

CHAPTER 11

The investigators from the various U.S. agencies were able to set up a command center in the undamaged residence wing of the embassy. Power, lighting, and communications were restored with the help of Corp of Engineers staff flown in along with large portable generators. Larry Scofield and his forensics team had set up a lab area to pre-process physical evidence before shipping it to the FBI laboratory at Quantico, Virginia. They had been at the tedious process of sifting even fine debris looking for remnants of the detonating device for several days. From residue samples, the explosive material was quickly identified as military grade Semtex.

“Any idea about the method of detonation, Larry?” Kavanagh said.

Scofield was looking through a microscope. “Maybe. Look at this.”

Kavanagh looked at the specimen under the magnification. He had no idea what this might be. “And this is?”

“Pretty sure it’s a piece of a transistor. We have some other fragments as well.”

“So do you have a theory as to the means of detonation?”

"Well it could be pieces of a digital clock. Could be a timing device but we don't think so. We still need more evidence to establish not only how, but also the possible origin of the components."

"Your best guess right now?"

"I'd guess some sort of radio frequency trigger. There are fragments of capacitors and resistors that are inconsistent with a simple electronic timing circuit. But here's something of equal interest."

Scotfield picked up a thumbnail piece of blackened material with tweezers and placed it under a large magnifying glass.

"It's a piece of fiberglass board about three millimeters thick. White fiberglass."

"And the significance?"

"See this small hole. Now look closely and you can see a trace of solder around the hole. This fiberglass sheet is something you'd find at a hardware store. It's not original electronic material. The hole I would think was for the lead of an electronic component. This is not from a laminated printed circuit board. In short, this suggests it was homemade rather than a commercial device. Somebody made this. If it turns out to be a radio frequency receiver, that suggests a real level of sophistication. The guy had to know electronics well beyond a basic level."

Kavanagh conferred with Charles Williams. Williams agreed that they should press the Salvadorans to investigate sources of radio device sales. They argued about sharing Scotfield's preliminary opinion that it was a sophisticated device created by a trained technician. Williams felt that the quicker they moved on that the better. Kavanagh argued that the Salvadorans might react indiscriminately and arrest anyone with electronics training. The FBI should pursue that line of investigation further before sharing with the Salvadorans. He relented when Williams

pointed out they had no choice since they were not free to operate independently in El Salvador.

But Kavanagh had no illusions about the investigation proceeding objectively. The Salvadoran government and the powerful military junta were concerned with the political implications not the truth. While the use of Semtex suggested it was not the typical rebel choice of weapons, Colonel Benavides would counter that it represented evidence of foreign Communist support for the rebels, probably the Cuban DGI. Kavanagh might be in agreement about foreign involvement, maybe even the Cubans. But he also felt that the perpetrators might not be directly affiliated with the leftist rebels of the FLMN. If so, that meant they were something new to worry about. It made no investigative difference other than the stupid Salvadorans would impede progress of the investigation in attempting to serve their own interests. Kavanagh wondered if this was a new international terrorist group bringing their brand of terrorism to the Americas. Everyone did agree this attack was directed at the United States. The next target would again be the United States. In El Salvador or another Latin American country?

The investigation became more strained over the next several days. Kavanagh was spending most of his time on a computer link back to Washington headquarters from the FBI's command center in the damaged embassy. To the NSA, was there any indicative signals traffic connecting El Salvador with known foreign bad guys? Feelers were put out to contacts at various intelligence agencies throughout the world looking for tracks that might lend information about this seemingly new terrorist group. His two staff agents from counterintelligence were in the field with Williams' criminal investigative agents working with the Salvadoran National Police.

Word came via an FBI agent that he was wanted for a meeting at the National Police headquarters with Agent in Charge

Williams. The Salvadorans had apparently turned up an important lead.

Colonel Benavides himself was presiding over a crowded conference room. Charles Williams sat next to Benavides. A Spanish speaking FBI agent sat next to Williams to act as interpreter. Kavanagh also brought one of his own Spanish speaking agents. The others were all Salvadoran military and police.

"Please sit down Director Kavanagh, we are about to begin," Benavides said.

"Salvadoran police immediately began investigating all possible sources for the types of electronic components used to detonate the bombs at the United States Embassy. We believe we have found that source. Bring in the witness," Benavides said to the officer by the door.

A small middle-aged man was brought in and seated in a chair. Although the room was cool, the man was sweating profusely, with dark stains evident on his shirt under his arms. His eyes darted back and forth, obviously terrified to be in the presence of all of these uniforms.

"This is Ernesto Morales," Benavides said. "He owns a television and radio shop in the city of San Miguel. That is one hundred-thirty kilometers to the east of here. Two weeks ago he sold a customer a list of electronic components. The purchase was unusual. Explain why it was unusual, Señor Morales."

"Sí, Señor. Well most of my customers come to my shop to buy televisions or radios, or for repairs. I have used televisions which can be purchased"

"We're not interested in your business. Tell us about the person we are interested in."

"Sí, sí. Well this man comes in and asks if I can sell him electronic components. I told him yes. What was he looking for? This man hands me a list. A long list of specific electronic items. There are capacitors, resistors, transistors, radio frequency oscillators. Radio stuff, but all different sizes. I told him if he was re-

pairing a radio that maybe I could help if he brought it into the shop. That's when he explained."

"And he told you what, Señor Morales?"

"That he was an engineering professor at a university. Showed me his university identification. Said he was buying various components for use in his classes. Then he asked if I had an oscilloscope he could buy. That of course was very unusual. Only a person knowledgeable in electronics would need such an instrument so it was not something I would ordinarily have for sale."

"But you did sell him this piece of equipment, is that correct?"

"Yes. I had an old spare oscilloscope I was willing to sell."

"And the purpose of this oscilloscope?"

"It is used to analyze radio signals. It tells you the frequency."

The Spanish speaking agents translated for Williams and Kavanagh.

Benavides nodded to an aide who placed several photographs on the table.

"Señor Morales, come here and point out the man who came to your shop and made this purchase."

The man rose from his chair and came to the table. Picking up the photos with shaking hands, he came to the third photograph. "It was this man. The man with the foreign accent."

Looking somewhat displeased at Morales, Benavides passed the photo to Agent Williams.

"His name is Emilio Chavez," Benavides said. "Teaches electrical engineering at the Universidad Tecnológica here in San Salvador. He has been arrested. We are investigating all those with whom he is acquainted. He is undergoing questioning."

"Has he provided any information? Has he confessed?" Williams said.

"Not yet. But we are certain this is the man. He identified himself to Señor Morales. We found evidence at his home suggesting his affiliation with the rebels. Apparently he was close to Professor Augustin Portillo and his group of traitors."

That would be the late Professor Portillo that was murdered?" Kavanagh said.

"Yes."

"Can we speak to this suspect, Colonel?" Kavanagh said.

"Not yet, Director Kavanagh. This is a Salvadoran investigation."

"What about Señor Morales' comment about this man having a foreign accent?"

"We believe Señor Morales was mistaken. When we pressed him further he could not identify what kind of accent, or even what made him believe it was an accent."

Benavides said something to that effect to Morales who replied, "Yes, I probably heard wrong. It was probably nothing."

"Does the suspect have a foreign accent, Colonel?" Kavanagh said.

"No. But I am sure in your country there are many false leads and witness mistakes in any investigation."

Kavanagh and Williams met back at the embassy command center. Both were in agreement in their take on the meeting.

"That was all crap, Charles," Kavanagh said. "Maybe that shop was where the perpetrators bought the radio stuff, but this engineering professor is too pat. Makes them look good. Fortifies their claim that this is associated with the rebel left. Keep American aid coming or El Salvador will fall to a Communist-backed regime."

"I share the same conclusion, Kavanagh. But the problem is we're in a foreign country. We do not have freedom of action. We'll have to find ways to work around their incompetence."

"It's not incompetence, Charles, it's outright manipulation of the facts to suit their purpose. I don't think they have the bomb

maker. The engineering professor is too convenient. That shop keeper's testimony was a put-up job. And if that professor isn't the bomb maker, then there's no lead to who's masterminding this. These terrorists are still out there. Targeting the United States."

"And just what do you expect me to do to get the Salvadorans to cooperate more?"

"Pressure the Director to pressure the White House to lean on these Salvadorans. Quit kissing their asses."

"Tell you what, Kavanagh, you can have a crack at that yourself. We're expecting the Deputy National Security Advisor, John Negroponte and State Department Undersecretary for Political Affairs, Robert Kimmitt to arrive tomorrow."

"Shit. I don't know Kimmitt, but I know Negroponte," Kavanagh said. "He's a diehard supporter of these banana republic dictatorships. Regan's right-hand man. Ready to fight Communism at all costs. Covered up human rights abuses when he was ambassador to Honduras. Had his hand in Guatemala supporting the rebels in Nicaragua. Arming the Afghanistan resistance to counter Soviet occupation. Cozy with the Salvadoran junta. Close to CIA Director Casey and all the black ops stuff they were doing in Latin America. He's totally bent to the right."

"You'd know better than I would about your pals at Langley. At any rate, Negroponte's a lame duck as deputy security advisor. He'll be moving on now that Bush is President. So he's acting the part of more Bush's envoy until Bush gets his new team in place."

"Wonderful, a lame-duck, junta-loving hawk. He'll be a great help to our investigation."

Kavanagh was right about Washington changing nothing that would assist in the investigation. But Williams was also right in his assessment, that even if the Salvadorans were more cooperative, it might not matter much. This was still a third world country. The environment in the United States and the

resources the FBI could bring to bear at home were just not the same in El Salvador.

Negroponete said, "I appreciate the difficulties your investigative team is facing Mr. Williams. We will attempt to exert more pressure for more cooperation, but we are not authorized to up that pressure in the form of threats that could affect U.S. military aid as Mr. Kavanagh suggests. It's not even clear what you expect in the way of cooperation. This is still a backward place in the midst of a civil war. Meaningful police work would seem difficult at best."

Kavanagh said, "All true, Mr. Negroponete, but there's still some basic things they have failed to investigate. For example, they have no witness statements of any kind other than the radio shop owner. No witnesses from the neighborhood where the band members were murdered. Someone must have seen something, heard the gunshots. The FBI hasn't been allowed to investigate that crime scene. They haven't reported any forensic evidence from there and never will. This shopkeeper's whole story sounds like a police fabrication. This engineering professor is therefore an unfortunate stand-in for the real bomb maker. He'll be tortured by their secret police and yield either nothing or some confession that will suit the police."

"And you would like them to do what, Mr. Kavanagh?" Negroponete said.

"Allow the FBI full access to the shop keeper. He mentioned something about a foreign accent from the guy who purchased the electronic components. Access to the engineering professor with our own interrogation team. Door to door canvassing for witnesses in the area around the murdered bandleader's house. Access to witnesses and files related to the two murders of those ranking military officers.

"Right now all we know is that military grade Semtex was used as the explosive, triggered by some radio frequency control

of some probable sophistication, assembled from components purchased from a radio shop, and one partial fingerprint. A fingerprint we haven't matched in any western database. Only general descriptions by four U.S. Marines of the men that delivered the musical equipment."

"In short you'd like them to get out of your way and let the FBI run the investigation," Negrofonte said.

Williams tried to warn Kavanagh off by a subtle shake of his head.

"That would help. The Salvadorans are too incompetent, too corrupt to do anything credible. Remember this gentlemen, and remind President Bush, this terrorist attack on our embassy was not perpetrated by some faction of the Salvadoran rebels. It probably was of foreign origin using the civil war here as the perfect environment. An environment to launch an attack on the United States. The target is now the United States not El Salvador. And this is not the last we'll hear from these guys."

"Mr. Williams, what do you say? You're in charge of this criminal investigation."

"I'd like the same access as Mr. Kavanagh outlined, but I'm a realist. That's not going to happen here. We'll do everything we can but the results will be compromised by having to work under the constraints of this foreign government."

"Jesus, Charlie, that's self-serving crap. We help these fuckers with arms to create their police state then we don't have the balls to demand our own justice."

The State Department Undersecretary weighed in. "Mr. Kavanagh, you head up the counterterrorism division of the national security branch of the Bureau, is that correct?"

Kavanagh nodded.

"No personal criticism intended, but your group has uncovered nothing in the way of intelligence related to this terrorist group?"

"Nothing at all," Kavanagh responded. "There's nothing out there. I've been in contact with all of the western intelligence services even some that are not always the friendliest to the United States. Not a thing that would suggest a new group, or even point to some existing group. No unusual signals traffic from any of the known bad guys. Points to a new group, clever and well concealed."

Negroponete said, "Well at least your people have not found their tracks. Might all this expressed anger at the Salvadorans be a smoke screen for a failure of your counterterrorism section, Mr. Kavanagh?"

Kavanagh clinched his jaw and glared at Negroponete, wisely choosing not to respond at the provocation. It didn't matter. Two days later Kavanagh was recalled to Washington by his boss Bernie Saunders. The order came from the White House. The wording, *Director Kavanagh was not sufficiently sensitive to diplomatic circumstances to continue investigating from within El Salvador.*

The same day, Williams sent Kavanagh a message that the engineering professor was found hanging in his cell by his own belt. According to the Salvadorans, he never confessed or provided any names.

Within a month, John Negroponete was appointed Ambassador to Mexico. His replacement as Deputy National Security Advisor was Robert Gates. Gates was a former Deputy Director of Central Intelligence. Gates had a friendly history with Egan Kavanagh at the FBI. So at least Kavanagh would no longer remain persona non grata at the White House.

