Gauntlet

A Novel of International Intrigue

Richard Aaron

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Extract

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"SO JUST HOW BIG A CRATER *will* it make if we blow up 660 tons of Semtex?" Richard Lawrence asked Sergeant Jason McMurray.

"No clue," replied the taciturn McMurray, scratching his chin. "There's no precedent for something like this. It's an unconfined explosion, and it's gonna be a damned dangerous one. But if I can't handle it, no one can." McMurray was from the Army's 184th Ordnance Battalion, stationed in Fort Gilles, Georgia. He'd had more than 15 years of training in the disposal of conventional, chemical/biological, and nuclear weapons. He had defused or disposed of bombs, warheads, mortar shells, and land mines, and had a pronounced scar on his left cheek as a daily reminder of the danger of his vocation. He was the best of the best. And he was already planning a 30-day leave after he'd wrapped up this particular circus. Cold beer, family, and golf.

Now he looked around the place once again, this time with annoyance. What had started as a solid, common sense idea had turned into a carnival. The Islamic Republic of Libya had finally come around to the idea of repudiating its position of the '70s and '80s. Libya, with its ample reservoir of oil, had announced that it wished to join the community of nations. The western world, led by the United States and the United Kingdom, had announced in turn that they were prepared to accept the olive branch. And the oil. But first, reparations needed to be made, especially to the families of the Pan-Am flight that had been destroyed in mid-air over Lockerbie, Scotland. Among other things, the desert nation was required to dismantle its nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons programs. More importantly, it had to give up its enormous stockpile of the Czechoslovakian plastic explosive known as Semtex. The question had quickly become how the United States would dispose of the explosive once it was surrendered. Then some bright executive in the Pentagon had come up with the perfect solution. Cart the explosive to the middle of the Sahara Desert and blow it up, where it wouldn't hurt anyone.

Sergeant McMurray was in charge of a crew of 20 soldiers from the 184th — men who had been hand picked to take care of the mess. At the moment they were busy receiving, counting, packaging, and then transporting the packets of Semtex from an abandoned landing strip near Bazemah, which

was nothing more than a tiny town adjacent to an oasis in the eastern Libyan Sahara. A strange base for such a large operation, but it had been the best they could do. Most of the Semtex had been delivered by air, in a variety of planes. Some had also come by Jeep, and, amazingly, some by camel. Most came in the cellophane-wrapped "bricks" that had been sold by Czechoslovakia in the '70s; each ten inches in length, four inches in width, and two inches in depth. There was 660 tons of the stuff — approximately 600,000 kilos. Each brick was measured for size, weight, and contribution to total, and turned over to the Army for transport to the detonation site.

Richard Lawrence was the CIA's contribution to the field trip. He was a trained pilot who had flown for the Navy, then retired his wings to become a Federal field agent. He didn't know anything about explosions, and was demonstrating his ignorance at every turn.

"And we're looking at what, about 120,000 bricks?" he asked.

"Yup," came the terse reply.

Richard performed a few calculations. "Have I got it right, McMurray?" he asked. "The pile's going to be 20 feet wide, 25 feet long, and 11 feet high, more or less?"

"Well more or less," replied McMurray. "The thing you have to realize, though, is that you can't blow it up cartoon style, with one fuse running to the pile. If you did that, a fair amount of the material would be blown free through the kinetic forces. Not all of the Semtex would be destroyed."

"So what are we doing instead?" pressed Richard.

"Multiple blasting caps and fuses, together with Amtec timers, so that separate electrical signals are transmitted to the pile at precisely the same instant," said McMurray. "And by 'precisely,' I mean within a nanosecond. It's actually not that different from detonating a whopping big pile of C4. These bricks are a little larger, but the characteristics are similar."

"Oh obviously," said Richard, flicking a fly off his clipboard. "How big will the blast be?"

"We're looking at two-thirds of a kiloton, but this is Semtex, not TNT. I'd say we're looking at the equivalent of a kiloton of TNT. That will make the explosion, if things are fused properly, the equivalent of a small nuclear blast."

Richard reflected on that for a minute. "How far back should they be?" he asked, referring to the pack of reporters that appeared to be growing by the hour.

"I would say at least two miles," responded McMurray. "Maybe more."

Richard hadn't counted on the growing crowd of reporters, journalists, and gawkers that had started to assemble around them. But August was a slow news month, and the destruction of Libya's Semtex stash was starting to make the front pages.

He'd also overlooked the political wile of Libya's leader, General Minyar, who had assembled a large tent near the center of operations. He wasn't there yet, but would be when the demolition began. His communications department had gone out of their way to make his presence known. "Minyar the good," the headlines would say. "Libya now open for business."

This had further motivated the news stations, which were there in force. News Corp was setting up a camp, and CNN, BBC, and Al Jazeera were also there to record the fireworks. The official moment of detonation was still two days away, but Bazemah had already seen a substantial increase in tourists, all waiting to see the "big bang." Several movie studios had sent crews and cameras, for the sole purpose of shooting footage of such a large explosion, to be used in some future high-budget action film. A festive atmosphere prevailed. The overriding concern shared by the news crews was that they would run out of cold beer before the explosion occurred. A fitting worry, since the explosion was taking place in the heart of the great Sahara; it was, by early afternoon, 120 degrees in the shade.

The question about the size of the explosion, and specifically the size of the crater it would create, was starting to tease the airwaves. There were many predictions, and there was even a Las Vegas betting agency setting odds on calling the crater size. What would it be… 500 feet across? Maybe 600?

Richard already had a throbbing headache from the pressure. He tried to ignore it, continuing to review the inventory counts that arrived with each new shipment, counting again and again the number of bricks, and entering them into a spreadsheet on his laptop. "God-damned bean counter now," he muttered aloud, the corners of his mouth drawing down in a grimace. He longed for a return to his Navy days, when he was landing Tomcats on what, from a short distance out, appeared to be postage stamp-sized aircraft carriers. He had taken pride in his skills, and was devastated when, in his early 30's, his vision started to deteriorate, and he could no longer meet the Navy's requirements. Of course he hadn't told anyone what was going on at the time, and had continued to do his job as best he could. Everything had been fine until one night, when he splashed a Tomcat in the course of a difficult

nighttime carrier landing. It hadn't been a mistake the Navy was willing to forgive. After that he had taken a lateral transfer to the SEAL program and had served in the second Gulf War as a special operations officer.

He had grown up in Islamabad, Pakistan, where his parents had worked at the US Embassy. When he was 16, both his mother and father had died in a car crash, and he'd moved to California to live with the Goldbergs, a family that had also been stationed at the Islamabad Embassy, and who had known Richard's parents well. On his nineteenth birthday, he signed with the Navy. When he'd been forced to leave after the carrier crash, his background and his skill with languages, especially Arabic, Farsi, and Urdu, had made him a natural choice for the CIA's very busy Middle East operation. His dark complexion didn't hurt either.

So here he was, 45 years of age, turning gray, counting bricks of Semtex like they were loaves of bread in an American supermarket, in this stinking, ungodly heat. Some promotion. He was well on the way to "Greeter" status at the local Wal-Mart. He popped a couple of Vicodin and continued the seemingly endless count. Since getting kicked out of the Navy, nothing had gone the way he'd planned, and his problems seemed to be growing. If his life was a river, he thought, it had definitely changed from a bright sparkling mountain stream to a mass of sludge and mud blockaded by a dam.

THE ONE AGENCY MISSING on the Semtex scene was the relatively new Terrorist Threat Integration Center. TTIC (pronounced "tea tick") had been established on May 1, 2003, partially in response to devastating terrorist attacks on American soil. The concept behind the new agency was simple enough. Analysts from every agency in the US Intelligence Community received a steady stream of information to be developed by their agents and sources. Intelligence officers from every department continuously fit those pieces into the ongoing and ever-changing factual mosaic. Information was probed, developed, questioned, validated, and analyzed. Further information might come to the surface at any time and require immediate attention. The stream of "Intel" was continually sent "up the chain" from these Intelligence Agencies, and now also went laterally to TTIC. That agency received reports from the National Security Agency, the CIA, FBI, BATF, Secret Service, and all military Intelligence Agencies. It also received reports from security agencies from other countries; MI-5 and MI-6 reports were received daily from the United Kingdom, and Israel's Mossad and Canada's security organization, CSIS, reported daily. All told, 27 countries sent information on a regular

basis. The people working with TTIC had distinguished themselves in their own Intelligence Agencies prior to their TTIC assignment. Generally, they were also individuals with highly developed computer skills. All in all, it was a brainy crowd, with an incredible amount of information at their fingertips.

The true power of TTIC was in its ability to access hundreds of thousands of databases in countries all over the world. Cellular phone, driving, and criminal records, and records from all the large retail chains, were at their beck and call; dozens of new databases were added to their vast addressing system each day. TTIC had access to trillions of bits of information — pieces that it could splice, dice, and parse in many ways, and at very high speeds. If someone bought a prescription, TTIC could find it. If they applied for a fishing license, TTIC would hunt it down. With debit and credit cards, commerce was becoming "cashless," and slowly turning toward being completely "digital." TTIC was designed to take advantage of this digital age.

The agency was powered by an experimental IBM computer known as Blue Gene/L. The computer was originally built for the Livermore National Laboratory in California, installed in 2004 with much fanfare. It contained 16 towers, each approximately six feet in height, and came with an elaborate Freon cooling system. The system had stolen the supercomputer crown from Japan, which had built the exotic Earth-Simulator supercomputer a few years earlier. Blue Gene/L had staggering amounts of RAM, and could perform more than 300 trillion calculations per second, far outweighing anything else that had ever been built.

What was not made public was that IBM had actually manufactured several such systems — one for Livermore Labs, and a second for TTIC, in Washington, DC. The TTIC model had roughly 25% more processing power than the Livermore model, and several times more disc space. Sixteen systems were also given to the National Security Agency. The existence of these systems was kept secret, even from most of the Intelligence Community. They were networked in a 16-system cluster, and together they performed at more than 1 quadrillion calculations per second. The NSA had operated the fastest computers on the planet since the beginning of the computing era, although few outside the walls of Crypto City, their home base, knew that. They saw this new system as nothing more than their God-given right.

At TTIC, the processing modules, power supplies, and disc drives took up an entire floor of their own, below the floor that housed the control room. Unlike the supercomputers of the past, which required armies of staff to keep the hardware operational, Blue Gene required only 20 people; essentially

four shifts of five employees, working to ensure that the infrastructure remained intact. Given the computer's sophistication and self-reliance, it was a fairly simple job. Their main responsibilities were virus patrol and making pots of coffee.

The second floor of the building contained some administrative offices, boardrooms, and secretarial stations. The main floor had reception, storage rooms, and little else. Not seen, but omnipresent, were many armed security personnel. The front of the building was marked by a small sign that said "Donovan and Sons Information Processing Corporation." It was an inside joke.

The building had a large number of dedicated and highly secure fiber optic telephone and data connections. Should some enterprising soul have found a way to compromise those links, they would have run into an extremely high level of encryption — the cutting edge of what hundreds of mathematicians working at the NSA had developed. The lines were linked to the CIA offices, the Pentagon, the White House, and the 15 other agencies that made up the American Intelligence Community.

The most important floor in the building was the fourth floor, which housed the huge TTIC control room — this was where the eyes, ears, and hands of the organism lived. The room was built on a circular plan. The curved front wall contained nine large flat panel displays, specially built by IBM, each with a diagonal measurement of approximately 101 inches. Currently, one was tuned in to CNN, another to BBC, and a third to Al Jazeera. There were three satellite images — two from KH-11's focused on Iraq, and the third a feed from one of three spectacular new ORION satellites, currently focused on a North Korean factory site. Two more screens displayed video feeds from Predator Drones, and the ninth displayed Google's homepage. Twenty 48-inch screens were vertically stacked on the extreme left and right sides of the wall.

The rest of the room consisted of two raised circular terraces with built-in desks, each with inlaid computers and display panels. Some of the stations had five or six additional independent display screens of various configurations and sizes. In all, there were 40 such stations. The center of the room contained a large, recessed, illuminated world map, some 35 feet across. The map was in fact a specially manufactured, interactive LCD display; if any portion of the map were activated, detailed information appeared in a separate window, which could in turn be enlarged for even greater detail. Using technology similar to the LCD mapping programs found in high-end

cars, information could be drilled down to street level. Data about who lived, worked, or had significant connections in the area could also be brought up, or displayed on any of the larger monitors on the front wall. The staff had started to call it the "Atlas Screen."

Hamilton Turbee was one of those fortunate enough to be working with these elite systems at TTIC. He had been personally invited by the Senate subcommittee in charge of TTIC to join. "Turbee" didn't need the money. He didn't need the job. He was by nature resistive of authority, and didn't fit into an orderly bureaucracy. He was also affected with a social disorder, though he had medication to control it. He had known from the start that the atmosphere wouldn't be easy for him. But the thought of playing with the most powerful computer on the planet was too seductive for him to pass up. When invited, he agreed to become one of the first employees of the new agency. He was distressed when he discovered, several months later, that the NSA actually had more computing horsepower than TTIC.

Daniel Alexander, the TTIC director, had immediately regretted the decision made by the subcommittee to employ Turbee. A number of Dan's closest advisors had told him that the new employee would be an excellent addition to the exclusive TTIC employee list. The youth possessed great skill in mathematics, and particularly in the development of complex search algorithms. But once inside the department, Turbee had fared poorly. Most of his coworkers were analysts from the Intelligence Community, or leading academics, or both. Most were workaholics. Most fit naturally into the TTIC culture. They were fastidious in habit and buttoned down in dress and attitude. Turbee shared none of these characteristics. He was 5′6″ and only 26 years old. He had never worked for the CIA, FBI, or any branch of the Armed Forces. He slouched. He dressed poorly. He came and went as he pleased and was as pale as a ghost. These eccentricities, along with a number of others, placed him immediately on Dan's blacklist, though the youth didn't realize it. Turbee knew nothing about reading nuances and tonality of voice, and did not understand what people thought of him. Dan, on the other hand, knew everything about these things. It was second nature to him.

Daniel Jonathon Alexander, IV was born April 4, 1952 to a high-class family in Hartford, Connecticut, a child of war and fortune. Rumor had it that the family was worth several billion dollars, although the exact sum was a closely guarded family secret. Dan's various ancestors had fought in the First and Second World Wars, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and in the first Gulf War. The family had distinguished itself not only on the battlefield,

and in the worlds of commerce and industry, but also in service to country in high-level administrative positions. Various members had served as Under Secretary of State, Deputy Director of the CIA, and, for a brief period, Deputy Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Honesty, forthrightness, hard work, and intelligence characterized the various chieftains of the Connecticut Alexanders. Unfortunately, none of these qualities had been passed down to Daniel IV.

This particular Alexander simply gloried in the family wealth; he'd spent more than $20 million on a mansion on 600 acres in Connecticut, and a further $5 million on a condo in Washington, DC. He had an undergraduate degree in history from Yale, and a law degree from that same institution. But while most students worked diligently and, in the case of law school, extremely diligently, Dan had never exhibited the ability to work hard. He threw money around liberally, having other students do his term papers and take notes for him in class. He spent many of his school hours on the golf course and in the bars, either practicing his chip shot or bedding women.

He did enjoy the sense of connection and power brought by his name. The family pull had gained him an invitation to join the Skull and Bones Society, and he instinctively knew which additional strings to pull in order to gain entry into the halls of power. He'd thought briefly about joining the military in family tradition, but abandoned that idea when he realized the amount of work involved, and that route's attenuated opportunities for shortcuts.

Instead, he developed his high-level associations by using his wealth to gain entry to the Republican Party's inner circle. It was rumored that he had given more than $10 million to Republican presidential campaigns, through various funding vehicles. As a direct result of these connections, he held a number of high-ranking posts within the Intelligence Community. He hadn't come by them honestly, but he knew how to use them to his benefit. And what he lacked in candor was more than made up for by his shrewdness and ruthless craft. He had developed the habit, early in his career, of "building files" on perceived adversaries. Individuals standing between him and a particular objective would soon be mired in scandal, usually involving some youthful indiscretion or sexual misadventure. Dan took steps to ensure that the same fate did not befall his own reputation; he had a PR firm on full-time retainer, building his resume and polishing his image. And there was no arguing that he looked the part — his handsome aristocratic features seemed to portray infinite strength and intelligence. To those who didn't know him.

Dan was a gifted speaker, and quick with a witty retort. He did well

speaking on TV news shows like CNBC and MSNBC. He had coauthored a book on terrorist threats inside American borders (the truth was that he paid the author $1 million to be noted as coauthor). These activities were all well-represented on his resume. His staff of PR people had spent years weaving an image of Daniel Alexander IV, dean of homeland security issues, expert on terrorism. Underneath it all, however, his character had not changed. He was lazy, arrogant, ruthless, and not overly bright.

Like so many modern playmakers, Dan eventually found that wealth, pleasure, and luxuries were not enough for him. Power was the ultimate aphrodisiac, and once he had tasted it, in his undergraduate years at Yale, he became obsessed with its pull. He had obvious designs on the presidency, and was looking for a post that would vault him to national prominence.

Hamilton Turbee, on the other hand, was a (comparatively speaking) simple mathematician and programmer. He and Dan were destined for conflict from the start. He had no Intelligence background, didn't have secret wishes to climb to high governmental positions, and was clueless about the internal workings of the CIA (most people thought this was a positive attribute). He was totally lacking in social graces and skills. He had been categorized by the pediatric psychiatrists at Georgetown University Hospital many years earlier as a "highly functioning autistic." He was born with repetitive motion problems in his right arm, couldn't tolerate loud or obtrusive noises, and hated being "outside." He avoided all eye contact, needed a maid to keep him and his small apartment clean, and was able to make himself tolerable to others only through a rich cocktail of antidepressants, mood stabilizers, and stimulants. Without the medicinal support, his mother claimed, he would have spent his time "bouncing off the walls."

In university, his social issues had been eclipsed by the achievements brought on by his nearly photographic memory and dazzling skills in mathematics. He wrote a number of "fuzzy" search algorithms that were picked up by Lexis and Google. He was also the author of unique search programs that matched similarities across multiple databases. Turbee's father, James Turbee, was the managing partner of an international law firm headquartered in Washington, DC, and had been able to utilize his firm's intellectual property lawyers to negotiate reasonable compensation for these efforts. James Turbee also managed his son's funds, which had become quite extensive; his net worth was well into the range of eight figures. Not that Turbee cared. As long as he had more computing power and larger screens than anyone else, he was content. So he came to be TTIC's wunderkind, to play with one of the

most powerful supercomputers on the planet. And with any luck, to find and stop terrorists in his free time.

Turbee's first months in the new workplace had been rocky. He had not fit in very well; the majority of the staff avoided him. More than once he had been told by Dan, in aristocratic tones, to "take a shower and behave." He was introduced daily to new and increasingly severe individuals from different components of the Intelligence Community. He hated dealing with strangers, and knew many of his colleagues more by footwear than facial characteristics. His deathly pale complexion and darkly circled eyes became a source of comment. Was he sick? Was he on drugs? People who tried to ask received either a silent shrug or no answer at all.

He became ostracized and quickly withdrew into his own world, allowing himself to take the role of outcast. TTIC was a miracle agency, but even among people who should have been smart enough to understand him, Turbee had become the misfit. His depression increased, and he looked for a way to silently disappear. Soon after he started working there, Turbee began retreating from the TTIC community on a regular basis by playing Internet video games instead of working. He'd almost immediately stopped participating in any of the agency's social activities. Though possibly the smartest person on the entire team, Turbee was not a functioning member.

ON ONE OF THOSE EARLY DAYS, before all the equipment was fully operational, when there were still technicians crawling under worktables and cables littering the stepped floors, there was a commotion, and a collective muttering of "oh shit." A small detail of Marines entered through the rear doors, and one announced, "Ladies and gentlemen, the President of the United States." Through the doors stepped the man himself. He was wearing his usual awkward grin, and dressed casually, without a suit jacket or tie.

"Sit down, everyone," said the President. "Get comfortable. I won't take up too much of your valuable time." Turbee noticed Dan's purple features out of the corner of his eye. Clearly Dan had not been expecting this. No one had.

The crowd of engineers, technicians, scientists, and Intelligence personnel sat down as one, shocked. The techs without desks simply sat on the floor.

"I know that this is a little bit unusual," said the President. "But I think it's important for you to hear directly from me why you are here, and why this is going to be an agency of critical importance to my presidency, and those

that will follow.

"You probably know that this country is still reeling from the terrorist attack we recently experienced," he continued. "While it was not the first terrorist attack weathered by this country, it was the attack that woke us up. The entire nation could see that there was, for whatever reason, a frightful collection of terrorists aligned against us, with means of great destruction at their disposal. They declared war on the free and democratic nations of this world, and especially against our own country.

"There were, unfortunately, a great many Intelligence failures that led to these tragic events, and many committees, investigations, and inquiries have been created to find how this could have happened, and to make sure that it never happens again."

There was a general nodding of agreement in the audience. The mood was electric. It wasn't every day that the President dropped by to say good morning and welcome the team.

"One of the findings of all of those investigations," the President continued, "was that there was not adequate coordination and communication between the various agencies charged with keeping the security of this nation. Too often, our Intelligence Agencies were passing one another like ships in the night, not being receptive to the information that other agencies had developed, or duplicating information unnecessarily. Sometimes the left hand did not know what the right hand was doing. And too often, patterns that could have been gleaned from streams of information developed by different agencies were not discerned, primarily because information was not being shared. That's where you guys come in."

Suddenly the President gave one of the disarming "awe shucks" grins for which he was so famous. "We have in this room," he continued, "some of the most respected analysts, gathered from all of the agencies that form our Intelligence Community. In addition, we have highly educated people hailing from our great universities: Harvard, Princeton, UCLA, Yale... maybe I should reverse the order," he chuckled, and the room chuckled with him. "We have individuals in this room who have been station chiefs in Riyadh, in Islamabad, in Khartoum, and elsewhere. We also have people who excel in finding patterns in oceans of data where others see nothing but chaos."

At that point Turbee saw those powerful eyes fall directly on him, and immediately looked down at his feet. The speech continued for a little longer, and he was impressed in spite of himself. Having only recently graduated from the university life, Turbee, like most university students, felt that the

man was a twit and had come to power only because of his last name. But there was nothing stupid about this speech, and nothing weak about the man. Turbee felt a grudging respect begin to grow, and found that he was actually looking forward to working for and with this man. As the President finished his speech and was ushered out, Turbee wished he could go out and shake his hand, but found himself instead rooted to the floor.

At TTIC, the day began with a discussion of the President's Daily Brief, or PDB, and the issues that it raised. The PDB was a briefing prepared every day for the President by the Office of Current Production and Analytic Support, a division of the CIA. Over the years, the PDB had been expanded, until the people handling it renamed it the National Intelligence Daily. During the Kennedy administration, it was reformatted and rearranged, and took on the appearance of a small newspaper. One President had even joked that it should contain a few ads and a sports section. It reflected the Intelligence Community's perspective on the affairs of the present day, and was the most important newspaper in the country, possibly in the world. The PDB came into play when TTIC was charged with specific tasks by the Director of Central Intelligence or the Deputy Director of Central Intelligence. On a number of occasions, the orders came directly from the President. Through hard work and the enormity of their responsibility, especially in regard to issues that made the front page of the PDB, the members of the team soon began to respect one another and to resemble the team that their President had directed them to be.

Many of them continued to wonder about Turbee, though. His messiness, his proclivity to bring food into his workspace without eating it, his pale features, and his unusual repetitive motor mannerisms all puzzled them. One day, however, Turbee showed the team why he was there. On that day, at 7:34AM, Madrid time, unknown terrorists detonated explosives on four trains in that city, using cell phone transmissions. More than 200 people were killed, and 1,500 were injured. It was the worst terrorist action that Spain had ever experienced. The bombings occurred during a national election, so the Spanish government immediately blamed the ETA, a Basque separatist organization. The matter was front and center in the PDB the next morning in Washington, and was vigorously discussed during the TTIC morning meeting.

The man leading the discussion was Liam Rhodes. Rhodes, age 45, came from a family that had a history with the CIA — his sure ticket into the Intelligence world, if he wanted to take it. He was a West Point graduate, a

former Marine, a Desert Storm vet, and a scholar. After leaving the Marines, he had been admitted to Harvard, where he had obtained a Ph.D. in Middle East Studies in a record three years. After taking time off to handle some family issues, he had re-entered the Intelligence arena as an analyst in the CIA's Middle East Department. Within ten years, as his skills, intelligence, and education showed through, he was promoted to Director of that department. From there he had been appointed to TTIC.

"No way," he was saying. "It's al-Qaeda. The organization of it. The audaciousness. No way the ETA could pull something like this off. One bomb, maybe, but not all of this, and certainly not simultaneously."

Rather than paying attention to the discussion, Turbee was noodling his way along the Internet, not really following the thread of the conversation. An article had just appeared in one of the Spanish newspapers, stating that an unexploded bomb had been found, and that it had an unusual detonator — a Goma-2 ECO.

Turbee smiled; this was way more interesting than what was going on in the office. He immediately started looking into which corporation produced these detonators. Having determined the culprit, he took a few minutes to hack into its corporate database, and discovered that 20 such detonators had recently been purchased by a numbered company registered in the Cayman Islands. That got his attention. People using numbered companies in the Caymans were generally doing something that they wanted to keep hidden. Like purchasing detonators for bombs they meant to use. Using the power of Blue Gene, he was able to hack into the corporate registry of the Grand Cayman records system, and found the only listed director of that numbered company to be a person from Morocco, by the name of Abu Dujan al-Afghani. Running this man's name through a Madrid street address database, and further databases for power and telephone service, Turbee found that al-Afghani and one James Zoughan lived across the hall from one another in an apartment building in Madrid. Further searches on the supercomputer revealed that these two individuals had been living side by side in various other buildings in Madrid for the past two years.

Turbee sat back in his chair and considered. If you live beside a terrorist once, that's a coincidence. If you live beside him three times, in the same city, over a space of two years, that smacks of conspiracy. These two were connected. Using his personal web-bots, which could hack into a server, scour its contents, and send back anything they found, Turbee teased the names of 12 likely conspirators from the various databases to which he had access. Then

he stepped it up — he got their current addresses as well. Just as the group meeting was about to finish up, Turbee gingerly raised his hand.

"This ain't school, Turbee. You can say what you want," Dan snapped.

In a quiet and somewhat shaky voice, Turbee answered, "It is al-Qaeda. In fact, al-Afghani, the mastermind, claims elsewhere that he is al-Qaeda's military chief in Europe. His coworkers in this bombing were James Zoughan and 12 others." Then he gave their names.

The rest of the TTIC team looked at him in astonishment. "How the hell did you get that so fast?" one man asked slowly.

Turbee slowly explained his process, looking down at his shoes to keep from meeting anyone's eye.

"Get it down on paper," said Dan. "We need to get that to the President right now."

"I don't do paper," replied Turbee. "Someone else can write it down. Oh, and I've got their addresses too."

With one phone call, Dan was connected to the President's Chief of Staff, and, after a few tense seconds, he found himself talking to the President of the United States. He gave him the names and addresses of the conspirators.

"How sure are you of this information, Danny?" asked the President.

"It's this odd whiz kid I've got, named Turbee. He used his search algorithms to work the information out of literally hundreds of databases. He explained it to the team. Rhodes is convinced Turbee's got it. I would say it's pretty reliable, sir," Dan answered.

"OK, Dan. I'm going to run with it. If we miss it's going to be embarrassing, but if you've nailed it, Spain will owe us."

The President put down his phone and asked for his Chief of Staff. "Get me Acedo on the line as well," he ordered. Acedo was the prime minister of Spain, and currently in the midst of an election battle. Within five minutes the call was put through, and the President delivered to Acedo the names and addresses of his terrorists.

It took Acedo and his government several hours to retract their Basque terrorist theory, but in due course they acted on the tip, and arrested the terrorists who hadn't yet committed suicide. For the subsequent press release, the Spanish security service indicated that a telephone belonging to Zoughan had been found, and that a quick search of the recent phone calls had revealed the names of the other terrorists. That was easier and less embarrassing than saying that some kid with a foreign supercomputer had tweaked out the names in 20 minutes just to pass the time. Even though TTIC was never

acknowledged, and Acedo never publicly thanked the US government, word of the coup spread rapidly through the normally tight-lipped Intelligence Community.

On that day, Turbee made his bones with the TTIC team. Despite his many eccentricities and blemishes, he was adopted and accepted. For the first time, he learned what it was to be at home in an organization and with other people.

"JOHNSON, turn up the sound on the CNN feed for a second," barked Dan. Ted Johnson was the custodian of the master controls, in charge of deciding what image or feed went to which of the big 101 screens. He also managed the conference room's phone lines. The TTIC staff had nicknamed him "the yellee," due to the fact that he was almost always addressed by Dan in a somewhat elevated tone of voice.

"OK," Johnson answered.

It took only seconds for everyone in the room to tune in to the events taking place in Libya. On the central 101, a CNN reporter was in the middle of an interview with a demolitions expert on the US mainland. "How big will the explosion be?" asked the announcer. "How big a crater?"

"I can't say for sure," said the expert. "But I agree with the Army representative — this explosion could be the equivalent of firing a kiloton of TNT. It could level any block in New York City. It could create a crater, in my opinion, of more than 500 meters across, and deeper than 20 meters."

The reporter moved on to talk about the odds makers in Vegas, and the rapidly growing pool of cash to be paid to the participant who most accurately called the depth and diameter of the crater. A sly grin slid across Turbee's usually serious face. He turned to his computer and went to work.

INSPECTOR INDERJIT SINGH, of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, was watching the same CNN feed on a small, 20-year-old television set. He sat alone in his cramped office at the RCMP provincial headquarters on Heather Street in Vancouver, British Columbia, shaking his head in disbelief. "Tons," he muttered to himself. "Almost 660 *tons* of Semtex. And now they're betting on the size of the crater. Nuts. Totally nuts." Indy, as he was affectionately nicknamed by the other denizens of the cramped complex, went back to the problem at hand.

British Columbian marijuana, known on the streets of California as "BC Bud," was pouring across the border separating Canada and her southern

neighbor in record quantities. There seemed to be no stopping it. The border was evidently full of holes. Millions of dollars were being spent by four different levels of government, namely British Columbia, the state of Washington, and the two Federal governments, to stop the flow. With no success on either side. A tidal wave of pot, thought Indy. A veritable tsunami.

The source of the drugs was, to the dismay of Indy and many of his colleagues, transparently obvious. After four decades of lax marijuana laws, minor or nonexistent sentences, budget cuts, and a local government that did not seem to care, BC had developed a fruitful and potent marijuana crop. A local economist had suggested, on the basis of fairly reliable evidence, that the marijuana industry had replaced the forest industry as BC's number one exporter. Marijuana was freely smoked on the streets of downtown Vancouver every day. A number of restaurants and "hemp shops" were openly selling it. To Indy's utter amazement, a local TV broadcaster had aired interviews with the proprietors of those establishments, even giving their street addresses. Still nothing had been done.

Many of Indy's colleagues knew judges, prosecutors, and high government officials who made no secret about the fact that they smoked weed. The drug children of the '60s and '70s were now holding the levers of power, and they saw nothing wrong with smoking marijuana. Not surprisingly, organized crime had become involved, and BC Bud was now being transported and warehoused by local motorcycle gangs. But how was it getting across the border? Indy leaned over his desk, running his hands through his hair. No matter how many times he asked himself this question, there was never an answer. Every inch of the border was monitored. The American Coast Guard had extra vessels plying the waters between Vancouver Island and the American mainland. Remote aerial craft with TV cameras were being employed. Monitoring rooms with hundreds of video feeds existed in BC and Washington, and yet the border leaks continued, unimpeded. There was obviously a hole, but where the hell was it?

The issue before him, however, was even more serious. High-grade heroin was now showing up in California, Oregon, Washington, and other neighboring states. It was a new and very serious aspect to the problem. Agent Stanley Hagen, of the Seattle FBI field office, had been particularly aggressive about the issue during their telephone call earlier that day.

"And now heroin is coming into the US through BC," Hagen had literally shouted into the phone. "Load after load after damn dump truck load of high-grade marijuana, and now, and now HEROIN!" He had seen many

good kids go sideways because of marijuana; he didn't want to think about the added criminality that came with the more serious use of heroin yet. He was going to take it up with the State department, he said. He was going to DC with this. It had to stop.

Indy knew Hagen was right. Indy also had a reasonably good idea about what would happen next. The FBI would lean on State. State would lean on its Canadian Embassy, who would start a chain of events that would end with the Inspector General of the RCMP proceeding to shit on Indy and his colleagues. Indy's protestations about low budgets, lax laws, and easy courts with dope-smoking judges would simply fall on deaf ears.

The evidence Hagen presented to Indy seemed clear enough. The heroin coming into the United States was from the Middle East or the golden triangle of Southeast Asia. And it was repeatedly showing up in raids of marijuana wholesalers in the state of Washington. That meant that the same hands were involved. It was coming over the BC/Washington border somehow. Somewhere. But where? And how?

THE CONVOY CAME at the expected time. An old Humvee. An even older Volvo N86. And another Humvee. The vehicles came rumbling down the Al Jawf Highway in Libya, surreal in the shimmering bands of heat. "Highway" was a bit of a misnomer, since the road was only a rutted single-lane trail, often disappearing completely beneath the shifting sands of the Sahara. The heat and the late afternoon sun were unrelenting. Without water, no human could last more than two days in this environment. Abu bin Mustafa was born in Egypt, but on the Nile delta. He had spent years in the deserts of Yemen and Afghanistan, but still found the endless sandy solitude of the southern Sahara to be unnerving.

He shifted from one foot to the other, pulling his attention off his thirst. "This should be easy," he told himself, speaking aloud simply to break the heavy silence. Just get the job done and he could get on a plane and have all the water and air conditioning he wanted. The location was perfect for an ambush — the roadway descended slightly, and rounded a sharp curve. Mustafa had his men park their Toyotas across the road, where they would be least visible. Then he and the three others assumed positions behind the rock formations that rose up on both sides of the highway. The sun's position was in their favor. There would be ten, he'd been told. Four in the lead vehicle, two in the Volvo, and four more in the third vehicle. Three American soldiers. Seven Libyan soldiers. Mustafa and his men communicated through

collar microphones, and each carried a Heckler and Koch PSG-1, equipped with a 6x Hensoldt scope. The rifles were extremely accurate, auto-loading, and equipped with 20-round magazines. The ammunition used had also been modified to maximize the weapons' killing power. The modifications were not popular, because of the expense, but that had never deterred Mustafa's employer, who was the mastermind behind the attack. Mustafa drew a breath and gave the count as the vehicles drew to within firing range.

At Mustafa's signal, four rifles cracked as one. Four soldiers keeled over, dead. Two soldiers in the last Humvee and the two soldiers in the Volvo were hit. Within a split second, four rifles fired again. The two soldiers left in the trailing Humvee slumped over. Two soldiers in the lead Humvee were hit. One more split second reload. As the two remaining soldiers in the lead Humvee rolled out of their vehicle, attempting to gain some cover, they were also killed. Mustafa was astounded at the ease of it. It was just as Yousseff, his boss, had said to him more than once. Preparation was everything.

The men rose as one and headed down to the vehicles. Barking a quick command at the others to check the bodies, Mustafa pulled back the tarp slung over the Volvo's deck and smiled as he saw row upon row of what appeared to be reddish cellophane-wrapped bricks. Again, it was as Yousseff had told him. The two old Humvees were driven off the road and parked behind the same rock formations that had hidden Mustafa and his men. The bodies were pulled out of the Volvo and placed in the Humvees, and the Volvo, with its valuable cargo, was turned around. A new convoy formed, this time heading north — a Toyota in front, a Toyota in the rear, and the Volvo with the Semtex in the middle. Mustafa rode shotgun in the Volvo.

The three vehicles raced northward as quickly as the tattered roadway allowed, and within an hour turned right, heading east on a barely visible goat-path of a road that serviced, occasionally, the desert village of Zighan. Another five miles, and a decrepit, weatherworn building came into view. Behind it sat a few single-engine craft and a reconditioned DC-3. It had taken Mustafa and his colleagues several days to find this isolated and rarely used airport, and a goodly sum of money to cover the bribe that would permit them to take off without a flight plan. When they arrived, the Volvo was backed up to the DC-3, and the four men worked quickly to transfer the bricks, row by row, to the cargo compartment of the plane. This would be the first of many transfers. Mustafa saw the airport manager watching the process with interest. Not a good sign.

The sun had set by the time the task was finished. Mustafa ordered his

sweating men to board their plane. He went back into the tiny terminal, and smiled at the master. He didn't like this part of the job, and wished one of Yousseff's paid assassins had been sent along to take care of it. The station-master appeared friendly, with lines of laughter circling his eyes. But he had seen too much, hadn't he? Yousseff hated loose ends, and would commend his judgment. When he was four feet from the man, Mustafa pulled out his 9 mm Glock and shot him once in the head. One more bullet in the heart for good measure, and that was that.

One of the other men had already started the engines of the DC-3 when Mustafa reached it, and within minutes the plane, loaded down with 4,300 kilos of Semtex, was on a southeastern course, headed toward the Sudan. Mustafa reached for the Thuraya Sat-phone.

THREE THOUSAND MILES and several time zones to the east, in a large hangar in Jalalabad, a phone was ringing. Three times, then a pause, then twice more. Then silence. It was the signal. Yousseff smiled to himself, setting down what he had been reading and leaning back in his chair. The plan was in motion, and there would be no turning back now.

A MILE OR SO DOWNRIVER from the hangar, Zak Goldberg was making his first transmission in a week, using the tiny transmitter engineered by the propeller heads at Langley. Smaller than a matchbox, it contained only two buttons — an on/off switch and a Morse code communication button for sending out an encrypted Morse code signal. More than 90 percent of the device was battery. When turned on, it transmitted its position to one of the several unmanned Global Hawks cruising 60,000 feet above him; they in turn transmitted the position, and the Morse code message, to the US Embassy in Islamabad. The Morse code was translated to alphanumeric characters, and printed out on a high-speed printer located in the communications room in the Embassy's basement. When this newest message came in, the clerk on duty glanced at it, yawning. Then he snapped to attention and read it quickly, and wide-eyed, a second time. It was no fine judgment call in this case to ring Michael Buckingham, the CIA station chief. This information needed to be passed along immediately. He picked up the telephone and quickly dialed Buckingham's local number.