

SIGINT INTERCEPT
CHANNEL 7B // 203.7740 MHZ
DF ACTIVE

38.9072° N
-77.0369° W
GRID: 18S US 44873 10294

SOME SECRETS
DON'T STAY BURIED.
THEY JUST WAIT
FOR THE RIGHT PATTERN.

PATTERN OF LIFE

— A CAL MERCER NOVEL —

APPALACHIAN REGION
WEST VIRGINIA

38.7413° N
-79.4207° W

SIGNAL ANALYSIS

FRANK MATRANGA

Pattern of Life

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CHAPTER ONE

The lot was three-quarters empty at five-fifteen in the morning. Cal had his pick of spaces and still ended up with a four-minute walk, because the close lots needed a hang tag he'd never bothered to get. By the time the cold came through his shoes, he'd decided, as he decided every February morning, to get the tag this week. He wouldn't. He never did.

The guard at the checkpoint knew his face, not his name. She scanned his badge, matched him to it, gave him the small nod that was all that ever passed between them, and waved him through. He left his phone in the lockers outside the floor and went through. Past the checkpoint, nothing reached the outside world, which was most of the point.

The operations floor at this hour was a different building than it was at eight. The overhead lights ran at two-thirds, dimmed for the overnight, and the hum was the only sound. The air was sterile and a few degrees under comfortable, conditioned for the equipment rather than for anyone using it, and under that it held the smell of old coffee and stale cigarettes without the cigarettes. The desks were extremely well ordered, which was requirement and not habit, because classified material

left in the open was a serious breach and the rule was upheld strictly. Along the wall stood file cabinets with combination dials, for the part of the work that was not digital. A handful of night-shift analysts sat hunched at their stations, in the compressed posture of people in the last hour of a long watch. Something was always happening somewhere in the world and the people on this floor were handling all of it, and they were doing it in a hush, which was the eerie part. Cal made coffee no one else had touched and carried it back to his desk and sat down. The floor settled around him. He started work.

The report stack was three inches thick. A light morning.

He was an analyst, not a collector, and the distinction mattered to him in ways he'd stopped trying to explain to people outside the building. Collectors gathered. Analysts made sense of what was gathered, found the shapes inside the noise. He'd come up through Army signals before NSA, learning the trade where the consequences were close and immediate. He was good at it. His branch chief called him an unusually strong pattern recognizer. What Cal made sense of was foreign. That was the premise the work and the law operated under, signals from other countries and the people who served them, the chatter the nation listened to so it would not be surprised. Whatever reached his desk reached it because someone upstream had judged it to come from somewhere other than here. What the people on either side of him were working on he did not know and did not ask, and that was true at every desk on the floor.

Marcus Webb appeared at his elbow at five-forty, on his way out. The night shift's version of a courtesy.

"Anything live?" Cal asked.

"Quiet, mostly." Webb had his jacket over his arm, already in his car in his head. "GCHQ liaison product came in around two, flagged for cross-reference, it's in your queue. Node seven had a processing hiccup at four, IT knows." He paused. Something almost like amusement crossed his face. "Oh. The Belarusian trade attaché at the Brussels dinner last night got himself recorded trying to seduce the Ukrainian ambassador's wife."

Cal looked up.

"At the table," Webb said. "During the fish course."

"How bad."

"Bad enough that Minsk has been generating nervous traffic since midnight. Nothing that means anything. But it's a full inbox." He shrugged into the jacket. "Rowan wants the quarterly node summary by end of week. He mentioned it twice yesterday."

"Noted."

Webb left. The floor went quiet again, and Cal turned to the stack.

He found the anomaly at six fifty-two, buried in the third report.

It wasn't obvious. If it had been, someone on nights would have flagged it. What caught his eye was a coordinate reference in a routine emissions summary, the kind of passive-survey product generated automatically and read by almost nobody, because they almost never held anything new. The signal had come in attributed to a

foreign platform, which was the only reason it was in his stream. The coordinate was tagged to a system that, per the catalog, had been decommissioned and taken offline four years ago.

Systems didn't emit after they went offline. That was the point of taking them offline.

He pulled the catalog entry. Decommissioned, yes, the paperwork complete and properly dated. He pulled the activation record, the maintenance history, the decommission verification, and laid all four side by side. The system had been certified offline before its last maintenance record was filed.

That was either a clerical error, which happened, or the maintenance record wasn't about maintenance.

Cal flagged the coordinate with a question mark in the internal system. Nothing that would trigger automatic routing, just a marker, the digital equivalent of a turned-down page corner. He kept reading.

He found the second thread forty minutes later, in a finished product from three weeks back that had been recirculated for a reason the distribution note didn't explain. Different frequency, different area, nothing related on the surface. But the emission profile had the same quality as the first. Clean in a way that didn't match the age of the platform it was hung on. Precise in a way that hardware from that generation wasn't precise.

Two data points weren't a pattern. They were a coincidence worth watching. He'd done this long enough to know the difference, and he wasn't sure yet which one this was. Both products had come through the same

collection node. If there was a cataloging error or a processing artifact, it would show up in a third.

He went looking. He found it before seven-thirty.

Same node. Same anomalous precision. Different platform attribution that also fell apart when he pulled the underlying records.

Three data points were a pattern.

He leaned back and looked at the ceiling, which was what he did when he needed his eyes to stop so his brain could catch up.

What he had, laid out plainly, was a series of emission signatures attributed to dead platforms, all routed through one node, all displaying characteristics inconsistent with the hardware they were assigned to. The most straightforward explanation was a cataloging problem, wrong IDs on real signals from something else. The second was a processing artifact in how the node handled data before pushing it downstream.

The third explanation was that something out there was generating signals nobody had acknowledged.

Cal didn't reach for the third. He documented the first two, noted the third as a possibility to rule out, and started writing a clean summary for Rowan.

Dennis Rowan was his branch chief, a fifteen-year man who wore three ties in rotation and kept a desk photo of his kids that was four years out of date, because he'd never replaced it, or preferred them at that age, or simply hadn't noticed. Cal had never asked. He liked Rowan the way he liked an old couch, nothing elegant about it, but it held up and it was where you expected it to be.

By eight-fifteen the floor had become itself. A hundred and forty workstations, most occupied, the lights at full. The NSA seal on the far wall was the one thing in the building that said plainly what the building was, and Cal had stopped seeing it in his first month. He squared his three printouts and the catalog records and crossed the floor to Rowan's office, past rows of analysts with no idea what was in his hand.

Rowan was already in, jacket off, coffee going, reading his screen with the look of a man absorbing news he'd rather not act on.

"Mercer. You're early."

"Relatively."

"What've you got?"

Cal walked him through it on paper, in sequence, conclusion last, because Rowan needed to see the path before he'd accept the destination. Eight minutes. Rowan asked two questions, both good, and Cal answered them.

He had meant to say the rest of it. That the three profiles weren't just inconsistent but inconsistent in a way that read engineered, and that the cleanest reading was a live system wearing a dead one's name. The words were right there. He gave Rowan the discrepancy and the request to run the IDs and stopped short of the conclusion, and told himself it was because he hadn't proved it yet, which was true, and didn't fully explain why his mouth had closed on its own.

"Could be a node processing issue," Rowan said.

"Could be. I flagged the technical team to look at the node. But the profiles are inconsistent in the same

direction across all three, which makes a random artifact less likely. A systematic one is possible.”

“Or a cataloging problem.”

“Also possible. I couldn’t verify the platform IDs from my access.”

Rowan was quiet a moment, actually thinking and not being performative. “Document it and sit on it. I’ll run the IDs up and see if anyone recognizes the attribution. These usually turn out to be something boring.”

“Usually.”

“Good catch, though.”

Cal collected the papers and left. Behind him Rowan’s keyboard started, the sound of eight minutes of work being compressed into whatever format carried it one level up. Standard process. Correct procedure. He’d done the right thing, mostly, and the small part he’d held back sat with him on the walk across the floor, an itch he couldn’t quite reach.

It was a Friday. Claire had her seminar in the afternoon, and they’d agreed to meet at the Thai place on Route 32 after, the one with the green curry she called the single most effective argument for civilization in the DC metro area. He’d told her that was a low bar. She’d told him she was a historian and pessimism was a professional requirement.

He’d started thinking about her at odd moments in the workday, not in a way that disrupted anything, more like a background process running on a machine doing other things. She talked about the sixteenth century like she’d recently come back from a long trip. Two months ago

she'd looked at him across the table, on what he hadn't quite decided was a date until she looked at him like that, and said intelligence work and archival history were the same discipline at different speeds. He'd thought about it for three days before deciding she was right.

The anomaly sat in his flagged files. Rowan's chain would come back with something boring.

It didn't feel boring. He couldn't have said why, and he was careful about that kind of instinct, because instinct without evidence was just bias with a better story.

He opened the next report and kept working.

Pattern of Life is out in September 2026.

You will hear from me when it is available.

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