

OSMAN

By Malcolm Grandis



Britains Greatest Terrorist Threat

OSMAN

Prologue and First two Chapters - FREE

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Prologue

“Do you not see that Allah has created the heavens and the earth with truth? He can put you away if He will and bring into being a new creation indeed, that is no great thing for Allah.” The Koran.

Qasr Al Mihaya Detention Centre, Baghdad, Iraq 20th October 2004

The prisoner prayed silently as he carefully washed his hands, face and feet in the lukewarm water from a scratched plastic bowl. The ritual helped him to clarify his thinking as well as to purify his body for the task ahead.

He looked at his reflection in the water. Without the turban his long greying hair bushed out untidily, and his beard was unkempt. Perhaps fittingly he looked the way he imagined a holy man of the desert would have looked in the old days. He was certainly emaciated enough after eight weeks of a limited diet, forced exercise, and sleep deprivation.

He had deliberately picked a fight with one of the guards that morning. He had succeeded in his aim, which was to be moved to solitary confinement rather than the group holding cells. The prisoner was a proud and honourable man and he did not want any of the other Muslim detainees being blamed for his actions.

The guard had called him a ‘Fucking rag head bastard!’ last week when he had shown the prisoner his own picture in the British newspaper. The prisoner could not read the alien text but he did not have to. He recognised the red title block of the newspaper as one that was sold at many of the hotels and larger shops across Baghdad. In his previous life as a cab driver a western businessman had once left a copy in his cab.

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The prisoners shame was clear for the whole world to see; his naked picture printed across the page in black and white, his face to camera, eyes closed, a dog leash about his neck, with the woman's heavy boot pressing down on his bare arse.

The peephole in the cell door snapped open for a few seconds, then snapped shut. It was his signal to begin. The guards inspected on a so-called random basis but the prisoner knew that the time between inspections was seldom less than fifteen minutes.

His own father had been a medical orderly in the army back before Saddam and had told him many stories. One was of a captured deserter who had done what he was about to do rather than face torture. It was not impossible if approached in the right way. Fifteen minutes would be more than enough time; there was even time to pray.

He thought longingly of his wife, and his son. He knew he would never see either of them again. He had written a final note to her on a precious scrap of stolen paper with a tiny piece of pencil loaned by one of the other prisoners. He wondered whether they would ever give her the message. Probably not, he decided, as he took it out from under his right armpit. Never mind he knew Saida would understand. She would probably have seen his shame herself in the foreign paper at her Uncle's shop and would know why he had to do this.

He smoothed out the note and placed it carefully on the floor where he intended to die. He lifted his dirty paper robe and from the crease of skin between his testicles and the top of his thigh he removed a tightly folded thin polythene bag, which had once held a guards lunch. He shook the bag out and opened it. For a few minutes he knelt, forehead almost touching the floor, and meditated in silent prayer to Allah.

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Sitting on the floor next to his note, the prisoner emptied his lungs of air, fighting the urge to breathe for as long as possible. He took a tiny shallow breath and did it again. After seven such breaths he felt dizzy and weak. As he began to involuntarily breathe in for the eighth time he whipped the plastic bag over his head and wound the end of it tightly around his neck.

If anybody else had been there to see, it would have been a bizarre and horrible sight. His face, eyes distended and muscles working, was visible through the plastic bag as he fought against his survival instinct. He made remarkably little noise as he jerked and shuddered, fighting his treacherous instinct to live. His body suddenly convulsed, as he deliberately bucked backwards driving his head hard against the concrete wall and removing the last trace of consciousness in a sudden burst of pain.

By the time the guards found the prisoner he had been clinically dead for six minutes. This was for them particularly bad news. There would be another investigation and more procedures added to standing orders as a result. There was some cursing about all the paperwork to be filled in and British Army bureaucracy in general as they finally zipped the prisoner's body into the rubber bag and tagged it.

The Army pathologist found the piece of paper with its scrawled Arabic message. The Arab-speaking Major, who was a basically kindly and religious man, read the note and struggled with the conflict between his conscience and security procedures. His conscience won, and after a few days he arranged for the note to be delivered to the dead prisoner's wife by one of the Iraqi boys who brought bread to the centre in the mornings. He would never know it, but this was to prove one of the worst decisions taken by any British officer in the Iraqi wars.

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Al Ishbalaya, Baghdad, Iraq, 18th January 2005

The Americans were going from door to door, shouting questions in bad arabic and sometimes taking people away. Her Uncle had stopped to warn her as he fled down the back alley. Saida could not run, not yet, not without her boy. She turned back into the coolness of the house, her beloved Osman was all she had left now.

By the time she reached the child in the front room it was too late. An American soldier stood at each end of the alleyway, gun at the ready. An armoured car was at the front of the houses with an American shouting something incomprehensible through a public address system built into the vehicle. She did not speak American, and there was no way out.

The locked front door began to shiver as a soldier put his heavy combat boots to work. She bundled Osman into the old carved blanket chest at the back of the room and told him to be quiet and not to come out. He nodded, looking back at her bravely as she shut the lid on him.

The door lock burst open, she whirled around and two Americans charged in weapons at the ready. One of them covered her with his assault rifle, which looked deceptively like a child's plastic toy, and the other searched the rest of the house. To her relief they ignored the blanket chest, which was not big enough to hide a man.

When they knew she was alone they visibly relaxed and began to smile at each other talking in that harsh grating way that they did. Suddenly one of them grabbed her and she began to panic and struggle. The language barrier was no hindrance to her understanding of what was about to happen.

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The second soldier ripped the seam of her robe down from her neck and exposed her breasts, squeezing them hard and making her cry out. He said something to his companion who laughed and shifted his chokehold to get behind her, pistol held in one hand. The soldier was pinching her right nipple till she felt it would fall off, his other hand ran up her thigh and his fingers hurt her. As he prodded hard inside her, she began to cry and plead. Struggling was useless. All she could do was call upon God to strike down her defilers.

The lid of the cedar chest banged open and the boy leapt out shouting. His mother marvelled at the twelve year olds fearlessness as he rushed across the room to beat his fists against his mother's attacker. The American behind her casually aimed his pistol and shot Osman in the face.

It seemed as though the world suddenly slowed down as blood and fragments of flesh exploded from her son showering her in red. She could taste his blood... and there were bits of something raw in her mouth... she spat and retched. The American loosened his grip slightly.

She screamed and lashed out catching her captor in the eye. The last thing she ever saw as her face was pushed down onto the tabletop was the creased scrap of paper that was all she had left of her husband. In her mind she apologised to him and to God for the undignified way she was being forced to act.

Saida never saw the round metal circle of the pistol barrel as it spat out the round that took half her head away, but her death did not go unobserved. It was the last thing Osman saw with his good eye as he lost consciousness, that image and the hot iron smell of blood mixed with explosive were forever fixed in his mind.

Chapter 1

Selly Oak, Birmingham, England Wednesday 14 September 2011 2PM

Osman shifted uncomfortably in the fake leather chair. Why was it, he wondered, that English bars were so fake? Fake chrome, fake leather, fake wood, and sometimes even the staff seemed totally unreal. His discomfort was only increased further by the fact that this was a pivotal moment in their conspiracy. After this one decision was taken there could be no return to normality, no return to a cosy life full of comfortable certainties.

Like most student bars in the area, this one really only came to life on Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday nights. At lunchtime on a weekday the bar was generally a deserted, sticky, beer smelling and dispirited place. The Birmingham rain trickled steadily down the window, almost obscuring the view of the railway bridge across the busy A38 main road. Not the best place to begin a major venture, but it was their normal meeting place on Wednesday lunchtimes for the past year. It had been chosen for its quietness, and anyway to change a routine was to draw attention.

Osman finished his Pepsi Max and looked across the scarred but trendy blue vinyl topped table at his friends and partners in this conspiracy.

Suliman with his handsome almost girlish face was looking around the scruffy Selly Oak bar with a blank expression. Suliman was the son of a respected Elder in the Muslim community back in Hounslow where he came from. You wouldn't know it by the way he went through women, they seemed to throw themselves at him. He was tougher than he looked though and smarter than most.

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Mahut, often called ‘the dustbin’ by his friends or Jabba (as in Jabba the Hutt from Star Wars) by his enemies was stroking his large belly as he considered the issue. Mahut was the son of a rich Asian businessman and his white ex-model wife. There had been an acrimonious split when Mahut was seven, and his father brought him up as a devout Muslim. Sometimes this drew some hostility from other Muslims because Mahut looked one hundred percent English. Privately Osman suspected that his ‘father’ was not his father hence the break up. Whatever the case he was loyal, paranoid, and his looks would be useful.

Selim on the other hand was just leaning back and popping peanuts into his mouth. He was squeezing them like little soap bars until they shot from between his fingers into the air where he caught them in his thin lipped mouth. It was as if he had not got a care in the world. It was hard to imagine that here was a world-class computer programmer, a mathematical prodigy, and a student of theology all in the same skinny body. He was a true mongrel, being born of the unlikely union between an unknown African merchant seaman and an Iranian nurse in Liverpool. For him the intellectual challenges would always be the thing. Osman had never known a situation that Selim could not think his way out of in seconds.

This was a typical terrorist cell, the disaffected, the lonely intellectuals and the oddballs. Exactly the people Osman had been trained by his associates to recruit.

Mahut suddenly leaned forward. The others took it as a signal and copied. His bright steely blue eyes swivelled from face to face and a huge smile suddenly appeared.

‘Yes, Osman. By Allah, Yes!’ he hissed, ‘we shall do it all as we discussed!’

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He sat back. Osman smiled at him and began to relax. If paranoid and sceptical Mahut agreed then surely the rest would follow.

‘And the rest of you? Suliman, Selim?’

‘Let us die as martyrs for the cause if we have to.’ Suliman winked, ‘But preferably not until I have relieved my Sarah of her virginity!’

Osman frowned, ‘You have not got shall we say Attached? You know what must happen to her.’

‘Do not worry, all infidel girls are whores!’ Suliman shrugged and waved his hand dismissively.

‘Good... I would not like to have to cancel our plans now. Selim?’

‘It was my initial idea Osman, the best use for our discoveries. I would not back out now. Let us all get our hands dirty as brothers should and avenge ourselves and Allah.’

‘Very well Selim. Thank you all. We should move on to the first part of the plan quickly, our target would not be available to us after the end of the month. She plans to return to live with her father when her contract at Judges is finished. Suliman you will get her to come here to the bar either tomorrow evening or Thursday evening. When you are here text Mahut the signal as arranged, he will text me. Selim, you should attend and give your evening lecture as usual. You will not need to be physically involved for a few days.’ Osman raised his eyes theatrically to the yellowing ceiling ‘Allah willing, the faithful will prevail. God is great!’

Mahut leant forward again.

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‘Remember the listening systems, Echelon and Cerberus, the Satan and the British have their ears and eyes everywhere, use phones sparingly and stick to the codes. It is my responsibility in this group to ensure we remain undetected until it is far too late. Now let us go, follow the plan and act normally.’

One by one the others left the bar until Osman was alone, he ordered a celebratory fruit juice though he craved something alcoholic to celebrate with. Somehow he felt that on the beginning of such an audacious plan dedicated to Islam it would be more than usually sacrilegious. He caught himself watching the barmaid, her clearly visible nipples moving under her thin blouse. When she bent over to retrieve his bottle of juice her jeans dropped to show off a lacy black thong disappearing into the cleft of her buttocks. Suddenly he was hot. Suliman was right; all infidel women are whores. He downed his new drink quickly in disgust with himself and left.

As he walked back through the rain to the rented house he shared with two Chinese students and a Moroccan, Osman tapped a short coded text message into his second mobile phone and sent it. It was one of two hundred code words he had memorised which singly or in combination would cope with most circumstances.

He would throw the mobile phone away later, he had ten more such pay as you go phones. Those who mattered, those who had trained him to recruit and lead during his years of exile in the wild mountains of Pakistan would now know that a plan was to proceed. They knew no details, only that the aim was to cause widespread chaos and economic melt down rather than mega deaths. Osman himself had no qualms about disposing of any number of the hated English, but the rest of the group except perhaps for Mahut were weak, anglicised. This was strange

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because Mahut looked English, but the ways of Allah were, as always, incomprehensible to men.

There was a time before the 9/11 Twin Towers victory when most of the cells in the group had funds and investments working in Britain. In that climate such a plan would not have met with approval – doing as much damage to their financial standing as to the British. Now the new government had frozen all the accounts, seized assets worth hundreds of millions, and made large cash movements difficult. Strangely the situation was easier in America where money and property were still more sacred than life. There were still many investments, accounts and businesses in the US that generated money for the cause.

The result was that now the British economy was a major target, as it had never been before. The infidels would reap a new harvest that they were not expecting. The first step in a long and risky plan to bring Britain's financial and security infrastructure to its knees was at last to be taken. Either tomorrow or Friday they would kidnap Sarah Cullen, the daughter of the head of Scotland Yards anti-terrorist unit!

Selly Oak, Birmingham, England Thursday 15 September 2011 8PM

Dressed in his most expensive red shoes, tightest Chico jeans, loosest white embroidered shirt and a new Levi denim jacket Suliman whistled his way tonelessly down Heeley Road. He paused only to check his reflection in the window and lights of the Off Licence. Reaching the green door with no numbers on he knocked and stood back.

‘Er... Yers?’ The girl was an under-dressed, blonde and busty apparition in pink with a thick Midlands accent.

‘Is Sarah in? It is Ahmed, I am expected!’

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‘Er.... Well loike, er Yeah yer berrah come in ere loike. Sheezabout somewhere. Sarer? Sarer? Bloke foi yer!’ The apparition headed for the stairs.

‘Thank you.’ Suliman could barely understand her. Why was it most of the English never spoke English?

The small front room had furniture so tatty that Suliman decided not to sit on any of it. He pretended to be engrossed in a torn wall poster promoting a series of rock bands and festivals until he saw it was two years out of date.

‘Ahmed! Great to see you again!’

She had put on even more weight. Soon she would be the size of Mahut. A fat red headed bitch like the picture of her dead mother she had shown him. Not the sort of woman he would normally seek out. He remembered Osman’s comment about getting involved and repressed a snigger into a wide smile.

‘Sarah!’ He wrapped his arms around her and kissed her, she smelt inevitably of cheap cologne and tasted of salt and vinegar.. ‘Come on – I want to show you off to my friends. We will be late.’

‘Ok, where are we going? I just want to tell Zoe, she is the girl who let you in, she worries about me worse than my mum.’

‘Tonight, no expense spared for you my honey. A couple of drinks at the bar, then we will be whisked away by minicab to the best venue in all of the city....’ He paused deliberately.

‘Not ... not Whites?’

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‘Yes! The very same!’ Years of experience with women had taught him ways to get them to specify where they most wanted to be taken.

‘Fantastic.... Zoe? I am going to the pub then Whites!’ Sarah shouted.

‘Luggi cow... ooh can oi come?’

‘Behave! See you later.’ Zoe was a dear, but Sarah didn’t need a gooseberry. Not on her last night out in Birmingham with a new and very promising date.

It was a fine crisp winter evening, not yet cold enough to make their breath steam, but close. Twice Sarah claimed she was cold and made him stop for a cuddle as they slowly walked up the chewing gum strewn pavement alongside the deserted railway station. She really had it bad.

Sarah was really too excited and thrilled to be cold. Whites was a very expensive club and really trendy. All the football and music celebrities that lived in the Midlands went there... Ahmed must have pulled strings like mad and probably waved around some serious cash to get in. She was glad that she had dressed her best for the evening.

Unsure where Ahmed was going to take her on a first date she had at first put on her ‘student chic’ outfit with embroidered fringed suede jacket and ankle boots. The court shoes, black stockings and grey-green silk dress she had on now would go down much better in Whites.

They walked into the pub and as the heat of the bar hit her she adjusted the neckline of her dress surreptitiously to allow Ahmed a better view of her best assets. Tonight, she decided, she might let him fuck her. She could feel herself getting moist at the thought, if he used his tongue down there as well as he kissed then it would be a night to remember.

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‘Your Vodka and Red Bull Sarah!’

He placed the drink carefully into her hand and smiled at her in a way that made the hairs on the back of her neck stand on end. Sarah shivered and smiled back. God he was so bloody good looking. She glanced around to check. Yes he was easily the best looking man here. Too noisy to talk, he pointed to his mobile and raised his eyebrows asking her permission to use it. She nodded. He was so damned polite too. Not like the white guys she had been with who tended to leave her for ages with a drink in the corner while they chatted to their friends at the bar.

He didn’t drink alcohol either. It was a religious thing with Muslims she remembered, another plus point. No drunken groping in the back of a cab on the way home. Yes even though she had only talked to him on the bus back from work a few times before tonight he was definitely worth keeping. And fucking. If only she would be able to persuade her dad that he was a worthwhile match it could maybe go somewhere.

The trouble was that in her heart of hearts she knew that it was a forlorn hope. Dad had been all right with her predilection for interracial relationships until she had taken home an Arab student. Immediately he had caused trouble and almost kicked the poor boy straight out. Never go out with an Asian or an Arab, they are trouble and their culture relegates women to the status of slaves he had told her sternly before trying to stop her seeing him.

She was most of the way through her second drink when a short fat guy in Jeans and a checked shirt elbowed his way through the crowded bar and shouted ‘Taxi for Mr Ahmed Saheer! Taxi!’

Ahmed was suddenly at her side, so fast she never saw him move, ‘Come on my dear! Our carriage awaits...’

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As Sarah got up and knocked back her drink she felt a bit dizzy. Whoa there girl. Don't get up so fast. Can't be the booze, must be the damned blood pressure again. Ahmed took her by the elbow and steered her, giggling merrily outside.

She remembered to look at the back of the run down Ford to check it was licensed as she always did and was re-assured to see the blue black and yellow Birmingham city council licence next to the number plate. All sorts of terrible things could happen to you in unlicensed mini cabs according to the stories Zoe told her. The fat driver gave her a funny little sarcastic smile, nodded, and opened the door for her to get in.

Mahut shut the car door. As he walked around the back of the car he bent swiftly and pulled the cab licence plate off its scrap of double-sided tape. He had made it the day before by taking a digital photo of a real one, blowing it up, printing it out on his computer and gluing it to a scrap of hardboard. Not good for a close inspection but for a half drugged girl in the dusk it was good enough.

The car was of course stolen. If anybody watching on camera or in a traffic car ran a check then the car was, thanks to his paranoia, proof against even that. The number plates were stolen off another silver Ford at the back of a local used car dealers lot earlier that evening. The car would check out as road legal with no trace lost or stolen. Mahut was nothing if not thorough.

'Whites please, and can we go via the corner shop on Stanley road on the way? I need some credit for my phone.'

Mahut grunted and nodded at them. The excuse allowed him to drive an indirect route without the girl getting suspicious. The route as planned avoided all the cameras that were on the side of the vehicle where he and

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Suliman were sitting. Let them see the girl...but not her abductors. It would help convince them the threat was real.

At first Osman was going to drive, but Mahut had persuaded him not to. He just looked too shifty with his scarred face. It would not do to risk the girl insisting on another 'cab'. Mahut looked and sounded English, which would make things easier. Selim did not drive cars, preferring his battered moped, and so by default it really had to be Mahut who drove. He was not completely happy with doing it but it was the least of all the risks.

Keeping his eyes open for police on foot and in cars, Mahut navigated his way through the back streets of South Birmingham cursing at a seemingly suicidal woman who tried to wedge her car in the impossible gap between their stolen Ford and a double-glazing van. The last thing he wanted was an accident, even if it was not his fault.

'Don't bother with the shop my friend. She is asleep, that stuff works fast. You can head straight for the factory.'

As Mahut drove smoothly and competently through the night he wondered how many times Suliman had used Rohypnol on unsuspecting English girls. He was the one who had suggested using it and seemingly already knew where to get it from with no questions asked. No it was probably not a good thing to trust Suliman too much on a personal level.

Osman checked the building for a second time. He had leased the almost derelict factory building on the site for a derisory sum. The Midlands industrial estates were full of the abandoned leavings of a once great British industrial empire. The estate agent had been glad to get the six

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months rent and had asked no questions especially when Osman had given three months cash in advance.

There was nobody hiding here except an occasional rat and the one remaining pigeon in the roof that nobody had been able to flush out. For the third time Osman returned to the false room he and Mahut had built painstakingly out of cinder blocks and plasterboard. It sat centrally on the factory floor looking from the outside like the cell that in fact it was. He checked the set-up carefully, trying to put himself in Sarah's place. Did she have any means of escaping that they had not thought of? Eventually he decided that she did not.

Osman went through the room, checking the contents off on his mental tick-list. Satisfied he left the room, switched off the lights and opened the blinds over a factory window overlooking the car parking area and settled on a tall stool by a table full of electronic equipment.

The scar on Osman's face from the American bullet began to throb in the cold. He had been offered plastic surgery and full facial reconstruction at the American clinic but he had refused. He owned specially made latex prosthetics that would hide the worst of it but he hardly ever wore them. He preferred leaving it to remind him, and others, just how much cause he had to hate the Americans and British.

His mother abused, groped and eventually shot by American soldiers. His face wrecked when he was shot as a child while trying to defend her. The months in a run down South Baghdad hospital and the American childrens clinic afterwards. All the rich water fat Americans trying to ease their guilt by repairing some of their collateral damage. His father humiliated by being pictured in the British press. A Jihadi hero so ridiculed at the whim of a British female soldier that he had committed suicide before his release from detention. Yes soon Osman would begin to have his revenge. He could feel it!

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He did not have long to wait for Mahut and Suliman. The dazzling beam of a car headlamp slid across the ceiling and instead of vanishing, as it would do if it had continued on the road, became a glare that penetrated to the back wall. Osman stepped to the door and looked through the small window set next to it.

Soon the ungodly would be starting to pay. The plan had been a year in the making. It would soon be time for the second step.

Chapter 2

“Muster against them whatever you are able of force and tethers of horses, so that you strike terror into the enemies of Allah and your enemy, and others besides them whom you do not know but Allah does. All that you spend in the Way of Allah shall be repaid to you. You shall not be wronged.” The Koran

Oldbury, Birmingham, England Friday 16 September 2011 11.20AM

Sarah awoke with a mighty headache and feeling confused. She could remember going to the pub and getting in a taxi then nothing. Her vision was so blurred she could not really tell where she was. It wasn't all due to the hangover because really she should wear glasses. She hardly ever wore them, being too worried about her appearance.

‘Where the fuck? Ahmed? AHMED?’ She turned over and waited but no reply came.

There was a rumbling sound. A familiar noise, a passenger train but it was getting louder. When it passed the floor vibrated. Christ this place must be near to a track. Maybe it was one of the houses that backed onto the railway in Selly Oak.

Maybe it was Ahmed's room? She checked between her legs with one hand. Well if it was then they had not had sex. She sat up and fresh pain shot through her head along with a wave of nausea. She seemed to be on a mattress placed directly on the floor, no bed. A bare continental quilt was wrapped round her and she was cold despite being still fully dressed. No heating in this dump then.

Squinting, she tried to make out the rest of the room. It was just a plain wallpapered box, no window, and one door. A desk in the corner was the only furniture, apart from the mattress and duvet on the floor. By the

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looks of things her coat, bag and shoes were on the desk. The soft light was coming from a single fitting on the ceiling with a dimmer switch next to the door. There was a phone point on the wall but no phone plugged into it and a smoke alarm over it on the ceiling. The room looked and smelt freshly decorated, un-lived in. The floor looked un-scuffed and new, bare imitation wooden flooring of the sort that slots together.

Sitting up was too much effort. God she must have had a few last night, she couldn't remember a thing. Giving up, she lay back with a groan. If only that bastard Ahmed would appear with a coffee and some painkillers.

‘AHMED! AHMED!’ It was no use, shouting just made her head worse. She felt too groggy to get up and drifted off into a fitful doze after a few minutes. Another train jolted her awake.

With no window it was impossible to gauge how long she had been asleep in the room. Now she was starting to worry. Zoe should have rung her mobile before now. They had a pact to ring each other at set times when out on an overnight date. It was surely past nine in the morning. Come to think of it she could hear voices outside.

She got up gingerly, holding herself awkwardly. God that floor was bloody freezing on her stocking clad feet. Sarah tried the door and rattled the knob. She tried pushing and pulling to no avail. The sod had locked her in! All the old stories she had heard about women being abducted and sold overseas started to surface uncomfortably in her head.

‘Ahmed you MOTHERFUCKER! LET ME OUT!’

She banged on the door and kicked it but it stood solid. Tears of fear and frustration started to well up. Dad was right about Arabs and Pakis. She

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vowed to herself from now on she would stick to black and oriental guys.

Of course! She remembered, her mobile was in her bag! Relieved Sarah retrieved it and flipped it open. Fourteen fifteen according to the display ... bloody Zoe should have rung three times by now. She brought up Zoe's number and dialled it. Silence for a few minutes then a beep. 'No Network Coverage', the phones display said. Typical. Then she noticed the envelope propped on her coat.

Ten minutes later she was still sitting on the mattress, deep in shock. She had read the letter over and over again but it still said the same. She was not to panic, it said. Hah! She was now a prisoner of the Freedom for Islam group and was to be ransomed. All her needs were to be taken care of; everything she would need for the next 24 hours was in the room. Well right now she needed the toilet for a start, and there was no toilet she could see. What about food?

More worryingly she realised that Ahmed must be a member of the group and she had seen his face. If they knew who her father was then surely they would have to kill her rather than risk capture? Dad would never give up and the penalty for kidnap had to be high.

She tried pounding on the door and shouting for what seemed like an age but nobody came. She bit back her tears and started to think. There had to be a way out. Maybe she would think straighter with an empty bladder. Perhaps there was something in one of the desk drawers she could relieve herself into.

The top left drawer was locked, but in the deep file drawer beneath it was a small bucket and in the right hand drawer was some fruit, tissues, some bottled water and some biscuits. Obviously her captors were not intending to return for quite some time so maybe she could break out?

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After she had succumbed to the indignity of the bucket and eaten an apple she felt, if not better, at least more positive. Sarah decided to try using the desk to ram the door. She had seen it done in films so maybe it would work.

Shifting the desk turned out to be futile because it was somehow fixed to the floor. She turned out the contents of her handbag, and was surprised to find everything untouched. Nothing she could use to escape though. The only place she couldn't look was in the locked desk drawer.

Another train, and distant voices again. Sarah crossed to the door and pressed her ear to it. The voices sounded English but after a while she gave up trying to listen to what they were saying because the sounds were too indistinct. She returned her attention to the desk. She remembered when she had forgotten the key to her desk at work and the security guy had shown her a little trick. Maybe it would work on this desk too.

Sarah opened the bottom drawer, undid the clips at the rear of its slides and took it out. Then she placed her foot on the metal surround that framed the drawers and pushed down. Sure enough the metal frame was so flimsy without the bottom drawer fitted that it bent. As the top drawer moved downwards with the frame, its locking tongue popped out from the slot under the desktop.

Inside the drawer was a brown leather case containing a small notebook PC and a modem lead. Sarah grinned... this was more like it! If only the phone socket was connected she could log into the computer system at work and send an email that way, exactly the way she did from a hotel when she was on a trip. Then she could put it all back, re-assemble the drawers and her kidnappers would be none the wiser.

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She opened the notebook and turned it on. Luckily the owner had not installed a boot-up password. For a moment she was tempted to look at the files on the hard drive to see if she could find anything useful but she soon realised that she had no idea how much longer the fifty percent battery power shown on the task bar would last her.

Working quickly she connected the lead into the wall socket, found and opened the comms program on the notebook. It had only an old version of Hyperterminal but she could live with that.

A few keystrokes and the tiny computer was dialling her allocated outside modem line. The computer at work was an old Hewlett Packard mainframe, all text menus and clunky systems. Slow but reliable. The quiet chirping of the modem trying to connect set her nerves on edge... connect.... Connect damn you....there... got it!

It took her a few precious minutes to enter her login and get the mail menu up on the screen. What to send? Who to? Most of the people who worked with her did not know that you could send email to any Internet address as well as internally. The trick was simply to append '@internet' to the normal email address. Her ex-boyfriend the systems administrator had told her about that one evening 'working late'.

Sarah checked the battery power; it was down to a dangerous thirty-five percent already. Modems ate power she remembered somebody saying and her laptop batteries never lasted long online. OK two emails; a short fast one that was sure to go out addressed to her father, and one that was longer but might not make it addressed to all the email addresses she could remember.

Swiftly she set out an email to her fathers Scotland Yard address and circulated a copy to his home one as well. It just said she was kidnapped, safe for the moment and was being held in a house near a railway,

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possibly in Birmingham. She added Ahmed's description and a brief summary of what happened including the pub, the cab, and how she came to be able to send the email. Finally she tacked on a short personal message so that her father knew it wasn't a fake and sent it. She was just going to start the second email when she heard loud noises like a door being unlocked and opening and then footsteps and voices.

She pulled the modem lead out of the wall, turned off and closed the notebook, then rammed everything back into the case. No time to log out, the sysadmin at work would be hopping mad. As if she cared. Sarah had barely got the drawers back into the desk when the door of the room was quietly unlocked. In walked Ahmed with a pistol, a newspaper and a palm sized video camera.

'You fucker.' She said simply, her emotions exhausted.

'Shut up bitch. Did you think I really wanted *you*? Fat English slut.'

He motioned her away from the desk and locked the door. In a whirl of emotions she moved back to the mattress and barely caught the paper he threw to her.

'Hold the newspaper so your *daddy* can see the front page. Now talk to him and tell him you are all right for the moment and that he must do as we say. Do it now!'

Tearfully she stumbled through a statement; it took her three tries to get everything out properly without completely breaking down.

'Now we want his address, and his phone number.' Ahmed tossed her a scrap of paper and a pen from his pocket. She scrawled the address in Bermondsey and her fathers home phone number.

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‘Oh yeah, just realised I forgot something. Put the paper down on the desk. Now lie on the mattress...’

He waved the pistol at her again and she complied. He caught the way she looked at him.

‘In your dreams you stupid slut. I just want to get some of my property back before you find it and fuck it up.’

Ahmed took a key from his pocket and unlocked the desk drawer, pulling the leather cased notebook PC out and looking at it suspiciously.

‘Have you touched this? Because if you have...’

He took two steps towards her and held the pistol against her head. She shook her head slowly and nervously. She was now so scared her tears had gone, she just felt icy cold and numb, frozen and remote from the world.

‘Good. Well you better hope Daddy pays up and does as he is told. Stay there until the door is locked.’

After he had locked the door behind him she allowed herself the luxury of cursing him properly. Eventually she lay down and cried herself to sleep.

*New Scotland Yard, London, England Friday 16 September 2011
15.20PM*

John Cullen was not in the best of moods. He sat looking at the latest intelligence report from the giant tiered MI5 office and found it as

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incomprehensible and impractical as always. He sighed and added the thick daily report to the green file drawer marked sarcastically TFTRB. He had once told Sir Thomas that the initials stood for Terrorist Files, Terrorist Reports and Briefings but his deputy Philip and his secretary Julie knew that they really stood for 'Tales From The RiverBank'.

The problem was not that the intelligence machine produced dud information. On the contrary the mass of information contained in the condensed 'Box 500' report was accurate and presented in nit-picking detail. The report was couched in exquisite civil service jargon, littered with acronyms and obscure phrasing. It covered so many topics and was so impenetrable that the chances of finding anything worthwhile in it quickly enough to do anything about it were minimal.

The spooks did not always seem to understand the difference between data and information. Always after an incident, a trail and a set of remarks somewhere in the reports could be found to prove their prescience, or to point the finger elsewhere, but hindsight was a remarkable tool. Cullen would defy anybody to find the single useful paragraph in the five thousand or so he was expected to digest each week without already knowing what they were looking for.

He had once requested a budget for IT aid to screen the report but it had been turned down twice. He had been most impressed with an American system he had seen on his visit to the Chicago Police Department. Built around a thing called an inference engine the software could sift out related facts from a jumble of disparate reports from detectives, beat cops, traffic cops and news sources and construct likely chains of events. Some of the cases the machine had helped solve were amazing. If only.

Without knocking, Julie his secretary rushed in. A tall normally ruddy-faced brunette with a penchant for baggy clothes, she looked pale and distraught.

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‘John, an email from your daughter just arrived that you need to look at. Its serious.’

‘So was the last one. She wanted to go to Ibiza and it cost me a fortune...’

Something in the look Julie gave him made him dry up.

‘It looks like Sarah has been kidnapped...’

‘Oh bloody hell no. It could be a fake of course ... let me have a look.’

His heart starting to beat faster Cullen swivelled his chair and opened up his email screen. Sure enough there was a mail from Sarah’s usual work address, the subject line was ‘Dad open this quick – URGENT!’.

When he had finished reading the email Cullen’s mood was grim but resolute. He repressed the cold tickle of fear that ran down his spine.

‘No doubt about it that’s from her. Nobody else would know the story about her first pet cat. I daresay the bastards think they can get to me through my daughter, well they are wrong. She has given me enough information that we may even be able to stamp on this before they get round to demanding anything. Julie, get me the Chief Constable of the West Midlands on the line as soon as you can.’

Oldbury, Birmingham, England Friday 16 September 2011 16.01PM

Suliman alias ‘Ahmed’ checked the big tape machine that fed the ‘outside’ noises into the room. Just to be sure he rewound the tape loop a way so that the timing of the noises would not be too repetitive. He

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closed and locked the doors to the factory and hummed happily to himself as he walked across the road to the bus stop.

That was phase one out of the way. He knew that Sarah had used the notebook to send an email, just as Osman and Selim had predicted she would. He knew because for five hours of the day he had been sitting in the factory watching her with the tiny CCTV camera concealed in the dummy smoke alarm. Fifteen minutes after she had connected to the phone line as per plan he had started making noises. The silly cow had no idea what she had done; she probably thought she had been clever.

They could have used anybody from the offices at the engineering company for the sting but when Suliman found out from an overheard conversation Sarah's father was *the* John Cullen of the anti-terrorist squad they had their target. Everybody agreed that it was an ideal opportunity to play some mind-games with the authorities and wrong-foot them even before the plan itself properly began.

After two stops Suliman got off the bus and walked to Selim's flat, dropped the leather cased PC together with the camcorder tape through the letterbox and set off for home. He sent a text 'Your present is with my brother.' to Osman to let him know he had made the drop.

His next stop was to be the barbers to get his head shaved, then the tattooist to have 'Allah is great' tattooed prominently on the back of his right hand in Arabic. The combination of the two would make identification more difficult from any description Sarah could have emailed. It was not planned that she would be around to identify him herself.

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Selim's flat was the ground floor of a three storey terraced Edwardian house, with its own front door and plenty of big tall windows. He loved plants and computers; every room except one was full of greenery and at some times of the year flowers. Usually the plants came first and every evening he would walk through the rooms with a watering can to which a few drops of plant food had been added.

This evening was different; upon his return from the college at six the first thing Selim did was to take the notebook from its leather case and head for the only room with no plants. The room was painted a neutral grey with concealed lighting around the ceiling. The only furniture was a leather swivel chair, a large desk housing his paper files, a home built quad processor PC and a scanner/printer.

Selim plugged the notebook into its power pack and started it up. Spreading his fingers wide he pressed the control, alt and shift keys together with 'j' on the keyboard simultaneously. A little window popped up enquiring after a password, which he tapped in with no hesitation.

A few seconds later, Selim was looking at the results from the keystroke logger. With an external dial-up number an existing account and a password he was half way to getting access to the information they needed. He opened an encrypted file on his desktop machine called simply 'Passes' which held the access codes for every machine he had ever broken into or worked on. Selim added the new information. From the commands that Sarah had entered he deduced that the target machine at Judges was running a Unix variant operating system so he added that information to the file. He wrote her fathers Scotland Yard email address on a notepad next to his keyboard. That would be needed later.

Selim sat back, closed the notebook PC and set up his machine to access the net via an anonymous proxy in China and from there to his own

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secret gateway into the BT network. He then logged into the mainframe that Sarah had accessed, using her account name and password to open up a dialog from his machine to the mainframe at Judge Engineering. After a few commands he confirmed what he thought, she had access only to a very limited sector of the machine concerning accounts and admin. Never mind- this was irritating but as expected.

He uploaded a program from his machine to her storage space. It was a Hacker tool called 'ODINSUP' and when run on a Unix system it acted as a window giving him read access only to the root level of the machine.

It took him five minutes to retrieve a file from the targets root directory called 'password\$.upd' and close the connection, removing the 'ODINSUP' tool and leaving a script running that he had written himself called 'LOGFILL' which was designed to get around the fact that he could not change the security logs yet. 'LOGFILL' just performed a dozen or so random commands under Sarah's account name every five to fifty minutes for the next day or so and would fill the security logs so full of garbage that the systems administrator would not notice easily anything he had done.

The password file he had just stolen contained pairs of account names and passwords. The account names were in plain text but the passwords were encrypted. The encryption system used was the standard one used on almost all Unix based computers. The password was encrypted using itself as the encryption key. In this way not even the computer had to store the plain text of the password. The machine just encrypted the password the user just entered, and compared it with the encrypted version stored. If the two were identical then the unencrypted passwords had to be the same so it would let the user in.

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The hole in the security came from the fact that the file needed to be read by the login program even before the user gained any access to the machine. The 'ODINSUP' program subverted the login program in order to be able to read the contents of the root directory.

To compound these technological weaknesses human beings preferred to use sensible words, names or phrases for a password. Selim had a password-cracking program that would simply run a dictionary of forty thousand common passwords gathered from hackers all over the world against every entry in the file using the Unix decryption method. It came straight off the Internet like many hacking tools. Why re-invent the wheel?

If he had to crack a potentially twelve-character password at random it would take him something like a couple of months worth of run time per password. This was why any system administrator worth their salt nowadays insisted on monthly changes to passwords and allocated passwords randomly instead of letting the user choose them.

It was paradoxical that the higher up in an organisation you looked, the more lax computer security got. A member of higher management with the most access, would often have a stupidly simple password like 'thetopman' or 'numberone' or 'hotshagger'. Any lowly computer technician would know enough to do better. Really you should choose an un-guessable password with mixed upper and lower case, punctuation and numbers like Selim's own '?cymBalene911'.

It would take about an hour for his password cracker to try all forty thousand passwords against all two hundred and twenty accounts. It would probably find around twenty accounts that he could use. Of these the chances were good that one or two of them would have access to all the areas of the machine he needed.

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Of course the Sysadmin here might be unusually good for a civilian. If so then Selim could use a type of program called a Trojan Horse to steal another user's ID but it could possibly leave an electronic trail leading to his true internet IP address so he would rather not.

He turned his attention to the videotape, inserting it into his camcorder and while his password-cracker was running he connected the camcorder to his PC, opened the video editor and began to import the tape for editing. It was a good job he had plenty of coffee in the cupboard. It was going to be a long night.

Selly Oak, Birmingham, England Friday 16 September 2011 7PM

Osman sat in his car pretending to make a phone call and waited outside the bar to watch the fun. As expected the Police were doing house-to-house enquiries along Heeley road next to the railway line. Their arrival had caused a mass exodus in an area that was home to many students, illegal immigrants and junkies.

The police, expecting the youth in that area to be fleet of foot, always turned up with two officers on police trail bikes. Usually the bikes with their ability to get down most alleyways and over many obstructions proved the decisive factor in arresting a fleeing suspect.

Footsteps pounded noisily down the pavement past the car window, followed closely by two trail bikes, a policeman on a bicycle and rather less closely by two breathless officers on foot. This man was probably an illegal immigrant. He had made a run for it and disappeared into the alleyway on the left of the bar, flinging what looked like a bag of large marbles or ball bearings on the ground. All the pursuing bikes were now down in the mouth of the alley, a heaving tangle of metal and fluorescent-jacketed limbs.

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The bikes were in fact stopping the police from chasing on foot. The man was bound to get away. Osman wished him good luck, laughed, and shook his head as he started his car. It was just like a scene from an old slapstick movie, Chaplain could have created no greater chaos! The British police were such incompetents. Yes, the police would certainly be no match for him and Selim.

With the information that the group hoped was held by Judge Engineering about the governments new secure database system and the secure networks connecting it Osman estimated they should be in a position to cause inestimable damage within a year.