

PART ONE

Assignment

CHAPTER ONE

IF HE HAD BEEN ASKED, JERRY DERMOTT COULD HAVE PUT hand on heart and sworn that he had never knowingly hurt anyone in his life and did not deserve to die. But that did not save him.

It was mid-March and in Boise, Idaho; winter was grudgingly loosening its grip. But there was snow on the high peaks around the state capital and the wind that came down from those peaks was still bitter. Those walking on the streets were huddled in warm coats as the state congressman came out of the legislature building at 700 West Jefferson Street.

He emerged from the Capitol's grand entrance and walked down the steps from the sandstone walls towards the street where his car was parked in readiness. He nodded in his usual genial way at the police officer on the steps by the portico door and noted that Joe, his faithful driver of many years, was coming round

the limousine to open the rear door. He took no notice of the muffled figure that rose from a bench down the sidewalk and began to move.

The figure was clothed in a long dark overcoat, unbuttoned at the front but held closed by hands inside. There was some kind of fretted skullcap on the head and the only odd thing, had anyone been looking, which they were not, was that beneath the coat there were no jeans-clad legs but some kind of a white dress. It would later be established the garment was an Arab dishdash.

Jerry Dermott was almost at the open car door when a voice called, 'Congressman.' He turned to the call. The last thing he saw on earth was a swarthy face staring at him, eyes somehow vacant as if gazing at something else far away. The overcoat fell open and the barrels of the sawn-off shotgun rose from where they had dangled inside the fabric.

The police would later establish that both barrels were fired simultaneously and that the cartridges were loaded with heavy-gauge buckshot, not the tiny granules for birds. The range was around ten feet.

Due to the shortness of the sawn barrels the shot-spread was wide. Some of the lead balls went past the congressman on both sides and a few hit Joe, causing him to turn and reel back. He had a sidearm under his jacket but his hands went to his face and he never used it.

THE KILL LIST

The officer on the steps saw it all, drew his revolver and came running down. The assailant threw both hands in the air, the right hand gripping the shotgun, and screamed something. The officer could not know whether the second barrel had been used, and he fired three times. At twenty feet, and practised with his piece, he could hardly miss.

His three slugs took the shouting man in the centre mass of the chest – he staggered backwards, hit the trunk of the limousine, fell forward and died face down in the gutter. Figures appeared from the portico doorway, saw the two bodies down, the chauffeur staring at his bleeding hands, the policeman standing over the assailant, gun double-hand gripped, pointing downwards. They ran back inside to call for back-up.

Two bodies were removed to the city morgue and Joe to hospital for attention to the three pellets that had lodged in his face. The congressman was dead, chest penetrated by over twenty steel balls which had entered heart and lungs. So was the assailant.

The latter, stripped naked on the morgue slab, gave no clue to identity. There were no personal papers and, oddly, no body hair save his beard. But his face in the evening papers yielded two informants: the dean of a college on the edge of town identified a student of Jordanian parentage, and the landlady of a boarding house recognized one of her lodgers.

Detectives ransacking the dead man's room took away many books in Arabic and a laptop computer. The latter was downloaded in the police technical lab. It revealed something no one in the Boise police headquarters had ever seen before. The hard drive contained a series of lectures, or sermons, by a masked figure, staring at the screen with blazing eyes and preaching in fluent English.

The message was brutal and simple. The True Believer should undergo his own personal conversion from heresy to Muslim truth. He should, within the confines of his own soul, confiding in and trusting no one, convert to jihad and become a true and loyal soldier of Allah. Then he should seek out some notable person in the service of the Great Satan and send him to hell, then die as a *shahid*, a martyr, and ascend to dwell in Allah's paradise for ever. There were a score of these sermons, all with the same message.

The police passed the evidence to the Boise office of the FBI, who passed the entire file to the J. Edgar Hoover Building in Washington DC. At the national HQ of the Bureau there was no surprise. They had heard of the Preacher before.

1968

Mrs Lucy Carson went into labour on 8 November and was taken straight to the natal wing of the Navy Hospital at Camp Pendleton, California, where she and

her husband were based. Two days later her first and, as it turned out, only son was born.

He was named Christopher after his paternal grandfather, but since that senior US Marine officer was always called Chris, to avoid confusion the baby was nicknamed Kit, the reference to the old frontiersman being entirely coincidental.

Also fortuitous was the birth date: 10 November, the date of birth of the United States Marine Corps in 1775.

Captain Alvin Carson was away in Vietnam where fighting was ferocious and would remain so for a further five years. But his tour was close to its end so he was permitted home for Christmas to be reunited with his wife and two small daughters and to hold his first-born son.

He returned to Vietnam after the New Year, finally returning to the sprawling Marine base at Pendleton in 1970. His next posting was no posting, since he remained at Pendleton for three years, seeing his boy grow through toddler stage to four and a half.

Here, far from those lethal jungles, the couple could live a customary 'on-base' life between married quarters, his office, the social club, the PX commissary and the base church. And he could teach his son to swim in the Del Mar boat basin. He sometimes thought back to those Pendleton years as the days of wine and roses.

The year 1973 saw him transferred to another 'with family' posting at Quantico, just outside Washington

DC. Back then Quantico was just a huge spread of mosquito- and tick-infested wilderness where a small boy could chase squirrels and raccoons through the woods.

The Carson family was still on base when Henry Kissinger and the North Vietnamese Le Duc Tho met outside Paris and hammered out the accords that brought to a formal end the decade of slaughter now called the Vietnam War.

The now Major Carson returned for his third tour in Vietnam, a place still seething with menace as the North Vietnamese army poised itself to break the Paris Accords by invading the south. But he was repatriated early, just before the mad scramble from the embassy roof to the last aircraft out of the airport.

During those years his son Kit went through the normal stages of a small American boy – Little League baseball, cub scouts and school. In the summer of 1976 Major Carson and family were transferred to a third enormous Marine base – Camp Lejeune, North Carolina.

As second in command of his battalion, Major Carson worked out of the 8th Marines HQ on ‘C’ Street and lived with his wife and three children on the sprawl of married-officer housing. It was never mentioned what the growing boy might like to be when he grew up. He was born into the heart of two families: the Carsons and the Corps. It was just assumed he would

follow his grandfather and father into officer school and wear the uniform.

From 1978 to 1981 Major Carson was tasked to a long overdue sea posting at Norfolk, the great US Navy and Marine base on the south side of Chesapeake Bay, Northern Virginia. The family lived on the base, the major went to sea as a Marine officer on the USS *Nimitz*, the pride of the carrier fleet. It was from this vantage point that he witnessed the fiasco of Operation Eagle Claw, also known as Desert One, the forlorn attempt to rescue the US diplomats being held hostage in Tehran by ‘students’ in thrall to Ayatollah Khomeini.

Major Carson stood with long-range binoculars on the bridge wing of the *Nimitz* and watched the eight huge Sea Stallion helicopters roar away towards the coast to back up the Green Berets and Rangers who would make the snatch, and bring the liberated diplomats back to safety offshore.

And he watched most of them limp back. First the two that broke down over the Iranian coast because they had no sand filters and had run into a dust storm. Then the others carrying the wounded after one of the ‘choppers’ had flown into the windscreen of a Hercules, causing a fireball. He remained bitter about that memory and the foolish planning that had caused it for the rest of his days.

From the summer of 1981 to 1984 Alvin Carson, now lieutenant-colonel, was posted with his family to

London as the US Marine attaché at the embassy in Grosvenor Square. Kit was enrolled at the American School in St John's Wood. Later the boy looked back with affection on his three London years. It was the time of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan and their remarkable partnership.

The Falklands were invaded and liberated. A week before British paras entered Port Stanley, Ronald Reagan made a state visit to London. Charlie Price was made ambassador and became the most popular American in town. There were parties and balls. In a line-up at the embassy the Carson family was presented to Queen Elizabeth. Fourteen-year-old Kit Carson had his first crush on a girl. And his father reached his twenty-year mark in the Corps.

Col. Carson was promoted to command the 2nd Battalion, 3rd Marine Regiment as a lieutenant-colonel and the family transferred to Kaneohe Bay in the Hawaiian Islands, a considerably different climate from London. For the teenage boy it was a time of surfing, snorkelling, diving, fishing and taking a more than active interest in girls.

By sixteen he was developing as a formidable athlete but his school grades also showed he hosted a very fast-moving brain. When a year later his father was promoted G3 and sent back to the mainland, Kit Carson was an Eagle Scout and a freshman in the Reserve Officer Training Corps. The presumption made

years before was coming true; he was on an unstoppable glidepath to follow his father into the ranks of US Marine officers.

Back in the States a college degree beckoned. He was sent to the William and Mary at Williamsburg, Virginia, where he resided as a boarder for four years, majoring in history and chemistry. And there were three long summer vacations. These were devoted to jump school, scuba school and Officer Candidate School at Quantico.

He graduated in spring 1989 aged twenty and simultaneously got his college degree and his single shoulder bar as a second lieutenant in the Corps. His father and his mother, both bursting with pride, were at the ceremony.

His first posting was to Basic School until Christmas, then Infantry Officer School until March 1990, emerging as the honours graduate. Ranger School at Fort Benning, Georgia, followed, and with his Rangers tab he was shipped to Twentynine Palms, California.

Here he attended the Air/Ground Combat Centre, known as 'The Stumps', and was then posted to 1st Battalion, 7th Regiment, on the same base. Then on 2 August 1990 a man called Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait. The US Marines went back to war and Lt Kit Carson went with them.

1990

Once the decision was taken that Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait could not be allowed to stand, a grand coalition was formed and ranged along the Iraqi-Saudi Arabian desert border from the Persian Gulf in the east to the Jordanian border in the west.

The US Marines came in the form of the Marine Expeditionary Force under General Walter Bloomer, and this encompassed the 1st Marine Division commanded by General Mike Myatt. A very long way down the pecking order was 2nd Lt Kit Carson. The division was posted to the extreme eastern end of the coalition line with only the blue waters of the Gulf to its right.

The first month, the stupefyingly hot August, was a time of feverish activity. The entire division with its armour and artillery had to be disembarked and posted along the sector to be covered. An armada of freight ships arrived at the hitherto sleepy oil port of Al-Jubail to discharge the impedimenta required to equip, lodge and keep supplied an entire US division. It was not until September that Kit Carson got his assignment interview. It was with an acid-tongued veteran major, probably passed over at that rank and not happy about it.

Major Dolan read slowly through the new officer's file. Finally his eye caught something unusual. He looked up.

'You spent time in London as a kid?'

‘Yessir.’

‘Weird bastards.’ Major Dolan completed his perusal of the file and closed it. ‘Parked next door to our west is the British Seventh Armoured Brigade. They call themselves the Desert Rats. Like I said, weird. They call their own soldiers rats.’

‘Actually, it’s a jerboa, sir.’

‘A what?’

‘A jerboa. A desert animal like a meerkat. They got the tag fighting Rommel in the Libyan Desert in World War Two. He was the Desert Fox. The jerboa is smaller but elusive.’

Major Dolan was less than impressed.

‘Don’t get smart with me, Lieutenant. Somehow we have to get along with these desert rats. I am proposing General Myatt send you over to them as one of our liaison officers. Dismiss.’

The coalition forces had to spend five more months sweltering in that desert while the combined allied air forces achieved the fifty per cent ‘degrading’ of the Iraqi army that commanding General Norman Schwarzkopf demanded before he would attack. For part of that time, after reporting to the British General Patrick Cordingley, commanding the 7th Armoured, Kit Carson liaised between the two forces.

Very few American soldiers were able to establish either interest in, or empathy with, the native Arab culture of the Saudis. Carson, with his natural curiosity,

was an exception. In the ranks of the British he found two officers who had a smattering of Arabic and from them memorized a handful of phrases. On visits to Al-Jubail he listened to the five daily calls to prayer and watched the robed figures prostrate themselves, time and again, forehead to the ground, to complete the ritual.

He made a point of greeting Saudis he had occasion to meet with the formal '*Salaam alaikhum*' (peace be unto you), and learned to respond with the reply: '*Alaikhum as-Salaam*' (and unto you be peace). He noted the jolt of surprise that any foreigner should bother, and the friendliness that followed.

After three months the British brigade was increased to a division and General Schwarzkopf moved the British further west, to the chagrin of General Myatt. When the ground forces moved at last, the war was short, sharp and brutal. The Iraqi armour was blown away by British Challenger II tanks and American Abrams. Domination of the air was total, as it had been for months.

Saddam's infantry had been pulverized by carpet bombing in their trenches by B-52 US bombers and threw up their hands in droves. The onslaught for the US Marines was a charge into Kuwait, where they were cheered, and a last run to the Iraqi border, where higher authority ordered they should stop. The ground war took just five days.

THE KILL LIST

Lt Kit Carson must have done something right. On his return in the summer of 1991 he received the honour of transfer to 81 mm Platoon as the best lieutenant in the battalion. Clearly marked out for higher things, he then did something, for the first but not the last time in his life, unconventional. He applied for and received an Olmsted scholarship. When asked why, he replied that he wanted to be sent to the Defense Language Institute, located in the Presidio at Monterey, California. Pressed further he admitted he wanted to master Arabic. It was a decision that would later change his entire life.

His somewhat puzzled superiors conceded his request. With the Olmsted under his belt, he spent his first year at Monterey, and for his second and third was given a two-year internship at the American University in Cairo. Here he found he was the only US Marine and the only serviceman who had ever seen combat. While he was there, on 26 February 1993, a Yemeni called Ramzi Yousef tried to blow up one of the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center, Manhattan. He failed but, ignored by the American establishment, he had fired the first Fort Sumter shot of the Islamic jihad against the USA.

There were no electronic newspapers in those days but Lt Carson could follow the unfolding investigation across the Atlantic by radio. He was puzzled, intrigued. Eventually he paid a call upon the wisest man he had

come across in Egypt. Professor Khaled Abdulaziz was a don at the Al-Azhar University, one of the greatest centres in all Islam for Koranic studies. Occasionally he gave visiting lectures at the American University. He received the young American in his rooms on campus at Al-Azhar.

‘Why did they do it?’ asked Kit Carson.

‘Because they hate you,’ said the old man calmly.

‘But why? What have we ever done to them?’

‘To them personally? To their countries? To their families? Nothing. Except perhaps distribute dollars. But that is not the point. With terrorism that is never the point. With terrorists, whether Al-Fatah or Black September or the new supposedly religious breed, the rage and the hatred come first. Then the justification. For the IRA, patriotism, for the Red Brigades, politics, for the Salafist Jihadist, piety. An assumed piety.’

The professor was preparing tea for two on his small spirit stove.

‘But they claim to follow the teachings of Holy Koran. They claim they are obeying the Prophet Mohammed. They claim they are serving Allah.’

The old scholar smiled as the water boiled. He had noticed the insertion of the word ‘holy’ in front of Koran. A courtesy but a pleasing one.

‘Young man, I am what is called “hafiz”. That is one who has memorized all 6,236 verses of Holy Koran.

Unlike your Bible, which was written by hundreds of authors, our Koran was written – dictated, actually – by one. And yet there are passages that seem to contradict each other.

‘What the Jihadists do is to take one or two phrases out of context, distort them a little more and then pretend they have divine justification. They do not. There is nothing in all our holy book that decrees we must slaughter women and children to please the one we call Allah, the Merciful, the Compassionate. All extremists do that, including Christian and Jewish ones. Do not let our tea go cold. It should be drunk piping hot.’

‘But, Professor, these contradictions. Have they never been addressed, explained, rationalized?’

The professor served the American more tea with his own hands. He had servants but it pleased him to make his tea personally.

‘Constantly. For thirteen hundred years scholars have studied and composed commentaries on that one single book. Collectively they are called the hadith. About 100,000 of them.’

‘Have you read them?’

‘Not all. It would take ten lifetimes. But many. And written two.’

‘One of the bombers, Sheikh Omar Abdul Rahman, the one they call the blind cleric, was . . . is . . . a scholar too.’

‘And a mistaken one. Nothing new in that in any religion.’

‘But I must ask again. Why do they hate?’

‘Because you are not them. They experience deep rage at what is not themselves. Jews, Christians, those we call the “*kuffar*” – the Unbelievers who will not convert to the one true faith. But also those who are not Muslim enough. In Algeria the jihadists butcher villages of *fellagha*, peasants, including women and children, in their Holy War against Algiers. Always remember this, Lieutenant. First comes the rage and the hatred. Then the justification, the pose of deep piety, all a sham.’

‘And you, Professor.’

The old man sighed.

‘I loathe and despise them. Because they take the face of my dear Islam and present it to the world twisted with rage and hatred. But Communism is dead, the West weak and self-serving, concerned with pleasure and greed. There will be many who will listen to the new message.’

Kit Carson glanced at his watch. It would soon be time for the professor’s prayers. He rose. The scholar noticed the gesture and smiled. He too rose and accompanied his guest to the door. As the American left he called after him.

‘Lieutenant, I fear my dear Islam is entering a long, dark night. You are young, you will see the end

of it, *inshallah*. I pray I shall not live to witness it.'

Three years later the old scholar died in his bed. But the mass killings had begun with a huge bomb in an apartment block favoured by American civilians in Saudi Arabia. A man called Osama bin Laden had quit Sudan and returned to Afghanistan as honoured guest of a new regime, the Taliban, which had swept the country. And the West continued to take no measures to defend itself, but continued to enjoy the locust years.

Present Day

The little market town of Grangecombe in the English county of Somerset attracted a few tourists in summer to stroll through its cobbled seventeenth-century streets. Otherwise, being off all main roads to the beaches and coves of the Southwest, it was a quiet enough place. But it had a history and a royal charter and a town council and a mayor. In April 2014 he was His Worship Giles Matravers, a retired clothier, having his Buggins' turn year of office and the right to wear the mayoral chain, fur-fringed robe and tricorne hat.

And that was what he was doing as he opened a new Chamber of Commerce building just behind the High Street when a figure rushed out of the small crowd of onlookers, covered the ten yards between them before any of them could react and plunged a butcher's knife into his chest.

There were two policemen present but neither was

armed with a handgun. The dying mayor was tended by his Town Clerk and others but to no avail. The policemen tackled the killer who made no attempt to flee but repeatedly shouted something no one understood but which experts later recognized as '*Allahu akhbar*' or 'Allah is Great'.

One officer took a slash to the hand as he lunged for the knife, then the assailant went down under two blue uniforms. Detectives duly arrived from the county town of Taunton to institute the formal inquiry. The assailant sat dumbly in the police station and refused to answer questions. He was dressed in a full-length dishdash, so an Arabic speaker was summoned from County Police HQ, but he had no more success.

The man was identified as a shelf-stacker from the local supermarket, living in a one-room bedsitter in a boarding house. His landlady revealed he was an Iraqi. At first it was thought his action might have stemmed from rage at what was happening in his country, but the Home Office revealed he had arrived as a refugee and been granted asylum. Youngsters from the town came forward to testify that Farouk, known as Freddy, had until three months earlier been a party-goer, drinker and dater of girls. Then he had seemed to change, withdrawing to become silent and contemptuous of his earlier lifestyle.

His bedsitter revealed little but a laptop whose contents would have been very familiar to the police of

Boise, Idaho. Sermon after sermon by a masked man sitting in front of a sort of backcloth inscribed with Koranic inscriptions urging the devout to destroy the '*kuffar*'. Bemused Somerset police officers watched a dozen such sermons, for the sermonizer was speaking in virtually accentless English.

While the killer, still silent, was being arraigned, the file and the laptop were sent to London. The Metropolitan police passed the details to the Home Office, who consulted the Security Service, MI5. They had already received a report from their man in the British embassy in Washington about an event in Idaho.

1996

Back in the USA, Captain Kit Carson was assigned to Camp Pendleton for three years, the place where he was born and spent the first four years of his life. During those years his paternal grandfather, a retired colonel of the Corps who had fought at Iwo Jima, died at his retirement home in North Carolina. His father was promoted general with one star, a promotion his own father was puffed with pride to witness just before his death.

Kit Carson met and married a Navy nurse from the same hospital where he had been brought into the world. For three years he and Susan tried for a baby, until tests showed she could not conceive. They agreed to adopt one day, but not just yet. Then in the summer

of 1999 he was assigned to Staff College back at Quantico and in 2000 was promoted major. Following graduation he and his wife were posted again, this time to Okinawa, Japan.

It was there, many time zones west of New York, seeking to catch the late-night newscasts before turning in, that he witnessed, unbelieving, the images that would later simply be designated Nine Eleven, 2001.

With others in the officers' club he sat out the night watching the slow-motion shots of the two airliners ploughing into first the North Tower and then the South, in silence, over and over again.

Unlike those around him, he knew Arabic, the Arab world and the complexities of the religion of Islam, subscribed to by over a billion of the planet's inhabitants.

He recalled Professor Abdulaziz, gentle, courtly, serving tea and prophesying a long dark night for the world of Islam. And others. He listened to the rising buzz of rage around him as the details came through. Nineteen Arabs, including fifteen Saudis, had done this. He remembered the beaming smiles of the shopkeepers of Al-Jubail when he greeted them in their own tongue. The same people?

At dawn the entire regiment was summoned on parade to listen to the regimental commander. His message was bleak. There was now a war on, and the Corps would, as ever, defend the nation whenever, wherever and however it would be called upon.

Major Kit Carson thought bitterly of the wasted years when attack after attack on the USA in Africa and the Middle East had led to one-week-long outrage from the politicians but no radical recognition of the sheer size of the onslaught being prepared in a chain of Afghan caves.

There is simply no way of overestimating the trauma that Nine Eleven inflicted on the USA and her people. Everything changed and would never be the same again. In twenty-four hours the giant finally woke up.

There would be retribution, Carson knew, and he wanted to be part of that. But he was stuck on a Japanese island with years of the posting yet to serve.

But the event that changed America for ever also changed the life of Kit Carson. What he could not know was that back in Washington a very senior officer with the CIA, a veteran of the Cold War called Hank Crampton, was scouring the records of Army, Navy, Air Force and Marines for a rare type of man. The operation was called the Scrub and he was searching for serving officers who knew Arabic.

In his office at the No. 2 Building, CIA compound, Langley, Virginia, the records were fed into the computers which scanned them far faster than the human eye could read or the human brain digest. Names and careers flashed up, most to be discounted, a few retained.

One name flashed up with a pulsing star in the top corner of the screen. Marine Major, Olmsted scholarship, Monterey Language School, two years Cairo, bi-lingual in Arabic. Where is he, asked Crampton. Okinawa, said the computer. Well, we need him here, said Crampton.

It took time and a bit of shouting. The Corps resisted but the Agency had the edge. The Director of the CIA answers only to the President, and DCI George Tenet had George W. Bush's ear. The Oval Office overruled the Marine protests. Major Carson was summarily seconded to the CIA. He did not want to swap services, but at least it got him out of Okinawa and he vowed to return to the Corps when he could.

On 20 September 2001, a Starlifter rose above Okinawa heading for California. In the rear sat a Marine major. He knew the Corps would take care of Susan, bringing her later to accommodation on the Marine base at Quantico, where he could be near her at Langley.

From California Major Carson was shipped on to Andrews Air Force Base outside Washington and thus presented himself to CIA headquarters, as per orders.

There were interviews, tests in Arabic, a compulsory change into civilian clothes and finally a small office in No. 2 Building, miles from the senior ranks of the Agency on the top floors of the original No. 1 Building.

He was given a pile of intercepts of broadcasts in

Arabic to peruse and comment. He chafed. This was a job for the National Security Agency over at Fort Meade on the Baltimore road up in Maryland. They were the listeners, the eavesdroppers, the code-breakers. He had not joined the Corps to analyse newscasts from Radio Cairo.

Then a rumour swept the building. Mullah Omar, the weird leader of the Taliban government of Afghanistan, was refusing to give up the culprits of Nine Eleven. Osama bin Laden and his entire Al-Qaeda movement would remain safe inside Afghanistan. And the rumour was: we are going to invade.

The details were sparse but accurate on a few points. The Navy would be offshore in strength in the Persian Gulf delivering massive air power. Pakistan would cooperate but grudgingly and with dozens of conditions. The American feet on the ground would be Special Forces only. And their British equivalents would be with them.

The CIA, apart from its spies, agents and analysts, had one division that involved itself in what in the trade is called 'active measures', a euphemism for the messy business of killing people.

Kit Carson made his pitch and he made it strong. He confronted the head of the Special Activities Division and told him bluntly: you need me.

'Sir, I am no use sitting in a coop like a battery hen. I may not speak Pashto or Dari, but our real enemies are

Bin Laden's terrorists – Arabs all. I can listen to them. I can interrogate prisoners, read their written instructions and notes. You need me with you in Afghanistan; no one needs me here.'

He had made an ally. He got his transfer. When President Bush made his announcement of invasion on 7 October, the advance units of the SAD were on their way to meet the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance. Kit Carson went with them.

CHAPTER TWO

THE BATTLE OF SHAH-I-KOT STARTED BADLY AND THEN went downhill. Major Kit Carson of the US Marines, attached to the SAD, should have been on his way home when his unit was summoned to help out.

He had already been at Mazar-e-Sharif when the Taliban prisoners revolted and the Uzbeks and Tajiks of the Northern Alliance mowed them down. He had seen fellow SAD Johnny ‘Mike’ Spann caught by the Talib and beaten to death. From the far side of the vast compound he had watched the British Special Boat Service men rescue Spann’s partner Dave Tyson from a similar fate.

Then came the storming surge south to overrun the old Soviet airbase at Bagram and take Kabul. He had missed the fighting in the Tora Bora massif when the Americans’ paid-for (but not enough) Afghan warlord had betrayed them and let Osama bin Laden and his

entourage of guards slip over the border into Pakistan.

Then in late February word came from Afghan sources that there were still a few diehards hanging on in the valley of Shah-i-Kot, up in Paktia province. Once again the intel. was rubbish. There was not a handful; there were hundreds of them.

The defeated Taliban, being Afghans, had somewhere to go: their native villages. They could slip away and disappear. But the Al-Qaeda fighters were Arabs, Uzbeks and, fiercest of all, Chechens. They spoke no Pashto, the ordinary Afghans hated them; they could only surrender or die fighting. Almost all chose the second.

The American command responded to the tip with a small-scale project called Operation Anaconda and it went to the Navy SEALs. Three huge Chinooks full of SEALs took off for the valley, which was thought to be empty.

Coming in to land, the leading helicopter was nose up, tail down, with its ramp doors open, a few feet off the ground, when the hidden Al-Qaedaists opened up. One rocket-propelled grenade was so close it went straight through the fuselage without exploding. It did not have enough time in the air to arm itself. So it went in one side, missed everyone and went out the other, leaving two windy holes.

What did the damage was the raking burst of machine-gun fire from the nest among the snowy rocks.

It also managed to miss everyone inside, but it wrecked the controls as it ripped through the flight deck. With a few minutes of genius flying, the pilot hauled the dying Chinook aloft and nursed it for three miles until he could crash-land it on safer ground. The other two behind him followed.

But one SEAL, Chief Petty Officer Neil Roberts, who had unhitched his tether line, slipped on a patch of hydraulic fluid and slithered out the back. He landed unhurt in a mass of Al-Qaeda. SEALs never leave a mate, dead or alive, on the field. Having landed they came storming back for CPO Roberts. As they did so they called for help. The battle of Shah-i-Kot had begun. It lasted four days. It took the lives of Neil Roberts and six other Americans.

Three units were near enough to respond to the call. A troop of British SBS came from one direction and the SAD unit from another. The largest group to come to help was a battalion from the 75th Ranger Regiment.

The weather was freezing, way below zero. Flurries of driven snow stung the eyes. How the Arabs had survived the winter up there was anyone's guess. But they had and they were prepared to die to the last man. They took no prisoners and did not expect to be taken. According to witnesses later they came out of crevices in the rocks, unseen caves and hidden machine-gun nests.

Any veteran will confirm that battles quickly descend into chaos and Shah-i-Kot was faster than most. Units

became separated from the main body and individuals from the unit. Kit Carson found himself alone with the ice and driven snow.

He saw another American – the headdress, helmet against turban, gave the identity away – about forty yards distant, also alone. A robed figure came out of the ground and fired an RPG at the camouflaged soldier. This time the grenade did go off. It did not hit the American but exploded at his feet and Carson watched him fall.

He took out the rocketeer with his carbine. Two more appeared and charged him, screaming '*Allahu akhbar*'. He dropped them both, the second one barely six feet from the end of his barrel. The American, when he reached him, was alive but in a bad way. A white-hot shard from the rocket casing had sliced into his left ankle, virtually severing it. The foot in its combat boot was hanging by a sinew, tendon and some tendrils of flesh. The bone was gone. The man was in the first no-pain stunned shock that precedes the agony.

The smocks of both men were crusted with snow but Carson could make out the flash of a Ranger. He tried to raise someone on his radio but met only static. Easing off the wounded man's backpack he pulled out the first-aid wallet and shoved the entire dose of morphine into the exposed calf.

The Ranger began to feel the pain and his teeth gritted. Then the morphine hit him and he slumped

semi-conscious. Carson knew they were both going to die if they stayed there. Visibility was twenty yards between gusts. He could see no one. Heaving the injured Ranger on his back in a fireman's lift, he began to march.

He was walking over the worst terrain on earth: football-sized smooth boulders under a foot of snow, every one a leg-breaker. He was carrying his own 180 pounds, plus his 60-pound pack. Plus another 180 pounds of Ranger – he had left the Ranger's pack behind. Plus carbine, grenades, ammunition and water.

Later, he had no idea how far he slogged out of that lethal valley. At one point the morphine in the Ranger lost effect so he lowered the man and pumped in his own supply. After an age he heard the whump-whump of an engine. With fingers that had ceased to feel anything he pulled out his maroon flare, tore it open with his teeth and held it high, pointing it at the noise.

The crew of the Casevac Blackhawk told him later it went so near the cabin they thought they were being shot at. Then they looked down and in a lull saw two snowmen beneath them, one slumped, the other waving. It was too dangerous to settle. The Blackhawk hovered two feet off the snow as two corpsmen with a gurney strapped the injured Ranger down and pulled him aboard. His companion used his last strength to climb aboard then passed out.

The Blackhawk took them to Kandahar, now a huge

US air base, then still a work in progress. But it had a basic hospital. The Ranger was taken away to triage and intensive care. Kit Carson presumed never to see him again. The next day the Ranger, horizontal and sedated, was on a long-haul to USAF Ramstein, Germany, where the base hospital is world class.

As it happened the Ranger, who was Lt-Col Dale Curtis, lost his left foot. There was simply no way it could be saved. After a neat amputation, little more than completing the job the grenade had started, he was left with a stump, a prosthetic, a limp, a walking cane and the prospect of a looming end to his career as a Ranger. When he was fit to travel, he was flown home to the Walter Reed outside Washington for post-combat therapy and the fitting of the artificial foot. Major Kit Carson did not see him again for years.

The CIA chief at Kandahar sought orders from higher up and Carson was flown to Dubai, where the Agency has a huge presence. He was the first eyewitness out of the Shah-i-Kot and there was a lengthy debriefing with a gallery of senior 'brass'. They included Marine, Navy and CIA interrogators.

At the officers' club he met a man of similar age to himself, a navy commander on a posting to Dubai, which also has a US naval base. They had dinner. The Commander revealed he was from the NCIS, the Naval Criminal Investigation Service.

'Why not transfer to us when you get home?' he asked.

‘A policeman?’ said Carson. ‘I don’t think so. But thanks.’

‘We’re bigger than you think,’ said the Commander. ‘It’s not just sailors overstaying shore leave. I’m talking major crime, tracking down criminals who have stolen millions, ten major navy bases in Arabic-speaking locations. It would be a challenge.’

It was that word which convinced Carson. The Marines come within the ambit of the US Navy. He would only be moving within the larger service. On his return to the USA he presumed he would be back to analysing Arabic material in No. 2 Building at Langley. He applied for the NCIS and they snatched him.

It got him out of the CIA and halfway back to the embrace of the Corps. It secured a posting to Portsmouth, Newport News, Virginia where its large Navy hospital quickly found a position for Susan to join him.

Portsmouth also enabled him to pay frequent visits to his mother, who was in therapy for the breast cancer that took her life three years later. Finally, when his father General Carson retired the same year he became a widower he could be close to him as well. The general withdrew to a retirement village outside Virginia Beach where he could play his beloved golf and attend veterans’ evenings with other Marines retired along that stretch of coast.

Kit Carson spent four years with the NCIS and was

credited with tracking down and bringing to justice ten major runaways with crimes to answer for. In 2006 he secured his transfer back to the Marine Corps with the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel and was posted to Camp Lejeune, North Carolina. It was while motoring across Virginia to join him that Susan, his wife, was killed by a drunk driver who lost control and rammed her head on.

Present Day

The third assassination in a month was that of a senior police officer in Orlando, Florida. He was leaving his home on a bright spring morning when he was stabbed through the heart from behind as he stooped to open his car door. Even dying he drew his sidearm and fired twice, killing his assailant instantly.

The ensuing inquiry identified the young killer as of Somali birth, also a refugee granted asylum on compassionate grounds and working with the city cleansing department.

Fellow workers testified that he had changed over a two-month period, becoming withdrawn and remote, surly and critical of the American lifestyle. He had ended up being ostracized by the crew on his garbage truck as he had become so difficult to get on with. They put his mood change down to homesickness for his native land.

It was not. It was caused, as the raid on his lodgings

revealed, by a conversion to ultra-Jihadism deriving so it seemed from his obsession with a series of online sermons that his landlady heard coming from his room. A full report went to the Orlando FBI bureau and thence to the Hoover Building in Washington DC.

Here the story had ceased to cause surprise. The same tale, of conversion in privacy after many hours listening to the online sermons of a Middle-eastern preacher speaking impeccable English, and an unpredictable, out-of-nowhere murder of a local notable citizen, had been reported four times in the USA and to the Bureau's knowledge twice in the United Kingdom.

Checks had already been made with the CIA, the Counterterrorism Center and the Department of Homeland Security. Every US agency even remotely dealing with Islamist terrorism had been informed and had logged the file, but none could respond with helpful intelligence. Who was this man? Where did he come from? Where did he record his broadcasts? He was only tagged as 'The Preacher' and began to climb the lists of HVTs – the high-value targets.

The USA has a diaspora of well over a million Muslims deriving either in their own lifetimes or via their parents from the Middle East and Central Asia, and that was a huge pool of potential converts to the Preacher's ultra-harsh Jihadist sermons and their relentless call for converts to strike just one single blow against the Great Satan before joining Allah in eternal bliss.

Eventually the Preacher came to be discussed at the Tuesday morning briefings in the Oval Office and he went on to the kill list.

People cope with grief in different ways. For some only wailing hysteria will prove sincerity. For others a quiet collapse into weeping helplessness and very much in public is the response. But there are those who take their hurt away to a private place like an animal his injury.

They grieve alone, unless there is another relative or companion to hold close, and share their tears with the wall. Kit Carson visited his father at his retirement home but his posting was at Lejeune and he could not stay long.

Alone in his empty house on base he threw himself into his work and drove his body to the limit with lonely cross-country runs and sessions of gymnasium workout until the physical pain blunted the inner hurt, until even the base medical officer told him to ease up.

He was one of the founder thinkers of the Combat Hunter Program, whereby Marines would go on a course to teach them tracking and man-hunting techniques in wilderness, rural and urban environments. The theme was: never become the hunted, always stay the hunter. But while he was at Portsmouth and Lejeune, great events were taking place.

Nine Eleven had triggered a sea change in the

THE KILL LIST

American Armed Forces and governmental attitudes to any even remotely conceivable possible threat to the USA. National alertness inched its way towards paranoia. The result was an explosive enlargement of the world of 'intelligence'. The original sixteen intel. gathering agencies of the USA ballooned to over a thousand.

By 2012 accurate estimates put the number of Americans with top secret clearance at 850,000. Over 1,200 government organizations and 2,000 private companies were working on top secret projects related to counter-terrorism and homeland security at over 10,000 locations across the country.

The aim back in 2001 was that never again would the basic intel. agencies refuse to share what they had with each other and thus let nineteen fanatics bent on mass slaughter slip through the cracks. But the outcome a decade later, at a cost that broke the economy, was much the same as the situation of 2001. The sheer size and complexity of the self-defence machine created some 50,000 top secret reports a year, far too many for anyone to read, let alone understand, analyse, synthesize or collate. So they were just filed.

The most fundamental increase was in Joint Special Ops Command, or J-SOC. This body had existed for years before Nine Eleven but as a low-profile and principally defensive structure. Two men would convert it into the largest, most aggressive and most lethal private army in the world.

The word 'private' is justified because it is the personal instrument of the President and of no other. It can conduct covert war without seeking any sanction from Congress; its multi-billion-dollar budget is acquired without ever disturbing the Appropriations Committee, and it can kill you without ruffling the even tenor of the Attorney General's office. It is all top secret.

The first transformer of J-SOC was Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld. This ruthless and power-hungry Washington insider was resentful of the power and privileges of the CIA. Under its charter the Agency needed to be answerable only to the President, not Congress. With its SAD units it could conduct covert and lethal operations abroad on the Director's say-so. That was power, real power, and Secretary Rumsfeld was determined to have it. But the Pentagon is very much subject to Congress and its limitless capacity for interference.

Rumsfeld needed a weapon outside Congress's oversight if he was ever to rival George Tenet, Director of the CIA. A completely transformed J-SOC became that weapon.

With the agreement of President George W. Bush, J-SOC expanded and expanded, in size, budget and powers. It absorbed all the Special Forces of the state. They included Team Six of the SEALs (who would later kill Osama bin Laden), the DELTA Force or D-Boys drawn from the Green Berets, the 75th Ranger Regiment,

the Air Force's Special Ops Aviation Regiment (the Night Stalkers, long-range helicopters) and others. It also gobbled up TOSA.

In the summer of 2003, while Iraq was still blazing from end to end and few were looking elsewhere, two things happened that completed the reinvention of J-SOC. A new commander was appointed in the form of General Stanley McChrystal. If anyone thought J-SOC would continue to play a largely domestic in-homeland role, that was the end of that. And in September 2003 Secretary Rumsfeld secured the President's agreement and signed the EXORD.

The Executive Order was an eighty-page document and within its pages, buried deep, was something like a huge Presidential Finding, the highest decree in America, but without specific terms. The EXORD virtually said: do what you want.

About that time a limping Ranger colonel called Dale Curtis was finishing his one-year, post-injury paid sabbatical and convalescence. He had mastered the prosthetic on his left stump with such skill that the limp was virtually undetectable. But the 75th Ranger Regiment was not for men on prosthetics. His career appeared over.

But like the SEALs, a Ranger does not leave another Ranger in the lurch. General McChrystal was also a Ranger, from the 75th, and he heard of Col. Curtis. He had just taken command of the entire J-SOC and

that included TOSA, whose commander was retiring. The post of Commanding Officer did not have to be a field-action posting. It could be a desk job. It was a very short meeting and Col. Curtis jumped at the chance.

There is an old saying in the covert world that if you want to keep something secret do not try to hide it because some reptile from the Press will sniff it out. Give it a harmless name and a thoroughly boring job description. TOSA stands for Technical Operations Support Activity. Not even 'Agency' or 'Administration' or 'Authority'. A support activity could mean changing the light bulbs or eliminating tiresome Third World politicians. In this case it is more likely to mean the second.

TOSA existed long before Nine Eleven. It hunted down, among others, the Colombian cocaine lord Pablo Escobar. That is what it does. It is the manhunter arm called upon when everyone else is baffled. It has only 250 staff and lives in a compound in Northern Virginia disguised as a toxic chemical research facility. No one visits.

To keep it even more secret, it keeps changing its name. It has been simply 'The Activity' but also Grantor Shadow, Centra Spike, Torn Victor, Cemetery Wind and Gray Fox. The last title was liked enough to be retained as the code name of the commander. On his appointment Col. Dale Curtis vanished and became Gray Fox. Later it became Intelligence Support Activity, but when

the word 'Intelligence' began to attract attention it changed again – to TOSA.

Gray Fox had held his post for six years when in 2009 his chief manhunter retired, took a head full of really top secrets and went off to a log cabin in Montana to hunt steelhead trout. Col. Curtis could only hunt from behind a desk but a computer and every access code in the US defence machine is quite a head start. After a week a face came up on the screen that jolted him. Lt-Col. Christopher 'Kit' Carson – the man who had carried him out of Shah-i-Kot.

He checked the career list. Combat soldier, scholar, Arabist, linguist, manhunter. He reached for his desk phone.

Kit Carson did not want to leave the Corps for the second time, but for the second time the argument was fought and won above his head.

A week later he walked into the office of Gray Fox in the low-build office block in the centre of a wood in Northern Virginia. He noted the man who limped as he walked to greet him, the cane propped in the corner, the 75th Ranger tabs.

'Remember me?' said the Colonel. Kit Carson thought back to the freezing winds, the boulders beneath the combat boots, the gut-tearing weight on his back, the let-me-die-here-and-now exhaustion.

'Been a long time,' he said.

'I know you don't want to leave the Corps,' said Gray

Fox, ‘but I need you. By the by, inside this building we use only first names. For the rest, Lieutenant-Colonel Carson has ceased to exist. For the entire world outside this complex you are simply the Tracker.’

Over the years the Tracker was alone or instrumental in tracing half a dozen of his country’s most wanted enemies. Baitullah Mehsud, Pakistani Taliban, despatched by a drone strike in a farmhouse, South Waziristan, 2009; Abu al-Yazid, Al-Qaeda founder, financier of Nine Eleven, taken out by another drone strike in Pakistan 2010.

It was he who first identified Al-Kuwaiti as Bin Laden’s personal emissary. Spy drones tracked his last long drive across Pakistan until, amazingly, he turned not towards the mountains but the other way, to identify a compound in Abbottabad.

There was the American-Yemeni Anwar al-Awlaki who preached online in English. He was found because he invited fellow American Samir Khan, editor of Jihadist magazine *Inspire*, to join him in northern Yemen. And al-Quso, traced to his home in south Yemen. Another drone launched a Hellfire missile through the bedroom window as he slept.

The buds were coming on the trees in 2014 when Gray Fox came in with a Presidential Finding brought from the Oval Office by courier that morning.

‘Another online orator, Tracker. But weird. No name,

no face. Totally elusive. He's all yours. Anything you want, just ask for it. The PF covers every requirement.' He limped out.

There was a file but it was slim. The man had gone on air with his first online sermon two years earlier, shortly after the first cyber-preacher had died with his companions by the side of a track in north Yemen in September 2011. While Awlaki, who was born and raised in New Mexico, had a distinct American accent, the Preacher sounded more British.

Two language laboratories had had a go at trying to trace the voice to a point of origin. There is one at Fort Meade, Maryland, headquarters of the vast National Security Agency. These are the listeners who can pluck any snatch of conversation by cellphone, landline, faxed letter, email or radio out of space anywhere in the world. But they also do translations from a thousand languages and dialects, and code-breaking.

The other belongs to the Army, at Fort Huachuca, Arizona. They had both come up with much the same. The nearest guess was a Pakistani born into a cultured and educated family. There were clipped word endings in the Preacher's tone that smacked of the colonial British. But there was a problem.

Unlike Awlaki, who spoke bare-faced, staring into the camera, the newcomer never revealed his face. He wore a traditional Arab *shemagh*, but pulled the trailing end up across the face and tucked it in at the other side.

Only the blazing eyes could be seen. The fabric, said the file, might distort the voice, making derivation even more of a guess. The computer codenamed Echelon, the identifier of accents worldwide, refused to be categorical on a source of that voice.

The Tracker issued the usual all-stations, all-services appeal for even a sliver of information. This appeal would go to twenty overseas intelligence services involved in the fight against Jihadism. Starting with the British. Especially the Brits. They once ran Pakistan and still had good contacts there. Their Secret Intelligence Service was big in Islamabad and hand-in-glove with the even bigger CIA machine. They would all get his message.

His second move was to summon up the entire library of the Preacher's online sermons on the Jihadi website. There would be hours and hours of listening to the sermons the Preacher had been pumping into cyberspace for nearly two years.

The Preacher's message was simple, which could have been why it was so successful in achieving radical conversions to the cause of his own ultra-Jihadism. To be a good Muslim, he told the camera, one had to truly and deeply love Allah, may His name be praised, and His Prophet Mohammed, may He rest in peace. Mere words alone were not enough. The True Believer would feel an impulsion to turn his love into action.

That action could only be to punish those who made war on Allah and His people, the worldwide Muslim

umma. And chief among these were the Great Satan, the USA, and the Little Satan, the United Kingdom. Punishment for what they had done and were daily doing was their decreed portion, and bringing that punishment a divine charge.

The Preacher called upon his viewers and listeners to avoid confiding in others, even those who professed to think alike. For even at the mosque there would be traitors prepared to denounce the True Believer for the *kuffar's* gold.

So the True Believer should convert to True Islam in the privacy of his own mind and confide in no one. He should pray alone and listen only to the Preacher who would show the True Way. That way would involve each convert striking one blow against the infidel.

He warned against the devising of complicated plots involving strange chemicals and many accomplices, for someone would notice the buying or storing of the components of a bomb, or one of the conspirators would betray. The prisons of the infidel were peopled by brothers who had been overheard, watched, spied upon or betrayed by those they thought they could trust.

The message of the Preacher was as simple as it was deadly. Each True Believer should identify one notable *kaffir* in the society in which he found himself and send him to hell while he himself, blessed by Allah, would die fulfilled in the certain knowledge that he was going to paradise eternal.

It was an extension of Awlaki's 'Just do it' philosophy, but better put, more persuasive. His recipe for ultra-simplicity made it easier to decide and act in isolation. And it was clear from the rising number of out-of-nowhere killings in both target countries that even if his message resounded with only a fraction of one per cent of young Muslims, that was still an army of thousands.

The Tracker checked for responses from every US agency and their British equivalents but no one had ever heard reference to any 'Preacher' in the Muslim lands. The title had been given him by the West, for lack of anything else to call him. But clearly he had come from somewhere, lived somewhere, broadcast from somewhere, and had a name.

The answers, he came to believe, were in cyberspace. But there were computer experts of near-genius level up at Fort Meade who had been defeated. Whoever was sending the sermons out into cyberspace was keeping them untraceable and untrackable by causing them to appear to emanate from origin after origin, but then to whizz round and round the world, settling on a hundred possible source locations – but all of them false.

The Tracker refused to bring anyone, however security-cleared, to his hideaway in the forest. The secrecy fetish that motivated the entire unit had got to him. He also disliked going to other offices within the Washington

sprawl if he could avoid it. He preferred to be seen only by the person he wanted to talk to. He knew he was getting a reputation for being unconventional but he preferred roadhouses. Faceless and anonymous, both cafeteria and customers. He met the cyber ace from Fort Meade at such a roadhouse on the Baltimore road.

Both men sat and stirred their undrinkable coffee. They knew each other from previous investigations. The man the Tracker sat with was reputed to be the best computer detective in the National Security Agency, which is no small reputation.

‘So why can’t you find him?’ asked the Tracker.

The man from the NSA scowled at his coffee and shook his head as the waitress hovered expectantly, canister poised for a refill. She drifted away. Anyone glancing into the booth would have seen two middle-aged men, one fit and muscled, the other with the pallor of offices without windows and running to fat.

‘Because he’s freaking clever,’ he said at last. He hated to be eluded.

‘Tell me,’ said the Tracker. ‘Layman’s language if you can.’

‘He probably records his sermons on a digital camcorder or laptop PC. Nothing weird about that. He transmits on a website called Hejira. That was the flight of Mohammed from Mecca to Medina.’

The Tracker kept a straight face. He did not need explanations about Islam.

‘Can you trace Hejira?’

‘No need. It’s just a vehicle. He bought it from an obscure little company in Delhi which is now out of business. When he has a new sermon to transmit worldwide he sends it on Hejira but he keeps the exact geo-location secret by causing it to emanate from origin after origin, whizzing round and round the world, bouncing it off a hundred other computers whose owners are certainly completely ignorant of the role they are playing. Eventually the sermon could have come from anywhere.’

‘How does he prevent tracing back down the line of diversions?’

‘By creating a “proxy server” to create a false internet protocol. The IP is like your home address with postcode. Then into the proxy server he has introduced a malware or botnet to bounce his sermon all over the world.’

‘Translate.’

The man from the NSA sighed. He spent his entire life talking cyber-jargon with colleagues who knew exactly what he was talking about.

‘Malware. Mal as in bad or evil. A virus. Bot, short for robot, something that does your bidding without asking questions or revealing who it is working for.’

The Tracker thought it over.

‘So the mighty NSA is really defeated?’

The government’s computer ace was not flattered but he nodded.

‘We will of course keep trying.’

‘There’s a clock ticking. I may have to try some place else.’

‘Be my guest.’

‘Let me ask this. Control your natural chagrin. Just supposing you were the Preacher. Who would you absolutely not want on your tail? Who would worry the crap out of you?’

‘Someone better than me.’

‘Is there any such someone?’

The NSA man sighed.

‘Probably. Somewhere out there. I would guess from the new generation. Sooner or later the veterans are overtaken by some beardless kid in every walk of life.’

‘Do you know any beardless kids? Any specific beardless kid?’

‘Look, I’ve never even met him. But I heard at a recent seminar and trade fair of a youngster right here in Virginia. My informant said he was not at the trade fair because he lives with his parents and never leaves their home. Never, not ever. He’s peculiar. In this world he’s a bundle of nerves, hardly talks. But he flies like a fighter ace when he enters his own world.’

‘Which is?’

‘Cyberspace.’

‘You have a name? Even an address?’

‘I figured you might ask.’ He took a slip of paper from a pocket and passed it over. Then he rose. ‘Don’t

blame me if he's no use. It was only a rumour, in-trade gossip among us weirdos.'

When he had gone the Tracker settled for the muffins and coffee and left. In the car park he glanced at the paper. Roger Kendrick. And an address in Centreville, Virginia, one of the myriad small satellite towns that had sprung up in the past two decades and then exploded with commuters since Nine Eleven.

All trackers, all detectives, whatever and wherever the hunt, whoever the quarry, need one break. Just one. Kit Carson was going to be lucky. He was going to get two.

One would come from a strange teenage boy too frightened to leave the attic bedroom of his parents' backstreet house in Centreville, Virginia; and the other from an old Afghan peasant whose rheumatics were forcing him to lay down his rifle and come in from the mountains.