
PROLOGUE

DALLAS, TEXAS

Ahmed Shakir should have gone with his gut. He'd met the guy at the Dirt Hole in East Dallas. Despite its name, the place was a decent enough bar. It had thirty-cent wings at happy hour, a pool table that needed new felt.

And a bartender named Dale. For two hundred bucks a month, Dale looked the other way when Shakir sold coke out of the bathroom. Shakir wasn't Pablo Escobar, but he dealt more than casually. Fifteen regular buyers, thirty or so occasionals. Enough to keep him busy.

Shakir's customers were nice white people. They called him Adam. They didn't seem to mind that he'd been born in Cairo. He had mastered the secrets to success for drug dealers. He didn't use his own product, didn't sell on credit, didn't get greedy. He was small, with wiry black hair and dark eyes. A forgettable face, which suited him fine.

But everything went sideways after that Thursday night, cool for Dallas in the fall. The Bengals and Falcons played on the flat-screen behind the long wooden bar. Katy Perry sang about teenage dreams on the satel-

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lite radio. Shakir was in his usual spot, the booth by the bathrooms. Dale nodded him over.

“Somebody wants to say hi.”

The guy sat alone on a stool in front of the taps. He wore cowboy boots and a black sweater with sleeves pulled up to reveal a steel watch. Shakir hadn’t seen him before. The Dirt Hole attracted cable technicians, UPS supervisors. This guy was fancier.

He caught Shakir looking, tipped his Heineken.

Up close the guy’s skin was pockmarked. The watch was a Rolex. “I’m Jake.” His fingers twirled on the bar. Antsy hands. Cocaine hands.

“Adam.”

“That so?” The guy gave Shakir a sly sideways look that stuck in Shakir’s throat. “Bartender says you’re the man with the plan.”

Shakir didn’t recognize his accent. It wasn’t Texas. “I don’t know you.”

“My guy’s not answering. A girl I know said she hooked up here—”

“Name?”

“Katrina. Tall. Pretty. Short blond hair.”

And cold blue eyes. Shakir remembered her. She’d come to the Dirt Hole with a squinty little guy named Jimmy who owned a steak house. Katrina was taller than Jimmy and in a different time zone looks-wise. Shakir saw plenty of those pairs. You couldn’t be a coke whore if you didn’t like cocaine. Hearing Jake mention her made Shakir feel better. She was no narc. She’d practically marched Jimmy to the bathroom to start the party.

“Says your stuff is primo. She would know.”

Word of mouth, the best marketing. “What are you looking for?”

Jake nodded at the pool table. An eight-ball, then. An eighth of an ounce of cocaine, or three and a half grams. Also known as a party ball. Enough for a few friends to have a late night or one dedicated user to go on a bloody-nose rock-star bender. Shakir charged his regulars two hun-



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dred dollars for an eight-ball and everyone else two-fifty. A lot of coke to want on a first buy, enough to make Shakir nervous.

Though Jake's Rolex suggested money wasn't a problem.

"You drive here?"

"Flew on my broom."

"Keys." Shakir held out his hand. Jake seemed to understand that if he wanted his Bolivian marching powder, he would need to play nice. He handed Shakir an Audi key fob.

"Drive carefully. That's my baby."

Shakir found the A4 at the end of the parking lot, its midnight blue paint glowing under the lights. Standard black-and-white Texas plates. Shakir walked around it, seeing nothing unusual, nothing that suggested the car belonged to the cops or the Drug Enforcement Administration. The lot was mostly empty tonight. No weird dry-cleaning company vans or guys in trucker caps keeping a too-casual eye on him. Not that he rated that kind of attention.

Shakir slipped on gloves, slid inside. The A4 was so new that the leather still smelled fresh. Whoever he was, Jake kept his car immaculate. No candy wrappers or fast-food bags. The glove box held only the slim owner's manual, no registration or insurance. Or pistol.

Shakir drove southwest toward Deep Ellum, slowed for a yellow light. As it turned red, he gunned the engine and swung left. A few turns later, he was on Highway 75. Then east on I-30 among the big rigs. Nice car. He was no expert, but as far as he could tell, no one was on him.

He was going to a lot of trouble to sell one eight-ball. But Shakir didn't know what to make of this guy. Jake was too slick for his taste. Yet Shakir also sensed he might turn into a good customer, a fish who wouldn't care about price. Shakir hadn't had one of those in a year, since he'd lost a cardiologist at Presbyterian to rehab.

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Shakir drove another five miles east before doubling back to the Dirt Hole. He parked the Audi where he'd found it, tucked a plastic bag holding three and a half grams of cocaine under the driver's seat, stepped out.



Jake stood outside the front door, arms folded over his chest. "I was about to call the cops." Shakir stepped past. Inside, they settled into Shakir's booth. The Mavs game was winding down, the Mavs up twenty on the ridiculous Brooklyn Nets.

"See why you like that car. How do you pay for it?"

"I'm a lawyer."

"Have a card?"

"You're not the only one taking a chance. I don't care if your stuff is straight from the jungle, gimme my keys—"

Shakir slid them over. "Before you go, bet you the Mavs win."

"Now you're a bookie?"

"Two-fifty. I got the Mavs. You got the Nets."

Jake looked at the screen. Understanding dawned, and he extended a hand. "Two-fifty, sure."

Thirty seconds later, the game ended. Jake slid five fifty-dollar bills to Shakir. "Last time I bet basketball. So? We just do it here?"

Shakir kept a straight face. "Go home."

"My money—"

"Make sure you adjust your seat."

Jake's head swiveled to the door. "If I have to come back—" he said, and trotted out.

In three minutes, Jake *did* come back, and Shakir felt a flutter of anxiety. He had protected himself from a typical buy-and-bust. His fingerprints weren't on the bag or the Audi. The bet gave him at least a little cover for

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Jake's money. But if they were after him, if they'd wired the car . . . Why, though? Shakir couldn't see anyone going to that much trouble for a three-gram bust. Not when South Dallas was an open-air drug market.

"My man," Jake muttered in his ear. "Katrina was right. I mean, that is tippy-toppy. You feel me?"

Shakir wondered why cocaine made lawyers talk like rappers.

"Gimme your number."

Shakir wasn't ready to be on intimate terms with this guy. "I'm here Thursdays and Sundays."

On Sunday, Jake picked up another eight-ball. The next week, too. But he didn't show up the week after that. Too bad. Guys who dropped five hundred a week weren't easy to come by.

Then Jake was back. A Thursday, early, barely 9 p.m. Wearing a white shirt lined with sequins. Yeah, sequins. Two women with him, blond and brunette, stuffed into dresses that barely covered their asses. "My man. Meet Amber and Lacey." He was slurring a bit.

"Riley," the blonde said. "Not Lacey." She smiled like she didn't care.

Jake pulled out a money clip thick with hundreds and tossed one out. Actually tossed it. They all watched it flutter down. "Ladies, have a drink." He wrapped an arm around Shakir's shoulder. "You, walk with me."

Outside, sirens blared to the west. Shakir tried to shrug off the crawling sense they were meant for him.

"Need a little more tonight. Two ounces." The words fast and low.

Two ounces would last even the most serious cokehead for weeks, and the party might end with a heart attack. Shakir was also well aware that under Texas law, selling fewer than four grams of cocaine was a third-degree felony. More moved the crime to second-degree.

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An eight-ball fell conveniently just under the four-gram line. Two ounces—fifty-six grams—did not. In four years of dealing, Shakir had sold that much only once before, to the cardiologist. The guy said he was going on vacation for five weeks. *Hate to run out in the middle of the Grand Canyon.* He rubbed his runny nose. By then, Shakir knew the doc was headed for rehab. Or worse. Problem with coke, your best customers eventually went south.

“Who’s it for?”

“These girls *party*. And their friends. Figured I’d pick up what I needed for the weekend all at once. Maybe a volume discount, know what I’m saying?”

“No.”

“Help a brother out. Party with us, if you want—”

“Forget it.”

“An ounce? Don’t make me beg, Adam.”

Suddenly Shakir changed his mind. An ounce or two ounces made no difference; either way, he was deep in second-degree felony territory. He either cut Jake loose or took his money. And he wasn’t ready to cut Jake loose. “Two ounces. Fine. But no discount. Four thousand flat.” The price of sixteen eight-balls. He’d cut it more than usual, too. Make two grand-plus for a few minutes’ work.

“Should be like twenty-two, twenty-four hundred.”

“Call your old dealer, then.”

“Thirty-five. But it’s gotta be now. Like, right now.”

By the dumpster behind the bar, Jake counted thirty-five hundred-dollar bills from his clip.

“Give me your keys. I’ll be back.” Shakir wasn’t sure why he was still pushing Jake’s buttons, except that he didn’t like the guy.

“Take your own car. Don’t be a peasant.”

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Peasant. An odd word. At the end—the *very* end—Shakir would remember it. But at the time, in the lot, with the bar garbage perfuming the night air, it merely annoyed him. “Keys or no deal.”

Shakir lived with a purebred Persian cat whom he’d cheekily named Base—as in *freebase*—in a one-story ranch in East Dallas. He paid the mortgage every month with money orders. He kept his scales in the kitchen—nothing illegal about scales—and his stash in a wall safe. Now Base whined for milk as Shakir weighed out forty-nine grams of cocaine and seven grams of mannitol. A seven-eighths cut was plenty fair. He covered his mouth with a surgical mask, blended the powders, poured the whitish mix into a plastic sandwich bag.

His pulse thumped as he tucked the baggie into the Audi’s glove compartment. He was taking a risk for no good reason. Maybe he was tired of selling cocaine by the gram to sniffing electricians. Tired of living small.

He didn’t even get back to the bar. Three blocks out, a big black SUV loomed behind him and flicked on the red-and-blues in its grille. He thought about putting pedal to floor. Then a second SUV appeared beside the first. Chevy Tahoes, brand-new and mean-looking. Everything about this operation was expensive and new. Shakir wondered why he rated the attention.

He pulled over, lowered the windows. He curled his fingers around the steering wheel like he was already chained to it. The traffic rolled by, drivers gawking. Normals, living boring normal lives. Could he make a deal, talk himself back into their world? But the thought of wearing a wire on his next buy from the Downside D Homeboys, his suppliers, scared him more than prison.

The second Tahoe parked in front, bumper-to-bumper, boxing in the

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Audi. Two men stepped out of the one behind. They wore black T-shirts and jeans and pistols snug on their hips. Their badges swung on neck chains. Shakir wondered if they were local. No, probably DEA. From what he'd seen, the Dallas cops liked to show off during their arrests. They never used a patrol car when a SWAT team would do. These guys seemed relaxed.

The narc on the driver's side strutted up. He was white, with a brush cut, and the same bad skin as Jake. They could have been brothers.

"Mr. Shakir. I'm Agent Emery Reed of the Federal Bureau of Investigation." He even sounded like Jake, the accent unrecognizable to Shakir but not Texan. He flipped open his wallet to show Shakir his identification.

FBI? Not DEA?

"I know this is not your car. You can tell me where the stuff is. Or we can get a dog, impound it, add grand theft auto to the narcotics charges."

Shakir sensed this wasn't the moment to stand on his constitutional rights. "Glove compartment."

The other agent, a mountain of a man, reached inside with a gloved hand, came out with the baggie.

"Next question. Any firearms?"

Shakir shook his head.

"Good. Let's take a ride."

"Am I under arrest?"

The agent pulled a phone from his pocket, tilted the screen: a long-lens shot of Jake handing Shakir money, the dumpster completing the perfect ugliness of the image. "If you don't come, you will be."



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They frisked him and put him in the back of their Tahoe behind a thick wire screen, but they didn't cuff him. He assumed they'd take him to the



main Dallas FBI offices, west of downtown. Instead, the Tahoe went south. The streets turned mostly poor and black, brightly lit chicken joints and car lots, their NO MONEY DOWN pennants limp in the night air, flags for a losing team. The driver seemed to know exactly where he was going, no GPS necessary.

After fifteen minutes the SUV turned into a corrugated steel garage. Inside, the agents led Shakir into a windowless room, empty except for steel chairs and a table, surveillance cameras high in the corners. Reed put Shakir's wallet and keys and phone and the hundred-dollar bills in a plastic bag. The second agent took it and disappeared.

"Ahmed Shakir," Reed said. "You may not believe it, but this is your lucky day. Probably wondering why we picked you up, not the DEA. Why you're here and not at our office. Thinking we want to flip you."

Shakir held his tongue. He was in enough trouble already.

"We couldn't care less about the cocaine. As far as we're concerned, the war on drugs . . . Well, drugs won. We don't even work out of Dallas. We're based in Houston and we're in CT. *Counterterror*. We're interested in your cousin. Second cousin, to be precise."

Now Shakir understood. "Gamal."

"The one and only Gamal el-Masry."

Shakir and el-Masry had come to the United States as kids in the nineties, before September 11, when middle-class Arabs still had a shot at getting American visas. Their families wound up in Dallas. The North Texas heat agreed with Cairenes. As children, they'd been close, the eldest sons of ill-tempered fathers. They'd compared bruises more than once.

But they'd grown apart. While Shakir dealt eight-balls, el-Masry drove for Uber. He had a wife, who never left home without a headscarf, and three little girls. He was a regular at the Masjid al-Sunni, a mosque in Cedar Crest. Its Saudi-trained imam preached that Allah wouldn't be sat-

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isfied until the world lived under the laws of the Quran. El-Masry asked Shakir to pray with him every so often. Shakir found excuses to turn him down. Given his profession, he preferred to stay off Allah’s radar. He did fast for Ramadan every year, mainly to prove he could.

Despite their differences, Shakir saw el-Masry and his family a few times a year. They were Facebook friends, too. El-Masry often posted news stories about American bombs that killed civilians in Syria. *ALLAH WILLING, THE KAFFIRS WILL PAY FOR THIS!!!*

The second agent returned, holding a manila folder.

“When was the last time you saw Gamal?” Reed said.

“Maybe two months.”

“You know how he feels about the United States?”

“I’ve seen his Facebook page.”

“What about terrorism? Has he talked about committing an attack himself? Think carefully, now.”

“No.” But the possibility shocked Shakir less than he would have expected. El-Masry had a temper. Shakir had once seen his wife with a black eye. *I fell*, she said. *Clumsy*.

“Seen his Twitter feed? That’s the nasty one.”

“I’ve never even been on Twitter.”

“Good for you.” Reed smirked. Shakir already knew he would grow to hate that smirk.

The second agent slid photographs from the folder to Shakir. A pair of handsome Egyptian men, tall and skinny. “I’ve seen them at Gamal’s. Brothers, right?”

“Rashid and Nassir Fardous. We’re very concerned about your cousin and his friends. They’ve reached out online to dangerous people. Raised money for Islamic charities tied to terrorist groups. That mosque—at least one guy from there wound up in Syria.”

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Reed stared at Shakir until Shakir couldn't stand the silence. The silence and Reed's pockmarked face. Shakir had always thought FBI agents were supposed to be pretty. "Has Gamal done anything? Besides the on-line stuff."

Reed's smile revealed a mouthful of capped teeth. "Not yet. That's about to change."

Slowly his meaning sunk in.

"You want me to entrap my cousin."

"Just help him do what he wants. Now I'm gonna talk, and you're gonna listen. Save your questions." For the next half hour, Reed outlined the FBI's plan.

You go to Gamal, tell him you've seen the light. Guys beat you up in a Walmart parking lot, called you a dirty Arab, broke a couple ribs. You are seriously pissed . . . Or you had a dream that convinced you to change your ways so you don't spend eternity in the fire. The Prophet was big on dreams, right? Either way, you're ready to roll. You know he is, too . . . And, lucky you, the business you're in, you know people who know people. Your buddies will be happy to hook you up. AKs, Kevlar vests, so you guys can last a while once the cops show up . . .

You and Gamal and Rashid and Nassir pick a target, nice and juicy, New Year's Eve downtown, whatever he likes, and you practice, you scout it . . . We'll wire you, nothing cheap, nothing he's gonna catch, and we'll even set you up at an old gun range we bought east of town, it's wired, too . . . We don't need a ton of tape, just enough that it's clear that everyone was more than willing . . . You make suicide videos, go right to the edge, like it's really gonna happen . . . We're watching all along, just in time we show up and make the bust . . .

Presto! Ahmed Shakir, American hero. They'll make a movie about you, my friend. The Muslim Who Came in From the Hot. Now, questions?

"I'm setting up my own cousin?"

"So he doesn't kill innocent people."

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“That’s not Gamal.”

“Then he’s got nothing to worry about.”

“He won’t believe I’m into this.”

“He will. Same reason you trusted Jake, even though you never even saw him do a line, did you?”

Reed was right. What a fool Shakir had been. “It’s entrapment.”

“It’s not. Leave the law to the lawyers. Why we take it to the end, prove everyone was ready to go. Nobody gets entrapped into driving around with AKs and boxes of ammunition.”

“I still don’t get why it has to go that far. Unless—” And then Shakir understood what Reed wasn’t telling him. “You want to make a show of it. How close it was. Show all those people watching on CNN what a good job the FBI did.”

“I’d advise you to stay focused on your own role in this, Ahmed.”

“Will I have to testify?”

“No way around it. But here’s the best part. This little incident tonight, it goes away. I mean, a hundred percent. No charges, no plea bargain, it never happened.”

Shakir saw why the agents hadn’t officially arrested him or taken him into custody. “You want me clean. So the defense can’t cross-examine me, ask me what I’m getting out of this.”

“You’re a concerned citizen who came to us when you saw your cousin’s Facebook posts. We took it from there. But you will have to stop dealing while we put this together. Can’t have the Dallas cops stumbling onto you. Your buyers know where you live?”

Shakir shook his head. He didn’t want desperate cokeheads showing up on his door.

“Then just stop answering your phone. They’ll get the hint.” Reed paused. “And you have a girlfriend, right? Jeanelle.”

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A question that made Shakir wonder how long they'd been watching him. He hadn't seen Jeanelle in two weeks. "Not my girlfriend, but, yes."

"Get rid of her. Can't risk her either."

"How do I pay my bills?"

"We'll give you three thousand a month. Cash. You can even keep the money from tonight."

"And at the end it goes away."

"It goes away."

"What happens if you're wrong? Gamal won't play?"

"If it comes to that, we'll talk, but we're not wrong."

"Can I talk to a lawyer?"

"Talk to whoever you like, but this is a take-it-or-leave-it offer. One time only. Tonight."

"If I say no?"

"You're gonna make me say it, Ahmed." Suddenly Reed seemed tired. He rubbed his knuckles across his pockmarked cheeks. "Two ounces isn't the crime of the century, but you have the bad luck to be in Texas. Which doesn't like cocaine. And you made it so easy. Didn't even hide the cash. We have pictures, marked bills, a bag in the car with your prints. We'll hand it to the DPD narc detectives. One call, you're right in the middle of that two-to-ten band. Realistically, four or five years. We want to be nasty, we'll make sure they hit your house, too. Don't know how big a stash you have back there, but I'll bet it takes you closer to eight. No gang looking out for you, that's eight *long* years wherever the Texas Department of Criminal Justice sees fit to send you—"

Shakir didn't like any part of this offer. He didn't want to get his cousin in trouble. He wasn't sure he could trust this man across the table. In fact, he was sure he couldn't. But he didn't see any other way. He raised his hands in surrender. "You win."

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“Good man. You’re doing the right thing. Keeping America safe.” Reed slid a blank white card to Shakir, a number handwritten on the back. “That’s my cell. Emergencies only. We’ll be in touch.”

The other agent, who had never introduced himself, disappeared. He returned in a minute with the plastic bag of Shakir’s stuff.

“By the way, you can assume we’ve copied your house keys and put trackers on your phone and car. Don’t make us look for you.” Reed slid the bag across to Shakir. The second agent whispered in Reed’s ear and Reed grinned.

“Ahmed, Agent Mercer thinks a beatdown would give you the perfect excuse for a change of heart.”

“No.”

“You don’t have to. But if you can’t get Gamal interested—”

They left him with a black eye, a fat lip, and a bloody nose. Then they dumped him a block from the bus station downtown.

“You need to go to the hospital,” el-Masry said.

“Forget it.”

“What happened?”

Shakir spat blood into an empty Gatorade bottle that smelled of piss.

“You were right.”

“About what.”

“About them.” He refused to say more, knowing his silence would drive el-Masry to imagine the worst.

A week later, the bruises still mottling his face, he knocked on el-Masry’s door. “Cousin, I want to talk.” He was surprised how quickly el-Masry



bought in. He'd expected he'd have to speak in the coded language of drug deals. But when he mentioned punishing his attackers, el-Masry nodded.

"I knew Allah would give you a chance to save yourself from Hell. Staying out late, drinking alcohol, fornicating with their women. You think I don't know."

If only.

"You want to find these men, Ahmed?"

"I told you, after they hit me, they drove off. I barely saw them."

"What, then?"

"The Americans see us all the same way. Dirty Muslims. It's only fair we do the same to them."

El-Masry patted Shakir's hand. "Not just fair. Allah's will."

"I've wasted my life, cousin. I'm ashamed."

"Not anymore."

Shakir quickly realized that for all their fury at the United States, his cousin and Rashid and Nassir suffered from a certain naïveté about their adopted homeland. They all worked alone as drivers, so they didn't have American coworkers. They spent their free time with other devout Muslim men. Their understanding of American society came mostly from the imam's sermons and television. They didn't question Shakir's breezy assurance that he could buy assault rifles from a gang of Hells Angels he had met at the Dirt Hole, like motorcycle gangs regularly sold AK-47s to random Egyptian immigrants. They barely raised their eyebrows when he told them that the Angels would let them train at an old gun range east of Dallas.

Do they know what we're doing?

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I told them we're robbing a bank, Shakir said. They like that idea. They don't like the police either.

How much will all of this cost?

Twenty thousand. Twenty-one, to be exact.

You have that much?

All my money, Shakir said. I was saving it to get married, but I'd rather use it for this.

The most annoying part of being undercover was el-Masry's insistence that Shakir pray at the mosque once every couple weeks. El-Masry wanted him to come even more frequently, but Shakir said that too much sudden devotion might look odd. The brothers at the mosque were briefly suspicious, but they welcomed him after el-Masry told them what had happened to him.

He saw Reed and Mercer once a week. Reed, really. Mercer never spoke. They usually met at Burger Kings. Shakir didn't know if Reed had a weakness for Whoppers or liked the restaurants because they tended to be empty. Shakir never saw the other agents, but he noticed a white Chevy pickup and a black Tahoe following him. The vehicles came and went almost randomly, and he realized Reed had told the truth about the trackers on his car and phone.

After six weeks, he told Reed he was ready for the AKs.

"You were right." Shakir was almost embarrassed how enthusiastically his cousin had taken to the scheme. El-Masry liked to guess how many people they would kill. *Each of us should do as many as Mateen*—Omar Mateen, the shooter at Pulse, the Orlando gay nightclub, who had killed forty-nine. *Times four. Two hundred.*

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“For the guns, we need paperwork,” Reed said. He murmured in Mercer’s ear and Mercer left.

“Nice to have an errand boy.”

“Say it to him.”

They sat in silence. Shakir wondered sometimes what Reed and Mercer did when they weren’t with him, if they went home to Houston or stayed up here, if they had families. Neither wore a wedding ring, but maybe FBI counterterror agents didn’t advertise they were married. But Shakir knew Reed enough now to know those questions would just annoy him.

Mercer returned with a manila folder. Reed leafed through it, made notes on the pages inside. “This says we’re giving you five AKs, five thousand rounds of ammunition. Also five pistols. Glocks.”

“Five?”

“If anyone else joins up.” Reed slid two pieces of paper over, identical, both on official FBI letterhead, the figures inked in. Shakir skimmed, signed them, pushed one back. Reed wagged his fingers for the other.

“This is for our protection, Mr. Shakir. Not yours.”

Of course. “When do I get the guns?”

“Park by the Sears at Southwest Center Mall at noon tomorrow. Shop inside for an hour. When you come back, they’ll be in your trunk. It should go without saying but I’ll say it anyway. Don’t leave them with your cousin or Rashid. Tell them you don’t want them in a house with kids—tell them whatever—but keep them yourself.”



In truth, playing with the AKs was fun. The firing range where they practiced was on the edge of Grand Saline, a one-stoplight town seventy miles

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east of Dallas. Even with the GPS, Shakir barely spotted the building the first time. It was low, concrete-walled, set back from the road. Faded signs nailed to the front door read HARLEY PARKING ONLY and SUPPORT 81, the number a barely disguised code for *Hells Angels*.

Inside, the range had ten shooting stalls that faced a thick sand berm. The odors of gunpowder and stale beer lingered faintly. Tattered targets hung at the far end. Posters warned, in black capital letters, FACE FORWARD! POINT WEAPONS DOWNRANGE! IF YOUR WEAPON JAMS, STAY IN YOUR STALL! And, more pithily, DON'T BE A DUMBASS, DUMBASS!

They shot on semiautomatic. The AKs that the FBI had provided weren't set for full auto, and Reed had warned Shakir not to try to modify them. *You'll just mess them up.* After the first trip, Shakir downloaded manuals and online videos about how to attack for maximum civilian carnage. They were surprisingly common. *Three-shot bursts. Carry magazines on your chest, where you can easily swap them out. Cover one another during reloading so that your targets can't swarm you.* They set up obstacles in the middle of the range and worked on their tactical skills. Their accuracy improved, though Shakir was under no illusions about their chances against a trained police team.

They talked only once about the morality of what they were planning, or the fact it would surely result in their deaths. "You're not worried, cousin? About hurting women and children?" Shakir said, as they were finishing the third session.

"How many of us die every week in Syria? We're the lucky ones. Attacking the enemy."

"Won't you miss your daughters?"

"I'll see them in Heaven. Come on, cousin, don't tell me you're having second thoughts." El-Masry swung his AK on Shakir. He smiled, but Shakir didn't think he was joking.

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Shakir knew he wouldn't mention his doubts again. For the first time, he was glad the FBI had found him. Even after el-Masry's ready agreement, Shakir had feared he might be entrapping his cousin. And he still doubted el-Masry could have pulled this attack off without Shakir's help. El-Masry and the Fardous brothers weren't sophisticated enough to buy assault rifles without being noticed. But Shakir could imagine them bringing knives to a mall and stabbing strangers until they were shot. Maybe they wouldn't have killed hundreds of people, but they could have killed a dozen.

He was nervous when he drove back that afternoon. He made a mistake. On Highway 19, the two-lane state road that led to the interstate, he missed a speed trap. Suddenly he was driving 67 in a 45 zone. Even as he hit his brakes he saw the white Chevy Suburban tucked behind a stand of trees. The Chevy had steel ramming bars mounted to its grille, a five-pointed black-and-red sheriff's star on its driver's-side door. It pulled out as he passed, flipped on its lights.

El-Masry cursed in Arabic.

"It'll be fine." *As long as they don't search the trunk and find five unregistered assault rifles.*

"This isn't Dallas, Ahmed," Rashid said. "They don't like people like us here."

"If he tries to take us in—" El-Masry reached under the seat, where he had insisted on stowing a Glock.

Shakir signaled, pulled over as far as he could. To the left and right, hay bales lay gold on close-mown fields. Fresh asphalt stretched to the horizon. Another lonely Texas highway. "Don't be stupid."

The sheriff's deputy wore a cowboy hat, a long-sleeved khaki shirt, wraparound sunglasses. "Howdy, gentlemen. Where you headed?"

"Dallas."

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“Where you coming from?”

Shakir saw too late he should have had a cover story. “Dallas,” he mumbled.

The deputy tilted his head in mock puzzlement. “What brings you to Van Zandt County, then?”

“Just out for a drive.”

In the passenger seat, el-Masry muttered in Arabic, *Looking for infidel pigs to slaughter.*

The cop’s hand went to his pistol. “Excuse me, sir?”

Shakir’s heart clenched. They were a sentence or two from *shots fired*. “He’s saying how beautiful it is here.”

“Yeah. Got Walmarts and everything. So you gentlemen are all Arabs.”

“Egyptian, yes.”

“Home of the Pyramids, am I right?”

Shakir wasn’t sure if the deputy was joking or wanted an answer. “Yes, sir,” he finally said.

“Mighty impressive, those Pyramids. Saw a *Nat Geo* special on them. You got papers?”

“We’re legal.” Though Shakir wasn’t sure about Rashid and Nassir.

“Carrying anything in this vehicle I should know about? Narcotics? Weapons?”

“Of course not.”

“You don’t mind if I search it, then?”

I’ll blow his head off, el-Masry muttered.

“Sir, I’m going to have to ask you to speak English and step out of the vehicle—”

Behind him an engine roared.

And a black Nissan 370Z with tinted windows blew past, at least a

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hundred miles an hour, clearing the deputy's ample backside by no more than a foot. The deputy's head swiveled as the Nissan disappeared south.

"Your lucky day, boys. Not even going to bother to tell you to wait." He lumbered back to his Suburban and kicked on the sirens. Shakir didn't think he had a chance. The Nissan was flying, and the Interstate 20 interchange was only a couple miles south.

"Allah is with us today," el-Masry said, as Shakir eased his Hyundai onto the blacktop.

Yeah, Allah and the FBI. Apparently, Agent Reed didn't want anyone searching Shakir's trunk either.



They took a break from the range and Van Zandt County to scout targets. They spent a day looking over Dallas/Fort Worth Airport, checking the terminal entrances and the check-in counters. The airport's great advantage was that they could park close, hide the AKs in bags, walk to the terminals and come out shooting. Rashid suggested that they could cook up homemade explosive and pack it in luggage. But, ultimately, they decided against DFW. Police and Transportation Security Administration officers were everywhere. Each terminal had dozens of doors and emergency exits. Lots of ways to escape. Mateen, the Orlando shooter, had been able to cause so much carnage by herding his victims into corners.

The Cowboys were another possibility, a symbolically important target, playing in front of a hundred thousand people. "America's Team," el-Masry said. "At AT&T Stadium. Everyone knows AT&T spies on Muslims." The security checks at gates created choke points, long lines of ticket holders waiting to be screened. But after scouting a home game, they decided against AT&T. Driving close to the stadium was near impos-

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sible on game days. They'd have to park hundreds of meters away and try to approach without being noticed. Their rifle bags would stand out. And security was nearly as heavy as at the airport.

So they turned to the American Airlines Center, where the Mavericks played. The Mavs weren't the Cowboys, but the arena's name would resonate. More important, security there was notably lighter than at the airport or stadium. Instead of hundreds of police officers, the arena had a couple dozen. Even better, they could drive almost to the gates on the west side of the arena, which offered the same security checks as at AT&T Stadium and created the same choke points.

Best of all, if they could get inside, they could create panic. The arena's corridors were relatively narrow and encircled the seats that surrounded the floor. Two shooters could move in opposite directions and stampede victims toward one another. Meanwhile, the other two could mow down people inside the main seating area. With each minute, they would kill dozens more. Five times they went to games, scouting the screeners, walking the arena's halls to look for hidden security posts, checking sight lines.

They saw no obvious hurdles, nothing to dissuade them.

The American Airlines Center it would be.

The body armor was legal and easy to come by. To avoid arousing suspicion, Shakir ordered online from four different companies. The plates were military-grade, capable of stopping assault rifle rounds. Standard subsonic pistol ammunition would barely dent them. The armor made the plot feel more real to Shakir than the AKs had. The AKs were toys, somehow. The armor wasn't. When Shakir slipped it over his shoulders, its weight shocked him.

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They wore the armor for their suicide videos. They made those at the range, in front of a black cloth emblazoned with the *Shahada*, the Muslim profession of faith. El-Masry spoke first. In English, and then again in Arabic, he explained that he was a soldier carrying out this attack as revenge for the way the United States treated Muslims. *The Americans kill innocent women and children. It's only right that people here feel the same pain. We are the proud soldiers of Islam . . .* Rashid and Nassir followed.

Then Shakir's turn came. As he stared at the camera, he wanted to laugh. *Thank God, this isn't real.* He knew the United States better than these men. This attack would backfire, making Americans even angrier. Anyway, he didn't see his cousin running to Raqqa to live under the caliph.

"Ready?" el-Masry said.

"I'd rather let you speak for me." But el-Masry pressed him. Finally, Shakir choked out a few sentences.



Two days later, Shakir passed Reed and Mercer a copy of the videos.

"We're close. We've picked a date." He told them. They already knew the location.

"We'll step up the surveillance. Though you may not see us. The day of, we'll have helicopters and drones besides the on-the-ground stuff."

"Can't you make the arrests now?"

"It's America. Anybody can make a video. The lawyers will say they were puffing their chests, supporting the jihad symbolically—"

"We spent all this time scouting sites."

"You went to a few basketball games."

"Practicing with AKs."

"Which *you* provided, Ahmed."

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“I’ll testify.”

“They’ll say you’re a liar. Hint at the drugs, even if we try to keep them out. Say you have a hero complex. I want these guys to spend fifty years in prison, and that only happens if we nail them right before they start shooting.” Reed leaned in. “Your job is to keep them calm until we snap them up. No more getting pulled over, no dumb mistakes.”

“What about when they see you? They’ll start shooting.”

“You tell them you’re keeping the guns in the trunk when you drive to the arena. Easy enough to get them out when you get there. Eleven a.m., day of the attack, leave your car at Southwest Center Mall again, give us a couple hours. We’ll pull the firing pins. The AKs will look exactly the same. Just be sure no one tests them after the switch.”

“I’ll tell them that I’ll pick them up at Gamal’s house, we’ll go straight to the arena.”

“And checkmate. Very good, Ahmed.”

They went twice more to the range, examined maps, watched one final game at the arena. The day came. Dallas Mavericks versus Oklahoma City Thunder, 7:30 p.m. A full house expected. Eighteen thousand five hundred fans.

Shakir left his Hyundai at the mall as Reed had instructed. When he came back, he found a note on his seat. *See you tonight. Almost done.*

The weight of what Shakir was doing to his cousin descended on him. *Fifty years in prison*, Reed said. A life sentence, really. El-Masry would emerge stooped and old, if he came out at all. He would never touch his wife again, hardly see his daughters. All along, he would know that his plan had failed, that the enemy he’d hated had won.

Thanks to his own cousin.

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Shakir wondered if he ought to tell el-Masry the truth, let him run. But he didn't need to guess at the FBI's reaction. Reed would be furious. Shakir would face the original drug charges, along with new ones, for compromising the investigation.

Anyway, the FBI had been right. His cousin wanted to shoot up a basketball game. He *should* be in prison. No, Shakir had to see the plan through.

As he drove home, el-Masry called. "Come over, Ahmed. Pray with us this afternoon. *A mouth that prays, and a hand that slays.*" An old Arab saying. "Make sure we're ready for Allah."

Shakir couldn't face spending hours with men who were about to go to prison because of him. "You get ready for Allah however you like, Gamal. I'll see you tonight."

The afternoon passed excruciatingly slowly, but at 6:20 Shakir strapped on his vest, pulled on a sweatshirt to hide its bulk, headed for el-Masry's house. Along the way, he saw a Tahoe following. Reassuring. He pulled up to el-Masry's house at 6:35, five minutes late. His cousin and the others stood outside, fidgeting.

On the drive over, they hardly spoke. Shakir wondered if the others were having second thoughts. He drove carefully, wanting to make sure the FBI stayed close.

The arena lay west of the downtown skyscrapers and north of Dealey Plaza, where Oswald had shot Kennedy. At 7:03, Shakir turned north on I-35E. He spotted the Tahoe once more in his rearview mirror. It seemed to be a long way back. The others murmured prayers in Arabic. Shakir wished silently for a quick, clean arrest.

At Exit 429, Shakir turned onto Victory Avenue. The arena stood close, a handsome building with a redbrick façade and a white shed roof. The pregame traffic was heavy but moving.

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Then they were there.

Shakir stopped beside the bollards that protected the emergency entrance to All Star Way, a few feet from the line for the security checkpoint. He killed the engine, popped the trunk, flipped on his hazards. The others opened their doors.

“Coming, cousin?”

Shakir stepped out, looking for unmarked SUVs. For Reed and other men wearing FBI jackets. He saw only the usual security guards. The nearest Dallas police officers were a hundred feet away and paying no attention to the Hyundai.

“Can’t park there,” a security guard shouted.

“Ahmed!” el-Masry yelled. Shakir came to the open trunk. The other men grabbed for AKs. He reached down but didn’t touch his. He didn’t want to be holding an assault rifle, even if it couldn’t really be fired. If the cops didn’t know about the sting, they might start shooting.

But why wouldn’t the cops know? The cops *had* to know, even if they weren’t taking part in the arrests.

Something was wrong.

No.

Everything was wrong.

“Now.” El-Masry and the other two lifted their AKs—

“GUNS!” yelled the security guard—

The AK came alive in el-Masry’s hand. The guard’s head exploded.

The pins . . . The firing pins—

The two cops turned, but even before they could pull their pistols, Rashid dropped them both. “*Allahu akbar!*” he shouted.

“Please—” a woman screamed.

An AK burst from el-Masry silenced her. The security line dissolved. The ticket holders ran along the arena’s outer wall or forced their way

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through the checkpoint. El-Masry and the Fardous brothers stepped forward and strafed the crowd, moving with purpose and precision toward the gate.

Shakir watched in bewilderment. Then, too late, remembered what Jake had said the night they'd arrested him. *Don't be a peasant.*

In all his years in the United States, he'd never heard an American use that word. Never.

He'd been so happy at the get-out-of-jail-free card that he'd ignored all the warning signs. *Why hadn't they brought him to the main FBI office and given him a written cooperator's agreement? Why had he only met two of them? Most of all: Why hadn't they made the arrests in a controlled setting?*

Bursts of rifle fire. Shrill screams of the dying. Thumps of bodies falling.

Shakir knew, couldn't avoid the answer. Because they weren't FBI agents. Whoever they were, they'd set this up. They'd found him. Then tricked him into leading his cousin into a fake terrorist attack that wasn't fake at all. And far deadlier than anything el-Masry could have pulled off on his own. Shakir tried to scream, found he couldn't move. What to do? Shoot his cousin? Run—

He'd never escape. But maybe he could surrender, explain the truth. He didn't have much to back his story. But he had a little. He could take the real FBI to the shooting range. Dale had seen Jake at the Dirt Hole. The mall must have security cameras.

A beeping from the trunk. Shakir looked down. The AKs had been wrapped in blankets. With them gone, Shakir saw that someone had moved the mat that covered the Sonata's spare tire. He lifted it—

The tire was gone.

In its place, whitish gray blocks in clear plastic, shaped to fill the hole. Three detonators were stuck in the blocks, connected with red and yellow leg wire that ended in a black box the size of an iPhone.

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“No.” A wish. Shakir reached down—
A light on the box flashed red.
The world went white. He felt everything. And then nothing.

The explosive was C-4, rarely seen outside military arsenals. Bombmakers prized the stuff for its power and stability. It wouldn't blow up if it were dropped. It required a sizable priming charge that itself had to be triggered by an initiator. C-4 was a professional's weapon.

But the team that had set Ahmed Shakir up was as professional as any in the world. It had made no mistakes with the four-hundred-pound bomb in the Sonata's trunk. The explosion vaporized Shakir so completely that investigators couldn't find enough of him for a DNA sample. Its overpressure wave and shrapnel created a kill zone that stretched a hundred fifty feet. Two hundred ninety people were in that space, hiding against the arena's walls or running for safety. Most of them died, along with others farther out.

El-Masry and the Fardous brothers just missed their goal. They killed one hundred forty-five people before SWAT teams pinned them down. Even then they didn't stop shooting. Police snipers had to kill all three of them. In all, the C-4 and the bullets killed three hundred eighty-five civilians and thirteen police officers in twenty-eight minutes, more than any terrorist attack since September 11.

Even before the suicide videos went online, no one doubted Muslim terrorists had committed this atrocity.

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COLUMBUS, GEORGIA

The Waffle House lay on Victory Drive, close by Commando Military Supply and the gates to Fort Benning, the two-hundred-eighty-square-mile base where the Army made soldiers into Rangers. John Wells remembered the restaurant from his own training, more than two decades before.

Back then, he'd still basically been a Montana boy. He'd come to Dartmouth for college, been shocked by the superior attitude so many East Coast kids put on. But Georgia had held its own surprises. At least Montana and New Hampshire both had mountains, even if the Bitterroots were bigger. Down here, the land was slap flat and swamp-cut.

Anyway, as far as Wells could tell, the Waffle House hadn't changed. Not the waitresses, not the plastic booths, maybe not the fryer grease.

The Ranger instructors eating one booth over looked the same, too. Square-jawed and narrow-eyed. Mostly white. Maybe a few more tattoos. They shoveled scrambled eggs in their mouths like they were machines for the ingestion of food. Cut, chew, swallow. Cut, chew, swallow. Wash it

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all down with the black liquid that Waffle House called coffee. They were almost too tired to speak, Wells saw.

Though not as tired as the soldiers they were training. Nothing in peacetime replicated combat, but Ranger School tried. *Rangers lead the way*, the unit's motto went. The training program was meant to weed out any soldier who couldn't. It was famously tough, especially at the beginning. Candidates were deprived of sleep and food while facing timed marches and the Darby Queen, a barbed-wire-studded obstacle course. Soldiers qualified through airborne training and a four-week starter course before they even had a chance at Fort Benning. Still, about sixty percent failed. Many who did pass had to repeat at least one part of the three-phase program.

Not Wells. He'd gone through in the minimum sixty-two days. He was made for soldiering. Not just because he was strong and lean and quick. Because he knew intuitively how to survive, to narrow his focus. Not to think ahead, not to promise himself that he'd get through this day or week but simply to *get through*.

A most un-Buddhist form of mindfulness.

So Wells went from Dartmouth to the Rangers, the Rangers to the Central Intelligence Agency, Langley to the Hindu Kush, the Kush back to the United States. Only the start of his travels. Two decades of spying and fighting, killing and not quite dying. He'd resigned from the agency but discovered he needed it as much as it seemed to need him. He'd become a Muslim, too, finding comfort, of sorts, in a faith not his own. And why not? All faiths were foreign in the end, walks through dark woods.

Had he changed? He supposed he must have. From the start, he'd been unafraid to kill, to take what he could never give back. Yet his dreams troubled him more than they once had—

“Need anything?” The waitress's smoke-roughened voice. Meaning:

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You've been sitting in this booth a while, time to order more or move on. Hungry soldiers waited by the door. Wells hadn't woolgathered this way twenty years ago, that he knew.

"Scrambled eggs with cheese. Triple order hash browns."

"Triple? Coming up." She offered him a broke-down smile and turned away. The United States had two thousand Waffle Houses, not one in the Northeast or on the West Coast. Places for working people who needed quick food cheap and cheap food quick. The eggs were iffy, but the hash browns were delicious, as long as Wells didn't think about what they were doing to his arteries.

He was waiting for his son. Evan. Though Evan didn't think of Wells as his father. Another man had raised the boy while Wells snaked the world's drains. Yet Evan, a grown man now, had decided to become a Ranger. Wells wasn't quite sure why. He was proud, but he feared Evan didn't understand the choice he'd made.

Evan had been one of the first-week Fort Benning failures. Not his fault. He'd blown his Achilles tendon eleven miles into the twelve-mile road march, the week's concluding exercise. Twelve miles didn't sound like much, except the candidates carried close to a hundred pounds of gear. Because Evan had failed for medical reasons, he could rehab here while he waited for another chance. If he wanted.

He'd called Wells the day before, two days after the injury, asked him to come to Georgia.

"Pep talk?"

"Something like that."

All his life, Evan had carried a golden ticket. Now defeat hung in his voice. Wells caught a dawn flight from Boston to Atlanta, rented a car for the easy hundred-mile drive to Columbus, on the Georgia-Alabama border. Eleven a.m., and here he was.

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He watched Evan park his gray Toyota Highlander—the SUV too new, too nice, for a young soldier, a vehicle that would earn Evan scorn rather than respect. The door swung open, and Evan hobbled out, a heavy white boot on his ankle. Like Wells, he was tall, with brown hair and cool-brown eyes. Though Evan was slimmer than Wells, more lithe. He was a superb basketball player, just a half step slow for the NBA. He'd started at shooting guard for San Diego State's nationally ranked team.

Wells met him at the door, gave him a hug that would have been awkward even if Evan hadn't been wearing the boot.

"John." Evan rarely called him Dad. "Couldn't take me somewhere classy like Denny's?"

"You don't know what you're missing."

"That's what she said." Evan banged his foot into the edge of a booth and grimaced.

"Maybe focus on walking."

The hash browns beat them to the booth.

"If this is what getting old is like, I'll skip it," Evan said.

"You may reconsider." Wells helped him sit.

"How's Anne? You're living together, right?"

So they were, in the farmhouse in New Hampshire that had become as much of a home as Wells expected to find. Anne was Wells's *girlfriend*, *partner*—whatever term of art the kids used these days. Not *wife*, though. Wells had proposed and been refused twice now. She'd told him she didn't want a ring, she wanted his heart, and she'd know when his heart was ready. Left unsaid were the words *And it's never gonna be*. Though his unready heart hadn't stopped them from having a daughter together. And now—

"Anne's pregnant." The first time he'd spoken the words aloud. He felt a swell of masculine pride despite the foolishness of having another child

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out of wedlock. But why not? He and Anne were good parents. And, truth, if anything happened to him, he'd put enough money aside to make sure the kids would have their educations paid for. Beyond that . . . Anne was smart and steady and he supposed he trusted she would find someone else. Evan had done all right without him.

"Seriously? Another half sister?"

"Sonogram says *brother*."

"You know there are these things called condoms, John—" Evan grinned in genuine pleasure. "Why didn't you tell me before?"

"I'm telling you now." What he wasn't telling, and wouldn't: Anne had miscarried three times since Emmie, their daughter. Wells hadn't wanted to say anything until they were sure. But she was sixteen weeks along, and the sonogram and every genetic test ever invented said the baby was healthy.

"Congratulations."

"Thank you."

"Glad one of us has good news, anyway."

"What happened?"

Evan grimaced, reliving the injury. "I felt the tendon getting super-tight, which used to happen at the end of games sometimes. Then *Snap!* I heard it even before I felt it. Then I was on my ass, like someone took a blowtorch to my leg. The other guys tried to help me. I knew I wasn't going anywhere. I told them, *Don't stop, don't mess up your march*. Just waited for the NCOs. Man, it hurt. But that's not the part that's messed up."

Wells waited.

"Felt like I'd gotten a get-out-of-jail-free card." Evan mumbled now as if the words burned his mouth. "I can't stand these rules. Sergeants yelling at me. *Surfer boy! Pretty boy! College boy!* And the other soldiers, they're barely eighteen, they all think it's a big gym class. Jackasses."

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“If I recall, you engaged in a bit of jackassery in San Diego.”

“I don’t want to sound like a snob, but—”

“But you are, and you didn’t even know until you got here.”

“We barely get any sleep, anyway, and they won’t shut up all night. Talking about how much ass they’ll get when they tell girls they’re Rangers. And when are they gonna blow claymores and try the 249.”

“You’re telling me you don’t want to shoot a machine gun?”

“Worst part is, all this crap about how they can’t wait to get deployed so they can start killing Arabs. *Make them pay for what happened last week.*” The funerals were still happening in Dallas, the flags still at half-staff. “*Nuke Syria.* They don’t even know the difference between Sunni and Shia. Remember a few years ago, in Missoula—”

At the time, Evan had accused Wells of being a psychopath, a contract killer whose sole client was the United States government.

“And you grew up.”

“I saw it was more complicated. But this takes me back to that, because that’s all these guys want. Was it like that when you were here?”

Wells nodded. Though, back then, the imagined targets had been the Russians and the Chinese. *Chink-chonk-cho, I shoot you, ah-so.* Fortunately, that guy had washed out. “They’re nervous. Trying to hide it.”

“They don’t sound nervous. They sound *amped*. If that’s what it takes to kill people, I don’t have it.”

The real reason Evan had called him. Wells let him eat for a minute and then leaned close.

“I don’t know if you have it. Or any of those other guys. Nobody knows. All those obstacle courses and live-fire exercises, they just tell you who *can’t* do it. You flinch here, then you’re probably gonna be no good in the real thing. But it doesn’t work the other way. Guys can roll through the Darby Queen because in the back of their minds they know it’s train-

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ing. Combat's different. It's only when you're up against people who want to kill you that you can be sure how you'll react."

"Kinda late by then."

"You know what's more like combat than anything else? Football."

"Because of the hitting."

"Because, in the moment, it's you or them. And basketball's not the same in terms of the physicality, but it takes that focus. If I had to bet, I'd bet on you."

They were quiet for a minute.

"Say you're right. What am I looking at? Months of rehab. Then years of taking orders from guys who barely got through high school."

"On the bright side, by the time you're done you'll be a killing machine who can't live normal civilian life."

"You make it sound so appealing."

"Know where we could have used a couple Rangers last week."

Words that snapped up Evan's head.

"I haven't told you what to do this whole time. But I'm telling you now. Don't quit. Not this way. It'll feel good for a month and then it'll haunt you."

"And the knuckleheads?"

"Keep your mouth shut. If you can soldier, they'll respect you soon enough. Maybe dump that forty-thousand-dollar station wagon outside, too, so it's not so obvious you don't fit in."

"Mom's gonna kill you. She told me not to call." Heather, Wells's ex-wife and Evan's mom, hadn't wanted Evan to sign up. To say the least. Evan had told Wells that she'd threatened to cut off his hands.

"Least you won't be living in the basement like all the other millennials." The waitress was coming their way. Wells fished for his wallet. "Come on. We stay much longer she'll make us sign a lease."

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Wells called Anne as the Highlander swung out.

“Babe.” She’d started calling him that recently. “How’s Evan? What I thought?”

“Yeah. I told him not to.”

Silence. Anne told Wells not to argue if Evan wanted to quit. *You need to let him find his own way.*

“He wanted me to change his mind, Anne. Why he asked me to come.”

“Hope so,” she said, as his phone beeped with an incoming number, a 202 area code. Wells wanted to be surprised, but some part of him had expected this call since the first bulletins from Dallas.

“Call you back.” He clicked through.

“Mr. Wells?” A man. “President Duto would like you to come in. Are you in New Hampshire?”

“Fort Benning.”

A pause. Wells realized the man at the White House had never heard of Fort Benning. And civilians wondered why soldiers didn’t respect them. “Military base in Georgia. Has an airport.”

“I’ll call you back.”

The voice was gone. *President Duto would like you to come in.* Not a question. Wells called Anne.

“I have to stop in D.C.”

I’m pregnant, John. Or have you forgotten? Words she’d never say. “Tell the gang I said hi.”

Five hours later, Wells walked into the Oval Office to find Vinny Duto flipping through a briefing book in a black binder. Even when Wells had

first met Duto a decade before, the bags under his eyes had been prominent. Now they sagged into his cheeks. He looked like he hadn't slept in days. He probably hadn't.

"John. Thanks for coming."

Duto had been justifiably proud of his record, Wells knew. Proud the country hadn't suffered a major terrorist attack while he was director of the CIA or president. Until now. Four killers, three hundred dead, the Islamic State claiming credit.

Duto flipped through the binder. Wells glimpsed photos, pools of blood. He waited for Duto to explain what the agency and FBI knew and what they didn't, what the next moves would be.

"Want a drink?" Duto said abruptly.

Wells didn't. And it was barely 5 p.m. And Islam forbade alcohol, anyway. But he couldn't make the President of the United States drink alone in the Oval Office. "Sure."

Duto closed the binder and gave a low, grateful sigh, the sound of a dog kenneling itself under a porch on a hot day. He'd installed a chrome-and-leather bar cart by the Oval Office's second door, the one that led to the bathroom and points beyond. He plucked a bottle, thick glass and a cork stopper, labeled with a hand-drawn cowboy sitting on a white horse. *High West, yippee ki-yay*. He poured himself half a highball glass. For Wells, barely a finger.

"To those pricks. May they rot in Hell." Duto raised his glass, took a pull. Wells gave himself a mouthful. The stuff wasn't bad, a little sweetness to hide the fire underneath. Duto's face loosened as the liquor hit him.

"Whiskey?"

"If the river was whiskey, and I was a diving duck . . ." Duto took another sip, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Rye. You think I drink too much, John?"

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People who weren't worried about their drinking rarely asked that question. "I think you're the president, and if you want a predinner cocktail, nobody's telling you no."

"Promised I'd keep us safe."

"Can't stop everything."

"I don't mind being divorced—as a rule, I enjoy it—but this last week I wished I had someone to talk to."

Wells and Duto had never liked each other. Duto loved power, for its own sake and for the rewards it brought. He'd used Wells a dozen different ways on his march from Langley to the Senate to the White House. But he'd been a case officer and then a station chief, too. At least he understood the field, unlike most of the men and women in this town. So Wells wanted to feel sympathy. Heavy is the head. But he couldn't start thinking of Duto as human. Not now.

"No one made you take the job, Vinny. Tell me you didn't call because you need a shoulder to cry on."

Duto raised both middle fingers, and Wells glimpsed the man he remembered, the one who had a quotation from Stalin for every occasion: *The people who cast the votes decide nothing. The people who count the votes decide everything.*

"Don't flatter yourself. I talk to you because you keep your mouth shut. Not that anyone would listen. You're like a dog that somehow learned to shoot."

"It's all on my blog."

Duto took another sip, settled back on the sofa. *Good. I'm glad we got our feelings out of the way.* He pushed the briefing book at Wells.

"Don't ask me where they got the C-4 or figured out how to wire it. We don't know. Gamal and the brothers were in FBI databases for some online posts, and that mosque was on a watchlist, but it wasn't a priority.

No alarms at all for the presumed fourth bomber, the lovely and talented Ahmed Shakir. I say *presumed* because despite a scraping of human remains that would make an Orthodox rabbi proud, the techs haven't found any of his bits. At least we can be sure about the other three, because we blew their heads off. We don't know where they trained or who supplied the rifles. If they were real Islamic State operatives or fellow travelers. Long list of things we don't know."

"What *do* we know?"

"Can't prove it yet, but we think Shakir was the leader."

"Because he blew the bomb?"

"And it was his car, and he was driving, and he was the most successful. The others didn't even get through high school. He's interesting, though. A few people told the FBI he dealt drugs. Then he stopped a few months ago and vanished. But—you guessed it—we don't know why."

"Other cells?"

"We can't find any. But there was no chatter. Came out of nowhere, like Orlando. Only this is worse. Three hundred people out to watch Russell Westbrook. Men, women, kids. And this one was so professional. It feels different somehow. If this is where they're going . . ."

Wells understood. The trend was frightening. The San Bernardino attackers had killed fourteen. Mateen had killed forty-nine. Now this. September 11 had come with its own solutions. Reinforce cockpit doors. Tighten passenger screening. Destroy al-Qaeda. Not this time. These sorts of attacks were nearly impossible to stop if the jihadis kept their mouths shut.

"What are we going to do, cancel the NBA?" Duto, reading Wells's mind. "And it just fuels the Paul Birmans of the world. You know he's giving a speech tonight in Nashville?"

"Why would I know that?"

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Paul Birman, Republican of Tennessee, chaired the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence. He had spent Duto's presidency warning about Islamist terror groups. *Muslim terrorists want to destroy our way of life. They will attack the United States whenever they can. I thought our President understood the threat we faced from radical Islam. Now I fear he doesn't.*

Birman's popularity had risen with his aggressiveness. Two years ago, he had been an obscure senator best known for having married a former Miss America. Now he was a hero of the right. **CRUZ CONTROLLED: HERE COMES BIRMAN**, the *National Review* had headlined. He was hinting at a presidential run.

And he'd made those gains *before* the Dallas attacks.

"Never thought anyone would say I wasn't tough enough," Duto said. "Who knows what he'll propose today? Probably that we should nuke the Dome of the Rock. I'm guessing he doesn't know it's in Jerusalem." Birman wasn't known for his command of detail. *Big-picture thinker*, his supporters said. *He'll have a whole government to sweat the small stuff.*

"He can say what he likes. You're still president."

"People are listening. My pollsters—"

"You'll have to excuse me, but I couldn't care less about your approval rating."

"If that idiot gets in here, you will."

Strange that Evan, at the very bottom of the million-person American military pyramid, and Duto faced the same challenge, the same noisy saber-rattling. But Wells knew better than anyone that a lot of Americans were sick of the War on Terror and Islam. He had never talked much about his conversion to Islam. Now he avoided mentioning it at all. More than once, it had provoked outright disapproval. *You know Muhammad was a false prophet, and a pedophile, too, right?*

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He wanted to be home with his hand on Anne's belly. The wars would go on without him.

"Vinny, why am I here? Half the FBI is working Dallas, and we agree I'm not your therapist."

Duto flipped open the briefing book to photos of charred corpses still wearing their Dirk Nowitzki jerseys. Reminding Wells of the stakes.

"Enrique Martinez. Ricky. Hickory Dickory Dock. Colombian intel officer. I knew him back in the day in Bogotá—" where Duto had been chief of station. "Rich family, good guy. He retired five, six years ago. He was running all their South American ops. Called me yesterday. Wants a meet."

"Another Colombian." Years before, Duto had asked Wells to meet a Colombian army officer turned drug lord named Juan Montoya. Wells had wound up with a cracked skull for his trouble.

"Look, that worked out, did it not? Anyway, Ricky's not dirty. If anything, he was too honest. He lives in the highlands now, got a ranch."

"Unless I'm mistaken, we still have a station in Bogotá."

"He wants an X meeting." Meaning no regular agency officers.

"Tell him to come to Miami."

"John, I know this guy, he's weird, but he's not the type to jerk my chain. I told him he had to give me something or I couldn't make it happen, and he said it's about Dallas."

The magic word. "Doesn't make sense."

"We both know you're going, so let's stop talking about it."

Wells looked at the briefing book. Nodded.

Duto raised his glass. "One more thing. You need help from the agency, leave Shafer out." Ellis Shafer, Wells's oldest friend at Langley. His *only* friend at Langley.

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“Forget it, then.”

“Hear me out. It’s not just that he’s old”—Shafer was well past the agency’s mandatory retirement age—“it’s that people don’t want him around, he’s this weird guy coming down the halls poking his nose in everything. No one’s gonna say no because they know he knows me, but you don’t want that guy asking for a favor you need fast. You want his advice, fine. But if you need help in the field, I want you to call Julie Tarnes.”

“Who?”

“You really are out of touch. She’s in the DO. Assistant deputy director for ops for the Counterterror Center.” A big job. “Was in Pakistan for three years, Egypt—the real thing. Just meet her before you go, give her a chance.”

“Okay.” Even that much felt like a betrayal.

Duto slid a piece of paper to Wells, two numbers. “Top is hers. Bottom, Ricky’s.”

Wells tucked the paper away, left Duto in the Oval Office, with his briefing book and his bottle.

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