

A man in military-style clothing and gloves is aiming a handgun directly at the viewer. The background is a dark, starry space with blue and red nebulae. The title 'A MIND TO KILL' is written in large, cyan, sans-serif capital letters at the top. Below the man, the tagline 'Betrayal is personal, revenge is business' and the name 'SIMON STANTON' are written in white, sans-serif capital letters.

# A MIND TO KILL

Betrayal is personal, revenge is business

**SIMON STANTON**

# A Mind To Kill

Betrayal is personal, revenge is business

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# One

## Afghanistan - Three Years Before

The ground was freezing cold, the soldier could feel it through his boots, stinging his toes. The night air was colder, stinging his eyes and lips. He made a conscious effort to control his shivering, right now it was more important to remain completely still. He crouched down low, close to the freezing ground, in the partial seclusion of hard and dry bushes. He cradled his submachine gun and listened, straining to hear any sound of movement ahead.

He tried to keep his breathing under control, to lessen the mist from his nostrils and make him less visible, and to avoid misting up his night vision goggles. He looked through them into an eerie sparkling green world, penetrating the almost complete blackness of the moonless Afghan night. He adjusted the zoom and peered deeper into the village a hundred metres ahead of him, just beyond the sparse bushes which gave him a small measure of cover. His curiosity deepened, and started to border on concern. There were no lights in the village, none. Even in a ramshackle collection of mud huts like this, people still had lights, even the occasional fire. But here there was just blackness and complete stillness. He scanned across the village, hut by hut, each as dark and still as the next. Somewhere there should be movement, some sign of life. The stillness whispered to him, that something was very wrong. He knew that no-one lived in the surrounding area, there were only the villagers and their goats and ten million poppy plants. They'd spent a day getting here, all four of them spread out, approaching the village from different directions, inching their way along. They'd seen no-one during their approach, and no-one had seen them, but there should have been people in the village, the intelligence had shown a small population, maybe a few dozen. It was like the inhabitants had been spirited away.

Michael Sanders crouched in the darkness and thought about the situation. The intelligence had been solid, Taliban forces were using the village as an arms cache, storing rocket launchers somewhere close by. Michael and his team had a simple mission; stay invisible, get into the village, and place hidden cameras to keep it under close surveillance. For a special forces unit the mission was not their most challenging, but being deep in enemy territory made it dangerous enough.

A movement caught his eye and he scanned left. He had to wait and focus before he could see the figure, but there he was. On the far side of the village, crouched by the side of hut, almost invisible even in the green glow of the image intensifier, one of his colleagues. The man was in the right location to plant another of the miniature covert surveillance cameras. The figure was completely still.

The voice came into his mind. He couldn't hear it, not like a physical voice, telepathic communication wasn't like that, but the voice was just as real as a spoken voice. "This place is dead," came the voice in his mind. "There's no-one here." He didn't need to reply.

It was an understatement to say that Michael was still only just getting used to being telepathic. He still had to remind himself every time that it was real, that he and his three colleagues really could use direct mind-to-mind communication. It was bizarre, difficult to believe, but very useful, a silent communication, completely secure against any kind of eavesdropping. With this unique ability the four of them were a formidable fighting force.

He watched as the figure stood up and walked forwards, a deliberate act of breaking cover, a bold test of the man's belief that the village was deserted. For the first time in a long time Michael Sanders felt a stab of anxiety, his usual unshakable confidence wobbled for a moment. If anything was going to happen it was going to happen now, as his colleague made himself deliberately visible. He waited, and waited. Each second stretched into the next, magnifying the silence. But nothing came, no disaster, no shooting, no shouting, no-one rushing out at the appearance of an armed and obviously foreign soldier in their village.

Michael reset the zoom on his goggles and stood up. He took a moment and settled his thoughts, holding in mind the idea of his three colleagues. He spoke without speaking, being aware of the words but without vocalising them.

'The village is abandoned,' he thought/said. 'RV, position one.' His colleagues would know to rendezvous at the position chosen for the first covert camera.

Step by cautious step he began to make his way towards his edge of the village. The single dirt track stretched from one end of the village to the other. "Village" was being generous, this was just a loose collection of mud huts and wooden shacks and goat pens. With each step his boots crunched on the cold and stony ground and he listened for any reaction from inside the huts, but none came. He reached his comrade.

'What's the point putting out the cameras? There's no-one here to watch,' said his comrade in his normal spoken voice. From under his helmet a wisp of blond hair stuck out, he never could keep it under control, and the man's concern leaked out just as noticeably. Evan Bullock was six foot, lean and athletic.

Michael heard something from behind and turned to see the movement in the dark of their remaining two team mates walking towards them. One of them was a big man, tall and broad shouldered, the other was shorter and a slimmer build. The four of them stood by the side of a mud hut, black suited figures, image intensifier goggles attached to their helmets, submachine guns cradled in their arms. They couldn't have looked more out of place, if there had been anyone to see them.

'This is like walking into a surprise party and finding there's no party, I'm really disappointed,' said the tall one, his voice deep but still whispering. Vince Marshall was an imposing figure, even in the dark.

The shorter of the four spoke. Julian Singh had a softer voice, well spoken. 'There's no weapons cache here, this is a bullshit mission.' No-one disagreed.

'Did I miss something?' said Bullock, 'but I'm sure the briefing said there were people here.' The sarcasm in his voice was clear.

'Intel' was wrong,' said Marshall.

'No,' said Singh, 'something else is going on. This place looks like it's lived in, it's just all the people have left.'

'Why? There's nowhere to go,' said Bullock.

Michael turned to Singh. 'Find something and get a sense of what happened.'

The man moved to one of the huts, he pushed through the crude curtain covering the doorway and emerged a few moments later, carrying a blanket. He turned it over in his hands, eyes half closed, kneading the rough material with his fingers. He half closed his eyes, as though remembering something, or trying to.

Of all their psychic abilities this was the strangest, Julian Singh's ability to connect to a physical object, and through that connect to the people who had handled it. Only two of them had that ability.

'They were sent away, all of them, ordered out,' said Singh. 'Men with guns, soldiers, like us.'

'Why?' asked Marshall.

'Can't tell,' said Singh, turning the blanket over in his hands. 'All I can sense is they were ordered out.'

'This is wrong, very wrong,' said Bullock.

Singh spoke again, 'but one stayed, he's still here.'

In a single movement the four had their weapons in hand and raised ready to fire, fingers flicking off safety catches, crouching, moving away from each other, spreading out. Singh used his right hand to motion towards one of the huts on the other side of the dirt track. They inched their way across the track to the hut, Marshall and Bullock on each side of the hanging blanket covering the opening to the hut, Michael and Singh in front. Singh's voice came into Michael's mind, and he knew into the minds of the others as well.

'He's in the hut,' said the voice, 'just inside. He's listening to us.'

With almost frightening swiftness Bullock pulled open the blanket covering the door and Marshall reached in and pulled the man bodily out onto the dirt track, the man letting out an involuntary yelp.

The man was shaking with fear his hands clasped in prayer then open towards them in prayer again, chattering away in some dialect of Pashto. The meaning of his words was unknown to the soldiers, but their intention was clear, the fear was written all over the man's face, fear they were going to kill him.

Michael looked back at Singh. 'Why's he still here?'

'Don't know, all I saw was the villagers being ordered out by the soldiers.'

'I'll find out' said Marshall, and before Michael could react the man had his gloves off and reached for the begging villager. The man put his hands up in defence but the soldier just slapped them out of the way and grabbed the man's head, a hand on each temple.

'Marshall, no,' Michael hissed, too late. The man on the floor stopped jabbering, his voice dropped to an occasional moan, his hands sank to his sides, and his blank eyes stared up at the man gripping his head.

The big soldier leaned over the man on the floor. 'Four of them came here boss,' said Marshall. 'One of them spoke Pashto. Ordered the villagers to leave.'

'Why?' asked Singh.

'He said others would come, to hurt the villagers, but the soldiers would stop them, kill them, there'd be lots of shooting. This one was to tell them when the others came.'

'What is going on here?' said Bullock.

'So soldiers are coming here,' said Singh, 'and we must be the "others" he was warned about.'

'So who's coming?' asked Bullock, 'who else knows we're here.'

Marshall focused harder on the man, who let out a whimper as he succumbed to the psychic onslaught of Marshall's mental interrogation.

'He doesn't know who the soldiers are, but he is clear they're coming to kill us,' he said.

'Bastards, this isn't a surveillance mission it's a fucking ambush,' said Singh.

'How? How was he to tell them?' asked Michael.

Almost in response the man on the floor took something out from under his jacket, a small black device, sleek and modern, a single red button set in the centre of it.

'Bastard,' said Bullock. 'Radio beacon, they know we're here.'

'We need to get ready,' said Michael, 'Surprise them before they surprise us.'

'What about him?' said Bullock, motioning to the man on the floor. The man on the floor looked up, the fear shining in his eyes, the look of a man who knows his life could end at any moment.

'We take him with us,' said Michael.

There was an unpleasant wet crack as Marshall twisted the man's head violently. The man crumpled in a heap, motionless.

'Problem solved,' said Marshall.

## Two

### London - Present Day - Monday morning

The grey, overcast morning had settled over London and looked set to stay, making Finchley as dull as every other part of the capital. Chaville Way was just another road, going from Regents Park Road down to Finchley Central Station, a stop on the Northern Line of the London Underground, although here trains ran over ground. Occasional commuters walked up or down Charville Way, coming from or going to the railway station. On one side of the road a chain link fence and thick bushes separated the road from the railway lines, on the other side was a row of parked cars.

Michael Sanders sat in the passenger seat of the grey Audi A5 and watched, his driver sitting next to him. The car was plain, nothing to attract attention. Sanders was just as plain; average build, average brown hair, jeans and a plain, dark sweat-shirt, he could have passed for an accountant on a day off. The front of the station's tired brick building was visible behind him in the car's wing mirror. He watched the commuters, one after another, some ambled down the road to the station, an occasional one hurried, no doubt late for some engagement or other. The morning rush hour had finished, the mad dash of commuters had, for the moment, subsided. Michael had no interest in these people. His target hadn't arrived yet. He glanced at the clock, another few minutes. From within the car he looked up the road towards the traffic lights where Charville Way met Regents Park Road. He looked at the cars parked at the side of the road. Even he couldn't tell which were MI5 assets and which were ordinary Londoners. The ordinary folk would have no idea who they might be standing next to, and that's exactly how it needed to be. Covert surveillance wasn't much good unless it was unseen. Michael could see one CCTV camera, on the side of a lamp-post at the far side of the traffic lights at the top of the road. He couldn't see the surveillance and communications vehicle, nicknamed the Battle Bus, but knew it was somewhere nearby.

'ETA two minutes,' crackled a man's voice from the miniature radio transceiver in his ear. Michael felt himself tense, he was ready.

Two minutes later he heard the train arrive, its brakes squealing as the train came to a halt at the station platform. Another minute and the occupants of the train started leaving the station and walking up the hill. Michael saw his target, just a glimpse in the mirror, then he focused forward, his line of sight not betraying his interest.

'Have visual,' he said, the transceiver in his ear picking up his words and transmitting them. 'Target is wearing a dark grey business suit, dark blue overcoat, carrying a black document case.' The group of commuters, having left the station building, started walking up the road, past the line of parked cars.

Michael watched as the individual walked among the commuters who made their collective way up the hill towards the traffic lights. The man he watched was very obviously the wrong side of fifty, more than slightly overweight, his remaining tufts of hair were grey and wispy. Michael waited until the group was far enough ahead.

'I'm following on foot,' said Michael as he opened the car door and got out. He started walking up the hill. In his jeans, trainers and casual sweatshirt he looked like any other civilian, blending in. Michael walked up the hill keeping a sensible distance, the group ahead had already reached the traffic lights, people going in different directions.

'Target has turned south west on Regents Park Road,' came the voice in his ear. Spotters would watch the target and report his movement, each staying in a location or even walking in the opposite direction to the target, letting him go passed them. Then they'd move and take back-streets to get ahead, always keeping the target inside a box made of four, five, six or more spotters. They'd change tops, wigs and glasses as they went, the target would never pick them out from the crowds, but it allowed Michael to follow on foot without being seen by the target. Other security service assets (he always thought it was disrespectful to call people assets) would also keep pace, their transceivers boosting the signal from Michael's ear-piece and relaying it to the Battle Bus for onward transmission to the MI5/GCHQ network.

Michael reached the traffic lights and turned left, his target was already almost out of sight, becoming one of the many Londoners walking one way or another along the road. The other exit from the railway station would

have been a more obvious choice for anyone going this way down Regents Park Road, unless you wanted time to assess if someone were following you before setting off to your true destination. Was the target practising “field craft”, or simply taking the long way round for no good reason? There were more people on Regents Park Road, a main road which ran all the way into the centre of London. His target was now lost in the crowd, but Michael trusted the team, and he carried on walking.

‘Do we know where he’s heading?’ Michael asked.

‘Mr Gerald Crossley works for a printing supplies company, there are two printing companies within twenty minutes walking distance,’ came the reply. The team in the Operations Centre at GCHQ in Cheltenham would be continually monitoring his location and assessing possible destinations, which “persons of interest” might live locally or be known to be in the vicinity. Computer programs would be running real-time simulations to predict possible outcomes or risks. Gerald Crossley would have no idea of the amount and power of human and technical resources the combined security services were employing to track his location and possible intentions.

Michael looked ahead. Branching off to the right was Hendon Lane. At the moment Michael was one of many walking up or down past shops, offices, cafes, restaurants, dog grooming parlours, banks and other assorted retail premises. But if they had to cross the main road it could be slow, he and his colleagues ran the risk of being more exposed. Michael realised he had been speeding up, so he slowed down, it would be unfortunate to run straight into the back of his target.

‘Target has gone into Pedro’s cafe, fifty metres ahead,’ said the voice in his ear. All positions were relative to Michael’s. He stopped. Crossley wasn’t going to cross the main road. Michael had the thought that someone skilled in field craft would have crossed the road, an obvious way of checking for anyone following. It was tempting to go and see what Mr Crossley was doing in the cafe, but that risked breaking cover. He’d have to wait and let the spotters do their jobs and relay the details to him. Michael had stopped next to a bench, and after checking for any chewing gum, used condoms or worse he sat down, and waited. The spotters would walk past the cafe and each get into a location from which they could watch.

‘Target has taken a seat and is talking to someone. No audio. ID pending.’ One of the team would have used a covert camera to video the pair, maybe even having gone into the cafe and ordered a coffee, walking out and never looking at the pair. The picture of the other person would already be with the analysts in GCHQ, scanning their databases of facial images, cross referencing. The result was back in moments.

‘Crossley is talking to Marcus Berman, known far right activist, multiple accounts of violent behaviour and breaches of the peace. Berman’s on a level two watch list.’ Michael struggled to hear some of the update over the noise of the traffic, but he got the most important parts.

So, dear old Mr Gerald Crossley, printing supplies manager, suspected of being the leader of a secretive far right group, was having morning coffee with a known thug and violent activist.

A new voice came in his ear. Female. He recognised it of course, the MI5 Head of Section. ‘If Crossley and friends are planning any fire bomb attacks we need to know sooner rather than later. I suggest you have a quiet word with Crossley as soon as Berman has left.’

‘Just what I was thinking,’ said Michael. ‘Find me somewhere quiet.’

After a few moments’ pause the man’s voice was back in his ear. ‘Three hundred metres, left into The Avenue, two hundred metres there’s a footpath goes behind bushes, limited foot traffic, it’s not overlooked.’

Michael waited. This would take as long as it needed to. The spotters would tell him when Crossley or his contact moved. Surveillance would be easier if they left separately. They did.

After ten minutes came the man’s voice in Michael’s ear. ‘Berman has left, crossing the road towards Hendon Lane, Crossley is paying. Now Crossley’s leaving, continuing south west.’ Good, he was already heading in the direction Michael needed, and the other man, Berman, was heading away and out of sight. Michael stood up and marched in Crossley’s direction. He passed the blue and white front of Pedro’s Cafe, an instantly forgettable purveyor of weak tea and cheap coffee. He could see Crossley ahead, walking about as quickly as any mid-fifty year old businessman walked.

‘Sanders, going quiet,’ said Michael. He pressed his finger into his ear and there was a dull beep telling him that his ear-piece had gone on mute. There were some things he didn’t want others to overhear.

Michael caught up with Crossley and as he walked past the man he glanced across.

‘Gerald,’ Michael said with delight, a big smile across his face. ‘Lovely to see you again,’ and held out his hand for a handshake.

As intended this surprised Crossley who raised his hand to accept the handshake as an almost automatic reflex. Michael took Crossley’s hand and let a pulse of psychic energy flow through the hand-to-hand connection. The smile faded from Crossley’s face and he stared into Michael’s eyes. Crossley seemed to relax, his eyelids fluttered as his face relaxed. Then, for a moment he tugged, trying to pull his hand back.

‘It’s okay Gerald, we’re friends,’ said Michael. He moved his hand up and down to give any curious passers-by the impression that they were shaking hands and talking, not just frozen like statues. The growing



strength of Michael's psychic control was invisible to any observer, but Michael could feel it, a flow of his intention to dominate and control rushing from his mind and into Crossley's, into it and through it.

'I need to talk to you Gerald, walk with me.' Keeping hold of Crossley's hand Michael walked him further down the road, the man complied without protest, looking a little bemused as though someone had just asked him a bizarre question. They reached The Avenue, a narrow tree lined road, conveniently quiet. Crossley jerked his hand, surprising Michael, trying to free himself from the handshake. Michael slowed and focused his mind. He reached further with his mind through the linking hands, and felt something push back, like greeting someone and being rebuffed. Michael let the feeling approach his mind, and then he swept it away with a powerful and dominating thought. Crossley stopped pulling.

They walked down The Avenue away from the noise, distraction, and possible intrusion, away from the main road, and away from the MI5 spotters. They reached a wider part of the road and, as expected, on the right was the opening to a footpath which led off the road and round a corner, turning behind a large bush. Michael led Crossley off the road and round the corner, and now they were alone.

He kept hold of Crossley's hand. He let his mind extend out through the handshake. He felt the outer limits of Crossley's mind. It was like looking at someone from the other side of a crowded room, someone who was almost familiar. This was unexpected, there should be no distance, no separation of minds. He must tread carefully, to push too hard against a vulnerable mind could damage that mind.

'Who are you? What do you want?' asked Crossley. Michael was now annoyed, Crossley should be subdued, compliant, not arguing.

'I'm a police officer,' Michael lied. Crossley would never remember the encounter so the lie wouldn't matter, he reasoned.

'No you're not, what do you want with me?' This was becoming irritating and Michael was considering using more mental force.

The blow to Michael's head was as violent as it was unexpected. For an overweight printing supplies manager Gerald Crossley had a horribly strong punch. Michael collapsed into the bush, the world spinning around him, aware only vaguely of Crossley running around the corner and back onto The Avenue and out of sight.

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Michael staggered to his feet, his head pounding. He lurched back onto The Avenue, looking left and right. Crossley had gone. With no warning that he was on the move the spotters might miss him, especially if he'd headed away from the main road. Michael took a moment and calmed himself as best he could. He opened himself to the thoughts and feelings around him, and there it was. Crossley's panic and confusion hung in the air like a cheap perfume. The man had run away from the main road, hoping to find safety in the opposite direction. Michael could tune into Crossley's mind, like focusing on a single conversation in a crowded room. Having made physical contact with Crossley Michael now had a persisting psychic connection, but something was different this time. The connection felt distant, weak. Between the strange quality of this connection and the banging headache Michael was unable to reach out to Crossley's mind and exert control at a distance.

And where had that punch come from? No-one had warned him that Crossley presented any physical danger, and worse he'd missed any warning sign. He'd had a direct mind-to-mind connection with the man but got no sense that Crossley was violent. How could he have missed that?

Michael ran in the direction of the panic-sense. The Avenue ran past the backs of office blocks and their car parks, fences bordering residential properties, but the sense was always forwards. Crossley was still out of sight, he must have got a good head start. Michael had a thought that sometime soon he was going to make the man pay for that punch. He kept running. The Avenue turned to the left and ahead it became a footpath, a canopy of trees hiding it from sight. He thought he saw a figure further down the path, running. Michael stayed in pursuit.

The easiest thing would be to call for support, to have the Battle Bus and the Audi rock up, to have GCHQ access every CCTV camera in the area, but somehow admitting that a man called Gerald had outwitted and out run him just didn't seem the best thing to do.

'Michael, what's happening?' the female voice asked. Oh shit, this was just the one person he really didn't want to speak to right now. The figure ahead had disappeared in the shadows and the panic-sense had faded. If Crossley was beginning to think he was safe he'd feel less afraid, and he'd be harder to track. The only way Michael could explain it to himself was that confidence just sort of didn't smell as strong as fear, not physically and not mentally.

Finally Michael reached the end of the path, and emerged onto a residential street. Suburbia stretched out to the left and right, lines of parked vehicles, semi-detached houses, a young woman and a child standing next to a bus shelter, but no Crossley.



'Shit,' he said, rather more vocally than he meant to. The young woman glowered at him and pulled the child closer to him. He thought about asking her if she'd seen Crossley, but wasn't convinced it was worth the effort.

Left or right? Toss a coin. He stuck his finger in his ear and the beep let him know his ear-piece was active again.

'I've lost him,' Michael said. There was a pause, not what he wanted.

'What do you mean "lost him"?' the female voice asked.

'I'll give you the details later, for the moment I'm on Manor View and Crossley is out of sight.'

Silence.

'We need to find him. If this man is planning fire bomb attacks against soft targets we need to find him now.' Michael hoped his forceful tone would dissuade anyone from coming back with the reply that it was he who lost the target. No-one did.

'Got him,' came the male voice. 'He's heading up Gravel Hill, the A504. Your quickest way is through the houses to your right and across the sports field.'

'Good. Keep the Audi close but for the moment let Crossley think he's got away.' Oh it was so tempting to call in the car and just set off in pursuit, but wrong-footing the target was more important. He knew, though, that now Eric would be on the move in the Audi, keeping it far enough away to be unobtrusive yet close enough to be on hand within moments.

Michael looked at the houses on his right. Going through a house would be difficult, occupants might object, but gardens were a different matter. He walked up the drive of the nearest house, trying to catch sight of anyone through the front windows. A wooden gate guarded the path to the side of the house, he vaulted the gate with ease and jogged down the path to the garden at the rear. He was keen to run faster, but surprising residents could be awkward, physically running into them at speed would be a significant delay. As he'd hoped, the occupants were either out working or shopping. He sprinted down the garden, clearing the ornamental pond in a single stride and then scaling the wooden fence at the end.

On the other side was the green expanse of the sports fields, several football pitches marked in faded white paint on tired grass. He sprinted across the grass, heading for the buildings on the far side. He guessed they were changing rooms, club room, offices and the like, and he hoped had a clear access out on to the main road. Breathing heavily he skipped the low wall separating the sports field from the car park, dashed across the asphalt car park and through the gate onto the main road. He looked left and right, no sign of Crossley.

'Where is he?' he asked.

After a pause the man's voice said, 'We lost him.'

## Three

Anna Hendrickson still sometimes had to pinch herself to remind herself that she did actually work in her dream job. She looked up over the partition between her desk and the man opposite and looked across the office. Most of this part of the building was open plan, “pods” of desks arranged to make team based work areas, though most people focused on their own computer screens. Concealed strip lights lit the office space, but most of the light came from computer screens and desk lamps. This area was in the outer part of The Doughnut, the “secret” headquarters of GCHQ, the UK Government Communications Headquarters. The building itself wasn’t secret, no building that big could be secret. The Doughnut was a circular building (hence the name) in a suburb of Cheltenham, South West England. More than one hundred and eighty metres in diameter, it was home to over five thousand intelligence analysts, IT specialists and more. It was hi-tech in every respect.

Almost all the work done inside was secret. Anna had read a newspaper piece recently speculating on what surveillance work was carried out there, and she couldn’t help a wry smile at how much the journalist had underestimated the work. This was the heart of the UK’s electronic surveillance and intelligence gathering, and Anna was loving every minute of it. Olive skinned, black haired, too elegant to be called a geek but she was proud of her intelligence and how she used it.

She adjusted the headset and checked the display on her communications panel. She couldn’t call it a phone, it was far more than that. Her phone and workstation connected her to one of the Command & Control Centres, a room somewhere in Thames House, the MI5 headquarters building in central London. From the Command and Control room MI5 personnel were directing a field mission and Anna was providing communications, analysis and intelligence support. She focused back on the three large flat-panel displays in front of her. On one display multiple windows showed feeds from a selection of CCTV cameras. She noted the train on one screen and checked against the Transport for London information screen in another. She was sure TFL didn’t know that GCHQ had direct access to their systems, but then that was true for most systems she was currently monitoring.

“Train on schedule into Finchley in two minutes,” she said. She tried to keep any trace of excitement out of her voice. She needed to be calm and focused and professional.

She heard in her ear a man’s voice from the Command & Control Centre relay the “two minutes” notice to whoever they were supporting in the field. Anna was sometimes curious about what the mission might be, who they were supporting, what they were doing. But then this was part of the “secret” service, so she didn’t ask.

Anna heard the man next to hear typing into his keyboard and then dialling into another call. Kingston, like Anna, was a senior analyst. Anna was never sure of Kingston’s cultural background. His skin was dark, darker than Anna’s olive, almost Mediterranean skin, his hair was thick and black and straight, and his features were distinctly not-from-around-here. Anna had never worked up the courage to ask where his family were from (he’d probably say Gloucester) or if Smith really was his family name. Kingston was part of the same team as Anna, but today working on a different activity. Their work was usually sifting through transcripts of intercepted telephone calls or emails or texts, cross referencing with a vast assortment of other harvested data, working out who was talking to whom, and writing summaries of what might be happening or about to happen. Sometimes, and these were the good days, they got involved in more “interesting” activities. This was a really good day. She’d heard Kingston preparing for his call, running a penetration test of the Bank of England’s firewalls, something Anna definitely thought was “interesting”.

Anna focused on her headset, she heard a man’s voice, it must be the “man in the field”. The man they were tracking was wearing a dark grey business suit, dark blue overcoat and carrying a black document case. Anna scanned the feed from a CCTV camera, looking down the road towards the exit from Finchley Central Station. She saw the group of commuters walking up the road, the image was grainy and indistinct. With a couple of clicks of the mouse she engaged a program which sharpened the image. It still wouldn’t show faces, the camera was low quality and no computer program could add in detail the camera couldn’t see. As the group of people started to spread out the man in question became clear, he was the only one of the group in a business suit and carrying a document case. She pointed her cursor at the man’s image and clicked. This engaged an array of computer

programs to capture the man's image and to track it from one CCTV feed to the next. Along with the data from the people in the field they would maintain a location for this individual for as long as they needed.

Other programs were already identifying his mobile phone signature and cross-referencing all this data to look for connections with any other "persons of interest". Every face that came into view of the selected CCTV cameras would be analysed and searched for in vast databases and on social media sites, looking for (and speculating about) any connection between the individual and the man they were tracking. She felt some sympathy for the civil liberties campaigners; democracy was based on freedom, and freedom required privacy, but to protect that freedom the awesome computing power of GCHQ had all but negated those privacies. Few civilians could know just how little privacy they had left.

She brought her attention back to the matter at hand. Information scrolled on one of the screens. Another window on another screen gave Anna a continual feed of possible destinations or activities. Two items caught her eye.

'There are two printing supplies companies within twenty minutes' walk of current position, flagged as possible destinations,' she said into her microphone.

Kingston's voice caught her attention. 'Mr Mason, are we good to go?' Kingston asked, his voice a nice clear English accent, still no clue as to his origins. Kingston began tapping at keys. Anna was keen to lean over and ask how it was going, but she had to focus on her own tasks. She didn't know who "Mr Mason" was, but she knew that Kingston was using GCHQ's formidable computing power to attack the Bank of England's computer system, to identify any vulnerabilities, any weak spots that a hostile force might exploit.

Anna listened to the conversation on her own headset. The target was in a cafe. She brought up a window showing a live video feed. From the jerky movement it was a body camera, the wearer was walking and the camera was looking sideways as the person walked forwards (perhaps the camera was on the strap of a bag the person was carrying). The wearer walked past a cafe and the screen showed the image through the window of the cafe. In a moment the system highlighted the target's face with a red square, picking the man out from the other customers. Anna clicked on the man sitting next to him, almost immediately another window opened with relevant details. She clicked a button to share the information. At the same time other automated programs captured the images of all the faces visible to the camera and set about identifying them and tagging them for future, more detailed investigation.

'Target is meeting Marcus Berman, details on Command screen.' Everyone in the Command & Control Centre were now seeing the details of Marcus Berman.

Anna heard a new voice, a female voice. 'Suggest you have a quiet word with Mr Crossley as soon as Berman has left.'

"Quiet word" sounded odd, not something she'd heard before in the context of a surveillance exercise.

She heard someone ask for "somewhere quiet" and a moment later someone else gave directions to The Avenue, it sounded like one of the Command & Control team who would have interactive maps of the area and probably knew the area. Computers were good, but human knowledge was still valuable.

'Oh sneaky,' said Kingston. Anna looked over. Kingston was flicking between various windows on his screen, typing furiously then watching the result. No doubt he was trying various viruses and worms, IP attacks, packet hijacks and more to try to get past the Bank of England's outer defences and connect with a system inside their network. It was the kind of work that fascinated Anna, and she couldn't help but watch.

She recognised the program Kingston had opened. It repeatedly mimicked the login page of a Bank of England secure website and simultaneously monitored the time the various messages took to get back and forth. From this it would calculate which Internet servers along the way were passing the messages, and which of these they knew had weaknesses.

'It won't work,' she said.

Kingston looked over and almost scowled. 'You do your job and I'll do mine,' he said.

'I am doing my job,' said Anna, almost defensively. 'But that won't work, we tried it before.'

Kingston stared at the screen, but then turned to Anna. 'Okay, why won't it work?'

'Their server is configured to mistime the packets, we could never accurately tell which servers were on route.' She suppressed a big grin, but on the inside was smiling all the way back to her screen.

'Anna,' came the voice from the other side of the partition, 'you need to focus on the mission in hand.' That was a slap on the wrist from Wayne, their Section Leader. Anna put her head down and scanned the various windows open on her screens. Wayne could be friendly enough, but he could also be serious, and today Wayne seemed to have his serious head on.

She heard "going quiet" on the headset. Nothing was happening on her screens. Someone was having a "quiet word" with someone else in a "quiet place".

'Bugger,' Kingston muttered.

Anna sneaked a look sideways at Kingston's screen, and realised that his latest attempt wasn't going to work either. It was a good try, but she knew that the Bank's firewalls were proof to that kind of attack, but it did

give her an idea. Anna pulled a sticky note from the pad and scribbled a quick note on it, she pressed it down on Kingston's desk, firmly enough that he'd notice. He read the note and frowned and looked across at her. She looked up at him, briefly, and smiled. He read the note again, and frowned again. Almost with a sigh he put the note down and started typing.

A quick scan of her own screens, just to make sure she wasn't missing anything, and she turned to Kingston's screens. The program she'd suggested he run was currently battering the Bank's systems with a blistering array of attacks, all focused on one single opening, and measuring changes in the response time. Any drop in response would show that the Bank's computer was becoming overloaded with data and that the attack had found a potential weakness. Another idea popped into her head, this really was a very good day.

'Hit the login screen with buffer over-run attacks as well,' she said, half whispering, trying not let Wayne hear her.

'As well?' asked Kingston.

'Yes, the port attack and the buffer attack can sometimes overwhelm the message queue, if it does you've got a way in.'

Anna heard something in her headset and her heart leapt, the male field agent said "lost him".

Anna's heart felt like it missed a beat, she clicked as fast as she could at various controls and windows on her various screens, sending the target's image to various tracking systems. The systems pulled feeds from CCTV cameras in the surrounding areas, scanning faces, searching for Crossley's likeness. An image opened to full view on her screen and the system highlighted a man's face with a thick red circle.

'Target located, heading up the A504,' Anna said into her headset. She heard the information relayed to the man in the field.

That was close. Losing a target in the middle of an operation could be seriously bad news. Anna watched the man on the screen, following his every move as he walked strode up the main road. He didn't stand out from the crowd, except to the ceaseless analysis by the GCHQ computers.

A grunt from beside her interrupted her, Kingston had run into a problem, he was almost clenching his fists at the screen. Anna couldn't resist peering at his screen, she looked at the information scrolling in one window, the results of the assault on the Bank's login system. She saw that the timings were going up and down, the Bank's server couldn't handle the combined attack, Kingston was nearly there.

She pulled her headset to one side and leaned closer to Kingston. 'Spoof the security certificate of your login packets,' she suggested. Kingston tapped like a manic at the keyboard. The information on the screen went red and stopped scrolling. Kingston smiled and leaned back in his chair. He grinned at Anna.

'You're brilliant,' he said, 'one bank computer well and truly hacked.'

Anna slipped her headset back on just in time to hear the man in the field demanding to know "where is he?"

She scanned all the screens, willing Crossley to appear. She checked the logs from the surveillance programs, there was no sign of Crossley, he'd simply disappeared. In desperation she clicked from one CCTV feed to another, making sure the facial recognition programs were running on all feeds. Her eyes darted from one window to another, from one screen to another, hoping that Crossley would appear in plain sight, saving her from admitting the worst possible outcome. But as someone had once pointed out to her, hope is not a strategy.

'Target has been lost,' she said, trying to keep her voice down, as if such a report would go unnoticed.

She looked up and saw Wayne stand up at his desk, glowering down at her.

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About the author...

Simon Stanton is a new author from West Yorkshire, England. He's not completely new, he started writing science fiction at an early age and continued into his mid-teens, when he stopped.

After a thirty-something year hiatus, which he still isn't sure he can explain, he returned to writing. Now working as a project manager for a large financial institution, he fits writing into evenings, weekends and holidays. *A Mind To Kill* is Simon's first novel, having previously published (on Smashwords, Amazon and his own website) a series of short stories.

Simon still writes short stories, and these are available freely on his website. You can also sign up to his email list to receive exclusive short stories, previews of forthcoming stories, and more.

Simon is now working on the next book in the *Psiclone* series.

To find out more about Simon, his (free) short stories, and the next *Psiclone* novel (but, to be fair, not much about Yorkshire), visit his website at:

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