

Introduction

In 2013, best-selling novelist Brad Thor revealed that he was a member of the "Analytical Red Cell Unit," a top-secret operation run by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. Working with professionals from the creative industry, their mission is to imagine possible terrorism scenarios, which are used by the military, government, and intelligence services to allow them to consider their response, and to work out their strategy to pre-empt future terrorist attacks. Thor has described Red Cell as the Las Vegas of U.S. government programmes, stating that "what happens in Red Cell stays in Red Cell."

This novel is a work of fiction. References to Red Cell and other groups, events, and individuals are used in an entirely fictional context.

Prologue

Neil Johnson's first book was crap. He knew that now. Five years on from the day he had decided he must be able to write a book at least as good as some of the junk he'd read, he had come to terms with the fact that his first attempt would never be the New York Times bestseller he once felt certain it would be.

Pledging to write a book wasn't the first New Year's resolution he'd ever made, but it was the first one he'd kept longer than the second week of January. He'd got straight to work, crafting the intricate plot of a global vampire conspiracy, and then sat down every morning before he left for work to knock out five hundred words at a time. Six months later, he had a first draft he was happy with, and he got a few copies printed up for eager friends and family members to take a look at. Most of the books came back with positive-sounding notes in the margins of the first few pages, but he suspected most of his well-intentioned volunteers hadn't read all the way to the end. However, a few copies did come back with a decent amount of red ink, which gave him enough to set about working on the second draft. The process repeated several times, with Neil roping in a few more friends each time, until he had what felt like a final draft. Everyone who had read it agreed—this was a real page-turner and they would buy it if they saw it on the shelf in a book shop. At that point he thought, *Okay, what the hell do I do with this now?*

He trawled the internet, looking for potential agents and publishers, and spent the next six months

sending off enquiries. They all asked for exclusivity, meaning no publisher wanted to review a novel that was under consideration by a competitor, but Neil took the approach of *what they don't know won't hurt them* and blasted out his first thirty pages with a cover letter to every one of them at the same time. He walked away from the post office daydreaming of a seven-figure cash advance to turn his little book that everybody loved into a major literary franchise, with a subsequent deal for the movie series being little more than a formality. He could tell his boss to shove his boring tech support job up his backside, and spend the rest of his life writing stories and spending his millions.

One at a time, the responses came back. The letters all began in a pleasant manner. "Thank you for your submission" was then followed by a sentence that contained the words "not at this time," but then offered the encouragement of "we wish you all the best in your writing career." Some prospective authors keep their rejection letters in a shoe box so they can refer back to them when superstardom knocks on their door, and Neil started to do the same.

He was two years into his writing career, and he had two piles of paper to show for it: one completed manuscript and a tower of rejection letters almost as high. Life carried on, but Neil was bored at his job and, with no prospect of moving up the career ladder, he couldn't stop himself from staring out of the window at the rain and dreaming of sitting outside his beachfront property in Malibu, tapping away at his laptop on his next blockbuster novel. More Googling led him into the self-publishing world and he got an immediate reality check.

He was the only person in his immediate circle of friends and family who had even tried to write a book, never mind actually making it to the end of a draft, but he discovered a culture where there were thousands upon thousands of people just like him. They had all written their own novels, their family members loved them, they had also received their own mountain of rejection letters and they were now publishing their potential blockbusters themselves. Within this culture, Neil learned about authors like Hugh Howey, Scott Sigler, and Andy Weir, who had started off as self-publishers but then secured deals with publishers based on their cult following and were now living the dream—writing full-time and paying the bills with the proceeds. On top of this, Neil was horrified to discover that every man and his dog—just like him—seemed to have written a book about vampires that was certain to take the world by storm, in the author's opinion at least.

Despite these knocks to his early confidence and the decreasing likelihood of his literary superstardom, Neil pressed on and published his book anyway. "Blood of the Vampires" hit the virtual bookshelves and after a week he had sold seven e-books, and three kind souls he had recently befriended on Twitter ordered paperback copies. After a month, he got his first review—a three-star sympathy nod from someone who had bought the e-book, but—Neil suspected by the contents of the review—hadn't read the whole thing.

After two months, Neil had stopped checking his static sales figures on a regular basis and instead began to read endless articles about self-publishing. He wondered why these bloggers were considered

experts when none of them had written and published a book he'd heard of, but he resolved to keep his bitterness and frustration to himself and make his next book more of a success.

Writing was something he felt deep within his soul—he had stories to tell and he was confident that if he could find people who wanted to read them, they would enjoy reading them as much as he enjoyed writing them. He was given heart by one article that summarised his feelings better than he could articulate himself. The article had been written by a self-published teen fiction author who had tasted moderate success, and she was comparing the public perception of self-pubs against the public perception of "real" authors who have agents and publishers, and could find their books on the shelves of every bookshop on the high street. She summed it up like this:

"My favourite author is Stephen King. If I were to meet Stephen King in the street, or find myself sitting next to him on a plane, I would ask him about the book he was working on. The conversation would end with me telling him I would buy his new book as soon as it hits the shelves. On the other hand, when I meet someone new, or if someone I already know finds out I'm an author, and I tell them about a book I've written, they say, 'That sounds great. Give me a copy, I'd love to read it.'

"This has happened to me countless times. People don't mean any harm by what they say and, until you're in this situation, you don't understand why it's a little offensive. The reason is this: the unconscious insinuation in their words is that you have a garage full of your shitty books that you can't sell and they're

prepared to do you a favour by offering to take one off your hands. After all, it'll help you clear some space, won't it? Maybe I'm going a little over the top, but keep this in your mind the next time you find yourself in this situation. As a self-published author, you will find yourself on the receiving end of many comments like that. If you don't, then you're either not working hard enough on your marketing or you've already hit the big time. Make no mistake—this is the difference between a self-pub and a mainstream author."

This article was a revelation. Neil scrolled down past the end and found a long stream of comments from other self-pubs who agreed with her. He read more of her articles and took more and more of her advice on board.

"Don't waste your time writing the next epic. Three years spent on a two-hundred-thousand word opus is three years of your life you won't get back. No one wants to read seven hundred pages by a self-pub."

"Put tasters out there. Short stories and novellas are growing in popularity, especially in digital formats, and they give a self-pub the best way to create a showcase for their talents."

"Give some books away for free. If you're not relying on your writing to pay the bills, you have nothing to lose and readers to gain. If they like your work, they will be back to pay for more."

"Write pilots—lots of short stories that open new series. For the ones that do well, write more episodes. For those that don't do well, do the same as any Hollywood TV executive does with unsuccessful pilots—drop them."

Neil was a new man. He did exactly as she said. He came up with story after story, all less than five thousand words each, and published one a month for six months straight. Some still had typos and several made very little sense, but he found he was getting a lot of feedback and reviews from people who were kind enough to read his stories. One of his new fans even sent him a fully-edited version of the first two stories, and after that point, Neil sent him an advance copy of each one to proofread.

At the end of the six months, one of Neil's pilot stories had sold three times as many copies as any other and it had received positive reviews from a few e-book review sites. It was the story of a detective that investigated outlandish conspiracy theories, but with a low word count to aim for, Neil cut out all the procedural investigation and opened with the scenes that would be the final twist and showdown in a regular detective novel. Over the next few months, he put out more of his short detective stories and, while he never topped the charts, he found that each one sold more in its first week than the previous one. As the number of five-star reviews increased, so did the interest from a couple of literary agents who told him they would keep an eye on him and be back in touch if his trajectory continued upwards.

The day job ticked along, but his aspiration of jacking it all in and writing full-time began to feel more like an achievable goal and less like a pipe dream. Little did Neil Johnson know that he was standing on the verge of the stardom he had yearned for all this time, and his life would change forever the day three hundred and thirty-three people died at the Super Bowl.

Detective Dookie and the Super Bowl Massacre by Neil Johnson

Dookie's earpiece fizzed.

"All clear."

What the hell is going on? he thought. *Have I got it wrong?*

But he knew his information had come from a reliable source. His man on the inside had given him the intel to thwart Al-Hassam's terrorist plans countless times before; he saw no reason for today to be any different. So what was it? What was he not seeing?

He stood on the steps and surveyed the scene before him. All around, the noise of the crowd was building in anticipation of the imminent half-time performance by globe-trotting rock superstars The Deadheads. The hasty construction of the stage in the centre of the field was now complete and those with VIP tickets were standing on the sidelines, eagerly poised to rush to the front. The score between the Bears and the Broncos was tied and he knew this would probably go down as one of the most memorable Super Bowls of all time, but it was his job to make sure it was for all the right reasons.

As with so many of the cases that had gone before, he had been drafted in to work with the Feds after he came forward with information from one of his sources. He had it on good authority that there would be a terrorist attack on the Super Bowl during the halftime show. More specifically, the message had been, "Many hundreds of infidel pig-dogs will be slaughtered by their own sword."

Security around a Super Bowl had never been

tighter. FEMA had designated the game a "Level One Event" and there were hundreds of federal agents and local lawmen dotted all over the stadium and the surrounding area, searching for known associates of the Al-Hassam terror group and its affiliates. Sophisticated systems had been put in place to monitor the crowd and compare their faces with those on file in the CIA's terrorist database. Every cellphone in a ten-mile radius was being monitored for current and historical activity that might indicate terrorist associations or sympathies. But all day long, Detective Dookie had heard nothing other than "All clear" in his earpiece every time one of the exhaustive searches was complete.

The lights dimmed and the crowd rushed onto the field, surrounding the stage, with rapturous applause for the septuagenarian rock band as the four members of The Deadheads took to the stage. The stick-thin womanising lead singer shouted, "Hello New York!" into his microphone and the crowd cheered back.

Dookie's heart was pounding. Something was wrong; he could feel it in his bones. Either his intel was bad—which had never happened before—or he'd missed something, and that would be so much worse. He looked up and scanned the stadium. Eighty thousand people were here to enjoy a football game, unaware of the threat to their safety, unaware of the massive law enforcement presence, unaware of the thirty snipers watching over them from—

...slaughtered by their own sword.

The phrase had confused Dookie from the moment he heard it, but now it began to make terrible, obvious sense. The pieces fell into place. He

recalled the death of the celebrity hypnotist two days ago. It had been written off as an auto-erotic accident but now it became horrifically clear to Dookie that his suicide had been faked. Time moved in slow motion as he ran up the steps and back into the stadium, screaming into his microphone, "It's the snipers! They're controlling our snipers!"

Dookie stopped and turned to look at the crowd on the field as he heard the opening guitar riff of 'The Deadheads' first song. At that moment, something changed in the minds of the thirty men with sniper rifles dotted around the stadium. Those three guitar chords flicked a switch in their brains, awakening instructions that had been suggested to them under hypnosis just days earlier.

Kill them. Kill them all.

In perfect unison, all thirty men spoke over their radios. "Fire at will."

At first, the sound of gunfire was masked by the music blaring from the stage. Each sniper dropped two citizens apiece before anyone really noticed. With the lights dimmed and everyone singing and dancing, anyone next to a victim was almost oblivious to their neighbour falling to the floor. It was only when they looked down and saw the massive gaping gunshot wounds did they realise what had happened.

The chaos really began when one of the snipers took out the lead guitarist. The video screens showed his neck exploding in a burst of blood and sinew, in ultra-high definition. The music stopped and he was dead before his body slumped to the floor. There was a brief moment of silence across the entire stadium, which was then broken by the crack of gunfire

echoing around the stands. Eighty thousand people had a sudden moment of realisation and they all started screaming at once.

Dookie was frozen to the spot. His radio buzzed with the frantic, panicked shouts of "What the hell is going on?" and "What the hell are we going to do?" Hordes of spectators rushed past, almost knocking him off his feet, which snapped him out of his trance. That was when it hit him: *there must be a way to snap the snipers out of their trance*. Citizens were dropping like flies, but a lightbulb lit in Dookie's brain and he spoke into his radio, shouting over the screaming crowd that was still scrambling to get out of the line of fire.

"Benny, are you there?" he said, addressing his partner of two years, the longest period Dookie could remember having a partner that hadn't been killed in the line of duty, or didn't ask for a transfer away from his high-pressure cases.

"I'm here, Dookie. Go ahead."

"What was that strange one-liner at the end of the dead hypnotist's suicide note?"

"The hypnotist?" Benny said, then it clicked. "Oh my God, Dookie. This is related, isn't it?"

"Just tell me, Benny. People are dying here!"

"Okay, if I remember right, it was, 'God bless the American flag, the one true global banner.'"

"Good. Now get on the snipers' radio channel and say that."

"Do you really think..."

"Do it. Do it now!"

Within the wall of sound coming from the panicked citizens in the stadium, Dookie could still hear the crack-crack-crack of rifle fire from the

snipers. The first tier of stands surrounding the field were no longer filled with people; they were now almost empty apart from a scattering of dead bodies. The spectators who had chosen to tend to the wounds of the fallen had then been picked off by the snipers too, leaving clusters of the dead all over the stadium. The snipers had gone for the easiest shots every time. Anyone who was running or difficult to aim at had a decent chance of escaping, but anyone caught in a crush was a sitting duck. He counted himself lucky that he was standing at one of the exits, and must have been out of sight, or at least not an easy target.

Then the gunfire stopped. The screaming and running continued, but Dookie pushed his way through the crowd, against the flow of frantic spectators, down the stands and onto the field.

"Benny, are you there?" he said into his radio.

"It worked! You're a goddamn genius, Dookie."

Detective Dookie stood by the stage and surveyed the scene. Dead bodies were strewn everywhere, lying in pools of blood where they had fallen. This was supposed to have been a party, a celebration of sports and music, not just for the fans in the stadium, but for the billions watching around the world. He wondered at what point the TV cameras stopped broadcasting. How many people had met their end on live TV before the producers pulled the plug? There were dozens, maybe hundreds of bodies; innocent people who wanted nothing more than to sing, dance, and enjoy a game of football.

But Al-Hassam had a problem with that. The terrorist organisation would stop at nothing until the

way of life in countries with true freedom was destroyed. The fight against Al-Hassam would be fought in every street, in every city, and even though he was nothing more than a cop in the NYPD, Detective Donny Duke—Dookie to his friends—would do everything he could to stop them. But he had lost this battle. Sure, he had pieced the events of the last week together to crack the case, but it had taken too long. The dead bodies surrounding him were testament to that. The stands had been evacuated, and now silence engulfed the stadium.

"I'm no genius, Benny. Look around. You won't find anyone left in the stadium who thinks I am."

"Hey, if you hadn't worked this out, we'd be picking up a lot more bodies. You saved lives here today, Dookie, whether you like it or not."

Dookie thought for a minute, then wiped a tear from his eye. "I don't like it, Benny."

"We'll get them next time, partner."

"Yeah," Dookie said, his knuckles turning white as he squeezed the radio so tight he thought he might crush it. "Next time."

Then he threw the radio as hard as he could. It hit the floor, shattering into a thousand pieces.

The next day began like any other. Dookie got out of bed, showered, got dressed, ate breakfast on the subway on the way to the precinct, and walked down the corridor to the office of the NYPD's Special Investigations division. But what *was* out of the ordinary was the standing ovation he got from his colleagues when he opened the door.

It was clear that everyone had got in early to see him. Every desk was manned, even by detectives

he knew were on vacation or off shift that day. Everyone had come into the office to congratulate the man who had stopped a massacre becoming a catastrophe. His boss, Captain McKinney, stood at the end of the office, clapping louder and harder than anyone. Being a humble and private person, Dookie wanted this public show of appreciation to be over as soon as possible, so he made his way down the office as quick as he could. He extended a hand to McKinney, expecting him to shake it, but instead his boss grabbed it, pulled Dookie close, and gave him a rib-crushing bear hug.

"Good work, Dookie. No, *great* work. You know the mayor's had us under a microscope for months, but he called me last night to thank us for a job well done."

"If only we'd worked it out sooner," Dookie said. "All those people didn't have to die."

"We did the best we could, and he knows that. The important thing is that lives were saved." Dookie didn't agree, but he didn't argue the point.

"Okay, show's over," McKinney announced to the office, "you can all get back to work." Then he beckoned Dookie into his office. "I need to talk to you in private."

Dookie sat down at McKinney's desk. He could tell from the look on his boss's face that the atmosphere had got a lot more serious.

"What is it, sir?"

"What do you know about the Tactical Anti-Terrorist Squad?"

"TATS?" Dookie said. "It's a division of the FBI that combats terrorism in the Homeland. Very secretive. Set up a few years ago, but the FBI have

only just admitted that it exists."

McKinney was silent for a moment. Something on his mind was troubling him.

"What about them?" Dookie asked.

"Their deputy director called me this morning. He said he had an opening and wanted the genius who cracked the Super Bowl massacre to join them."

Dookie didn't know what to say.

"I know you've been involved in cases like this before, and you take them very personally."

"Sir, all I've ever wanted to be is a New York cop..."

"Can it, Dookie, and give me your piece and shield. This is your shot, your chance to take Al-Hassam down, and every terrorist organisation like it. I've already told them you'll accept. You're the best man I've got. You're a great cop, but this is your calling, your destiny."

"I... I don't know what to say, sir."

"Say thank you, then get the hell out of my office and stop these terrorists once and for all."

Dookie got to his feet and threw his badge and gun onto the desk. He exchanged a long, firm handshake with McKinney, said thank you, then opened the door to leave.

For the second time that day, he received a rapturous applause from everyone in the Special Investigations division.

THURSDAY 6TH FEBRUARY

1

Neil Johnson had always thought of a TV studio's green room as a cavern of unspeakable opulence. It was where rock bands would demand bowls of M&Ms with the brown ones picked out, or where a diva would insist on having the room climate controlled so the temperature of the air didn't mess with her vocal chords. TV and movies had set him up with a fantasy, but the reality he found himself in wasn't coming anywhere close to matching it. The room was tiny, with barely enough space for a worn-out sofa and an orange plastic chair. He sat on the sofa alone, feeling lucky that he wasn't sharing it with a rock band, dance troupe, or any other large gang of sweaty men.

He remembered seeing Hollywood megastars on this show, so maybe they set the truly rich and famous up in separate rooms, leaving the green room for normal people like him. But normal or not, the megastars had turned up to be asked softball questions by presenters Kate Brown and Roger Simpson on the same sofa he would shortly be sitting on. He wondered how many of the unemployed, stay-at-homes, and off-shift workers would see him make his first-ever appearance on TV?

How many of his friends, family members, co-workers, and ex-girlfriends would be watching? The last few days had been such a whirlwind, he hadn't had time to stop, gather his thoughts, and tell those closest to him what was about to happen. One of the runners had made him hand over his phone before

going into the green room; how many messages would be waiting for him when he got it back?

The only sound in the room came from a TV screen hanging in the corner, displaying the show as it went out live. He was going to be their final guest, and he had been sitting in the green room alone since the only other guest left to do his interview over an hour ago. He'd been happy to be left alone. The other guest was a man who had been accused of sexual assault, and chose to protest his innocence by exposing the fact that he had been castrated as a child in front of the world's media. How were you supposed to make small talk with someone who had all that going on in his life? Talking to him would have made Neil feel like an even bigger fraud than he already did.

"And when we come back," Kate Brown said on the screen, "we'll be talking to the British author who has literally become an overnight sensation. Stay right there."

The show went to a commercial break, and the door to the green room flew open.

"Showtime, pal," the runner said. "Let's go."

The runner led Neil to the studio and sat him down on the guests' sofa. A makeup artist buzzed over, waved a brush in his face, then buzzed away again. The two presenters sat down in the sofa opposite.

"Nervous?" Kate said.

"A little," Neil said. His voice cracked as he spoke, and he cleared his throat.

"Can we get him a drink of water?" Roger shouted to no one in particular.

"Don't be," Kate said. "It'll be exactly the same

as it was in the pre-interview this morning."

"Okay," Neil said, and flinched as a bottle of water was thrust in front of his face. He took a swig, then the unseen hand yanked it away again and he heard someone shout, "Back in ten!"

"Don't worry, we're on your side," Kate said with a reassuring smile that Neil assumed she flashed at all first-time interviewees who were shitting their pants as much as he was.

"Okay," someone shouted, "we're live in three, two..."

2

"Welcome back to Kate and Roger In 'The Morning," Roger read from the autocue. "Joining us on the sofa is someone you would almost certainly not have heard of just a few days ago, but now his name is on everybody's lips. His name is Neil Johnson, and before we meet him, here's a short reminder of why he's here."

Someone shouted, "Run VT!" and they all turned to watch an edited set of news clips on the screens dotted around the studio.

An American female newsreader said, "We're getting reports of a shooting at the Super Bowl..." The sound of gunfire had been added into the package, then it cut to mobile phone footage of people screaming and running through a football stadium. In the background, someone shouted, "It's the snipers!" It then cut to a man dressed from head to toe in black, with a mask over his face. He pointed a sword at the camera and said, "Infidels, you will kneel before Al-Qirmizi. While America and the Unified Nations continue to spread their evil around

the world, so will we continue to slaughter the infidels." The screen then went black for a second, and faded back into the shot of another American female newsreader, who said, "In a strange turn of events, an unknown British writer has become an overnight sensation. Just hours after the terrible events on Sunday, a short story selling for just ninety-nine cents topped every bestseller list around the world. Its title? Detective Dookie and the Super Bowl Massacre. Is this an example of life imitating art, or is something more sinister going on?" The video ended and the producer cut back to the studio.

Kate said, "That writer is anything but unknown now, and he's here with us for his first interview since the events of last Sunday. Neil Johnson, thank you for being with us today."

"Thank you for having me on your show," Neil said, happy just to get his first words out without stumbling over them. His heartbeat slowed a little, but it was still pumping at a rate that made him worry about the potential of suffering a heart attack live on air. He could feel the eyes of the world watching him through the TV cameras.

"So, we have to ask you this first: like the reporter said in the clip, is this just an example of life imitating art, or is there something more sinister going on?"

Neil gave the smile he'd been practicing all morning. It was sympathetic to the victims, but still relayed the message that he thought this situation was as absurd as everyone else thought it was. "Kate, first I want to say that I was as shocked and disgusted at Sunday's events as every other right-thinking person around the world. The answer to your question is yes.

This is just a sample of life imitating art, but I would never describe what I do as art."

"How would you describe what you do?" Roger asked.

"I write short stories, I publish them, and, until Sunday night, hardly anyone had read them. It's just a hobby, something that I enjoy doing. Never in a million years did I think the crazy things I dream up would ever mirror real life."

"You say hardly anyone ever read your stories, but that all changed on Sunday night," Kate said. "Tell us more about that."

"I went to bed early because I had to get up for work the next day."

"You work in IT, don't you?" Kate said.

"That's right. I'm not into American Football, so I didn't stay up late to watch the Super Bowl. Some of my co-workers had the Monday booked off so they could stay up late, but it's just not my thing. Then I woke up and checked my ebook sales. Most days I've sold one or two copies, and it's a nice feeling to see that someone is reading one of my books."

"But you got a surprise, didn't you?" Kate said.

"I certainly did. While I'd been asleep, I had sold over ten thousand copies of my Super Bowl story."

"Ten thousand copies!" Kate exclaimed.

"I couldn't believe it. It's an amazing feat if I sell ten copies of anything I've written in a day, never mind ten thousand."

"Tell us a little bit about your short stories," Kate said.

"They're detective stories set in the United States. The only problem with detective stories is that

they tend to run long. You have to show the detective piecing the puzzle together and solving the crime from scratch, which usually takes at least three hundred pages. I wanted to write short stories, so I decided to cut to the chase. If you can imagine the last fifteen minutes of an episode of CSI, where the heroes solve the crime, that's what my stories are like."

"Where did all those sales come from?" Roger asked. "How did everyone find out about your book?"

"I worked it out pretty quickly. Right after the shooting, a conspiracy website came across my book and wrote a review of it. They said there were too many similarities between my story and what had actually happened for it to be a coincidence. Then all the other conspiracy sites picked up on it, shared it on social networks, and it looks like anyone who has a passing interest in conspiracy theories downloaded my book."

"And I guess life changed for you at that moment?" Kate said.

"That's right. My boss has been really good and given me time off this week to come to terms with what happened. The company I work for has been overwhelmed with requests for interviews with me and my co-workers. Unfortunately, there's no juicy gossip to report, and I've decided to donate all the profits from this book to a number of charities that help wounded soldiers coming back from fighting Al-Qirmizi. I'm just a regular guy with a bit of an imagination. There's no conspiracy here."

"And we're clear," someone shouted.

Neil breathed a huge sigh of relief. It was over. His first appearance on live TV had come and gone, and he felt confident that he hadn't made an idiot of himself in front of the whole world. While Kate and Roger had been questioning him, it had felt like time was standing still, like the world would keep shining a spotlight on him forever. But now that it was over, it felt like the interview had gone by in a flash.

Roger got up from the sofa immediately and left the studio. Kate was a little more courteous, telling Neil he did well before she disappeared. A runner threw his bag of belongings on the sofa next to him and barked, "We need you to vacate the studio."

Neil did as he was told. He threw his bag over his shoulder and left, following the winding corridors as they led him to the reception area. Through the tall glass windows he could see the perpetual Manchester rain pouring down outside, so he asked the young woman on reception if she would call a cab for him.

"Sure," she said. "Where are you going?"

"To the train station."

"Piccadilly or Victoria?"

"Piccadilly."

"Okay, bear with me for a moment." She dialled a number and ordered a taxi for him. "It'll be a couple of minutes."

He thanked her and was about to leave the desk to sit in the waiting area when she said, "You're that author, aren't you?"

Neil smiled back at her and shrugged. "I guess so."

"How did it go today?"

"Okay, I think. It's the first time I've been on TV."

"My brother read your story."

"So what does he think I am: a terrorist or a CIA operative? It feels like ninety-nine percent of people around the world think I'm one or the other."

"He just thinks it's a really weird coincidence."

"Well, that makes two of us."

She smiled. "How else would someone have predicted what could happen at the Super Bowl?"

"I've been asking myself the same question all week," Neil said. "The best theory I've heard is that I was brainwashed by Al-Qirmizi, at the same time they brainwashed the FBI snipers."

The receptionist laughed. "Really?"

"But what they don't take into account is the fact that the snipers who killed everyone hadn't been brainwashed; they were terrorist sympathisers who had been in the FBI for years. The brainwashing was in my story, not in the real world."

She pointed to the window and said, "Your taxi is here. Nice to meet you."

"Nice to meet you, too," Neil said, and made to leave.

"Wait!" she shouted, and thrust a notepad and pen in his direction. "Before you go, can I have your autograph?"

"You want my autograph?"

"Sure."

"Why?" Neil always felt incredibly awkward when any of his friends asked him to sign a copy of any self-published books he gave them. He was happy enough to be handing over a book they were prepared to read, but signing it made him feel even

more like a regular Joe pretending to be an author.

"I don't know," she said. "It just feels like you're on the verge of hitting the big-time."

"Tell you what," he said, "if I make it to the big-time, I promise to come back and sign anything you want."

"It's a deal," she said, and scribbled something on the pad. She tore off the page and gave it to him. "It's my number. So you know where to find me. My name's Gemma."

"Nice to meet you, Gemma," Neil said, his hands shaking as he folded up the note and put it into his pocket. He smiled and said, "See you when I hit the big time," then left the building, feeling like the king of the world.

4

At that moment in Washington D.C., a telephone rang. The phone was sitting on a desk in the White House, belonging to the administrative office for Secretary of State David Foley. As was always the case at seven-thirty a.m. on a weekday, the only person in the office was the Secretary of State's Executive Assistant Jennifer Forrest. The phone rang only once before she answered the call.

"Secretary of State's office," she announced in her direct tone that gave the impression that anyone who spoke to her—other than her boss—was wasting her time. "Executive Assistant Forrest speaking."

"I need to talk to Foley," said the man on the other end. The Texan drawl was a dead giveaway; this was CIA Director Jim West. He was hundreds of links higher up the chain than Jennifer and countless

pay grades higher, but she was the gatekeeper to the man he wanted to talk to, and she wasn't going to let him forget it.

"The Secretary is not here right now," she said. "May I take a message?"

"I know he's not there, Jennifer. Just patch me through."

She paused for a second, letting the dead air tell him what she wanted to hear.

"Jennifer, are you there? *Please* can you put me through to the Secretary of State?"

"Of course," she said. "That didn't cost anything, did it?"

Finally satisfied with the tone of his request, she hit the transfer button.

Secretary of State David Foley was sitting in the back of his stretch limo, stuck in traffic on his way to the airport. He answered his phone on the first ring.

"Foley," he announced.

"Foley, it's West."

"Hi Jim, what can I do for you?"

"Well, the first thing you can do is get a new Executive Assistant."

"I assume it was Jennifer who put you through to me?"

"She talks to me like my wife talks to our kids. And me."

Foley laughed. "She's a bitch alright, but she's my bitch. Biggest balls in D.C., Jim, present company included. We'll all be saluting her one day, mark my words."

"God help us if you're right, Dave."

"I assume you called to talk about something

other than my choice of support staff?"

"I just had a call from London. That writer's just been on TV in England."

"The Super Bowl thing?"

"Yeah. From what I hear, he's about to hit the big time."

"I'm getting on a plane to London. Is it time to put RCX into action?"

"Feels like the best chance we're going to get."

Foley said nothing.

"We'll make it work," West said. "You said yourself we need to do it. Remember, the clock's ticking."

"Fine. I'll make some calls to London and line it up. You sort out everything back here."

"Consider it done."

Foley hit the speed dial for Jennifer's desk. As soon as she answered, he said, "Get me the British Prime Minister."

5

At the same time as the U.S. Secretary of State was being transferred to speak to British Prime Minister Philip Meason, Neil Johnson was boarding a high speed train at Manchester Piccadilly station, bound for London in a journey that was scheduled to take eighty minutes. However, Britain's brand new high speed rail service from Manchester to London via Birmingham was unreliable at best, the whole project being dogged by delays, strikes, cost overruns, and legal action from beginning to end. The fact that, in reality, a high-speed journey from Manchester Piccadilly to London Euston took only a few minutes less than a regular train did little to justify the massive

cost of the project, which was of course reflected in the massive cost of a ticket for Joe Public. Neil Johnson didn't care, though. This was his first time on a high speed train, and the TV company was picking up the tab for his first class return ticket.

He found himself alone in the carriage, and breathed a sigh of relief as he sat down in his comfortable seat, which had more in common with a first class seat on a plane than anything he'd previously seen on a train. The armrest was studded with buttons and sockets to control the screen built into the back of the seat in front of him, but he had no desire to watch a movie. He wondered why the train company would give passengers the ability to watch movies with a longer running time than the length of the journey itself, unless they knew it was a way to keep them entertained during the inevitable delays. The thought escaped his mind, and he lay back, closed his eyes, and tried to relax as he closed in on the end of the single craziest week of his life.

On Sunday night he had gone to bed a nobody, but the strange way Al-Qirmizi's terrorist attack on the Super Bowl had mirrored his short story meant he had woken up on Monday morning as headline news. For the first few days, he struggled to maintain a grip on reality. The onslaught of calls from family, friends, journalists, and various law enforcement agencies made him feel like he was at the centre of the universe, and everything and everyone was orbiting around him. Photographers camped outside his building, and with no idea how to deal with his situation, he closed his curtains, locked his door, unplugged his internet connection, and turned his phone off.

He couldn't even turn on his TV. Sure, he was headline news, but he was just one of many headlines. The main story was still the terrorist attack on the Super Bowl, and until there was some kind of explanation why so many enemy insurgents were allowed to pass through the FBI sniper training scheme without being noticed, it would be the main story for a long time to come. Even with his wild imagination, it was difficult to dream up anything more outlandish happening anywhere in the world that would trump the Super Bowl massacre in the eyes of the global news media. But the worst part of it was the guilt he felt. His rational mind tried its best to reassure him that this was just a coincidence, that he was in no way responsible for the attack, but being locked away in his flat by himself did nothing to encourage rational thought. All he could do was sit on his sofa, or lie on his bed, and pray to be awakened from this nightmare.

But on the second day of his hermit-like existence, the inevitable happened: his parents showed up at his door. They fought their way through the photographers and rang the intercom. Neil let them in, and in true British fashion, they put the kettle on and talked through his problems over a cup of tea. Until this point he had been ignoring all approaches from the press, but they came to the conclusion that nothing would change for him until he made some kind of public appearance. His situation was too compelling for the media to ever give up. His parents showed him the latest headlines. Without anything firm on which to base their stories, they were taking what they read on conspiracy websites as truth, or just making up whatever they

wanted. Yes, a public appearance would help to set the record straight, but how would he do it?

His mother's favourite show was *Kate and Roger In The Morning*, and when Neil checked his messages he discovered dozens of emails from TV networks, including the producer of that very show. One phone call later, and he was lined up as a guest on Thursday's show. He would get the early train from Euston to Piccadilly, show his face on TV to tell the world he was just a regular guy who had found himself cursed by a coincidence, then get the afternoon train back home, and life would get back to normal by the end of the week.

The first two steps of that plan were now complete, and all he wanted was to get back home with his reputation restored and allow the media to find someone else to be obsessed with. For years, he had craved exposure and success for the stories he wrote but after a taste of fame, he was beginning to question whether life as a successful author was all that he dreamed it could be.

The vibration of his phone in his bag brought him out of his daydream. The taxi driver had chewed his ear off about the "bloody Council of Unified Nations" for the whole journey to the station, so he hadn't had a chance to check his messages since his appearance on TV. He unlocked the screen and was blown away. With twelve voicemails, nineteen messages, dozens of emails, and many more Facebook and Twitter notifications crying out for his attention, he didn't know where to start. The initial moment of panic associated with this overload of notifications passed and he checked the messages first.

The first was from his mother: "Well done Neil. We're really proud of you."

He smiled and checked the rest, which were either from his close friends telling him they thought he did well on TV, or from people he hadn't seen in years, asking him what was going on. An ex-girlfriend told him she wanted to see him again, and that he should call her when it all dies down. He deleted that message with a smile on his face.

It was a similar story on Facebook, only now he had friend requests from people he didn't know. Scanning down the list of requests, he could see they were all from girls, and good-looking girls at that. A few of them looked familiar, and closer inspection told him they had friends in common, but some of them were just total strangers.

He wondered about the motivation of people who fired off friend requests to random people they saw being interviewed on TV. What did these girls hope to get out of a Facebook friendship with him? Looking at their photos, he knew what he wouldn't mind getting out of a friendship with them, but he was acutely aware of how much of a douchebag he would look to the outside world if he used his association with a bloody massacre to pick up girls. He could see himself on the front cover of the Daily Mail already. He decided not to accept these friend requests, for now at least.

The train stopped in Birmingham, then thundered through the British countryside towards London. Despite the airbrushed photos and CGI renderings of high speed rail travel that were used to sell the idea to the public, there was very little to look at out of the window for most of the journey. In

order to achieve maximum speed, most of the track was buried in a trench, and the only greenery on show could be found on the grass walls on either side of the train. The train was running on time until ten minutes before its scheduled arrival at Euston station, when it gradually slowed down to a stop.

The PA system crackled and the driver said, "I'm very sorry, but there is going to be a short delay to your journey. Someone has thrown a sofa onto the line up ahead, so we need to wait here until the crew retrieve it. We should be moving again within twenty minutes."

Protestors against the high speed rail system had taken to throwing bulky items like sofas down the trench onto the line, because they knew that it would take a long time to move them out of the way. Having cranes permanently on standby and flying helicopters up and down the line to check for abandoned sofas added massive unforeseen operating costs to the project. The driver of the train reported the problem as if it was something he dealt with every day.

Neil's phone beeped, adding to the notifications he still hadn't caught up on. This time it was a message from his friend Dan.

Dan: Saw ur train delayed. ETA?

Neil: ETA where?

Dan: Euston. Waitin 4 u

Neil: What 4?

Dan: Check ur msgs. I'm takin u out 2 get pissed

Neil checked his messages, and found one from Dan, sent around the time he got on the train.

It said, "Hope ur on the train back u said ud be on. Meet u at Euston. U were mint on TV. Drinks on me."

Neil: Soz, missed it. Sounds good. Prob 20 mins late

Dan: C u in bar. Gettin them in now

Neil: OK c u there

6

In the time it had taken the high speed train to deliver him from Manchester to London, the U.S. Secretary of State had spoken to British Prime Minister Philip Meason, and they had agreed on a plan of action regarding Neil Johnson.

Neil got off the train at three in the afternoon and found Dan in the station bar. By the time he took his first swig of beer to celebrate his appearance on TV, a series of phone calls had taken place within the British intelligence community, ending in the order for an operations team to track his movements. GCHQ's Tempora data mine was used to track the GPS coordinates of his iPhone, then an operative was sent to stakeout his home, and two more began to monitor his activities from his current location.

Just after five o'clock, when Neil had relayed the story of the past week to Dan—and downed a few more pints—they took the tube to Archway, and headed for the Dog and Duck, their local pub, where the drinking continued.

"So what are you going to do about work, now that you're a famous author?" Dan said as he returned from the bar with their drinks.

"My boss has been really good about the whole thing," Neil said. "He gave me this week off to sort

everything out."

Dan looked incredulous.

"I've still got the same bills to pay," said Neil, ever the pragmatist. "If I don't have guaranteed money coming in, I won't be able to pay them."

"But how many books have you sold in the last week?"

"Thousands, but I only get pennies for each one and I've already said I'd give that money to charity so I don't look like some kind of dick who wants to profit from the shooting. I've got a few emails from agents and publishers, who say they want to talk to me, so I'll follow up on that, but they're not going to throw me any money in the next few weeks, are they? I don't want to tell my boss to stick his job up his arse if I'm then going to go begging for it back next month when I don't make it as the megastar author I told him I'd be."

Dan thought for a moment. His face said, "I suppose you're right," without the need for the words to come out of his mouth. "There must be some benefits to your new-found fame, though."

Neil smiled. "Chicks dig famous guys."

"What, even losers like you?"

Neil showed Dan the number the receptionist at the TV studio had given him, along with the growing number of friend requests from hot-looking strangers. Dan thumbed through the list on Neil's phone, his mouth open and his eyes wide. He said, "If I were you, I'd work through this lot first before I get back to the agents."

They heard a giggle and both turned their heads. Two women in their twenties were sitting at a table on the other side of the pub. One was blonde,

the other a redhead, and they were both wearing suits with pleasantly short skirts. They were looking over at Neil and laughing, but not in the way the girls had pointed and laughed at his acne in high school. No, these girls seemed friendly.

"Can we help you?" Dan said.

The blonde paid Dan no attention and addressed Neil directly. "You were on TV today, weren't you? You're that book guy."

Neil cast his eyes around the pub. It wasn't very busy, and as far as he could tell, no one else had heard what she said. "Yeah, I guess so," he said.

The blonde and the redhead looked at each other, exchanged a look that said, "Let's go," then picked up their glasses and made their way over to Neil and Dan's table. Neil felt a kick from Dan as they arrived.

"Do you mind if we join you?" the blonde said.

Their evening in the pub with Lucy (the blonde) and Sarah (the redhead) was the stuff of fantasy. Not the type of fantasy where two hot alien babes arrive on our planet demanding to learn about "this Earth thing called sex," but the type of evening that only went this well when it was written by a Hollywood screenwriter.

They wanted to know all about Neil's writing: how many stories he'd written, how he got his ideas, how he got into writing, whether he believed in the conspiracy theories he wrote about, and what he was going to publish next. After much coercion from the girls, he even read them a couple of pages of his next short story from an app on his phone, then stopped when he started to feel self-conscious about what he was doing. And even though Neil was the centre of

attention, they also wanted to know about Dan: what work he did, where they went to school, and how they became friends.

Then they talked for hours about anything and everything, sharing opinions on world events, movies, music, sport, and all the other things that four good-looking people in their late twenties like to do. There were no awkward silences where they struggled for something to talk about, and no fighting over how they would inevitably pair up. It just seemed to work out naturally that Dan and Sarah ended up having their own conversations, as did Neil and Lucy, and that was just fine with everyone. It was midnight before they knew it, and no one around the table had any qualms about exchanging phone numbers. They did so, and went their separate ways, the guys receiving a kiss on the cheek from the girls, along with the promise of another evening together.

Neil and Dan made for the kebab shop on the way back home, all the while basking in the glory of getting the girls' phone numbers. It was two in one day for Neil, a feat that had never been achieved in his life before.

Lucy and Sarah walked in the opposite direction. They got into a car two streets away from the pub and made a phone call using the hands free kit.

"Go ahead," the man on the other end barked.

"Contact made, sir," Lucy said.

"Assessment?"

"Complete, sir."

"Conclusion?"

"Negative, sir."

There was a pause, then the man on the other

end said, "Confidence level?"

"Ninety-five to one hundred, sir."

"Good work. Proceed as discussed."