First published in Great Britain in 2021 by Polygon, an imprint of Birlinn Ltd.

Birlinn Ltd
West Newington House
10 Newington Road
Edinburgh
EH9 1QS

www.polygonbooks.co.uk

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ISBN 978 1 84697 571 4
eBook ISBN 978 1 78885 454 2

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available on request from the British Library.

Typeset by 3bType, Edinburgh





Dedicated to the memory of
Alec Monteath










‘What we observe is not nature itself,
but nature exposed to our method of questioning’
—Werner Heisenberg






PROLOGUE

MI5 HQ, London

Where once oak-panelled walls echoed to the sound of exclusively male upper-class accents, tobacco smoke hung heavy in the air and the old school tie was as good as any badge of office, all had changed. Sleek, low-lit corridors in glass and steel made the place look more like a futuristic space from a dystopian novel than the offices of the organisation tasked with protecting the UK from its enemies.

Today – and long overdue, many considered – things were very different. Kazia Omar, in her position as head of operational contingencies, was frowning at the large screen in front of the long black glass table.

'You tell me he's super-glued himself to the carriage?' she said, watching the footage of a young man wrestling with half a dozen uniformed police officers.

'Yes, and he's not the only one.' Iolo Harris's deep Welsh baritone resonated round the room. 'It's a co-ordinated operation. We have sixteen such incidents here in London. It's affecting both rail and underground networks. I'm afraid the place is grinding to a standstill.'

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Omar looked across at a young man in a hoodie and expensive dive watch, whose gaze was fixed on a computer screen. 'Fabian, what about the rest of the country?'

'It's hard to say just what is happening,' he replied in a St Lucian drawl. 'But we have incidents flagged in Birmingham, Manchester, Glasgow and Cardiff.'

'They're closing the UK down!' Tabitha Saley-Brown blinked at Omar through her thick glasses, her face pale as a ghost. 'I think we should recommend that the army be deployed.'

Omar was always surprised how quick her head of implementation was to take the most strident action possible. Though she looked like a nervous sparrow, Tabitha was probably the most hawkish person in the room.

'Far too soon,' said Harris. 'In any case, it's our last card. We put the army on the streets, and they've won the argument. *We live in an oppressive, top-down society* – I can hear the bloody spokesperson now.'

Omar sighed. 'It's our job to work out what's going to happen next. It's clear the police are struggling. Goodness knows they've enough to do without people gluing themselves to trains all over the place.'

'Not only trains. One woman has chained herself on top of the empty plinth in Trafalgar Square. She's calling herself *the living embodiment of a tethered world*. She's been nominated for the Turner Prize, and it's only just a quarter after nine.' Tyrone Selnick, from Elizabeth, New Jersey, was on exchange from the FBI. His job was to gauge the global situation. 'But there's nothing anywhere else in Europe or back home. This must be a UK phenomenon,' he said, rather dismissively. 'Like a Chinese fire drill.' His eyes darted across the table. 'Oh, sorry, Zhan. No offence intended.'

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Zhan Wei scowled at him. 'I'm from Dudley. What would I know about Chinese fire drills?'

'Gentlemen, please!' Omar didn't like raising her voice. Her mother had taught her that it was an intimation of defeat. But the pair didn't like each other and were forever bickering. In any case, Selnick had been rather forced upon her and she found his abrasive character at odds with the way she preferred to run things.

Clashes within various factions of MI5 were legend. It was her job to end all that. But every day she saw examples of little federations sprouting up within this supposedly united service. She was determined to do all she could to extinguish them before they took hold. But one had to be careful.

Omar stared at the screen again. The man glued to the train had been stripped of his clothes. He appeared to be desperately grabbing his private parts as officers looked on, scratching their heads. 'What's happening now?' she asked Harris.

'It looks like they thought he stuck his clothes to the train. Turns out it was his bare back. He must have cut a hole in the back of his jacket or something.'

'That's got to hurt,' said Omar.

'I would imagine so.'

She bit her lip for a few seconds, trying to work out the best course of action. She was under pressure from the director general. He was one of the last of the old guard and Omar knew that if, in time, she wanted to replace him she had to prove her mettle. The job as his deputy was already up for grabs, but she faced stiff competition.

She looked round the table. 'Can you give me the room, please, guys?' As they all scooped up laptops, tablets and papers,

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she turned to Iolo Harris. 'Can I have a few minutes of your time?'

'Sure. Nothing much I can do until we have some more intel anyway.'

Finally the room cleared, leaving the Welshman and his boss alone.

'We can't go on like this, Iolo. It's the fifth time in two months. They're under pressure upstairs from the politicians, and that pressure is now on me.'

'Pass the parcel, eh? And now it's time for the shit to roll my way, I suppose?'

'You should know me by now. We've worked together for two years.'

'But we're rivals, mark you.' The Welshman smiled.

'The old man isn't going anywhere soon. You know that. Public support's our only crutch these days.'

'With this climate brigade, you're right. Everyone imagining their grandkids being drowned, or consumed by forest fires. I'm not sure about the dissident terrorists over the water, though –and those from further afield. There's no doubt there are some mounting problems to face down. But one thing's for sure: we can't go on like this. And while the climate protesters look like a rag-tag bunch, they're tight as a drum. We have very few viable assets amongst them, and even those we have are way down the chain of command.'

Kazia Omar walked across to the window and stared out at the grey January day. It made her feel depressed but, despite the weather, this country was her home. It had been a haven after a troubled childhood in Iran and she owed the country much. She turned to Harris. 'These organisations are much more careful with their vetting since the Met undercover boys

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ran about shagging everyone, the stupid bastards. But we need to do something. Rivals we may be, but we'll both be in the Min of Ag and Fish if this carries on.'

'Oh, that doesn't sound too bad. Bags me the fish part. I love the sea. You can't come from Port Talbot and not love it. Our little piece of heaven, it was.'

'Ha! I'll do my best, Yol. Meantime, while we're still here, let's get our heads together.' She hesitated. 'Have you applied for the deputy post?'

'You make it sound like the wild west. But yes, I have. First working-class lad from Wales as deputy director. Now that sounds good.'

'Not as good as first Iranian.'

'May the best minority win!'

Harris was smiling, but Kazia Omar could see the steel behind his blue Celtic eyes.

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Six months later

From the Kintyre peninsula, the great ball of the setting sun appeared to hover above the straight line of the horizon as though reluctant to make its passage beneath the waves. The glowing orb seemed desperate to cling on to its hold over the white sandy beaches, the mountains, fields and rolling hills, desperate to hang on to the day. It shimmered above a molten sea, still flecked by its fading sparkle. It called across the great expanse of time to all those who had witnessed this spectacle, for nowhere else did it set with such majesty – or so the good folk of Kintyre would tell you.

Across Islay and Jura settled a purple fringe, framing the islands in a luminescent glow, while to the south the sliver of land that was Ireland shimmered in the remnant of heat from what had been – for this part of the world, at least – a stifling day. The flash of the Antrim light was no more than a glint now. But soon, against the velvet curtain of the short night of stars, already embarking upon their twinkling dance across an unsullied sky, it would shine brighter than the sun.

Mandy Roberts first heard the aircraft while walking her dog on the Isle of Gairsay. She scanned the golden summer

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evening sky and noticed a small plane flying low over the North Channel.

Aircraft of all shapes and sizes were common in the skies above the island. But few flew at that altitude. As the plane banked to the right her eyes followed its likely flight path. She reckoned it was making for Machrie airport near Kinloch. Mapping out the terrain between Gairsay and there in her mind's eye, she supposed that, with no major obstacle in the way, it would be okay to fly so low – but still the journey would be nip and tuck.

Mandy pulled her mobile phone from her pocket and considered reporting what she'd seen to the authorities – but who?

She looked down. Craig, her Scottish Terrier with an insatiable appetite, was tucking into what looked like dung. Quickly, she slid the phone back in her pocket and pulled the dog away, chiding him for his disgusting behaviour. Thoughts of the low-flying aircraft soon disappeared with the waning tone of its engines as she knelt down and tried to clean the dog's muzzle with her handkerchief.

'Bad boy, Craig! How many times have I told you? I'm fed up cleaning shit out of your mouth.'

The little black animal looked back at her knowingly, head cocked to one side, caring little for her opinion – or anyone else's, come to that. He liked the taste of horseshit and was already scanning their likely route ahead for more as his owner wiped away the last vestige of mess from his muzzle.

Next to notice the plane was Sam Armour. He heard the high whine of the single engine as he emerged from the cake store

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located not far from his farmhouse on the very tip of the peninsula.

He removed his flat cap and rubbed his forehead free of sweat with the back of his hand. The opening to the cattle feed store, it seemed, became narrower every year. He patted his belly with a shake of his head as the plane flew past, almost at eye-level as viewed from his position on the mull.

'Are you seeing that?' said his wife Karen, walking towards Sam across the yard, her hands white with flour.

'Aye, she's low, eh? Must be landing at Machrie.'

'I hope so. If they go any further, they'll crash into the town hall spire at Kinloch! I thought the airport would be closed at this time.'

Sam looked at his watch. 'You're right: it will be by now. Och, who knows? Everybody and his friend has one o' they planes these days.'

'We don't. Mind you, the bother you've got getting in and out that cake store, I'd hate to see you trying to fit into a wee plane like thon.' She smiled. 'I've got scones jeest about to come out the oven. I know how you like them warm wae melted butter.'

'Aye. That's why I canna get in the cake store.'

The pair trudged back to the farmhouse as the sun began to sink into the ocean in a flurry of rainbow colours ranged across the sky. Soon, the whine of the aircraft's engine faded on the still, sweet air.

Wilma Cairns was driving too fast on the little single-track road that was a shortcut from her boyfriend's house back home to her parents' on the outskirts of Kinloch. Loud music thumped in the small but powerful red Mini as she swung the

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car into a long bend in the narrow road. She and Colin had been at the beach all day, and her tanned skin radiated the warmth of the sun. There was sand between the toes of her bare feet, but she liked the feeling, as she did that of driving with no shoes. The summer was heaven.

So loud was the music in the car that she jumped in her seat and slammed on the brakes as a plane, seemingly only feet above, filled her windscreen.

Wilma looked to her left. The plane was rocking in the air, its wings swaying like the pole of a tightrope walker, desperately seeking balance ahead of landing. She could see along most of the length of the runway at Machrie airport. There were no landing lights, which was unusual. She gasped, hand to her mouth, as the plane touched down. It bounced a couple of times, then rose back into the air once more before landing again, this time its wheels firmly planted on the tarmac but slewing to the right. It bumped across some rough ground – an emergency run-off area – before being brought to a halt by a chain-link fence, which it all but demolished.

Hand trembling, Wilma took the mobile from the tray just under the gear stick and dialled the emergency services.

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