



# THE CODEX FILE

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*For Ethan, Milo and Joanna*



## CHAPTER ONE

The flick-knife snapped open with frightening ease, its serrated edge glinting in the light of a passing street lamp. The weapon was standard issue for CODEX operatives, along with most of the contents of the canvas bag that sat in John Kennedy's lap.

Pulling each item out one by one, he scrutinised his equipment – preparation was vital, and nothing could be overlooked. The first object was a transparent bag containing an assortment of plastic ties, designed to restrain his victim and viciously bite into her flesh if she struggled. A length of rubber tubing was next, followed by duct tape, and finally a can of spray paint – everything he required for the job.

Vincent Trevellion sat next to Kennedy in the driver's seat, navigating the blue Mercedes through the dark, quiet streets of Hersham. Turning right into a long tree-lined road that stretched round a gentle corner, the 1930s pebble-dashed house they sought came into view.

Trevellion pulled the Mercedes up alongside the pavement a few houses down from their destination. Apart from a few parked cars, the street was deserted, intermittent street lamps illuminating the darkness.

Reaching into his jacket pocket Trevellion pulled out a handheld electronic device. The screen blinked, and a menu of options appeared. Sliding a finger purposefully across the screen an intelligence file on the 'target' containing a photograph of a woman appeared on screen, smiling, walking hand-in-hand with her husband, their daughter running along behind. The photograph had been taken on a long-lens camera several weeks before. He didn't need to look at it again. He knew what she looked like – it was burned into his memory.

He scrolled down past the photograph to the text below about Colette Robertson, a technical director at a leading web technology company. Past the biography, his eyes scanned the final line of text accompanying the picture: "Objective: Colette Robertson to be eliminated under Phase 1 of CODEX operation OP09/ST".

Closing the file, Trevellion opened a second intelligence report attached to the data on Colette Robertson. A picture of her eight-year old daughter, Clare Robertson, flashed up on the screen, a pretty girl, with long blonde hair that fell over her shoulders and down her back. Once more he scrolled past the image to the biography and objectives. And again, the same order had been issued: "Objective: Clare Robertson to be eliminated under Phase 1 of CODEX operation OP09/ST".

Trevellion closed the files and placed the electronic device back in his jacket pocket. The murder of a child might be distasteful, but it would guarantee the necessary nationwide media coverage.

Even if their car were spotted, the registration plates wouldn't lead an investigation anywhere meaningful. The stolen plates would only lead to a long deserted warehouse in rural Scotland, and whilst the police were chasing their tails, they'd be long gone.

Trevellion tapped his opposite jacket pocket to confirm the two high capacity flash drives were still there. They were special issue for CODEX operatives, not the standard multi-gigabyte versions you could buy on any high street. These could handle terabytes of data and weren't for public consumption.

Kennedy nodded silently, a slight sneer crossing his face. Replacing his equipment in the bag, he used the vehicle's mirrors once more to be sure their entrance wasn't overlooked.

Satisfied they were alone, the two men exited the Mercedes and began their approach to their victim's house.

Colette sneezed for the umpteenth time that day and reached for yet another tissue. She winced slightly as she dabbed her nose, red and sore from wiping away the non-stop proof of her cold. She really must buy some of those balmed tissues that were always being advertised she thought, gingerly stroking her nostrils.

She hated being ill and this was the third cold she'd picked up in as many months. She was starting to think that maybe it was the flu since she'd begun feeling progressively worse as the day had gone on. Her muscles ached, the throbbing headache was pounding now more than ever, and her streaming nose showed no sign of stopping. Tossing the damp tissue in the general direction of the bin she watched as it bounced off the side and landed next to her cat. He eyed her suspiciously, awoken by her latest sneeze.

She hoped she'd be well enough to return to work tomorrow. But secretly she doubted it as she felt her head, bunged-up with cold, start to throb again.

Reaching for the TV remote control, she began channel-hopping, looking in vain for something half-decent to watch.

Maybe she ought to do some work she wondered. There were always meetings to prepare for, reports to compile and strategic IT problems to solve. Particularly at the moment. Yet the thought of sitting in front of her high-powered tablet device just seemed to make her aching head throb further.

What she really needed was a bit of TLC. But instead, everything seemed to have gone wrong. On today of all days. It was their wedding anniversary after all. But where were all the people she cared for?

She began to well up again as the bitter exchanges around breakfast that morning came flooding back. Deep down, she knew it hadn't been Michael's fault that his company's Managing Director had invited him to an important corporate dinner.

*"Look, you know what these work functions are like, I really have to go. I can't get out of it. I'm really sorry," he said.*

*"If you were sorry, you would have said no and made some sort of excuse," she yelled angrily back at him. "I can't believe you didn't realise what day it was."*

*"I'll make it up to you, I promise," he replied sheepishly before returning to his toast.*

Attendance hadn't been obligatory. They never were, were they? You only didn't go if you were happy to stay in the same old job for the rest of your career. Michael hadn't mentioned the fact that she'd done the same many times in the past on her way up the career ladder at SW Technologies. She'd remembered though, and had kept that fact to herself.

It hadn't mattered this morning. It was their anniversary, and she'd been pissed off about it. Particularly since she'd gone down with a heavy cold, as well. It seemed like the whole world had been conspiring to ruin their special day.

She couldn't even seek comfort in their daughter. She was at an important ballet rehearsal. The performance was on Saturday after all. The mother of one of Clare's friends would be picking her up after the rehearsal tonight. Normally it would've been Michael. But not tonight, all because of that bloody dinner. It just wasn't fair.

At least she had Harry with her, she thought with a little more comfort when he jumped onto her lap and began purring softly.

Closing her heavy eyes again, her thoughts drifted slowly away to happier things. Before they reached very far, she became aware of a distant ringing, somewhere in a different consciousness.

*Have I started dreaming? Am I asleep or awake?*

She didn't really care until Harry leapt from her lap, clawing her thigh as he used it as his launch pad.

The ringing was much louder now, and much nearer. Opening her eyes with a start it took her sleepy mind several moments to realise the doorbell was ringing. Maybe Michael had forgotten his key in the heat of their argument in the morning?

Casting a quick glance at the antique clock on the mantelpiece she knew it was too early. Unless he'd decided to skip the function after all. Had he come home to surprise her on their anniversary?

In the hallway, she could see two figures through the glass of the front door. One tall, and one shorter and stockier. The shorter man was carrying some sort of case.

Reaching for the porch light switch, she blinked with surprise as the figures on the doorstep remained in darkness.



Slowly opening the door, the men who had been looking away, turned to face her. For a long moment, all she could see were their silhouettes and the slight outline of their faces. Just before the taller man spoke she noticed the porch light bulb was missing.

"Mrs. Roberston? Mrs. Colette Robertson?" the low, unfamiliar voice asked.

She'd barely confirmed her identity when the stocky man's fist crashed into her mouth and nose. A ring tore into her top lip. She felt herself career backwards and impact heavily on the oak floorboards. Sinking into unconsciousness, she was aware of the tall man closing the front door and bending over her.

There were times when she would have a particularly bad nightmare and wake in the middle of the night in a cold sweat. Clinging to Michael for security she'd soon breathe a huge sigh of relief that she'd been dreaming. Colette knew this wasn't one of those times.

Even through the semi-consciousness of waking she could feel the intense burning of her chest, although she felt slightly cold and restricted in her movement. Before she opened her eyes, she knew she'd been bound to something.

Her eyes shot open as the rasping pain burned into her waking senses again. Through bleary eyes, she could see a figure hovering above her. The flash of metal, the strangely white hands, the pain getting unbearable, as sleep was rapidly replaced with frightening consciousness.

Her eyes were fully open now and she could see everything. A stocky man in dark blue overalls.

*Blood.*

The blade of the flick-knife snapping shut.

*It's my blood.*

The white surgical gloves were coated with her blood, and it was running everywhere.

She tried to scream, but her mouth was unable to move.

*Duct tape.*

Her panic threatened to escalate out of control. Lifting her head, she looked at herself. Her feet were taped tightly together around the ankles, and her hands were tied to the bedstead with white plastic restraints.

It wasn't that which most concerned her. It was the pools of blood running from her chest, staining the white sheets of the bed. Her screams were only heard in her head as through wide, frightened eyes she looked at the bloody mess which had once been her chest. She felt sure she could make out a handful of individual wounds as her eyes rapidly switched between the blood and the man in the dark blue overalls as he circled menacingly above her.

John Kennedy looked down blankly at Colette's bloody, restrained body as Vincent Trevellion watched impassively from a chair to the right of the bed. Kennedy was quite pleased with his handiwork, although the full effect wouldn't be visible until she was dead and the bleeding had stopped. It was good enough for his purpose. Trevellion's suggested mutilations had been inspired and would send out a chilling message.

He studied the bloody mess and smiled wryly. It wasn't bad at all, considering it was the first time he'd carved a message in human flesh.

His eyes slowly moved across her exposed, blood-drenched breasts. Above them, he read: *'Fuck the Net'* in violently jagged letters. His gaze rose above her stained body to the message he'd smeared on the wall. *'Reclaim the World'* was daubed in her blood.

Seeing his colleague had finished his task, Trevellion stood up from his seat and approached the bed, peering at the message carved in flesh, admiring the application of his own macabre suggestion. Their work was nearly done. Whilst his accomplice had been securing Colette Robertson to the bed, he'd copied all of the SW Technologies state network tender project data, and wider semantic web development information from her tablet. The priceless flash drive sat snugly in his inside pocket.

Ransacking the house had also yielded a few more useful hardcopy files for him to study. The final satisfying act had been to format and infect her tablet device, removing all of the SW Technologies data forever. It was too risky to steal the machine as it would doubtless be fitted

with a tracking device given her line of work, and they didn't have the time to locate and remove it. He smiled as he gently tapped a second flash drive in his jacket pocket that contained the virus that had forever wiped her computer clean of all its secrets.

All that remained was for the others to complete their jobs. Breaking into SW Technologies' premises would be a formality. Once the information had been claimed the building would be torched. And the anti-net activists would soon be hunted for her death. After tonight's events there would be nowhere for them to hide.

Trevellion turned to his right, checking the digital video camera erected on its tripod was still recording. He smiled as the red light continued to beam, the intrusive lens capturing the death of Colette Robertson.

Turning to face his colleague, he nodded slowly before returning to his seat to watch the last rites. As he sat he saw the flash of the flick-knife blade snapping open, blood sticking from its earlier work.

Colette struggled violently as the bloody blade flicked into position. This couldn't be happening. Surely she'd wake in a minute and wrap a comforting arm around Michael's sleeping body. But she knew this was it. No waking up in a cold sweat. No relief at the vividness of her dreams. No escape.

She struggled more violently than ever as the man leant over her, careful to avoid the bloody sheets, the blade moving towards her face.

The tears streamed down her cheeks as for the first time she looked closely at his face and then to the man sitting nearby. She didn't recognise the man in the overalls, but the other taller man was a different matter. The dark hair, well-defined features and high cheekbones probably made him about 40. It was difficult to be certain, his neatly trimmed black goatee beard made him seem older.

She couldn't be sure where, but there was something strangely familiar about him. She'd seen him before. As sheer terror overtook her senses, her heart pounding in her ears, she couldn't remember where or when.

The blade was at her lips.

She sank back into the mattress as far as humanly possible. It wasn't enough. She closed her eyes and winced as the sharp blade flashed in front of her mouth. She waited for the intense burning pain, but instead, all she felt was a slight trickle of blood seep into her mouth.

Opening her eyes again, she saw that the stocky man in his overalls had moved away to one corner of the room. Her wide eyes scanned across, stopping in alarm as she saw her digital video camera propped up on its tripod.

All her muscles tightened involuntarily and she clenched her fists. Her eyes narrowed into tiny windows as her anger rose. As if what had been done to her already wasn't enough. They were going to kill her. She was certain of that. But the sick bastards were filming their work for all time.

*What sort of fucking animals are you? What are you going to do when you've left me butchered on the bed? Go home and get a hard-on watching this?*

Her gaze once more fell on the taller man and her anger quickly faded as tears spilled down her cheeks. She was never going to see Michael or Clare again. That was the most painful thing. Not the wounds on her chest which would have healed in time. She was going to die alone, never having the chance to hold them again.

Her sorrow evaporated as she looked back to the familiar-looking man, aware of him moving to her right. He was placing something in a leather-bound briefcase, open on the dressing table.

*Is that a flash drive?*

Her confusion at the situation rose even further. She attempted to think rationally as waves of terror and nausea continued to rush over her.

The bastard must have copied something from my computer. But that's all work-related, how that could possibly be of interest?

Her thoughts trailed off rapidly. The bell in her head was ringing more loudly. So this is what it was all about.

*This is about my work. And the tender I've spent so many hours on.*

She knew industrial espionage was a dirty game, but this was beyond anyone's worst nightmare.

And now she realised why the man looked familiar. She had a vague recollection of meeting or seeing him at an industry event the year before. He'd been making a presentation on advancements in...

The answers and images in her mind faded instantly as the stocky man approached the bed again. This time the knife was replaced by a long length of rubber tubing and a large white plastic container. Her eyes flicked rapidly from the man to the plastic container, desperately trying to read the words on the label.

The rubber tubing was roughly forced through the slit in the tape across her mouth, in between her swollen lips, and she caught sight of the label.

White Spirit. He's trying to pour White Spirit down my throat and burn out my fucking insides.

She clenched her mouth firmly shut, shaking her head from side-to-side. The rest of her body continued its losing battle to break free from its restraints.

Within seconds, the fist which had first greeted her at the front door had smashed viciously into her face three times. She was barely aware of her nose being smashed, her septum splitting, or the teeth breaking as unconsciousness began to consume her. If she'd been able to think clearly, she would have probably welcomed it rather than face what was coming.

As she finally succumbed to the black unconscious, she never felt the rubber-tubing slide into her throat.

The light bulb for the porch was missing. It was the first thing Michael Robertson noticed, as he approached his front door. Frowning, he reached into his jacket pocket for his door key, groping about in the darkness, sure in the knowledge the bulb had been there the night before. Perhaps it had broken that evening and Colette just hadn't got round to replacing it yet he wondered.

Another thought crossed his mind, one he hoped was too petty to be possibly true. Was Colette still sufficiently pissed off with him to have removed the bulb just to annoy him when he arrived home from his work's annual dinner?

Dismissing the idea, Michael exhaled noisily, hoping the bunch of red roses and bottle of Lindemans Bin 65 Chardonnay, one of Colette's favourites, would help smooth over their fight at breakfast. Even now he couldn't help but feel Colette was a little hypocritical in making a fuss about him attending. How many meetings, conferences and overnight stays had she been on in the last few manic months for her job?

Trips to London for emergency meetings at virtually no notice were almost as commonplace as her going into the office. There were some weeks he'd barely see her at all, and not once had he made a fuss, or made her feel guilty about it and the fact that their eight-year-old daughter Clare missed her dreadfully when she was away.

Although, as Colette had been keen to point out, none of those meetings had taken place on their wedding anniversary. And not only was it their anniversary, but she'd got a nasty cold, or maybe even the start of the flu, and needed looking after. If she did have the flu, it wouldn't be entirely surprising given how hard he knew she'd been working. Being a bit run down was all too likely the reason for her picking up something.

He knew the timing had been dire, but there was nothing he could do about it. The Managing Director had made it clear a dim view would be taken if all the senior insurance brokers didn't attend the annual dinner. And he'd duly obliged, incurring Colette's wrath in the process.

Sliding the key into the lock, the front door opened up into the dark hallway. Glancing at his watch, lit-up by the full moon, the time was a little after eleven. Normally Colette would still have been awake at this time, probably working on her laptop, but instead, all the downstairs lights were off. The only illumination came from the upstairs landing.

Flicking the hall light on Michael's gaze dropped to the assortment of letters strewn across the carpet, just beyond the doormat. Colette prided herself on her tidiness, and the letters and bills that needed to be responded to were always stacked neatly on the side of the hall table, not lying in a mess on the floor. Maybe Harry, their cat, had taken a walk across the narrow table, he thought, closing the door gently behind him.

For a brief second he thought about calling out to Colette, but rejected the idea in case she'd gone to bed. Despite the recriminations at breakfast, he hoped she was still awake and they could enjoy some of the remaining evening together with a pleasant glass of wine.

Placing his keys on the hall table, Michael headed in the direction of the kitchen to retrieve two wine glasses. Before he reached there, he stopped, his gaze honing in one of Colette's slippers, discarded on the bottom step of the staircase. Several steps further up, one of her gold encrusted earrings, a present from their last wedding anniversary, lay unattended.

A quizzical look crossed Michael's face as a slight frown formed before he turned and slowly began to climb the stairs. Even when she was ill, Colette wouldn't just dump things on the stairs, especially not her favourite jewellery.

With the roses in one hand and the bottle of wine in the other, Michael gently walked up the stairs, careful to avoid the creaky step at the top.

The upstairs of the house was just as quiet as downstairs. Eerily quiet. There was no sound of life from the bedroom. No quiet mumblings from the television. Not even the quiet whistling of the wind coming in through the bathroom window which was always open, even in winter. And no sign of their cat Harry keeping guard at the top of the stairs which was his nightly ritual.

Reaching the landing one more thing wasn't as it should have been. Their bedroom door was closed. They never closed it, just in case Clare ever needed something in the night.

Without further thought, Michael turned the door handle to his bedroom. The room, like the rest of the upstairs of their house, was in darkness. But there was something else he wasn't prepared for. The smell. A metallic chemical cocktail hung in the air, invading his senses as he grappled to decipher what it might be.

His heart began to pound and he could feel himself starting to perspire. Something was wrong, and as he reached for the light switch his sense of dread was rising by the second.

He felt the air being sucked from his lungs as artificial light bathed their bedroom. For a few long moments he stood, staring, unable to move, a sea of blood filling his vision as he looked at what had once been their bed.

Even as he stared at the sight before him, his confused thoughts couldn't process what he was seeing. The duvet was on the floor at the foot of the bed. The sheets were stained crimson, barely a spot of white remaining. Colette was bound to the bed, her wrists fastened to the bedstead, her ankles taped together.

Michael could feel numbness and nausea creeping through him simultaneously as he took in every detail of the horror before him. Bloodied duct tape was pulled over Colette's mouth, and what looked like a piece of rubber tubing was hanging limply from her swollen lips. On the floor next to the bed was a discarded white plastic canister. The words 'White Spirit' just visible from where the container lay on its side.

Beginning to shake, the acidic taste of bile burnt the back of his throat as his gaze dropped to Colette's exposed chest, her shirt torn open and crumpled beneath her. Savage markings and lacerations had been cut into her pale flesh, the blood now dried into a gruesome message that made no sense.

*'Fuck the net'.*

And on the wall above the bed, more blood, smeared in large letters, spelling out another message.

*'Reclaim the world'.*

Unable to hold back the nausea any longer Michael vomited onto the floor in front of him before beginning to hyperventilate.

"That can't be Colette," his mind was pleading.

But he knew it was as his eyes traced the lines of blood running from the wounds in her chest, matting portions of her long brown hair together where it had got in the way of the blood flow.

And as unconsciousness crept up on him, and he slumped heavily to the floor, one more terrible thought filled his head.

Where was his daughter?

## CHAPTER TWO

The shadows were beginning to lengthen as the dark blue Mercedes gently ground to a halt alongside the deserted playground. Two men quickly exited the car, following the path running round the edge of the play area. One wore a smart black suit, the other in dark combat trousers, a thin jumper and carrying a black holdall.

Creaking swings rocked gently in the breeze as they turned onto a narrow path running along the back of the houses on the small, quiet estate. Vincent Trevellion looked quickly around him, ensuring no-one else was on the path. There was no-one. The only sound was the gentle crunching as their shoes trod down on the gravel.

Walking purposefully up the quiet path Trevellion counted the houses, making sure they reached the back of their intended location. Conservatory after conservatory loomed up over the tall fences, the wooden structures decorated with a mixture of trellises and climbing plants, all backing onto the path.

At the seventh house, Trevellion stopped counting. They'd reached their destination.

Above the fence, they could see the upstairs of a large mock Georgian house. A vast conservatory ran along the entire back of the building. In front of where they stood was the back gate of the garden, shrouded in ivy hanging down from the bricked arch above.

Moving to one side Trevellion watched as his stocky accomplice, John Kennedy, prised open his holdall. Pulling two pairs of white rubber gloves from the material bag, he passed one pair to Trevellion. Silently, the two men pulled on the gloves.

Reaching back into the holdall Kennedy slid out a well-used crowbar. Checking they were still alone on the path, and confident the high fences obscured any view of their activities, he inserted the crowbar in between the gate and its wooden frame and leant heavily on the tool. The lock creaked and buckled and gave way to his weight. The gate swung open, revealing an immaculately manicured garden. The vibrant mixture of flowers and shrubs subdued by the twilight.

Closing the gate behind them, and propping a nearby shovel against it, hiding the evidence of their entrance, the two men stole up to the back door of the house. Kennedy still gripped the crowbar tightly in his right hand. Raising the tool to the glass Trevellion nodded as it punched a jagged hole through the glass above the door handle.

Dropping the crowbar back into the holdall Kennedy slid his hand through the hole in the glass, turning the key lodged in the lock.

A thin smile crossed Trevellion's normally sombre expression as they entered the empty house. They both knew the owner would be back soon.

Trevellion looked around the large galley-style kitchen until an item on the tiled wall opposite caught his eye.

"This should be very persuasive," he said menacingly, lifting the meat cleaver from its hook on the wall and passing it to Kennedy.

The meat cleaver glinted from its newness and Trevellion doubted it had ever been used. He smiled as he studied its reassuringly sharp edge as his able assistant grasped it tightly in his right hand. Eight inches of metal so sharp it could slice a wrist off in one vicious strike.

Everything seemed to sparkle in the kitchen. Pristine clean work surfaces. A well stocked wine rack with its excellent vintages. And shards of glass, decorating the polished wooden floor from where they'd forced entry.

Armed with the meat cleaver the two men passed silently from the kitchen into the study. The meticulously tidy room contained what they were expecting - a touchscreen computer, securely mounted at 45 degrees, and shelf upon shelf of paper files, computer disks, DVD-ROMs and flash drives. Almost a lifetime's work of a man dedicated to developing computer technology.

The bookcase along the adjacent wall was carefully stacked with manuals on advanced programming techniques and the online world into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. A filing cabinet sat beside the bookcase. This surely held more technology secrets Trevellion thought as his gloved hand

delicately stroked the top of the storage unit. The contents of the room were entirely what they were expecting.

The sound of the 7 Series BMW pulling into the luxurious gravel drive filtered through to the two men and Trevellion cast a glance at his watch. On time as usual, he thought knowingly, as the second hand moved on to 7.10pm.

Kennedy placed the meat cleaver down on top of the bookcase before slipping his hand into the pocket of his combat trousers. Silently, he pulled out a length of thin rope, about a metre long. As the key in the front door turned, Kennedy wound the thin rope tightly around his fingers. Moving just inside the doorway to the study, they both waited and listened.

As the front door opened, the sound of creaking hinges filled the quiet house. David Langley trudged into his darkening hallway, dropping his heavy briefcase onto the thick pile carpet with a dull thud.

A sickly odour of stale aftershave and a day's sweat permeated the hallway. Closing the front door, he tossed his keys onto the wooden table inside the door. A hoarse asthmatic cough echoed in the hallway. Pausing for a second to catch his breath he reached into his pocket for his Ventolin inhaler. Carrying the heavy briefcase from the car had stirred up his asthma yet again.

Pumping the inhaler twice between his lips, he looked down at his stomach. A mountain of flesh hung flabbily over his waistband. A puddle of sweat stained his Yves Saint Laurent shirt where it clung to his skin. He really ought to lose weight he thought, replacing his inhaler back in his jacket pocket.

Wiping the perspiration from his face, he exhaled loudly. Bending over to reach for the post congregated on his doormat he began to gasp for breath yet again. The thin rope bit into his flesh and tightened around his windpipe. Duct tape was quickly wound round his head and over wide, fearful eyes as struggled from where Kennedy was restraining him.

"Oh my God, if it's money you want I can get you money," Langley gasped, his voice rising in panic, the rope constricting his windpipe further.

"Shut the fuck up fat man," Trevellion said calmly.

His clenched fist smashed into the man's right kidney. Through a stifled cry Langley crumpled as his legs gave way beneath him. For a brief moment he was suspended like a limp puppet as he hung from the rope cutting into his throat.

As Kennedy's grip loosened the man slumped to the floor. Lying motionless, his reddened face gradually began to turn blue.

"Great, where's his fucking inhaler?" Trevellion snapped, his neatly polished shoe thudding viciously into the man's back.

Bending down, but still with a grip on the rope, Kennedy quickly rummaged through Langley's suit pockets. His searching stopped as his fingers wrapped around the inhaler.

Winding the rope tighter for more leverage Kennedy quickly yanked Langley into a sitting position before loosening his grip. The man's face had turned to a darker blue as he fought for every precious breath. Shoving the inhaler roughly between his quivering lips Trevellion pumped five rapid squirts into Langley's mouth.

*You're not allowed to die yet fat man.*

The man spluttered for a few seconds before his colour gradually returned.

"On your feet," Trevellion snapped as Kennedy roughly hauled Langley into a standing position.

"Look, what do you want?" he panted, sweat oozing from every pore.

"I'll ask the questions," Trevellion replied caustically.

The man was bundled into his study and pushed roughly into the swivel chair. Temporarily he sank into unconsciousness as Trevellion ripped a vicious blow across the side of his face with the outside of his fist.

Kennedy rapidly wound the strong, silver duct tape around Langley's ankles, fastening his chubby arms and wrists to the thick wooden armrests. Kneeling beside the right armrest he spread the man's fleshy fingers, taping each digit tightly to the chair.

Trevellion stood close by, looking down at the fat, balding middle-aged man before him. His face was bright red, sweat congregating in his furrowed brow. His stomach, which hung over his neatly pressed trousers, rose and fell rapidly.

"Look, who are you? What do you want from me?" he managed to blurt out.

Trevellion didn't reply. Instead, he walked nonchalantly to the bookcase, picking up the meat cleaver.

"I want access to ACE Solution's records relating to the state network tender and what's currently in your company's R&D pipeline."

Trevellion approached the chair, passing the meat cleaver to Kennedy.

"You must be bloody joking. I can't give you that," Langley replied incredulously. "I don't even have access to all that data."

As he finished his sentence Trevellion roughly brought his hand over the man's mouth as Kennedy brought the meat cleaver down. Langley struggled in his chair as his little finger shot two feet in the air, blood gushing from the gaping wound.

Trevellion pulled his hand away as the man began to whimper.

Langley began to feel the nausea well up inside him. The smell of his sweat and the metallic odour of his own blood filled his nostrils. His shirt was drenched in perspiration as he writhed in vain against his restraints.

"Oh Jesus, oh fuck. I'm going to bleed to death. Oh God, no."

Winding the thin rope back round Langley's throat, Kennedy pulled tightly.

"Don't fuck with me fat man. It's only going to get worse if you don't work with me," Trevellion snarled.

He paused, looking down at his polished shoes. The fat man's wound had dripped blood onto the Italian leather. Disdainfully, he wiped his spattered shoes on Langley's trousers.

"Listen very carefully. I know you're the project manager for the state network tender at ACE Solutions. That means you have access to the project information and the R&D pipeline. Tell me where it's stored and this will soon be over."

"I can access some of our network through a secure VPN connection from my computer here. But I don't know where the rest of it is stored," the fat man lied unconvincingly.

The meat cleaver whistled satisfyingly, slicing through the air, severing the man's thumb at the knuckle. The sickening sound of metal ripping through flesh, tendons and bone was drowned out as the fat man screamed.

Trevellion whispered threateningly, closing his hand over the man's mouth.

"Well, you're not going to be able to jerk off anymore with just three fingers. And if you don't start talking quickly you won't have anything to jerk off with because I'll cut your dick off and fucking feed it to you."

Removing his large hand from the man's mouth Trevellion stood back and looked at the man's bleeding hand.

"Alright, alright," Langley panted. "All of our developmental state network and intranet projects are stored and archived on a suite of secure remote servers. I can access all of it from my machine here. We don't keep hard copy files at ACE Solutions. It's not company policy. It's part of our push to the paperless office and meeting the needs of the Freedom of Information Act."

Sweat continued to pour down Langley's reddened face. A thin smile crossed Trevellion's.

Bending over the desk Trevellion deftly pressed the 'On' button of the elegant tablet computer. Within seconds an array of software options filled the uncluttered desktop.

"Where am I going from your desktop? Via the VPN link?"

As the man nodded Trevellion noticed the duct tape across his eyes beginning to work itself loose. It was probably the fat man's sweat that had loosened it he thought.

Motioning to his accomplice Kennedy quickly slapped a fresh piece tighter across the man's eyes.

Sliding his index finger across the glossy screen Trevellion tapped the VPN icon.

"User name and password?" he demanded.

The fat man flinched in anticipation of being maimed by the meat cleaver again.

"Er, 'ace497#dl' and 'home794#fv'," he spluttered.

Carefully keying in the details, the screen seamlessly changed, displaying two further options:

1. Connect to ACE Solutions Email services
2. Connect to ACE Solutions corporate LAN

Trevellion grinned maliciously as his eyes scanned the screen. Within moments of selecting the second option the rapid VPN broadband link had connected to ACE Solutions LAN.

A fresh menu of user options quickly appeared. In the corner of the screen the company's logo, a neatly defined sphere, smoothly rotated. Along the bottom of the screen were six buttons.

Trevellion glided his finger silently over 'Advanced user options' and softly pressed the screen.

His expectancy quickly faded and he sighed with annoyance as a further dialogue box popped-up. A cursor flashed eagerly in the centre of the screen.

"What's the PIN for Advanced user options?" he barked threateningly.

The fat man's resistance had been cut away as rapidly as his finger and thumb as he divulged the password. More waves of nausea swept through him as Trevellion entered the code.

Trevellion's gaze carefully scanned the new on-screen options:

1. Upload information
2. Copy information
3. Help

He smiled wickedly as his finger gently pressed for the second option.

'Please specify the destination drive and directory' a further dialogue box insisted.

Trevellion's hand hovered over the on-screen keyboard. The fat man's hand continued to ooze blood that dripped onto the dark blue carpet.

Pulling a high capacity flash drive from his jacket pocket, Trevellion slid it into the USB port before turning back to Langley.

"How much data is there on your LAN?" he demanded impatiently, casting a glance at the antique clock above the monitor.

Langley jumped a little, stirred from momentary unconsciousness.

"I don't know, er, three or four terabytes, I suppose," he panted.

*Fuck it*, Trevellion cursed silently. It wouldn't all fit nicely onto one of the drives.

Dismissing the slight irritation he typed rapidly, watching as the small red light on the flash drive flickered. In less than five minutes countless technological secrets of ACE Solutions were confined to his drive. The whole operation had been far too easy. And with a couple of finishing touches everything would have gone to plan.

Inserting a second flash drive into the USB port to complete his data theft, he slipped the usurped information into his suit pocket.

In front of him the screen had returned to its previous options. With a wry grin he selected the 'Upload information' option.

As the FTP application opened on the screen, Trevellion again turned to the bound, fat man.

"OK, it's nearly over now," he said almost soothingly. "I just need your FTP username and password for your company server."

Langley replied slowly as a stream of sticky sweat slid between his swollen lips.

Trevellion typed quickly on the command line, a slight grin crossing his lips as he accessed the heart of the system. And the area where they would wreak most long-term havoc.

Now he'd confirmed Langley's login details were authentic he'd pass the details on to his technical specialists. From there it wouldn't take them long to wipe the server clean of all its data and render it unusable. With their skills, no-one would ever retrieve the lost information. And with all of the ACE Technologies' backups simultaneously being destroyed in a further covert operation, it would put the companies R&D pipeline back years. Just as they'd planned.

Reaching into his jacket pocket he pulled out a fresh flash drive, inserting it into the USB port. Irrevocably formatting and scrambling the hard disk with a virus would suffice for Langley's own computer he thought maliciously as the drive flashed up an option on the screen.

One of his team had developed a particularly nasty virus that ensured no-one would ever retrieve any data from this machine, no matter how technologically gifted they were.

Clicking the 'Run' option on the screen the storage device began to whirr as the hard disk began to be disassembled by his program.



Rising from the seat Trevellion reached into Kennedy's holdall, pulling out a paintcan aerosol. In less than a minute the walls were daubed in jagged, black words.

*'Fuck the Net. Reclaim the World'*

His stocky colleague grinned as he stood menacingly behind his prisoner, poised to strike if required. Trevellion looked down at the bound, fat man who was shaking in his chair.

Langley sensed the strangers' attention had returned to him.

"Please don't kill me," he whimpered as he heard the meat cleaver slide slowly across the surface of his desk. "Why are you doing this? What have I got that you want so badly?"

"A piece of the future," Trevellion replied quietly.

Kennedy roughly slapped another piece of duct tape over Langley's swollen lips. Trevellion smiled as his colleague slowly raised his right arm.

The meat cleaver tore through the fat man's left wrist, severing the hand. Langley's arm shot free, flapping about uncontrollably, arterial spray staining the carpet. The severed hand remained attached to the armrest, the duct tape keeping it in place.

Langley howled in muffled pain as his lips split as he fought the duct tape.

Trevellion watched silently, careful to stay out of the arcing arterial spray as the fat man's restrained body thrashed about in the chair.

One more glint of the cleaver and Langley's other hand was severed with equal clinical precision.

*How long does it take a man to bleed to death?*

He watched as Kennedy also stepped back from the dying man, the widening pool of blood spreading further across the carpet.

By the time he collected the flash drive from the computer Langley had stopped bucking in his chair. Unconsciousness had taken over.

Trevellion grinned. What a nice neighbourhood this was.

### CHAPTER THREE

Digger curled his stubbled top lip into a grimace, snorted noisily, and spat on the ground in disgust as he read the newspaper article. They were coming. He knew it. They all knew it. Even Moley had said so before, and he wouldn't bullshit them.

The last time Moley had gone into the town to get some food and supplies for the group he'd seen it on the front page of one of the newspapers. And not one of the crappy tabloids mind, which was always reporting alien abductions or royal bleeding rubbish that no-one cared about.

No, this had been one of the quality rags. One that was always moaning on about whether Britain should fuck Europe or get fucked by it.

The words of warning had spread through the camp quicker than flies on shit. The suits that were going to destroy the countryside, yet again, were coming. One more road carving its way through woods, hillside and the 'natural land' as they called it.

They'd already ploughed on through Winchester and Newbury. Concrete monstrosities for ignorant fuckers whose only interest was to make a quick profit. If the countryside got in the way, fuck it. That was tough bleeding luck and the 'natural land' was bled dry.

But no more. They'd put up good fights in Winchester and Newbury. Kicked a few of their arses in the process. But this time they weren't going to get their moneymaking way.

Digger sniffed the cool morning air and ran his grimy fingers across his stubbled chin. His fists clenched and unclenched as he thought about their imminent arrival. This time they weren't playing by the rules.

Sure, in the past the suits from the government had quoted by-law violations. They'd even re-written the Criminal Justice Act they'd been so desperate to get rid of them. But this time it was different. Now the rules had gone out the window.

*What the fuck do we know about the internet anyway? Or care about it?*

Yet Moley had seen it all in that rag. As clear as day. Two important bastards from some rich computer companies had been killed and they were getting the rap for it.

Flicking open the pages of the tabloid Moley had picked up for him, Digger paused briefly to study the buxom blonde on page three. His eyes burned with rage as he reached the offending page. The story wasn't just in the quality rags.

*'Anti-Net activists implicated in gruesome murders' the headline read.*

His eyes quickly scanned the text, coming to rest on the fourth paragraph.

*'In both cases, police have confirmed that the murder scenes exhibited the words: 'F\*\*\* the Net, Reclaim the World'. At the murder scene of Colette Robertson police revealed that the message had been daubed in the victim's blood. Police have said...'*

Digger looked up, scowling, before hurling the pages away.

"It's a bleeding setup," he murmured, surveying the countryside before him.

Their camp was situated in a forest on the edge of Brookwood Heath, a previously protected site of special scientific interest with a vibrant and diverse eco-system. But that status had gone out the window thanks to a Government U-turn and chasing the pound signs that UKCitizensNet would bring. Parts of the open heathland, much of their forest, and countless habitats would be driven out once the bulldozers came.

Looking around the camp of platforms amongst the trees, his resolve to do all they could to stand in their way hardened. He looked back at the newspaper and the executives who'd been murdered and scowled again. What the fuck was going on? Their agenda had sod-all to do with the internet. Sure, their war-cry was 'Reclaim the World', always had been. But 'Fuck the Net', as well?

This time the suits from the government had a new plan to get rid of them.

At Winchester and Newbury there'd been a fair amount of support for their cause. Who really wanted a road instead of the countryside?

But, if the suits pinned a particularly brutal set of murders on them, then all sympathy would be wiped out. With no public sympathy, the pigs would have a free hand to use whatever strong-arm tactics they wanted to get rid of them.

He thought about the tabloid article once more, looking down from his high tree perch at the scattered pages below. They were building a link road to a new headquarters that was to be built for a company developing semantic web technologies.

“Digger, the bastards are coming.”

Moley’s warning broke his concentration as it echoed through the trees. On the horizon, he could see a gathering of vehicles heading in their direction.

*Right where the fucking road would go.*

Behind him, the chatter of voices and boots thudding on the ground filled the air. He watched as the rest of the group climbed the forest’s trees to their well-constructed lookouts or down the numerous tunnels they’d dug.

Turning to watch the approaching hordes his eyes widened in surprise.

*No, this is wrong.*

Instead of the normal police vans hotly pursued by a mass of hungry hacks looking for a story, were a strict formation of army lorries, two tanks, and a long black limousine.

*Where’s the fucking press? Who’s going to record our fight to protect the countryside?*

He looked again at the formation of army vehicles. For the first time since he’d chosen the life of an environmental protester, more than 20 years earlier, butterflies began in his stomach and he felt himself gradually perspiring, his breathing becoming heavier.

The bastards could do anything to them. And without the cameras no-one would ever know. The government suits could hide behind the Official Secrets Act and no-one would ever know what happened.

*This whole area must be pretty fucking important.*

The procession of vehicles ground to a halt at the edge of the trees.

“Wankers,” a female voice bellowed from a nearby tree.

It was Harmony, a veteran of conservation causes.

An officious-looking officer climbed down from one of the lorries and looked up at Harmony’s lofty position.

“Take that bitch down first as a warning,” Digger heard the officer order.

Two further soldiers leapt from the back of the lorry. Carrying a bulging army rucksack they approached the base of Harmony’s tree fifty feet away. Digger squinted to see exactly what they were doing, but the early morning sun blinded his vision.

Within a minute, the soldiers returned to their lorry, uncoiling a long length of something he couldn’t quite identify. His mouth dropped as the soldier raised the detonator plunger.

“No,” Digger murmured. “Harmony, get off the tree, use the ropes. They’re going to...”

A sudden orange flash and deafening explosion filled the forest. Thrust backwards by the force of the blast the sound of groaning and splintering wood sliced through the air. Harmony’s tree swayed for a few long seconds before crashing down in front of the army congregation.

*Harmony. Oh fuck it, no, Harmony.*

He looked down from his tree perch and into the swirling cloud of smoke hanging over the fallen tree. He couldn’t see her. He couldn’t see a thing. All he could see was more soldiers rushing into the smoke, punishing batons raised.

Digger’s eyes closed and he bowed his head as the dull thuds echoed through the trees.

To his left more branches began to sway and creak under pressure. Within seconds, Moley swung onto the lofty tree perch. Tying the rope around one of the sturdy branches he turned to Digger, his eyes wide with fear, brimming with angry tears.

“Harmony.....” he finally managed to blurt out.

“I know,” Digger replied quietly. “The bastards killed her.”

“Harmony,” Moley said again, shaking his head.

Digger placed a comforting arm around his shoulder. Moley wasn’t the most articulate of their group. But he was a damn good tunneller. Probably the best they had.

Digger looked into his stubbled face, his eyes wide with fear, his dreadlocks hanging limply around his chin. Behind the grimy exterior from days in the tunnels, was a frightened young boy.

It was easy to forget Moley was only 19. He'd been with them for four years now. A runaway and reformed intravenous drug user from the inner city of Birmingham. All he had wanted was to 'Reclaim the World' from a bloodsucking, poisonous establishment. Never mind all the 'Fuck the Net' bollocks. Their concern had always been the countryside.

Surveying the scene below, the fear he felt gave way to anger as his fists tightened once more, his scowl returning.

Behind him, he could hear the startled voices of his friends amongst the trees. But what was in front of him concerned him more. Five teams of soldiers, all with the now familiar army rucksacks, were approaching the edge of the woods. And for the first time since he had chosen this life, he prayed.

Sebastian Tate and Vincent Trevellion sat in the soft leather seats of the black limousine. The sound of explosions and batons subduing the protestors, one by one, bounced gently off the reinforced glass.

They needed the land and the protesters were trespassing on purchased property. The most recent amendment to the Criminal Justice Act, which Dr. Marcus McCoy had rapidly pushed through Parliament, gave validity to this punitive action should it ever come to light. Not that it would. They'd ensured the media hadn't got a whiff of this particular ejection.

Tate gazed through the black-tinted windows protecting their identities and smiled. This wouldn't take long, he thought as another tree fell into the forest in a cloud of smoke.

"How useful has the new data been?" he asked finally.

"It's been useful. Particularly one project the Robertson woman was working on. It's filled in a few blanks in our own semantic web projects. I doubt she knew the full potential of what she had, all other things considered. SW Technologies probably envisaged it as some neat application for people too stupid to remember their passwords, online personal details and digital footprint. Instead, as we hoped, we're looking at a far more powerful, next generation app. The possibilities are very promising."

Tate smiled from behind the rimless glasses, always peering intently over the top when someone else was speaking. Straightening his black silk tie gently, he considered Trevellion's information.

"And Langley's data?"

"Interesting in places. Not too much that our own people didn't know though. There are a few things which round off a few rough edges, one might say."

"Good. Now that Robertson and Langley have been dealt with, Phase I is complete. The sooner we get UKCitizensNet's headquarters built and the entire operation transferred to here, the better. My department has ensured maximum manpower is available for the construction work. I want you based here in three months."

Trevellion nodded as Tate pulled out his mobile phone to deliver his update on the Green protesters back to Miles Winston in Whitehall.

Three months were plenty of time to have everything ready.

## CHAPTER FOUR

The driver of the black Volvo estate floored the accelerator and hastily pulled a dark green balaclava over his face. His passenger followed suit before removing a thick rubber baton from a canvas bag in his footwell.

The engine roared as the vehicle hurtled forward; lights purposely switched to full beam to dazzle, moments before it slammed into the back of the silver Citroen. The din of scraping metal and tyres screeching was joined by a fountain of orange sparks as the two cars momentarily melded together and then split apart as the Citroen veered into the right hand lane.

With the left hand lane now clear the Volvo quickly pulled up alongside the stricken Citroen, its bumper thudding noisily on the tarmac as it hung off the back of the dented chassis. Turning the wheel sharply, the Volvo smashed into the back of the car again with the impact of a bullet from a 44 Magnum. The force of the collision into the back-end caused the Citroen to flip round 180 degrees as it lost its grip on the road, rubber scorching the tarmac in a perfect arc.

For a split second the two men in balaclavas were face to face with the opposing driver, Morgan Jones, his eyes wide with panic, his arms a flailing blur as he wrestled the steering wheel in vain, unable to prevent the inevitable.

Pushing down hard on the brakes the Volvo ground to a halt on the quiet country road amidst the corridor of mature pine trees that lined it. The Citroen, still facing the wrong direction had slid off the road. Perched at a precarious angle in a ditch on the opposite side, the nose of the car pointed upwards, tangled metal from the rear was embedded in the muddy bog.

Morgan Jones fought to rid himself of his seatbelt as the doors to the Volvo flew open. With his heart pounding in his ears, burning pain coursed through his back and neck from the impact of the crash. When his seatbelt finally unlocked he knew what was coming.

The two men, dressed in black combat gear, emerged from the Volvo, their faces obscured by menacing balaclavas, their intent burning in their eyes as they hauled open his car door.

The larger of the two men instantly brought his baton down on Jones' right arm with frightening force before he could move. Nausea welled up in him and for a brief moment everything went black as his body was engulfed with unspeakable pain.

"On the fucking floor," the man snarled, as Jones fell out of the car and into the wet, muddy ditch.

Prone on his back, too terrified to move, the two men stood above him, slowly circling their prey, deciding which bones to break first.

A heavy doc marten boot clattered into his ribs, causing him to roll onto his side, involuntarily adopting the foetal position, as if this would somehow protect him. Bile rose in the back of his throat and he was aware of one of the men bending down.

"I'm disappointed in you," the guttural, threatening voice said quietly. "I would have thought after our last visit you would have learnt your lesson and stopped poking your nose into things which are none of your fucking business. Was our last meeting in any way unclear?"

A second kick impacted on the same ribs as before, and Jones was sure they'd broken at least one.

"You see, because you haven't left it alone, we're really going to have to hurt you this time. But don't think we're just going to leave it there. We know all about your wife Margaret, and the family and children of your partners. They'd better start looking over their shoulders, if you know what I mean."

Despite the searing pain in his ribs Jones tried to sit up to protest, but was shoved roughly back to the ground.

"Get this straight you dozy twat. This is your last warning. Either you leave well alone and keep your nose out of computers and the fucking internet, or being driven off the road will be the least of your worries. Do you understand me?"

Jones nodded, unable to speak from where he was pinned to the ground.

*But as he looked into the eyes of his assailant through the narrow eyelits of the balaclava, he knew they weren't finished with him. The eyes were still full of intent, sparkling with adrenaline, relishing the prospect of impending violence.*

*Jones watched, transfixed, as his attacker slipped his hand into the canvas bag his partner had been carrying. A long, thin knife with a serrated edge that caught the early evening sun was paraded in front of his face, cutting the air as it moved slowly backwards and forwards in front of his eyes.*

*Without warning Jones' arm was hauled upwards and his wrist was turned as if he was being restrained. The second man grinned through the ragged mouth hole of his balaclava and yanked Jones' little finger outwards, almost dislocating it.*

*Jones' gaze followed the knife which had now moved away from his face. The attacker holding the knife smiled maliciously.*

*"Now this is going to hurt."*

Morgan Jones' eyes shot open and the vicious memories slowly receded. Despite his tiredness, he couldn't afford to go to sleep. Not tonight.

Hunched over his desk, a half-smoked cigarette hanging limply from his lips, he glanced at his computer's clock. The time was 11.34pm.

*Twenty-six minutes left.*

Jones' hand shook slightly as it hovered over his keyboard, throbbing from where the knife had sliced through his flesh, memories of all the pain he'd endured puncturing his thoughts. A severed finger, four broken ribs and a ruptured spleen weren't injuries you forgot too easily.

Most nights he'd wake up, his pulse racing, the darkness enveloping him, inducing the same sense of panic he'd felt when the men had restrained him before going to work on him.

Jones' gaze flitted quickly from one part of the screen to another as he began to type on the command line, the screen filling with code as he hacked deeper into one of the many government servers.

The security of the system was appalling if you knew what you were doing and had the right software to breach the firewall. For people like him and his three colleagues, former software engineers and security analysts, breaching the firewall had taken only a matter of minutes. If things had turned out differently, he would probably be working for them, advising them on weaknesses in their online security and how to beat the hackers. But not now.

To his right his three partners sat at individual machines, all typing rapidly, committing any useful data they found in their own searches to high-capacity flash drives. All four men were inside UKGovNet, the government's internal network, accessing vulnerable document stores, servers, and individual computers still logged-on to the network, looking for anything that could prove the imminent arrival of UKCitizensNet was a sham.

On the desk in front of him lay a well-thumbed edition of that day's Guardian newspaper, its headline as clear as it was stark: *"Internet shutdown to commence as UKCitizensNet comes online"*.

Jones's gaze moved back to the clock. 11.40. Just over 20 minutes away from the demise of the internet and freedom of online access and expression.

*How has it come to this?*

Stubbing his cigarette out in an empty coffee mug Jones shivered, rubbing his arms firmly, attempting to rid his limbs of the cold and damp that seeped through the quiet, empty warehouse. A slight smell of solvents hung in the air, but the only thing it now contained were a dozen propane canisters, fastened together in the centre of the warehouse floor below them.

Looking up from his screen, he peered down through the office window. The four of them had organised the canisters when they'd arrived earlier that evening, all acutely aware tonight was the night they'd most likely need to use them. But that was for later.

Once UKCitizensNet was up and running, they'd never be able to hack into internet sites in the same way again. The newspaper article confirmed that more robust security encryption was promised, and as skilled as the four men were, none of them really knew just how long it would take them to breach the system in future.

Turning to the right a shorter, broader man in his early 40s was peering intently at his screen, also with a cigarette in his hand.

“Have you found the money yet, Brown?” he asked seriously, one eye on his own screen as another directory downloaded its data.

John Brown frowned, taking a long drag on his cigarette before turning to face his colleague.

“No. Our separate account is still frozen and the money’s been drained from it. Fuck knows how they knew it was us, there shouldn’t have been any link back to us. And, it’s too well encrypted for me to hack into in the time we’ve got left to free-up the money.”

The other two men, Stephen Smith and Richard Green, sitting at computers opposite, looked up from their own activities.

“Then, that’s it, isn’t it? We’re fucked. They’re definitely onto us if they’ve shut down our account,” Green said, panic cracking his voice.

“It could be a coincidence,” Jones replied with little conviction, but knowing it couldn’t be.

Somehow the masked men that had been trailing them, and whomever they worked for, had discovered their discreet bank account in Geneva. It had been the only way to safeguard their resources in the event of any unforeseen accidents. But now they were onto this too.

Out of the corner of his eye Jones glanced at the propane canisters on the warehouse floor below. Looking away, he turned to Brown, who’d slumped back in his chair.

“Get into the CRB database and check to see if we’ve made an appearance in there. If they want to apply real leverage to us, the easiest way to get cooperation from all law enforcement agencies is to give us all a record. Check it out now, and bloody hurry.”

*11.50pm.*

Jones returned to his own screen, searching one server directory after another. A few minutes later his attention stopped on one area of a new server. His searching had taken him onto a Defence Department directory. About half-way down the screen he eyed a seemingly bland report produced by the National e-Government Strategy Group – a group of powerful commercial CEOs representing the UK computing industry and senior government ministers and civil servants. The report title suggested nothing more interesting than timetables for UKCitizensNet and how it would be implemented throughout the country. He almost dismissed it as irrelevant, but at the last moment he noticed in the meta-data description of the document the name Miles Winston, the Secretary of State for Defence. Intrigued as to why he should have an interest in the network he began to delve deeper into the Defence Department’s interest.

Documents containing the names of covert operatives working in foreign countries, surveillance activities, and information collected from moles and informants scrolled past. And whilst ordinarily most of this classified information would have been worth a discreet look, this evening he breezed straight past it.

Accessing a directory entitled ‘Networks’ he waited impatiently as its contents scrolled up on screen. His gaze stopped on a folder named ‘CODEX’. Casting a hasty glance at the clock he delved into the files hoping it might just contain something relevant to UKCitizensNet.

*11.58pm.*

A feeling of euphoria surged through him. Part way down the directory listing one file stood out: *CODEX file OP09/ST – UKCitizensNet implementation and development.*

Checking his flash drive was secure in the USB port he called up the PDF file, waiting anxiously as it loaded on screen.

*Come on, come on. Load damn you.*

The electronic file was issued by the Defence Department, the filename, also the title of the report, sat prominently at the top of the screen.

*What the hell is CODEX? And why is the Defence Department so interested in a new computer network? It doesn’t add up.*

The first few paragraphs stated the classified nature of the information before detailing the government’s timetable for introducing the new network.

There’s nothing new in this information. Why the hell is it covered by the Official Secrets Act?

*11.59pm.*

More information on the successful contractor for UKCitizensNet followed with details of key personnel. None of it seemed relevant to his search, and he could feel his frustration rising as he scrolled further into the document.

Finally, his eye caught the title of a paragraph: *Phase I – Primary Targets*. Three names were included on the page and he began scanning the text.

*Name: Colette Robertson*

*Position: Technical Director, SW Technologies*

*Skills: Semantic web technologies, financial management, broadband integration, legal and regulatory compliance*

*Dependants: Michael Robertson (husband); Clare Robertson (daughter)*

*Current personnel status: Colette Robertson (deceased), 16/9/10), Michael Robertson (active), Clare Robertson (deceased) 16/9/10)*

*Principal operatives: Sebastian Tate, CODEX Unit 2*

*Name: David Langley*

*Position: Technical Consultant, ACE Solutions*

Before Jones could read any further all the information vanished. The same thing had happened to the other machines in the small office.

The computer clock read 12:00.

Without warning a fresh message flashed up on all four monitors simultaneously, and as he read the words he knew he'd missed his chance to save the document.

*Access to the internet is now prohibited in the UK. If you possess a UKCitizensNet activation code, please use this when UKCitizensNet becomes active at 9.00am, January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2011.*

The four men looked at each other, none of them saying a word. In nine hours' time UKCitizensNet would begin and online freedom would be gone.

Jones turned to Brown, who was now clutching a handful of papers that had just emerged from the printer.

"Did you get into the Criminal Records Bureau in time?" he asked anxiously.

Brown nodded, handing him the pile of papers.

The first sheet was a criminal record report in his name - his real name. A surly-looking mugshot and an array of personal details were at the top of the document. What was underneath sealed his fate, and those of the other men.

Under 'Arrests and Convictions' were numerous entries relating to electronic crimes, all in breach of the Computers Misuse Act: hacking offences, access to restricted data, and dissemination of confidential material. It was followed by more alleged crimes relating to online extortion, identity theft, and correspondence with other criminal elements.

Looking up briefly at the three other men he quickly read the other 'invented' criminal records, all lengthy and incriminating.

"There's going to be nowhere for any of us to hide now, you realise that, don't you?" Brown said flatly, a slight tone of panic cracking his voice.

Screwing up the printouts Jones angrily tossed the paper balls in the direction of the window behind his computer.

"Well, I guess that settles it. We've run out of time and I've got no proof." He sighed, before adding rhetorically: "How many fucking hours have we spent looking for something, anything?"

The other three men shook their heads, fighting back their own anger and disappointment.

"We mustn't lose our resolve now. We need to stick to the original plan. It's the only way we can safeguard our families and expose UKCitizensNet," Jones said defiantly.

The statement was met with silence as each of the men looked through the glass screen to the propane canisters below.

A resigned smile crossed Brown's face.



“So where does your wife think you are tonight then?” he asked quietly, standing up from his chair to stretch his legs.

“At our regular card game,” Jones replied, also rising.

The other two men nodded. They’d given the same explanation to their own families. At least their stories would be consistent once it was done.

Taking one final glance at the canisters Jones turned back to his colleagues, before pulling a small photograph of his wife from his shirt pocket. Margaret was smiling as always, it was one of the things he’d always loved about her. She could always find the positive in every situation. How he needed her to do this now.

A feeling of sorrow washed over him. He knew he’d never hold her again. But at least after tonight, she’d be safe – all their families would be safe. And for now, in the absence of any proof of the conspiracy threatening all their lives, that was what mattered.

“If they know about the bank account, they probably know about this place too. It’s not going to be long before they get here. Gather up any information, flash drives or hard drives you’ve got and dispose of it as we agreed. Make sure you’re back here in 20 minutes. I’ll get things ready here.”

Without another word the three remaining men set about their task as the clock ticked on towards 12.20am.

Rubbing the tiredness from his eyes Jones reached into his pocket and pulled out a box of matches before heading towards the stairs that led to the warehouse below.

The black Volvo estate drifted carefully along the access road to the industrial park, its lights off as the driver searched for the warehouse. One unit after another slipped by, the premises largely empty apart from the odd delivery lorry delivering supplies for the following morning.

“Take a right up here,” the passenger said, glancing at the SatNav.

Turning right, a warehouse on the left hand side at the far end of the road came sharply into view, two upstairs windows illuminated. Drawing closer to the building the silhouettes of figures passing backwards and forwards across the windows could be clearly seen.

Slipping into the car park of a unit half-way up the road the men quickly exited their car, each holding a semi-automatic rifle. Both men pulled black balaclavas over their heads before the driver pulled out a handheld electronic device.

A schematic of the building appeared on the screen and the men rapidly processed the location of the building’s entry points. There were two entrances, one on the far right of the building, the other on the left side, virtually opposite. The schematic had been overlaid with a real-time infra-red satellite image of the building. Inside the boundaries of the warehouse four red, moving markers indicated their targets were all present.

“You take the left entrance, I’ll take the right,” the driver whispered, pointing at the building as they approached.

Reaching the perimeter of the warehouse’s car park the two men separated. Before they got more than ten yards apart the night sky was lit up as a searing fireball erupted from the warehouse sending them sprawling to the ground.

Concrete and metal debris cascaded all around the car park as the two men rolled over to protect themselves from the blast. An orange and grey plume of smoke rose from where the warehouse had once been, gently rising up into the sky as the fire raged below.

Scrabbling on their knees the two men took cover behind a low brick wall, pushing their backs against the protective barrier as a second smaller explosion tore through what was remaining of the warehouse’s aluminium structure.

“You OK?” the driver said, wiping away some of the debris from the black combat gear he was wearing.

“Yeah, I think so,” his partner replied, casting a look at the inferno raging behind them. “What the fuck happened?”

“Beats me,” the driver replied. “The boss isn’t going to be happy though. He doesn’t like deviating from the plan. Not that it matters. No-one could have survived that.”

Slipping his hand into his trouser pocket, the driver pulled out his mobile phone and dialed the number he needed.

"Is it done?" a clipped, familiar voice asked when the call was answered.

"Yes, sir, Mr. Tate, the job's complete. The warehouse has been destroyed...No, there are no survivors."

## CHAPTER FIVE

Michael Robertson woke in the familiar room. The room that had been his cell for 18 months.

He knew he'd be free soon. Free to return to the life he'd once had.

Their words, not his.

Sitting up on the narrow, uncomfortable bed, he ran his fingers through his untidy dark brown hair before shaking his head in an attempt to purge the nightmare from his thoughts. It was the same nightmare he had every night – the moment he found Colette's mutilated body in their bed.

*The duvet was on the floor at the foot of the bed. The sheets were stained crimson, barely a spot of white remaining. Colette was bound to the bed, her wrists fastened to the bedstead, her ankles taped together. Bloodied duct tape was pulled over Colette's mouth, and what looked like a piece of rubber tubing was hanging limply from her swollen lips.*

Every morning he'd wake up, cold sweat enveloping him, his heart racing until the images faded for another day.

*What a joke. How can I ever return to the life I had.*

His wife had been brutally butchered in the most horrific way imaginable. And if that hadn't been bad enough, it had been quickly followed by Clare's disappearance, and the discovery of their cat, Harry, in the back garden, bludgeoned to death. On the night it all happened the mother of one of Clare's friends was supposed to have picked his daughter up from her ballet rehearsal, an extra session her teacher had organised ahead of the performance at the weekend.

Michael's expression became more serious, a frown creasing his forehead, before he exhaled loudly, letting go of the anger that was slowly building. At the time all he could think of was that if the teacher hadn't organised the extra rehearsal, then Clare wouldn't have been there, and she wouldn't have been taken. Maybe then she would've still been alive.

But he knew this was a false hope. If she hadn't been at the rehearsal she would've been at home with Colette, and an even more unspeakable crime might have been committed against her. As it was, the police had discovered her body in a shallow grave in woodland not far from their home three days later. She'd been strangled. There'd been no sexual assault or mutilations, and that was one small thing to be thankful for he'd finally convinced himself. It had probably been quick, a fate that had been denied to Colette.

Since her murder he'd discovered that the mother of Clare's friend who'd been due to collect her the night she disappeared had received a phone call from a man claiming to be him, telling her he would collect his daughter. It was the reason why no-one had raised the alarm at the time, and why he hadn't found out she was missing until after he'd discovered Colette's body in their bedroom.

But now was the time to return home, to what had been their family home. And two years on he knew he was lucky he still had a house to return to. The mortgage company's patience had run out eventually. Their Life Assurance policy hadn't been quite as comprehensive as he'd thought in the event of one of their deaths. He'd only discovered a few months earlier that both sets of parents had agreed to continue paying his mortgage until he recovered and was back on his feet again. He doubted they would've thought it would be over two years before he returned home. But he was grateful for their help nonetheless.

Scowling, he clenched his fists as his muscles began to ache once more from the tension, his anger welling up again. There was nothing for him to return to except violent memories.

If the staff and counsellors at the care home called that freedom, then they could damn well keep it.

Why hadn't they just let him die, just released him from the torture of constantly reliving what he'd seen in their bedroom?

Why, when they'd been pumping him full of sedatives and anti-depressants in his darkest hours, hadn't someone injected him with something that would have taken away the pain forever?

Why hadn't the monster who'd killed Colette and Clare taken him as well?

As thoughts of all the things they'd taken threatened to overwhelm him, he slapped himself sharply across his left cheek. If the staff at the care home saw him like this they might reconsider their decision to discharge him.

Despite all the memories he would face, the thought of spending any more time here filled him with even greater dread. The whole atmosphere smothered him. It had done so from day one. The clinical white rooms and corridors, devoid of any personal objects or colour, and the bars on the windows to prevent the jumpers from escaping whatever trauma they'd experienced, only confirmed he hadn't been able to cope.

*But who would have coped if they'd seen what I saw in our bedroom?*

He clenched his eyes shut for a few lingering moments as the bloody images faded.

*I'm better now. That's why I'm going home.*

When he'd finished dressing there was a knock on his door and Martin entered the small, austere room. A single bed occupied one end, with the clean lines of a Belfast sink directly opposite. A saggy and faded, but deceptively comfortable tweed armchair was on one side of the bed next to a tall, but narrow pine wardrobe. Other than that there were no ornaments, personal mementos, photographs or pictures on the wall. Just the magnolia decor suffocating the warmth from the room. And at times it had felt as if this nondescript cell was sucking the very life from Michael.

*But I'm better now. That's why I'm going home.*

"Morning, Michael. All set for your big day?" he said cheerfully.

Michael grunted in acknowledgement as his toothbrush entered his mouth.

Martin was a few years older than himself. Forty-three he remembered him once saying. For all the time he'd spent in the care home Martin had been his counsellor. At first, they'd spoken about anything but what had happened. He'd talked about his own job in insurance, and then about Colette's in computing and web technologies. Details of how they'd first met, what had attracted him to her, their wedding, and the birth of Clare had helped fill the hours as he'd continually, successfully, dodged the real issues.

And for months he pushed what had happened, what he'd seen in their bedroom, to the back of his mind, to the very edges of his thoughts. His denial had been stubborn and he hadn't spoken about it.

Until one day. He wasn't sure what had been so special about that particular Tuesday.

*It was when he'd been ready,* Martin had said.

The memories finally came flooding forward and he blurted everything out in one torrential stream of consciousness. At first, it lifted a great weight from his mind and he'd believed he was coping with it. But within a few weeks the black edges of his violent memories began to return to every waking moment.

Martin had spent hour after hour for months working with him, helping him so far. But he always said the final step on the road to recovery couldn't be taken by a counsellor. It was up to him to stay on this 'lost road', as he put it, or seek out and find the way home.

He sighed inwardly, hoping this time he was on the right road.

"I'm ready," he replied, gesturing to the suitcase sitting in the corner of the small white room.

Martin smiled reassuringly. He had one of those faces that always seemed calm, on the brink of a warm smile, and never obviously troubled by anything. His tone was quiet, soothing, sometimes to the point of being soporific he'd found. The closest comparison he could make was the contented feeling that someone who'd found religion had, and how their faith seemed to have lifted their worries away.

They'd never discussed religion, so he didn't know if this assumption had any truth in it, or whether his demeanour was just something you learnt when you trained to be a counsellor. It didn't really matter. Martin had been his crutch, his support since he'd come to the care home. And without him, he would probably still have been drugged up to the eyeballs on sedatives and on suicide watch. He had a lot to thank him for.

"How have you been sleeping? Any recurrence of your nightmare?" Martin asked, glancing at the packed suitcase.

Michael turned away from his counsellor, supping some water from the sink as he pondered his response.

Since it had happened, he'd barely slept at all, instead counting each hour as they slowly passed through the night, every night. And when he could finally stay awake no longer, he never seemed to grab more than half an hour's sleep in any one go. Insomnia had become one of his new friends since he'd lost Colette and Clare.

For the short time he did manage to sleep it was always the same - his recurring nightmare. Each night he rediscovered Colette, tied to their bed, butchered virtually beyond recognition, her blood staining everything around her.

In his daily sessions with Martin he'd always talked about the dreams, of some new detail he'd noticed about the scene, and his waking belief that he was hallucinating the whole ordeal and that Colette would be there beside him when he woke.

*But she never is.*

It was only after months of the same conversation and recollections with Martin that he'd realised he was never going to be discharged whilst his nightmare persisted. Each day Martin noted it down, and that was putting him even further away from release.

In the end he'd begun to lie, telling Martin the nightmare was becoming less vivid, less frequent. And sure enough when it 'stopped' all together, they began talking about him going home.

"I've been sleeping fine," he lied. "I haven't had the nightmare for months. I'd have told you if I had."

Martin nodded, smiling continually.

"I'm glad," he said warmly, his gaze turning to the door. "Are you ready?"

Michael nodded, his heart thumping heavily at his deception as he reached for his case, his resolve never to return to this room as strong as ever.

"Let's go," he replied firmly.

Reaching the bottom of the grand staircase curling up the middle of the care home Michael saw his parents shuffling nervously in the foyer. They'd promised to pick him up and take him home.

Michael's father, a man close to retirement, held out his hand and wore a thin smile. Despite the bravado of the handshake he knew the smile was as brittle as snow. The strain his parents felt wasn't far beneath the surface, despite the reassuring expressions.

Embracing his mother, he looked into her aging face that was trying so hard to look strong, a forced smile cracking her pale foundation.

Three of the staff who'd looked after him during his stay shuffled behind his parents, all wearing cheerful smiles.

They must have got their training, or religion, from the same place as Martin he mused, smiling politely back. The four of them were the only people in the home he'd ever felt close too.

The rest of the staff were just sadists, enjoying the little bits of power they had. Little Hitlers who relished forcing pills down reluctant patients' throats. Revelling in the pain and suffering their very presence reinforced.

It was only Martin, and the three other carers, Danny, Kate and Elizabeth, who he cared for in this pseudo prison.

Danny, a young, athletic black man who always seemed to be working out, winked at Michael.

"We're going to miss you, mate."

They would be the only ones he thought bitterly as a surly male nurse walked by, dealing a familiar glare in his direction.

He couldn't blame him really. He hadn't been a model patient. In fact, he'd been downright objectionable at times. He'd lost count of the number of times he'd resisted his medication, hurling it across the room, demanding to be let out of his virtual cell. In the end they'd grown tired of his antics, forcibly restraining him before pumping his arm full of an anti-depressive cocktail. And despite slipping away into semi-unconsciousness as the drugs had taken effect he'd never really escaped from his own personal hell. It was always there, lurking at the back of his mind.

If the male nurse had seen what he'd seen, what he'd witnessed in their bedroom, he'd have understood why he'd behaved as he did.

With some effort he held back the bloody images of the past and turned back to his parents. Now wasn't the time for reflection.

He beamed a false smile. Now was the time to go home.

The light bulb was still missing. Two years on and no-one had replaced it Michael thought, reaching his front door again.

Turning back to the car where his parents were sitting quietly, he smiled weakly in their direction. They'd offered to come in with him, but he'd declined, telling them he needed to return home on his own.

The truth of it was he just wanted to be on his own. It was going to be hard enough returning to the scene of Colette's death as it was. Trying to make 'small talk' with his parents as well was something he could do without for the time being. At first they'd tried to argue the point, but had relented when he'd promised to ring them in a few days.

From the car his mother and father both waved back supportively as the vehicle pulled away, leaving him alone on his front step. Martin's words rang in his ears. And he knew he was right.

*"The next step can only be taken by you."*

Closing the front door behind him the hallway was just as he remembered it. The narrow hall table was where it always was. A few recent letters were stacked neatly on the surface.

*Just as Colette used to do.*

Exhaling loudly he was aware of an unfamiliar smell hanging heavily in the air. For a few brief moments his heart began to pound in his ears, propelling him back to that night. Closing his eyes, he pushed the thoughts to the back of his mind. The smell was lavender. It wasn't surprising he thought with a smile, it was his mother's favourite scent. Doubtless she'd littered his house with various lavender air fresheners and pot pourri. It was just like being a child again, he thought fondly.

But in amongst the heavy smell of lavender he was sure he could detect the slightest odour of disinfectant. The one remaining sign of what had happened in their house.

Moving out of the hall, he turned into the lounge. All of the furniture was neatly covered in dust sheets and, as his parents had explained, the whole of the house had been redecorated.

New carpets. New wallpaper. And new furniture.

Although they'd never come out and said it, they'd hoped by stripping out everything that had previously been in the house they could erase everything that had happened there. It was a kind idea Michael thought, surveying the covered furniture.

*If only it were that simple.*

Feeling his apprehension rise, he retreated out of the lounge, heading for the stairs and for their bedroom. The sooner he got it over with, the better. Then, maybe, he could begin to get on with his life again.

Reaching the top of the stairs, his breathing became more rapid as he stared at their bedroom door which was closed. Just as it had been the last time he'd come home.

With his heart pounding in his ears Michael reached for the door handle, turning it slowly. For a few long seconds he just stood in the doorway, eyes clenched shut, unable to move.

*Just open your eyes and do it. She's gone. They're both gone.*

Like the rest of the house, the bedroom had been completely redecorated. A small cream bowl of pot pourri was on the window sill, filling the room with the scent of lavender. The colour of the bowl matched the walls and carpet which were now inoffensively bland.

Looking at the bed Michael fought back the tears, remembering the horrific scene he'd discovered in their bedroom previously.

Admonishing himself for dredging up the past, Martin's words echoed through his mind.

*"Remember the good times with Colette. Remember the beautiful woman you fell in love with."*

Sitting on the side of the bed he slid open a bedside drawer. A wooden picture frame was face down, and he couldn't stop himself from reaching for it.

The three of them were on a sandy beach in the Bahamas. Clare was smiling and laughing as she buried Daddy further into the sand. Colette was standing behind them in her bikini, her dark brown hair blowing in the warm, gentle breeze. The most radiant woman on the beach.

*"These images will save you. The violent ones will only destroy you."*

Clutching the picture frame tightly to his chest the first tears rolled down his reddened cheeks. They'd taken everything from him.

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