bank wouldn’t come cheap, but I would guess at 25%. So that leaves us with just over half a million dollars, \$554,794 dollars and 50 cents to be precise. Doesn’t seem enough of an incentive to commit a crime on this scale to me.’

‘Well perhaps not,’ agreed Ronson. ‘But for a non-crime or a crime that is never going to be proved against anyone, then it seems pretty cool to me. After all it could have taken weeks to have traced those accounts, and every day more interest was accruing. So it was a gamble?’

‘That’s precisely what I don’t like about it. They made no effort to deceive or hide those transactions...they were simple open transactions that almost any teller could have traced. The lack of complicity here is going to make it impossible for us to make any type of conviction stick, even if we could find out who those accounts belong to,’ concluded Sanderson.

‘They probably used false names anyhow,’ said Hoff, ‘so the only way to catch these people is to be there when they collect the money.’

‘Won’t they simply transfer the money into a secondary account?’ asked Cole.

‘I don’t think so, after all they don’t want to leave any trace,’ suggested Dubois. ‘They are far too careful.’

Cranfield listened to the briefing by Sanderson a few hours later. ‘So that’s that,’ he concluded. ‘At least we’ve got the money back, and with the extra security now in place the atomic clock network is secure from something like this ever happening again.’

‘It’s more about the security at key computers during that leap second,’ suggested Sanderson.

‘Well we’ve done everything we can to prevent it and that’s all I’m worried about. The issues about the leap second can be dealt with by the National Cyber Security Agency.’ He

paused. 'I guess it's over for real this time.' He swung back in his chair tapping the tips of his fingers together, thinking. 'So what, someone has possibly managed to get half a million from the Government by borrowing some money for a few days. It's not the worse crime in the world. The Federal Reserve System wants us to drop the case anyway.' He paused. 'I think we should close the book on this one.' He leaned forward and closed the folder on his desk. He swivelled his chair around to the large picture window that looked out over Washington, snow was still falling but it wasn't settling. This was Sanderson's cue to leave.

'Do you mind if we try one more thing Joe?'

He reluctantly swung around to face Sanderson again. 'What are you suggesting.... I thought we didn't have enough evidence to convict even if we found someone to charge?'

'That's true, but I think it's important we do try and identify the culprits in this case at least even if we can't get a successful conviction.'

'I don't see the point,' he said. Then a glint came into his eyes. 'What are you suggesting?'

'I want to stakeout a couple of banks for a few days, a week maybe?'

'The money is long gone Becky, forget it.'

'Please Joe. I want to find out as much as possible about this crime, and I know we have a chance.'

He shrugged. 'A very slim chance, my gut is telling me the money has long gone.' He looked at her and smiled. 'Okay, but don't spend more than we've already lost okay. Now get out of here.'

That afternoon the entire team, minus Hoff who was minding the operations desk and writing up the report, and McGeever who was due to fly back to the States from London at about the same time, were making their way to the Airport. Four of the five banks that had received the money transfers were in Switzerland, three in Zurich; so it seemed to Sanderson that the best place to start looking was in that city. The overnight Swiss Air flight left Washington International Airport at 5.45 pm and would take about eight and a half hours arriving in Zurich in time for the early morning rush hour.

That first day was spent locating the banks and getting the US Embassy to organize clearance with the Swiss authorities to set up surveillance cameras. Sanchez, Cole and Dubois had each been allocated a bank to watch. A small surveillance team supplied by the US Embassy had established themselves at each one with CCTV footage being collected of all people entering and leaving each bank. Each Agent was responsible for their own teams and the stakeouts were scheduled from an hour before to an hour after normal opening times. The idea was that all the faces would be sent back to Hoff in Washington who would run them through the central identification system. Even if they recognized someone it was not going to be possible to arrest them in Switzerland.

The three agents had left at the crack of dawn the following morning to start the surveillance operation leaving Sanderson and Ronson to a more leisurely start to the day.

The phone rang next to the bed and Ronson picked it up stifling a yawn. 'Your breakfast is on the way up Madam is there anything else we can get you?'

'No thanks, that's fine.' She replaced the receiver and lay back. The early morning light was flooding the room and she glanced at the bedside clock. It was 9.00 am, and should have felt rested but in fact she had slept badly and her head was still confused by the six hour time difference. There was a discreet knock on the door and a young chambermaid pushed a trolley into the room.

'Breakfast Madam.' The maid spoke with a heavy German accent.

Ronson sat up. 'Just put it on the table, thank you.' The maid carefully laid out her breakfast and coffee, including a coffee and tea pot, milk and several newspapers.

'Enjoy your holiday,' the young woman called as she left the room carefully closing the door behind the retreating trolley.

Ronson had meant to shower before breakfast but she climbed out of bed and went over to the table still in her nightdress. She poured a cup of coffee and grimaced at the headline in the US newspaper. 'Potential Fraud hits Federal Reserve.' She picked up another, it was German the popular *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. At the bottom of the front page a smaller headline "2,5 Milliarden Euro verschwinden von der US-Bundesbank." She took out her phone and called Sanderson.

Two hours later Sanderson and Ronson were sat in a café in the heart of the City drinking coffee while taking in the scene outside. It was bitterly cold but luckily there was no snow. They had already had updates from the other three FBI agents and everything was going well. Sanchez's team had an initial problem when Sanchez himself discovered that his bank had a separate rear entrance, resulting in an extra surveillance camera having to be rapidly set up in a van parked opposite which was not perfect but had to do for the interim.

'Any news from Charlie?' Ronson asked.

'Yes, he's completed the interview with Stanley and said that he can find absolutely nothing to connect him with this,' replied Sanderson.

'What was Stanley's reaction to seeing Charlie again?'

'A mixture of pleasure and disappointment as far as I can gather. He is not happy in prison that's for sure,' confided Sanderson.

'Shit!' said Ronson suddenly spilling her coffee.

'Was it too hot?' inquired Sanderson reaching for some paper napkins that were neatly folded in a glass container on the table.

‘No, look!’ hissed Ronson urgently. ‘Over there, keep your head down or she will see you.’

Sanderson moved slightly and glanced carefully out of the window. ‘It can’t be?’ she said.

‘It fucking well is,’ said Ronson. ‘That’s Professor Anne Taylor.’

‘But she’s on bail, she can’t travel outside the States,’ commented Sanderson looking intently at the woman. ‘Well unless she has an identical twin,’ replied Ronson grabbing her bag, ‘come on!’

About 80 metres along the street Anne Taylor was kissing a tall grey haired man. They couldn’t see his face as he had his back to them. They were talking but clearly about to move on. The two women caused a bit of a commotion as they literally ran from their table. Ronson grabbed a wad of notes from her bag, dollars and Swiss francs all mixed together and threw it at the till as they rushed towards the door. Their sudden exit caused less of a problem than they might have expected as the staff gathered up about 240 francs in notes, certainly an overpayment for two Americanos and two pastries even in Zurich, so it was a sizable tip.

Once in the road they could see the two figures disappearing rapidly into the distance but going now in diverging paths, the man raising a hand in farewell to Taylor. ‘You follow the man,’ hissed Sanderson pulling her shoulder bag over her neck, ‘Taylor’s mine.’

‘It must be a coincidence,’ said Ronson breathlessly as they rushed past the parked cars dodging the traffic and at the same time trying not to be too conspicuous.

‘Taylor and Nicholson, we should have known,’ Sanderson was clearly angry that they had been duped.

After 35 minutes the man stopped to buy a newspaper from a stall. Ronson had kept a distance of about twenty to thirty metres as there were still plenty of people about. She didn’t want to lose him in the crowd, but then again, she didn’t want to be spotted either. She followed him across the road. At first she thought he was heading for a large hotel, but he suddenly turned down a side street. By the time she got to the corner the man had disappeared. So slowly and carefully she made her way down the narrow, cobbled street looking into first one shop then another. She was sure he hadn’t seen her because he had never once looked back nor made any sudden moves; so, she was sure he must have just gone into one of the shops. Then suddenly she saw him, in a small café his back towards the window. What was she to do? She had no gun, no cuffs, and come to think about it, no jurisdiction. She waited a few minutes outside and saw the waiter bring a plate of something made from eggs, she wasn’t sure. She had no way of getting back up from the other team members, they were all busy, and anyhow it would take too long. So she considered her options. If she went inside she would either recognize him in which case he would probably recognize her, or alternatively she could get a good look at the man and even get an image of him on her iPhone. Waiting outside and following him was a risk. She

could lose him easily, especially in a strange city which was completely unknown to her. If he identified her she could also be at risk with nothing at her disposal to protect herself with. She decided to go in.

Ronson was sure it was Nicholson and that he and Taylor had fled the country and were on route to somewhere without an extradition order to the States, like Morocco or the Cape Verde Islands. But then again Joe Cranfield had been doubtful if any charges would ever be brought so why these drastic measures. It didn't make sense. She walked past the man heading for an empty table but couldn't resist turning to look and at that very moment he looked up at her. 'Hello Gail, nice to see you,' he said in a relaxed and friendly voice.

'You don't seem surprised to see me?' she said simply.

'No,' he replied smiling, she almost felt he was genuinely pleased to see her. 'I was kind of expecting one of the team, but I'm glad it's you. Sit down and let me order you something.'

She took the seat opposite him and looked directly into his eyes. The waiter came up. 'May I help you?' he asked in English. How did these guys always know you were a tourist she wondered?

'What would you like?' the man asked.

'I'm not fussy,' said Ronson her head spinning, 'anything will do.'

'Then its two cappuccinos. Anything to eat?' he asked.

She shook her head. 'No thanks, I'm fine.'

Her phone buzzed indicating a text message. She looked down at the screen. 'It's my boss, Professor Taylor has just checked in for a flight back to the States.' The man just nodded.

The waiter returned and placed the two cappuccinos on the table. The man discarded his plate of food and leaned back in his chair and regarded Ronson and waited while she answered the text simply typing one word. 'Festor.' Finally she looked up. 'We know what you've done Uncle.'

Festor smiled. 'No you don't, you think you do, but you don't have any proof.'

'What was the money for?' she asked

'Are you recording this Agent Ronson?' he asked still smiling.

'No,' she said, and shook her head. Whatever he had done she couldn't help liking this man.

'Promise?' he asked.

'Promise,' she replied.

‘So, if I was to make up a story then I would say that the money was for Anne,’ he said simply. ‘Her career is over, it was to give her a new start. When she was released on bail she couldn’t go back to Pasadena and she turned up at my apartment in Washington. She had nowhere else to go. Well over the weeks we became close.’ He smiled. ‘She won’t be able to work for a while. She has no salary, all her accounts have been frozen, so she has nothing. One day she might get a teaching job somewhere but in the meantime, she is ... well you know.’

‘You can’t still work for NASA after this,’ said Ronson quietly.

‘I had made up my mind a long time ago to get out. I had stopped enjoying the work after I was blamed for halting those launches. If it hadn’t been for you guys turning up, well who knows.’

‘So how did you do it?’ she asked.

‘It wasn’t rocket science,’ he said, ‘and after talking with Daly that day, and reading all those files from Stanley’s disc my IT skills went up several notches. It was child’s play.’ He paused then added, ‘There are no records, no clues, nothing. The surveillance on the banks which I presume you have put into place since you arrived.’ He smiled apologetically, ‘Well you never had a realistic opportunity to know where to look before we had withdrawn the cash.’ Ronson’s eyebrows rose.

‘That’s a lot of cash to be carrying around,’ she said.

He laughed. ‘Come on,’ he said draining his cup of coffee, ‘I have a train to catch in a couple of hours. I am on holiday you know. I have this European Train Pass. I still have five days left of my holiday.’ He paid the bill and together they left and walked to the hotel next door to collect his bags which he had left at the desk.

Sanderson called off the surveillance. And a quick look at the CCTV footage showed that neither Taylor nor Festor had used the banks. Both were now out of Switzerland. Taylor heading back to the US and Festor to Italy.

‘What are you going to tell McGeever and the others?’ asked Ronson.

‘I am not going to tell them anything,’ said Sanderson. ‘Not for the moment anyhow.’

‘What about the Director?’

‘I don’t know. It’s just the two of us that know. I think we should let it go.’

‘Really?’ asked Ronson surprised, ‘I think we should report back.’

‘I suppose you’re right.’ said Sanderson sadly. ‘Festor ... I still can’t believe it.’

'The son of a bitch,' said Cranfield over the phone. 'I would never have thought.'

'We have nothing on him, no proof of any kind. Even the circumstantial evidence is weak,' explained Sanderson. Ronson was in the hotel room listening to her boss.

'So?' asked Cranfield.

'I think we close the case,' she said simply.

She could hear Cranfield humming and hawing at the other end of the line...then. 'We just let him go back to work at NASA?'

'Why not?' retorted Sanderson. 'How can we actually stop him?'

'We could find a way easy enough,' said Cranfield menacingly.

'The fact is I gather from Gail that he's going to resign anyhow,' she explained.

'And live off that stolen money I suppose,' came his terse response.

'If you check Joe you will see that when we did our preliminary screening of Festor at the outset, we found that he had been investing money in stocks for over 20 years. I reckon he might be pretty well off. His financial affairs totally added up. Apart from this he's straight.'

'Okay, if he agrees to resign then we will close the case,' relented Cranfield. 'Will you speak to him?'

'No, I will let Gail do that, he respects her.'

'Okay, call off the surveillance and get home.' There was a pause before he continued. 'You sure he did it?'

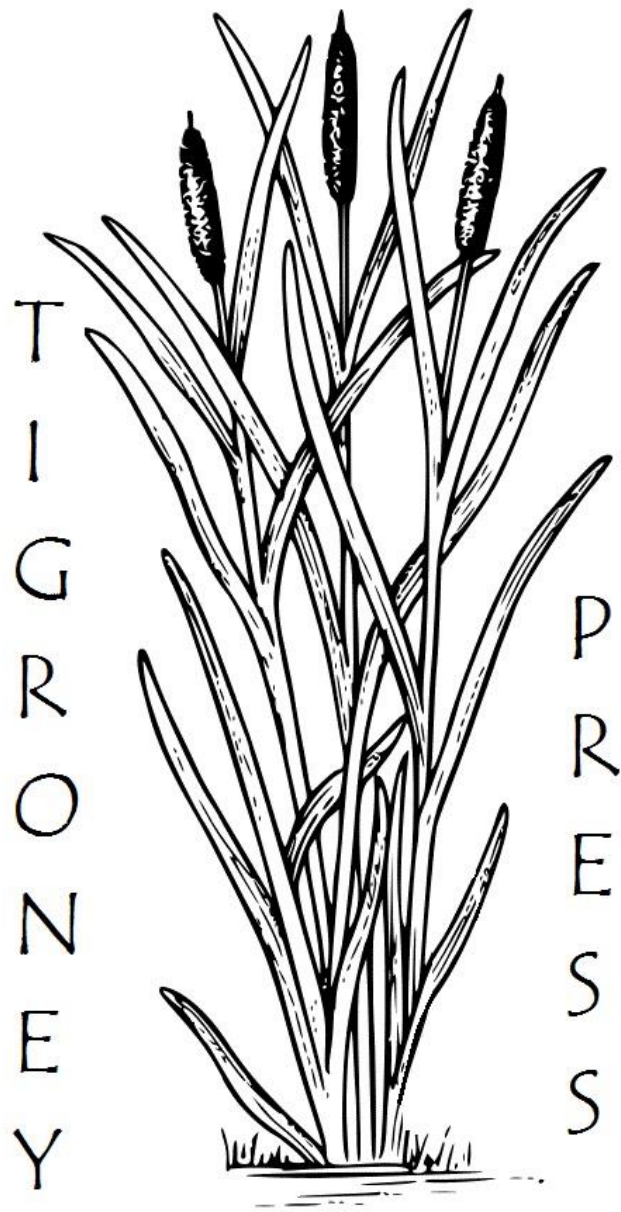
'Yes, without a shadow of doubt and without leaving a shred of evidence,' she replied.

'Hell,' said Cranfield, 'it's time to move onto the next case. I'll see you in a couple of days.' The line went dead.

Sanderson turned to Ronson who had been listening to the conversation. 'Was I wrong to trust Festor?' she asked.

'I don't know boss,' she replied. 'But without his help we would never have caught Nicholson and Stanley.'

'No, I suppose your right. Let's go home Gail,' she said simply, 'let's go home.'



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