

Searching for Martinez
Discovery
A New Mission
Closing In
The Fury
Wolves to Slaughter
Reunited



Secret Meeting

A covert operation was in effect under the cover of a blackened sky. The desert, vast and barren, stretched for untold miles. A windstorm had picked up, pushing a blanket of sand in all directions. Amid the rolling headwinds sat a hideout obscured by night and covered by a tan canopy that concealed the clay-and-stone building even in brightness of day. Such covert operations weren't unique to this desolate location. The desert had many secrets, known only to those who inhabited its hollow terrain.

The young men working throughout the night knew these secrets all too well. They were at war. They had been at war since their leader declared a fatwa against perhaps the greatest evil in the world: the United States of America. And this time, they were right in their enemy's backyard, along the southern border of El Paso, Texas.

The Islamic State was already embedded throughout Texas and had been growing steadily since its subsequent conquest of major cities throughout the Middle East.

Their expansion throughout Iraq, Syria, and Libya was important—crucial to their cause. But their ambitions didn't stop at there. They were going to infiltrate the enemy from within, through strategically placed sleeper cells ready to activate at a moment's notice.

For the longest time, Salah Asgar, leader of the Texas sleeper cells, hadn't heard anything from back home. He had a family in Fallujah, Iraq—a wife and two sons. His youngest son, Umar, had been killed in a drone strike by American forces, a target supposedly based on bad intel. The shop explosion killed fifteen other Iraqi civilians, including Salah's neighbor, Mustafa.

Ten years after his son's death, Salah wanted nothing more than revenge against the U.S. As a dedicated Sunni, he joined the Islamic State during its rise in power in the spring of 2013 just as the last remaining American forces had left

Iraq. From there, he was ready to do whatever necessary to avenge his son and his people.

One of their many Texas hideouts was a small concrete compound where they hid supplies underground. Its modest size and dilapidated exterior gave the impression that, even if discovered by outsiders, it was just an abandoned outpost not utilized in ages.

Tubes of long fluorescent bulbs hung along the ceiling, powered by a gas generator, their only source of electricity. There was little to be found inside the building, as their weapons caches, sensitive documents, and dirty-bomb materials were all stored belowground and out of sight.

Salah told his men that they could never be too careful and that they were to cover their tracks at all times.

“Fail me, and you fail the Islamic State,” he had told them. And he meant every word of it.

That evening, about thirty operatives—mostly young men—had gathered in the cramped confines of their hideout for an important meeting. Salah walked out from the room in which he had just finished talking with his closest advisors and turned toward the open hall.

Salah’s men were prepared for anything. Back home, they wore their uniforms proudly, which ranged from desert-tan military fatigues to more urban-gray patterns, similar or identical to U.S. Army uniforms. In America, however, they were required to blend in amongst the population. Casual T-shirts and jeans, polo shirts, and trim or no beards at all were the standard. The less attention they brought to themselves the better.

Many of the men had traveled far to be there, having been alerted to the meeting days prior. Those given the call were eager to hear what their respected leader had to say. Not everyone had been summoned, and such an exclusivity fed the anticipation in the air.

They sat in rows across the floor where crates of Kalashnikov AK-47 rifles sat open in the corner. The dimly lit room provided an equal amount of illumination and shadow. Quiet chatter ceased the moment the door opened and Salah entered, flanked by two high-ranking security men, Bosra and Nabil, both with thick beards and white caps on their heads known as taqiyahs. Back home, they were known to have carried out public executions against apostates, spies, and anyone who failed to adhere to the strict doctrines of ISIS. They were both feared and respected, providing Salah with a level of quiet awe whenever he entered a room with them at his side.

Silence fell as he took center stage, dressed in a long white robe with a checkered keffiyeh head scarf tied around his head. He was a tall man, skinny with a narrow beard that reached his chest. The men knew that their leader had not called the meeting for just any reason. There was news to be told. The time to strike was near.

Salah began his speech by first leading the men in prayer. They bowed their heads and prayed to Allah to provide them with the strength to slaughter their enemies, no matter who stood in their way. Salah then raised his head and thanked them for arriving on such short notice.

“Brothers, I am more impressed today with your discipline and readiness than I was last time we met,” he said with the gravelly baritone of an experienced lecturer. It had been two months since their last meeting.

“And today, I invited you here to discuss our next phase in establishing a caliphate in these United States.”

The young men applauded as though a switch had ignited their passion. Bosra and Nabil turned from their corners in the room and stared into the crowd, not saying a word. The cheers quickly died out, replaced by silence. Salah smiled slightly in response, looking out at the crowd with fondness.

“I know you are excited,” he continued. “For so am I.” His face went stern again. “But remember, you must hide your emotions, conceal your tendencies. The time for celebration is not yet upon us. Our leaders are watching us from afar. They have confidence in the mission, but the Americans will stop at nothing to wipe us out if we expose ourselves.”

The crowd looked on as the generator hummed in the back of the room. Salah, who looked strangely pale that evening, cleared his throat and continued.

“I say to you, brothers, that this mission carries with it an extreme risk. As I’ve said before, you may never see your families again. Once we awaken the beast, many of us will die or spend the rest of our lives in a prison cell. The Americans’ experiment is a great injustice unto the world, something our people have suffered under for a very long time.” He jabbed a finger at them. “And it is up to you in this room tonight to send a message to the Americans that their reign of terror is over!”

The crowd launched into a frenzy of applause once again. This time, however, Salah didn’t seem to be bothered by it, but instead basked in their evident motivation and enthusiasm. He opened his mouth to speak, and the young men went quiet, not wanting to miss a word.

“I’ve said before that we’re only as strong as our cause, and, my brothers, our cause is great. We give thanks to Allah for getting us this far—for getting us into America—because He is the guiding light in our lives, and we will stop at nothing to make Him proud.”

Salah stopped suddenly as his eyes narrowed, scanning the crowd, but none of the men would make direct eye contact. He then spoke slowly and with conviction. “Caution. Prudence. Dedication. Devotion. Discipline. These are the basic tenets we must live by to make this mission a success. All of this is threatened when we lose sight of our purpose.”

He stopped and cleared his throat again, looking away from the crowd, then turning back and zeroing in on them with foreboding dark-brown eyes.

“I announce to you this evening that we have a threat from within. And while this threat involves one among us, we are all culpable. Even myself.” He then stepped forward, his voice booming with passion. “Because when one of us commits an offense, it reflects on us all. When one slanders the prophet, he slanders every one of us.”

Clear confusion became evident throughout the gathering as the men looked around in uncertainty. Salah looked on with a penetrating stare, not eyeing anyone in particular, which made everyone even more uneasy. He then turned to Bosra at his right and signaled into the crowd. Bosra nodded and stepped forward toward the men, with Nabil following suit from the other side of the room.

More confused glances followed as the two towering men rushed to the middle row and yanked one bushy-haired young man up by the back of his shirt. The man shouted as they led him to the front with his hands held behind his back. Murmurs of fear rumbled throughout the crowd.

“What is this?” the young man cried out. “What are you doing?”

Salah said nothing in response as Nabil pushed the man onto his knees. Dust flew into the air. Salah stared down with his eyebrows furrowed. The man looked up, trembling, his boyish face stricken with fear.

“Mahir Kouachi. I remember your father,” Salah said. “He died a martyr at the hands of Americans during their invasion of Iraq. Before he died, I promised him that I would see to it that you were taken care of. I owed him because he was a good man.”

Salah then took a step back, shaking his head. “And this is how you repay me!” he shouted with a slap across Mahir’s stunned face.

The crowd looked on, stunned but hesitant to speak or move. No one, it seemed, knew what was transpiring. But things didn’t look good for their singled-out brother.

Mahir held the side of his head as sweat dripped down his forehead past his widened eyes. “My leader...” he began in a daze.

Another resounding blow to his face came this time from Nibal. “You do not address him unless spoken to,” he said gruffly.

Mahir said no more as Salah took a step past him and raised his arms to address the room. “Mahir has betrayed us. He has disgraced his father’s memory and his family’s trust.” Without disclosing any details, Salah leaned down inches from Mahir’s terrified face. “Your family members will pay the ultimate price, I can assure you.”

Mahir opened his mouth to speak, his mind racing, but nothing came out. Salah rose and turned to the crowd. “One mistake, my brothers, and we lose. That’s all it takes. It has come to my attention that our brother, Mahir, has spoken with the enemy. He is, in fact, a spy.” He then looked down at the frightened Mahir at his feet.

Mahir looked around the room in a panic. “It’s not true! I am not—”

Another smack came across Mahir’s head as he tried to shield himself.

“But you *are* a spy,” Salah said, looking down at him, as a disappointed father might do.

Mahir raised his head with tears streaming from his eyes, a deep look of shame embedded across his face.

“*How did we find out?*” Salah asked him. “Because we have people everywhere. On all levels. All reporting to me.”

Mahir looked down, ashamed. He then looked into the stoic crowd for mercy. “I told them nothing!” he cried out. “I talked to a few Americans, that’s all. I was trying to recruit them. Trying to do Allah’s will!”

Salah stared at him for a long, quiet moment. “You are weak, Mahir. And your carelessness is a threat to us and our mission.”

Mahir wiped the tears from his face, remaining on his knees, a defeated man who knew what was to come next. Salah looked at Nabil and nodded.

Nabil pulled a long Bowie knife from the sheath on his belt, yanked Mahir's head back, and drew the blade across his throat.

The crowd gasped. Salah watched impassively as blood gushed from the open wound. Mahir's eyes widened with shock, as though he had not expected such swift retaliation. The room remained silent as vacant faces stared ahead.

"Leave this world, young Mahir," Salah said. "May Allah judge you accordingly."

Mahir gargled and gasped his last desperate breaths. Nabil released his grip on Mahir's hair and pushed his head down. His body slumped over his knees as a thick puddle of blood formed slowly beneath him. His legs twitched with his wheezing until he went still on the floor.

Salah nodded again at Nabil and Bosra. In response, they lifted Mahir and carried him away past the silent crowd.

"Give him a proper burial," Salah said, signaling to the door. "It's the least I can do for his father."

Bosra and Nabil nodded back, holding Mahir by his arms and legs, spilling blood along the floor as they moved. Salah then turned to the crowd without an ounce of remorse in his eyes.

"All part of Allah's plan. This is where we are at, my brothers. No room for error." He stepped forward with a deadly serious glare from his dark coal eyes. "And if any of you decide to betray me, the very same will happen to you."

The men said nothing. Their frightened faces were all that Salah needed to see. Having made his point, he continued in a much calmer tone. "In one week, we deliver our first full-scale attack. Those are our instructions. The moment we've been waiting for has arrived. If there is a man among us not ready for the task, raise your hand now."

Salah stopped and looked into the rows, finding no objections. "Good," he said, smiling. "Let us prepare for battle."

Standoff

It was in the high eighties in Del Rio, Texas, a small border city one hundred fifty miles west of San Antonio. The United States Border Patrol had a busy presence in the area, and their hands were often full with long hours and meager assistance from the federal government and Homeland Security.

From her first year on the force, Angela Gannon had seen many disturbing trends in drug and human trafficking. She had heard the stories about terrorists sneaking across the border. She had seen the waves of migrant children apprehended and held in limbo at the border station. She'd seen a lot of things. But nothing could have prepared her for the day ahead.

She sat in the passenger seat of a white four-door Chevy Tahoe, parked atop a hill overlooking a desert valley along the Mexican border. She raised the binoculars to her eyes. The day was already warm, and she wore a dark-green, short-sleeved Border Patrol uniform that fit snugly against her thin, athletic frame.

She scanned the fourteen-foot fence a half mile beyond the valley, conducting a line watch as her partner, Captain Jorge Martinez, in the driver's seat beside her, munched on a small bag of Fritos.

They had been on watch the past three hours, in a state of heightened alert. But their intense readiness had waned in the last hour as they saw little more than tumbleweeds roll by and coyotes skitter from afar. They were both starting to wonder if they had been called to another false alarm.

Angela had longed to work for the border patrol, but the path to her burgeoning career hadn't come over night. In high school, she had joined the ROTC program, followed by four subsequent years in the army that had shaped her for a future in law enforcement. At twenty-seven, married with two children, she was astonished to think about how much had changed in her life.

Like most days at work, Angela sported a blonde ponytail, minimal makeup, and exhibited a calm demeanor. Relatively new to the profession, she took her job very seriously. Sometimes, it seemed, more seriously than did Martinez, who had been on the force for six years.

"How about we call it a day?" he asked with his hands on the wheel. The open bag of Fritos rested over his leg, nearly emptied. "My legs are asleep, and there's nothing out here that we didn't see yesterday."

"We're on high alert," she responded, lowering the binoculars. "And I didn't hear anything from headquarters yet saying otherwise."

Martinez sighed. He then ran one hand across his trim black hair and scratched the back of his head. He was pushing forty but looked young for his age, tan with a boyish face and warm brown eyes.

He had gotten rid of his mustache recently, which had become just one of the changes Angela had recently noticed about him. He had been fidgety and distracted the entire week. She wondered what was wrong but didn't want to pry.

"Headquarters has their heads up their asses," he said, in response to her insistence that they stay on watch.

"Sure. But it's been two weeks since we've seen some activity. I'd say we're about due."

Martinez thought to himself and then leaned closer to her, turning down the crackling dispatch radio. "Lemme let you in on a little secret, Agent Gannon."

Angela looked over at him, all ears.

"You're green," he continued. "I mean, you're good, but you're still green. I've been on stakeouts that serve no rhyme or reason to anything. They tell us, go here. Watch this sector. Sit and wait. Meanwhile, we leave a gap open over there. Drugs get in. People get in. It's all political."

"What do you mean?" she asked, genuinely perplexed.

"I mean that, according to the powers that be, sometimes to do the job right, we're not supposed to do it at all." He paused and looked out the windshield into the barren valley below.

Angela wasn't naïve, but she also wasn't nearly as cynical. "Sounds like you're suggesting that we're wasting our time out here."

He looked at her and smirked. "Not entirely. You've seen what we do. How hard you and I and all the agents work. What I'm saying is that there's a weird priority to things as of late. And it has me a little concerned."

Angela then asked him to elaborate. In turn, he waved her away and turned the dispatch radio back up. "I'd rather not be responsible for instilling low morale in fellow agents." He then switched the subject quickly to something else. "How's your Spanish coming along?"

She gave him a raised brow. "It's decent. I mean, I wouldn't have gotten this job without learning it."

"Of course," he said. "And are you teaching your children? Bilingualism is important to learn at a young age."

"Yes, professor," Angela said with a laugh.

Martinez whipped his head in her direction with a mock frown. "Excuse me?"

"Professor Captain Sir," she responded.

"That's better," he said.

Angela glanced up. Her smile disappeared. She pointed in the distance to a white box truck driving along the empty dirt road in the middle of the valley, a billowing cloud of dust trailing behind it. She immediately went to the binoculars as Martinez grabbed the hand mic from the dispatch radio under the dashboard.

"What do you see?" he asked, holding the mic.

"Standard cargo truck. No license plate," Angela answered. She kept careful watch as the truck barreled along at top speed, headed west. It was a suspicious sight to be sure, almost too alarming to be believed. Any trafficker in his right mind would be foolish to drive along the southern border without a licensed vehicle. Whoever was behind the wheel was asking for it.

"Two six, we have a box truck spotted in the valley. Driving at top speed. No license plate visible. How do you want us to proceed? Over." They always had to ask permission, which frustrated the hell out of Angela.

"They're getting away," she said with a hint of impatience.

Martinez turned the knob on the radio up while clutching the hand mic. "Truck is going fast. Requesting permission to engage," he said. However, all sense of urgency seemed lost on the responder.

"Negative, Bravo eight. Stay in position. Backup is on its way. Be on alert for suspects on foot."

Martinez and Angela glanced at each other in confusion. Martinez held the hand mic to his mouth as his eyes followed the truck quickly fading from their field of vision.

"There are no suspects on foot," he said, "but we have an unlicensed vehicle driving toward Route 83 toward Los Villareales. What's the word on that backup, over?"

There was a pause, as though the dispatcher was distracted. *"Stay in position,"* he said. *"Possible diversionary tactic. Keep your eyes on that fence."*

Martinez held the radio, dumbfounded, as his thumb hovered over the clicker.

"We need to follow them," Angela said, conviction evident in her bluish-green eyes.

"I know," Martinez said. "But if someone slips under that fence with a pound of junk on our watch, it's our asses."

"Unlicensed vehicle," she said slowly, enunciating each syllable. "If that's not a red flag, I don't know what is."

Martinez looked around, growing frustrated. He slapped the steering wheel with his free hand. “Where the hell is that backup?”

“Probably east of Starr County. We don’t have time for this,” Angela said.

The truck had disappeared under a mountain ridge—vanished. The only way to trail it was to drive down their steep lookout hill and try to catch up with the fleeing truck the best they could. Even if they were to follow, the truck would see them coming from a mile away.

Martinez looked past Angela’s shoulder out the window in deep concentration. There was another way down on the other side, where they could possibly cut the truck off before it emerged onto Route 83.

“What is it?” she asked.

“I have an idea.” He paused and then shifted the Tahoe into reverse. “We can still keep an eye on our spot and track this truck down. Hit ’em up before they get to the highway.”

“You know what I think?” Angela said. She continued, without waiting for his response. “I think you want to catch these guys yourself.”

He turned to her with a nod. “Yeah. Don’t you?”

Angela reached for her seat belt and buckled up. “I have to admit, because hoping that the Starr County PD catches them instead of us seems like a pretty flawed strategy.”

“Exactly,” he said, backing out.

The Tahoe crunched over deeply embedded rocks and pivoted to the side. Vast rolling hills of the Texas desert were in view. The chipped, faded pavement of a two-lane road nearly hidden under a layer of sand awaited them at the bottom of the hill.

Angela gripped her armrest as they descended the bumpy terrain, past rocks and trees whose arched branches and green leaves provided bits of welcome shade. Patches of weed growing in the cracked asphalt and faded brown were flattened by the Tahoe’s large tires as they continued down the hill, gaining momentum.

The vehicle shook and rattled as the dispatcher called over the radio, reminding them that backup was en route.

“We’re still here,” Martinez replied, winking at Angela. An unsettled feeling brewed in her gut. Martinez was right. She was green, in that she had only been on the force for a year. Breaking the rules so early-on was not a good precedent to set. But she did want to follow the truck, and if it was okay with Martinez, it was okay with her. She told herself this, as they reached the bottom, sailing over a dirt mound and hitting the road with turbulent force.

“Wooo!” Martinez shouted out, clearly enjoying himself.

Angela looked ahead nervously as he floored it, racing down the road. Their earlier focal point, in the distance past Martinez’s window, was fading quickly. It was doubtful that she could keep an eye on the fence much longer. The southern ridge disappeared as they drove alongside a high mountainous slab of jagged rock that lined the road like a guardrail.

Martinez kept his eyes forward, focused on his pursuit. Angela said nothing for fear of distracting him. The speedometer reached well past one hundred. The visible portion of the road raced under them like lightning. Ahead, the road was

empty. The formerly sunny sky had clouded into gray. Another afternoon shower was near.

"We're close," Martinez said. "I can feel it."

"What do you want to do when we catch up with them?" Angela asked. She hadn't thought that much ahead and hoped that he had a plan. Her trust in Captain Martinez was second to none on the force.

He smiled, as though she already knew the answer. "I say we follow them as far as we can. See where they're going. Then we call for backup again."

If that ever happens, Angela thought to herself. They reached a fork in the road, and Martinez went left without hesitation.

"*Bravo Eight, what's the status of the truck?*" a different voice said on the radio.

Angela recognized it as belonging to Agent Dawson, a young, eager recruit like herself. A few weeks earlier, on a night out with the team, he'd had a little too much to drink. He had hit on her, ignoring Angela's wedding ring, and then apologized profusely the next day. She'd long since forgiven him, but he had been avoiding her ever since.

Her husband, Doug, was ten years her senior, a fact that surprised many of her coworkers but not her. She didn't see the big deal. Doug was an engineer for Harris Corporation, a smart, caring man who had supported her in everything she did. The sound of Dawson distracted her for a minute, but then she snapped out of it. The mysterious box truck was still ahead of them, careening to the left shoulder and driving off the road just as a hill obstructed their view.

"He's going off-road," Angela said.

"I know," Martinez replied, still deeply focused. No one had answered Dawson's call yet.

Martinez turned toward the hill and launched up a bumpy path marked by deep tire tracks. They weren't the first travelers to consider the shortcut.

They continued up the hill and found a spot where they could still keep an eye on the box truck when it came back into view. Once they had repositioned, Angela took the hand mic and finally answered Dawson. "Roger. We still have eyes on the vehicle."

Martinez parked next to a giant boulder that concealed their position. Angela looked out her window to see the small town in the far distance like some kind of miniature model.

The sky was engulfed in gray. Lightning flashed in thin vibrant lines from the north. The approaching storm provided perfect cover to whatever nefarious operations were happening below.

Martinez got out of the car first, as Angela unbuckled her seat belt and opened her door. Her .40 caliber Smith & Wesson pushed against her waist from her side holster. She grabbed her binoculars and quietly shut the door. Martinez was already at the boulder, peeking around it and waving her forward with urgency. She turned the knob down on the handheld radio, holstered on the other side of her pistol belt.

She reached the boulder and looked around the other side, raising her binoculars. The box truck had stopped within a shaded area of trees, branches swaying in the rising wind. The trail of dust it had kicked up driving off-road drifted and dissipated, settling back into the sand.

To Angela's surprise, another vehicle was in view—a station wagon. In front of the wagon stood two men. Their features were hard to make out from the distance, but Angela could see that they were tall and strapping and dressed in checkered, long-sleeved shirts and tight blue jeans like something out of a bad western. She had no idea what to make of it.

Martinez came around to her side, holding his own pair of binoculars. "What do you think?" he asked, out of breath.

"I'd say a meeting is about to take place," she said.

"Drug traffickers?" he asked.

"Could be. Still too soon to call."

Martinez took his handheld from his side and spoke.

"We have eyes on two vehicles now."

"*What's your location?*" Dawson's voice asked.

"Same place we've been all along," Martinez answered, providing another wink to Angela. She got the idea. They had never moved. She knew it was right to trust him, though the intense drive still had her rattled.

"They're getting out of the truck," she said, looking ahead.

Two men exited the truck on both sides, strikingly different in appearance. Their baggy pants were tattered, and their white, long-sleeved shirts were stained with dirt and oil. Their dark hair was bushy, and each had beards that looked in need of grooming.

Angela's eyes then caught something else: every man below was armed—four in all. She could see a pistol protruding from each man's pockets.

"We've got to get a closer look," Martinez said. "They drive off, we'll never be able to catch them in time."

Angela turned and looked to him as he stood. It was the first time she found herself doubting his judgment. She felt safe where they were. Border Patrol procedures conditioned agents to call it in. They weren't encouraged to take action except in the most extreme circumstances. And they still weren't sure exactly what was going on.

Martinez crept past her before she could respond, crouching low and searching for a clear path down on foot.

"Captain Martinez," she called out in a whisper. "Sir!"

He was already climbing down the hill as she struggled to decide whether to follow. She certainly couldn't let him go alone. She held the radio to her mouth and called Dawson. "Pursuing the suspects on foot."

"*What?*" he said.

"Just getting a better look. We're on the hill right after the fork." She paused, thinking of the code name of their location. "Graffiti Junction," she said quickly, and then placed the radio to her side.

She followed Martinez, carefully keeping her balance as she approached the edge of their plateau. The air was thin even at their low altitude. Martinez was halfway down, crouching behind some bushes. Angela looked toward the vehicles. The men were standing closer to each other, talking.

Martinez had reached the bottom. He didn't look up until finding cover behind two large rocks, surprised at the gap between him and Angela. He waved her down while pulling his gun out.

What's he going to do? Angela thought.
And where was their backup?

Extreme Measures

Martinez ran crouched low with his pistol out and pointed down, finding cover behind a bushy desert Cypress Tree, one of many throughout the area. He moved closer to the men as they talked among themselves in the distance. Angela stopped behind a sandy mound far behind Martinez, fearing that they had been spotted. One of the apparent cowboys had looked up in her direction as if hearing or searching for something.

She raised the binoculars to get a better look. The driver of the truck and his passenger had their backs turned to her, but she was able to make out the facial features of the cowboys. They were deeply tanned with black goatees and thick eyebrows.

The thick cover of tree branches above them cast a shadow over their entire proceedings. Her handheld radio, nestled in its holster like a thin, small brick, crackled slightly, and her hand shot down to turn it off.

Martinez turned around to look for Angela. As they made eye contact, he raised a finger to his lips for silence. Angela knew the stakes, and she also knew that Martinez was growing a bit too eager.

As the men continued talking inaudibly, closer to each other, she wished that she could hear their words. Her boot dug into the ground as she crouched, ready to spring to the next position. Martinez looked ready to move himself, like a cat bending back its hind legs. Suddenly, the men moved together in a group toward the rear of the box truck. Martinez was off, gun raised. Angela froze in place. She couldn't believe it. Their surveillance mission had switched to apprehension before she even had time to think.

Martinez, it seemed, knew better, and took cover behind some rocks piled together in slabs. But it was too late. One of the cowboys stopped and turned just as the truck driver placed his hand on the rear latch of the cargo door.

The cowboy leaned in and said something to the other men with his eyes narrowed. The men halted. Their hands reached toward their pockets, where handguns bulged. A Wild West showdown was brewing under the cloudy Texas sky. For a moment, everything slowed down, and Angela wasn't sure what to do.

They had been spotted—that much she knew—and the only thing that was going to help them was the uncertainty of numbers. The four men had no idea just how many were watching them.

Martinez kicked up dirt as he hit the ground, skidding on his side, rushing to take cover. A cloud of dust floated above the rocks, and that was all the paranoid men needed to leap into action. The two cowboys fled like the wind toward the station wagon without turning back.

They shouted out in a stream of unintelligible panic—not in English or Spanish but something else. Feeling emboldened, Martinez launched himself up from

behind the rocks and shouted, “Freeze!” But the cowboys were already in their vehicle and peeling out as their two counterparts at the truck swung around, confused and startled.

“Hands up!” Martinez demanded.

The station wagon’s engine roared as it tires squealed away, billowing dust and exhaust in the air like a trailing smokestack.

Martinez stood fast, pistol aimed, and shouted at the remaining two men, ordering them to comply. Angela rose from her position and aimed, but they appeared too far away and out of range—at least for the precision required for a wounding shot.

The men looked at each other with their hands still at their sides, hesitant but not ready to throw in the towel. One had a large forehead with receding hairline, while the other had long curly locks to his shoulder.

“I’m not saying it again!” Martinez shouted. His voice was hoarse. He sounded exhausted. The men must have thought so too. They went for their pistols. Martinez fired a shot, startling Angela. It struck the shoulder of the balding man and sent him slamming into the back of the truck. His friend drew his pistol and immediately started firing back. The loud, echoing shots sent Angela diving for cover.

She got a mouthful of sand as her chest hit the hard ground. More shots were fired from beyond her mound—Martinez returning fire. She pushed herself up, ready to engage. The men were shouting in loud, angry tones. The high-forehead man, who had taken it in the shoulder, had his gun out, firing at random all over the place.

Martinez took cover as Angela crawled closer to him. She didn’t see the other man, the one with the curly locks, but when she reached Martinez, she could see a body lying next to the truck on his back.

“I got one of them,” Martinez said. “Right through the head.” He didn’t sound proud of it. His face was pale and his eyes dark with worry as though he knew they had taken their pursuit too far.

The remaining man was undeterred. He rushed toward them, firing his pistol, hitting the ground near them. A chunk of rock flew up and hit Angela in the cheek. Martinez looked stunned, too disoriented to move. And it was at that point that Angela knew she had to make a quick decision.

She jumped up as the shots coming at them ceased, only to see the man quickly gaining on them. She raised her pistol, aiming steadily, and fired a shot into his chest.

The man flew back and flopped onto the ground. His pistol lay just out of arm’s reach. His body was still. The echo of Angela’s shot echoed in the air as sirens wailed in the distance. Martinez was on his knees, staring at the ground. Angela knelt down and examined his worry-stricken face.

“Are you okay?”

He snapped out of his daze. “Yeah,” he said, wiping the sweat from his brow. “Why didn’t they listen? I-I didn’t want to shoot them.”

“You had to,” she said, placing a reassuring hand over his left shoulder badge.

“I know.” He paused to get on his feet, and Angela helped him up. “They didn’t listen. What language were they speaking?”

"It sounded Arabic," Angela said.

He flashed her a surprised glance and wiped away the sweat building on his forehead. "You think? I mean, I didn't understand a word."

At the same moment, they both looked ahead and surveyed the two motionless bodies in the distance. "You think these are our drug runners?" Angela asked.

"I hope so," Martinez said in a worried tone, his hand still clutching his pistol. The sirens were getting louder. Angela turned her radio on and was met with cross-chatter demanding their status. It sounded like a combination of Dawson's voice, their patrol chief's, and three others.

"Better check it out before the cavalry gets here," Martinez said, signaling to the box truck under the trees.

Angela agreed and followed Martinez as he walked toward the truck with his pistol aimed. There was no sense in letting their guard down now. Anything was possible along the southern border. Angela held the radio to her mouth and reported the incident the best she could.

"Received fire from suspected drug traffickers. Both assailants down."

Radio static was followed by an angry voice shouting. "*What the hell happened out there?*"

It was the voice of Border Patrol Chief Milton Drake. He was as gruff as they came, and he went completely by the book. Angela had managed to make it a year without getting on his bad side, though she had the feeling that those days were over. They'd have to come up with one heck of a story to explain themselves.

Martinez walked slowly past the curly-haired shooter's body, lying on the ground in a contorted pose. She could see shells in the dirt leading up to the place where he lay. Thunder rumbled in the graying sky—perfect timing.

She walked past the man and couldn't help but look at his face. The back of his head was buried in the sand. His eyes were open and his mouth agape, with a stream of blood trailing down his chin. His chest revealed a puckered hole in the center with blood soaking his shirt around it. She'd never seen a body so freshly dead and couldn't help but stop to look at him, her mind filled with questions and sadness too.

"*Am I talking to myself here?*" the chief's voice said on the radio. "*Agent Gannon, what the hell happened out there?*"

She raised the radio to her mouth sighing. Martinez was already at the truck, circling it with his pistol aimed.

"During line watch, we intercepted an unlicensed vehicle, sir. When we approached the vehicle, the driver and passenger fired at us."

"*And where is this vehicle now?*" Chief Drake asked.

"Near Graffiti Junction," Angela answered.

The name came from an area where Mexican gangs often tagged their surroundings after illegally crossing the border into America. She could see some of their spray-paint markings on the rocks around them, noticing them for the first time since they arrived on the scene.

"*You two stay put,*" Chief Drake said with finality. "*Don't make another move.*"

"Yes, sir," Angela said. She holstered her radio and jogged over to Martinez, who had just finished searching the area.

"I don't see anyone else," he said.

“What about the station wagon?” Angela asked, catching her breath.

Martinez looked around. “What about it?”

“We have to find them. Have the police issue an APB on it or something.” It was an older-model Lincoln with wood paneling, at least twenty years old. It shouldn’t be too hard to find, but Martinez seemed disinterested. He walked to the rear of the truck and placed his hand on the latch.

“The chief said for us to stay put,” Angela said.

Martinez looked down at his legs and then to her. “Does it look like I’m going anywhere?”

With that, he unlatched the door and pulled it open with little effort. Martinez was eager to see inside, past the darkness. Angela walked closer, peeking in. Her eyes adjusted to the dim light, but saw nothing inside. The cargo bed was completely empty. Martinez stared in with a look of disbelief.

“What is this shit?” he said under his breath.

The fifteen-foot cargo bed was startlingly empty.

“Maybe the station wagon had the narcotics,” Angela suggested, trying to get Martinez back on track.

He took a step back and rubbed his head. The first shooter’s body lay only a few feet away from them with a hole in the side of his big forehead. Blood spatter had hit the side of the truck next to the indentation made by one of Martinez’s first shots.

As he walked away from the truck, in deep thought, Angela wanted to pull him aside and ask what the plan was. She wanted to ask why he had been so determined to approach the men without backup. Now was not the time for him to grow aloof. They needed each other more than ever.

“Should we work on our story?” she asked, walking toward him.

“We tell them the truth,” he said, turning away from her.

“The truth?” Angela said, confused. “The truth is that we left our post and pursued this truck without backup. You have years under your belt, sir. What’s going to happen to me, a rookie?”

Martinez pivoted around, extending an arm toward her. His pistol was finally holstered. “Nothing is going to happen to you, Agent Gannon. This was my call, and I’ll take responsibility.”

His words were comforting, but it didn’t make her feel better about the situation. In clear view now, she could see a line of Border Patrol vehicles speeding down the dirt road beyond the valley, approaching them with their lights rapidly flashing. The cavalry had indeed arrived.

Taking a closer look at the first shooter’s body, Angela could see that he was distinctively Middle Eastern. His clothes were plain and baggy, and he was wearing sandals.

Martinez walked away from the truck and toward the line of patrol vehicles tearing off the road and traveling toward them—five in all. Before anyone arrived, Angela crouched beside the man and felt his pants pocket for a wallet or ID. There was nothing.

His still hand clutched a 9mm Glock pistol. Clues were bound to be found somewhere. As Angela stood up and surveyed the empty truck, she was almost

certain that the station wagon was the real vehicle they wanted. Only it was the one vehicle that had wisely gotten away.

Dawson's white Ford Crown Victoria led the pack as he slowed to a halt with top sirens flashing wildly but silent. A large cloud of dust covered the area like a blanket, causing Angela to cough. So little was known of why she and Martinez were there and what happened. She hoped that he'd do most of the talking. Doug would be upset with her, and she pondered how much to tell him about the incident at the end of the day.

Chief Drake exited the second vehicle, another white Tahoe, slamming the door. Other agents soon followed. He went immediately to Martinez, who was already busy explaining himself. Drake's slightly wrinkled face was red with anger. His thinning and short gray hair blew to one side in a gust of wind from the approaching storm.

Dawson walked toward the truck where Angela stood with Captain Reynolds, a female agent from the K-9 unit. Rex, her K-9, hurriedly moved along as she held his leash. Angela walked toward them, hoping to bypass their questions and just link up with Martinez instead. Dawson, it seemed, wouldn't have any of it.

"Are you okay?" he asked first, observing the body on the ground behind her with widened eyes.

"I'm fine," Angela responded while wiping dirt from her face.

"I sure hope so. What have you guys gotten yourselves into?"

Dawson was nearly Angela's age, and had a goofy overbite and short hair parted in the middle. Everyone at the station called him "kid," a term he resented at times. Captain Reynolds was a slightly older redhead with freckles, blue eyes, and a mouth that seemed set in a perpetual straight line.

"Looks like a real mess," she said to Angela, surveying the scene. The K-9 ran toward the man's body only to be jerked back.

Angela nodded at their comments and then pointed to the road. "Their friends got away in a station wagon. Something was about to go down, I'm certain of it."

Dawson nodded. "I don't doubt it. Who shot first?"

Angela tilted her head, finding offense in the question. "They did, of course."

"Agent Gannon," Chief Drake's booming voice called out as he approached with Martinez at his side. She turned and struggled to make eye contact with her clearly perturbed supervisor.

"Yes, sir," she replied.

"Captain Martinez said the men spoke in Arabic. Were there any other things you picked up about them before... well, before the two of you decided to play Dirty Harry?"

She looked at Martinez for guidance. He nodded at her to answer. "It's like I told Captain Martinez: the unlicensed truck was the giveaway." She then turned and glanced at the body behind them. "As far as the men go, they look like lower-level help. They came here to pick something up."

"Or drop something off," Dawson added as the K-9 busily sniffed around the truck with Reynolds holding the leash.

"Truck's empty," Martinez said with an air of disappointment.

Other Border Patrol agents approached the scene, looking around with intense curiosity. With all eyes on the truck and bodies lying next to it, Drake stepped

between Martinez and Angela, his voice low but tinged with sternness. "I want to have a word with both of you at the station when we get back. This entire incident is going to have to go beyond our department. If these men are foreigners, we'll have to bring in the FBI. But I don't want either of you saying a word of this to anyone. Not until we get the facts out."

Martinez cut in. "Sir, these individuals were operating right within our line watch. We were only responding to the high alert that was issued by the department."

Drake whipped his head to the side, further angered. "You can save it for the investigation, Martinez. And yes, there will be an internal investigation into this matter, and we will get to the truth. All of it!"

The K-9 hopped into the back of the truck, going wild. Reynolds climbed up in with him, and Dawson followed.

"Sir," Angela said to Chief Drake, who turned to her with an icy glare. "I have a good description of the station wagon that fled the scene. I'd suggest we get an APB on it as soon as possible."

"Yes, Martinez told me all about it. The APB has been issued, and if that wagon gets away, I'm holding the two of you personally responsible." With that he walked away and joined the others at the truck, leaving Angela and Martinez to ponder their fates. She had never seen him so angry, and didn't feel the least bit optimistic about it.

Seeing the color leaving her face, Martinez placed a hand on her shoulder. "Don't worry, Agent Gannon. It's like I said. I'll take the hit on this one."

"I don't think we did anything wrong," Angela said. Whether she was trying to convince him or herself of that she wasn't sure.

"The truck is empty. That's what's wrong," Martinez said. "Had there been at least a brick of marijuana, we'd probably be in the clear."

But perhaps Martinez had spoken too soon. From the inside of the truck, Rex clawed and whimpered at the floor. Curious, the other agents gathered around, sticking their heads inside.

"I need a flashlight and a crowbar," Captain Reynolds called out.

Angela felt her heart beating faster. Anticipation was in the air. Dawson hopped out of the truck, ran past Angela and Martinez, and grabbed both a crowbar and a flashlight from his trunk.

"This could get interesting," Martinez said, beckoning Angela to follow him to the truck, where everyone crowded at the back. More thunder rumbled in the sky, but there wasn't a drop of rain. Dawson ran back with a long crowbar in one hand and a flashlight in the other. He squeezed past two other agents and hopped inside the vehicle.

"I need room here," he said to Captain Reynolds. "Get Rex back."

She took the flashlight from him, shining it at the metal floor while tugging on the leash to pull Rex back.

"What do you see?" Chief Drake asked, leaning in.

Martinez pushed his way through and hopped up, leaving Angela behind to watch with the others. He went to his knees and immediately began feeling around. "Dawson's right. There's something here." He paused and felt around some more. "The surface... it's hollow underneath."

“Stand back,” Dawson said.

Martinez moved out of the way as Dawson drove the crowbar into one of the joints in the floor and pushed up with all his might, breathing hard. At first, nothing budged. He pulled the crowbar out and jammed it in again, pushing up and leaning on the end for leverage. A pop sounded, and the metal panel on the floor split open.

Captain Reynolds held the flashlight above them, shining it into the hole.

“What is it?” the chief said, squinting behind his glasses.

Angela looked over the shoulders of her fellow agents, staring down into the hidden compartment. She could see it as well as everyone else: multiple canisters aligned in rows.

“Canisters,” Martinez replied. “At least a dozen of them.” More eager than ever, he stood up and grabbed the flashlight from Captain Reynolds.

Rex pulled toward the hidden compartment, whimpering with intensity. Martinez then leaned down and flashed the light into the hole to reveal dozens of plastic bottles lined up in rows like a shelf at the grocery store.

“Hydrogen peroxide,” Martinez continued. “A shitload of it.”

Dawson pointed to a sealed metal case among the bottles. “What’s that say?”

Martinez shined the flashlight across the letters, which read, “acetone.”

“My God,” Dawson continued.

“Chemicals,” Martinez said as he turned to the group. He stood up and handed the flashlight to Captain Reynolds and wiped the sweat from his forehead.

“No narcotics?” Chief Drake asked. “What are we dealing with here?”

“Looks like a dirty bomb, Chief,” Martinez replied with his hands on his hips. “Or at least the right ingredients.”

A hushed silence came over the agents, soon followed by a commotion of side conversations. Angela could barely believe it herself. Had the men they shot been terrorists? The notion seemed more likely as she stared into the hidden compartment. Martinez quickly hopped out of the truck with a sense of urgency.

“Everyone needs to keep their distance,” he said, waving at Dawson and Reynolds to follow him outside. “I mean it. Stay the hell away from this truck. We don’t know what else is in it.”

“Captain Martinez is right,” Chief Drake added. “We need to get back and get a HAZMAT team in here pronto.”

The team seemed to agree, and everyone began backing away, keeping a careful distance between themselves and the truck.

“Where’s Dawson?” Chief Drake asked, looking around.

Angela was curious herself. She’d thought he was right behind her. It got quiet, and they could hear movement coming from the shadows in the truck.

“Dawson, what the hell are you doing?” Drake shouted. “Get out of there!”

“Hold on, sir,” Dawson called out. “There’s another panel here. Another compartment. I can almost lift it.”

Martinez stepped forward, angered. “Did you hear the chief? Get out of there before you—”

The explosion was surreal, silencing everything in a violent eruption that shook the ground. Angela couldn’t hear. One deafening blast and everyone hit the ground. The force threw her down onto the dirt. She could feel searing heat

traveling within inches of her face. She closed her eyes and saw nothing but dim shades of orange. When she opened them, she could see an immense fireball launching into the sky, with the echo of the blast traveling farther and farther and fading into the desert.

Smoke and fire enveloped the site, and it was at that moment when she finally comprehended that something terribly wrong had just happened.

Fallout

The box truck burnt away, engulfed in flames, with little remaining but its frame. Angela rose to her feet on wobbly legs. She could still feel the heat of the blast, warm and vivid.

Other agents, Chief Drake and Captain Martinez among them, stood up in a daze, feeling their heads and turning to the hypnotic dancing flames in the distance. Thick black smoke flowed upward as ashes rained down all around them. Pieces of metal, plastic, wire, and glass lay scattered on the ground. The truck's charred frame continued to burn with the shooters' bodies no longer around.

"We need to get out of here," Chief Drake said, rubbing his face.

"Sir?" Martinez replied.

"Clear the area," Chief Drake told him in a short tone. "We don't know what kind of chemicals are being released into the air right now."

Captain Reynolds stood up, her red hair unpinned and hanging in her face. "Rex..." she said. "Where's Rex?"

Angela looked around and could see no sign of the K-9.

"I'm sure he's around here somewhere," Martinez said. "He's a smart dog."

"Certainly smarter than us if we hang around here one minute longer," Chief Drake added.

Angela could see that all their faces were smudged with greasy black soot, and she doubted that her own appearance was any different. Her stomach was sick with grief. And as a parade of sirens wailed in the distance, the loss of one of their own had yet to sink in among the stunned group.

Chief Drake clapped his hands together as ash continued to fall from the sky. "That's it, people. Time to move out. We need to tell the emergency responders to keep their distance until someone can measure the level of chemical agents in the air."

Martinez began coughing, heightening the level of fear among them. "It's just the smoke," he said, waving the concerned faces off. "Don't worry about me."

Angela walked over to him and patted him on the back as the flames continued to flicker in the distance. Chief Drake was already off and headed toward the narrow dirt road where two fire engines, an ambulance, and several police cars were racing toward them. He held his radio up and called into it.

"All emergency responders are advised to stay back. Possible chemical agents in the air. I repeat, possible chemical agents in the air."

“Let’s get out of here,” Angela said. She placed her arm around Martinez, who was hunched down and coughing. He cleared his throat and rose just as Captain Reynolds approached them with a ghostlike shock in her eyes. “Agent Dawson...” she said, vacantly. “You don’t think...”

“I’m sorry,” Martinez said, placing both hands on her shoulder. “It doesn’t look good.”

Reynolds began to tear up. Martinez pulled her closer with a hug as she cried into his shoulder. Angela scanned the area for Rex. It was the least she felt she could do.

Two other agents, Bernasconi and Tyson, were in a dazed state as well but dutifully followed their chief to the road where the emergency vehicles slowed to a halt.

“This is too much,” Captain Reynolds said, backing away from Martinez and wiping her eyes. She then walked off with a slight limp, calling for Rex and scanning the area. Only Martinez and Angela remained, staring from afar at the fire still burning wildly.

“Truck was rigged with explosives,” Martinez said vacantly. “We stumbled on some real shit out here, Agent Gannon.”

Angela nodded as the glow of the fire flickered in her eyes. “That station wagon. It’s all we have now.”

He turned to her, agreeing. He hung his head down, cursing under his breath while balling his fist.

“We’ll figure it out,” she said, trying to say whatever she could to help.

Martinez no doubt blamed himself. His head slowly rose, revealing tears in his eyes. “We owe it to Dawson now to find out who’s responsible for this.”

After a moment of staring at the fire, they walked off together in sober silence toward the flashing lights on the side of a dusty road.

* * * * *

They arrived back at the Del Rio Border Patrol station shortly before nine in the evening. A federal chemical inspections team had been deployed to the area along Graffiti Junction to test the air for chemical agents. All roads and underpasses within five miles of the area had been shut down and cordoned off. Businesses and homes within the area had been evacuated, leaving a sense of dread in the neighboring community.

The local media were on the scene but were not permitted to enter the hastily constructed blockades. The authorities were also hesitant in disseminating information for fear of creating a panic. Word from the feds was to keep a lid on it, and Chief Drake’s department was advised to recuse themselves from the investigation until Homeland Security and the FBI could determine exactly what had happened.

For Martinez, there was no second guessing that the men they had engaged were terrorists. He believed that the chemical agents discovered before the truck explosion were materials likely meant for a dirty bomb of some sort. Angela agreed, but was curious on what they were going to do about it. They had no knowledge of the men’s terrorist affiliations or how far their network spread. Assuming there was a network.

She and Martinez watched the coverage of the scene in Chief Drake's office while they sat across from his desk waiting. Drake was in another room discussing the incident with other superiors. Word around the office was that the FBI was there.

The investigation was already in the works, and all Martinez and Angela could do was wait. They weren't being told anything, and what had started as a shootout with two suspected smugglers had now spiraled into something much larger involving terrorism. But the death of one of their Border Patrol agents was the single hardest thing to stomach about it all.

The television displayed an aerial image from a news helicopter of the smoldering ground where the truck had exploded. Firefighters had extinguished the fire and HAZMAT teams in full chemical gear were on the scene, monitoring the air with their electronic gadgets.

The news banner on the bottom of the screen indicated a truck explosion without going into details. Martinez's eyes were transfixed on the TV screen, while Angela read messages on the screen of her cell phone, and replied to a text from Doug. She hadn't gone into any details and only told him that she wouldn't be home any time soon.

Does this have anything to do w truck explosion? he asked in the text.

Not at the moment, was all she could say back. *I'll be home soon. Might have to put the girls to bed without me. Love you.*

Doug was understandably curious and worried, but she would tell him what she could when the time came. The important thing was that she was okay. The same couldn't be said for Dawson, whose family, she was told, lived in Oklahoma and had just been informed of his death. The news was devastating to everyone at the station.

Captain Martinez had been quiet since they'd left the scene, saying very little. Angela could see the worry and grief on his face, and the nervous anger of his constant fidgeting and foot tapping. As she turned to speak to him, he suddenly jumped up from his chair, clearly agitated.

"I just can't do this right now," he said, pacing around the office.

"Do what?" Angela asked from her chair.

He turned to her with his face flushed. His uniform, like hers, was still covered in dust, dirt, and ash. "Sit in here while they play politics with this whole thing."

"Who's playing politics?" Angela asked, genuinely confused.

"The powers that be, that's who." He scratched his chin and attempted to peer through the blinds in Drake's office. "We need to be out there trying to catch the bastards who got away." He balled one hand and smacked it against the other. Angela had never seen him so angry. "I told Drake about these sleeper-cell pukes. I told him that we need to put more resources into tracking them. And now that the shit has hit the fan, he's gonna drop today's entire fiasco in my lap."

Angela studied Martinez, confused. He was agitated, saying whatever came to mind. And if she didn't know any better, she'd say that he was coming off as paranoid.

"We're all on the same team here, though. Right, sir?" she said in the most sympathetic tone she could muster.

Martinez scoffed, laughing. "Sure thing. Until something literally blows up in our faces. Who authorized Dawson to search through the truck? Who authorized any of us? That's what they're going to be asking us, so I hope you're ready."

Martinez paused and took a step back, seeing the worry in Angela's face. "I'm sorry, Agent Gannon. I don't mean to upset you. You should have nothing to worry about. Like I said, it was my call, and I'll take responsibility."

"You didn't do anything wrong," she said, though she wasn't sure if she believed her own words. Going it alone had its consequences. They *should* have waited for backup, but she didn't feel the need to harp on it.

"Doesn't matter," he said, shaking his head. "What matters is that when you have terrorists sneaking across the border, the blame has to lie with someone. Is the chief going to answer for it?" He paused with brown eyes gleaming, but before Angela could respond, he was on to the next question. "Is the Homeland Security director going to admit they messed up? Is the president going to call a press conference and blame himself? No. It's gonna be someone like me. Happens all the time."

"But you said that we could catch these guys. That all we had to do was to find that station wagon," Angela said. "But nobody paid attention."

"Trust me," Martinez said, stepping forward. "I fully intend to."

The door swung open as Chief Drake walked in with several files in hand, his glasses resting on the tip of his nose and a nervous, preoccupied look across his stricken face. He noticed Martinez standing by the window and signaled him to take a seat next to Angela.

"This won't take long, I promise."

Martinez sighed and went back to his chair. They both sat watching as Drake placed the stack of files on the smooth wood surface of his desk. Behind him there was a bookshelf with several plaques and certificates and family pictures with his pretty wife and three boys.

The television in the corner of the room displayed the same aerial feed as before, but the banner at the bottom of the screen had changed. It now said, "Terror Bombing in Texas."

Drake took his glasses off and squeezed the bridge of his nose, stress showing on his worn face. He leaned forward with his hands folded and got right to the point. "We have to get a lid on this thing and do it fast."

Martinez glanced at Angela holding his hands out as if to say, No, it's not paranoia, this is for real, and Chief Drake knows it, too.

Drake continued. "The death of a young agent does not bode well for this department. The important thing is that we put an end to these rumors of a vast terror network, and find out who's responsible."

Martinez remained quiet and looked as though the chief's dismissive words were exactly what he had expected to hear.

"Any word on that station wagon, sir?" Angela asked.

Drake shook his head. "Unfortunately, no. They got away, and with everything going on, it probably wasn't too hard for them to do it. But all law enforcement agencies are on alert for a vehicle matching that description."

Martinez stared at the chief, shaking his head. "Today's events are part of a pattern I've been seeing. And if this department doesn't get on board—if we don't get the support we need—it's only going to get worse."

Drake slammed his hand on the desk, startling Angela. Martinez, however, didn't flinch. "Let's get one thing clear, Captain Martinez. You're in hot water right now. So you may just want to back off a little and get your head together."

"We're being overrun by terrorists!" Martinez said. "Not all of them are coming over the border. A lot of them come here on visas. Some on asylum status. They're here, and we need to take this shit seriously, starting now."

For a moment the room went silent as the two men stared at each other. Drake leaned back in his squeaky office chair and tented his hands. "I've been doing this job for some time now, Captain Martinez. And I know what we're out there looking for. Terrorism is no exception. We're entrusted to protect this border, and we can't very well do that to the best of our abilities when the department is ensnared in an internal investigation." He paused and pointed at Martinez. "When you're told to wait for backup, that's what you do! We may never know who those men are affiliated with now."

"We got an ID on the intact body, right?" Martinez asked, cutting in.

Drake jerked his chair forward and leaned over his desk. "The FBI are examining his body right now with the coroner's. But, if everything else of value was in that truck and it's all gone now..."

"I did nothing wrong," Martinez said. "We're authorized to pursue suspicious acts as we see them."

"I hope you're right," Drake said. "Despite what you think, I'm on your side. I take the side of any of my agents." He paused to clear his throat and then looked sternly at both Angela and Martinez. "You're both dismissed. We'll pick this up tomorrow. But you better be ready for it. And please... drop the martyr act."

Martinez rose slowly from his chair with a deep breath, not saying anything. Angela looked around the room nervously. She wanted nothing more than to bolt for the exit and go home. Martinez turned to the door as Angela stood.

"Have a good night, sir," she said to the chief.

"You too. Get some rest, Agent Gannon," he said.

It was dark outside the office window, and Angela was stunned to see how much time had passed. She followed Martinez as he walked out.

She closed the door behind her and tried to catch up with Martinez, who was already halfway down the hall. Most of the cubicles they passed were empty, though a few offices were occupied along the way.

"You need to quit leaving me behind," she said to Martinez as she caught up.

"Huh?" he said, walking fast with his eyes forward.

"You left me on that hill earlier. By the time I got out of the car, you were half way down."

He swung his head to the side, glaring as though he was about to rip into her, but instead, his face went calm with an indication of remorse. "I'm sorry about that."

"It's okay," she said. "I just want to make sure we're looking out for each other."

"We are. I've got your back, don't worry."

From the hall, they entered a lobby with two agents sitting at the desk, both rookies, pulling security. The agents raised their heads in surprise.

“You have something you want to say?” Martinez shot back, defensively.

“Not at all, sir. Have a good night,” the younger of the two men said.

“You too,” Martinez said as they walked past and pushed open the glass double doors.

The night air was dry but refreshing, much cooler than before. Under the parking lot lights, Border Patrol vehicles were neatly aligned in rows. A line of black SUVs took up one lane across the way. All were backed in and ready to go. Angela’s car, a gray four-door 2014 Toyota Camry, was parked in the employee lot in the corner next to Martinez’s Jeep.

“Don’t worry about any of this,” he said as their boots clicked along the pavement in the quiet night. “We’ll get it all worked out tomorrow.”

She wanted to believe him but was worried that their troubles were just beginning. She felt grief for Dawson—shame even, that it wasn’t her. Of course, she had no intention of revealing such thoughts to Martinez. Perhaps he felt the same way.

She wished him a good night and pressed the button on her keychain, unlocking the Camry. Martinez waved as he got into his Jeep and cranked the engine. Once inside her car, she sat for a moment with the engine running and waited for Martinez to leave. His headlights flashed across her rearview mirror, and he was off. With no one around, she leaned forward and rested her head against the steering wheel, sobbing.

* * * * *

Angela arrived home later that evening, pulling into the driveway of her brick three-bedroom sanctuary, located in a quaint neighborhood near Buena Vista Middle School, where her daughters, Chassity and Lisa, attended school.

Doug’s F150 was in the driveway, and she could see a light on in the living room window. She looked at the clock on her dashboard. It was 9:45. For the day she had, that wasn’t too bad. Doug worked normal nine to five hours, which proved to be an asset where their children were concerned.

She turned off the engine and opened the door, pausing for a moment to catch her breath. She felt like a nervous wreck. What was she going to tell Doug? Maybe it could wait until morning.

The neighborhood was quiet with cars parked in driveways under the glow of streetlights. She passed the front of Doug’s truck and moved along the cement walkway leading to their front door, past small lights planted in the ground.

Doug was on the couch watching television when she walked in. His short brown hair was parted to the side, and he was wearing a Duke University T-shirt and sweat pants, his typical evening wear.

“Hi, honey,” he said to her.

“Hey,” Angela said, walking into the foyer.

He muted the television set, took one look at her, and rose from the couch, stunned. “What happened to you today?”

Her cover was blown. She hadn’t had a chance to clean up yet, which she immediately regretted. “Nothing. Just a long day at the office, that’s all.”

He walked toward her, not buying it. "You're a mess."

She set her purse on the nearest end table and tried to make it to the kitchen but found herself blocked as he stood in her way.

"Talk to me, Angela. Is everything okay?" She could see the two days' growth on his thin face, a light shade of brown stubble. He was trying to grow a beard again. That, or maybe he was overworked too.

"Everything's fine. I just want to have a quick snack and go to bed."

She glanced at the television and saw live coverage of the blast still playing out. Reporters had swarmed the cordoned area, desperate for a story. An official statement from Homeland Security claimed that the explosion was unrelated to terror. However, a spokesman did say that all avenues were currently being pursued. Angela understood not wanting to incite panic, but to outright lie to the public?

* * * * *

"Your coming home late wouldn't have anything to do with this, would it?" Doug asked, pointing to the TV.

Angela paused, wanting to tell him everything, but she didn't think she was ready for it.

"Angela, talk to me," he said.

She couldn't fight it any longer and rushed to his arms, burying her face in his chest. "We lost an agent today. A truck was rigged with explosives. We didn't see it coming. My God..."

Tears began to flow, as Doug's comforting arms closed around her, his hands rubbing the back of her dirty uniform.

"It's okay..." he said. "Everything's going to be okay."

* * * * *

After a shower, she felt slightly better. She lay in her bed in a T-shirt and underwear as Doug brought her a glass of water and some Advil.

"Here," he said with concerned eyes. "Drink up."

She lifted her head, took the tablets, and drank them down with the water. The mattress shifted down as Doug sat next to her.

"You just need to clear your head of everything and get some rest," he said, rubbing her leg.

"I know," she said. Her voice was hoarse, and she was afraid she had awakened the girls earlier with all the crying. Doug assured her that she hadn't. "Dawson..." she said. "He was just a kid. Younger than me." She smiled a little while thinking about him. "He had a bit of a crush on me, but nothing serious of course."

Doug looked at her with one brow raised. "Really?"

She pushed his arm away, smiling more. "It was nothing. He was a good person."

Doug stared ahead sadly. "I'm sorry. I really am."

Angela rocked her head back and stared at the ceiling as her blonde hair spread out over the pillow. "I don't know how I'm going to go back there tomorrow."

"Take the day off and recover," Doug said. "I'm sure they'd understand."

She took his left hand and laced her fingers around it. "I can't. There's an investigation. Martinez is sure there's something bigger going on."

"So it *was* terrorism?" Doug asked.

Her eyes looked down. "That's what it seems like."

Doug rose from the bed and leaned toward her, kissing her forehead. "Just rest. Please. You'll feel better in the morning."

He got up and went to the nightstand on his side, switching off the lamp. Their spacious room went dark, and Angela felt unnerved by the sudden silence. Doug lay in bed next to her, and she wanted nothing more than to be cradled in his arms. She turned on her side and lay against him as he rubbed her back slowly, caressing her to sleep.

* * * * *

The phone call jolted Angela awake, sounding like an angry alarm clock. Doug lay sleeping on his side next to her. She reached for her cell phone on the nightstand, ready to throw it across the room until she saw the number. It was Martinez.

"Hello?" she said in a tired voice after swiping the screen.

"*Angela, I'm sorry to wake you.*" He sounded upset. He had rarely called her by her first name.

"What time is it?" she asked, rubbing her head. The clock on her phone had been a sleepy-eyed blur.

"*A little after two. Again, I'm sorry, but I really need to talk to you.*"

She held the phone for a moment, not sure what to say, and she was still so tired, she wasn't sure she was fully awake. "So talk," she said.

"*Not here. Not like this. Can you meet me somewhere?*"

She glanced at Doug, unsure how to respond. Soundly sleeping, his chest rose and fell with the subtle sound of his breathing.

"What is this about, sir?" she asked.

"*Please. You're the only one I can trust. There's a little diner on Orange, Roxy's. They're open twenty-four hours. Ten, twenty minutes. It's all I ask.*"

Strange as his request was, she couldn't say no. Her interest had been piqued. Doug would be against it, but her partner needed her. That was all there was to it.

"Okay. I'll be there."

"*Great. I'm leaving now. Meet you there.*"

And then he hung up.

Secret Meeting

Angela nudged Doug and told him she had to meet with Captain Martinez.

"Are you out of your mind?" he asked, immediately angered.

"This investigation could have serious implications for my career. I have to go," she said, already getting dressed.

"Don't do this," he said, his voice rising. "Whatever you need to talk about can wait until morning."

“No, it can’t,” she responded, with a look of conviction in her eyes.

Doug shook his head and lay back down. She apologized and left the room as quickly as she could, promising him that she’d be back in less than an hour.

* * * * *

Angela drove along the quiet, empty streets of her neighborhood, feeling alert and refreshed, even with only a few hours rest. The diner wasn’t far, and for that she was grateful. Whatever the urgency, Angela had to admit that she was intrigued despite the lack of details over the phone. What was Martinez up to? That was the main question on her mind.

There were a few cars in the Roxy parking lot, night owls and other dwellers of the evening. In her haste, Angela had forgotten her gun. She panicked, feeling the emptiness at her side but then figured that she probably didn’t need it.

Roxy’s Diner was located on a corner intersection. Neon letters buzzed above the entrance, and through the window she could see a few people sitting inside at booths.

She squinted to see any sign of Martinez. She saw his Jeep, so he had to be somewhere. A bell jingled as she opened the door and walked across the tile floor past the cashier. She turned and saw her boss sitting at a booth in the far corner, nursing a cup of coffee. The café smelled of eggs and sausage, enough to make her stomach growl.

* * * * *

Martinez looked up as she approached, not wearing her uniform but dressed in jeans, a jacket, and a T-shirt underneath. Her hair was tied up and her face bare of makeup. What else did he expect to see at two in the morning? His eyes darted around nervously as he feigned a smile and thanked her for showing up.

If Angela’s outfit was different from the usual, so was his. He wore a hoodie and a ball cap on his head. Angela smiled as she sat, amused by his covert appearance. She glanced at a paper menu but didn’t plan on staying long enough to eat.

A pretty young waitress, oddly perky at the late hour, approached the table from out of nowhere. “Can I get you something to drink, dear?”

Angela glanced at Martinez’s cup and just asked for coffee. “Lots of sugar,” she said.

The waitress nodded and went to the kitchen as Martinez leaned in closer, talking discreetly.

“Again. I can’t thank you enough. This is very important.” He stopped and glanced out the window, surveying the parking lot. Angela had been right about his behavior in the chief’s office. He was growing increasingly paranoid.

“Why don’t you just tell me what this is all about?” she asked. “What can I do to help?”

He took a sip from his coffee and set the mug down. She could see that one of his hands was shaking. “I’ve got a friend in the FBI, and she told me something about one of our guys. The one who wasn’t vaporized in the explosion.”

“He’s a terrorist,” Angela said, taking a wild guess.

“Not just any terrorist. He is the brother of a man named Sayed Rahman. Does the name ring a bell?”

Angela thought to herself then looked at Martinez. “No. Should it?”

“Just a few days ago, they caught Sayed in Belgium. He was hiding there after that London train station attack.”

The carnage came rushing back to Angela. She remembered it from the news. Two months prior, terrorists had detonated a series of dirty bombs at the Central London Metro Station, killing more than forty people and injuring a hundred more.

The attack had awakened the world to the reality of terrorism as the new normal. It was even worse than the attack in 2005. The Islamic State had taken credit for the tube’s bombing. Three of the four men had blown themselves up, but the fourth had gotten away—a man by the name of Sayed Rahman.

Angela looked at Martinez with fear in her eyes, realizing what he was telling her. “You’re sure about this? His brother? What was he doing here?”

“That’s what I’m trying to tell you, Angela. ISIS is here. They’ve been here, and they’re growing.”

Angela laid her hands out on the table, not fully understanding Martinez’s secrecy. “So why keep all this to ourselves? Can’t we just bring this to the chief tomorrow?”

“We’re on our own,” Martinez said, cutting her off. “The government isn’t interested in ISIS. I have some dangerous information. Things I’ve learned about some of the higher-ups, people supposedly on our side, and it ain’t pretty.”

The conversation seemed headed toward a conspiracy theory, and Angela wanted to clear things up. “*Everyone* wants to stop ISIS. It’s absurd to suggest otherwise.”

Martinez hit the table, rattling his coffee mug. Angela froze and went silent.

“Who do you think is arming them? How do you think they’re getting here?”

She looked back at him in disbelief. “I don’t know, but to suggest that Chief Drake—”

“Not him. Others in higher positions. This all goes back to that major clusterfuck in Syria and our involvement there. It’s all connected.”

“No, sir.” Frustrated, Angela rose from the booth just as the waitress brought her coffee and set it down. The woman stopped and glanced at them strangely, then turned and walked away.

“Please sit down,” Martinez said. “I don’t mean to be so cryptic. I’ll tell you everything that I can.”

Angela slowly lowered herself back into the booth against the vinyl. “Go on...”

“The government, through Homeland Security and Immigration Services, releases an annual report on the number of people living in the United States illegally. There is a separate report that also details the number of terrorist suspects that the FBI is tracking.”

He paused and took a breath, looking around. He stared directly at Angela. “They haven’t released either report in two years. Think about that. FOI requests from the media have been tied up in litigation. Why are certain agencies so reluctant to release the numbers?”

Angela shrugged. “You got me.”

Martinez leaned in closer with his voice barely above a whisper. "Because the numbers are devastating. And they won't see the light of day until big changes come from the inside."

Angela took a careful sip of her hot coffee and then put it down, stirring it with a spoon. "Maybe the FBI is keeping it under wraps so they don't interfere with surveillance efforts." She held her hands out. "Ever think about that?"

Martinez nodded and rubbed his chin. She didn't like seeing him in such a wired state. He was normally someone she could rely on to have it all together. "Whatever it is, I'm going to find out. I've got a couple of leads, and it's time to ruffle some feathers."

"We're Border Patrol agents, sir," Angela said, wary of his outlandish theories. "We have a very specific job. If you know something about terror cells, it's my professional opinion that you should bring it to the FBI and let them do their job."

Martinez slid his hands off the table and backed against his seat with a disappointed expression. He then spoke slowly and carefully. "Our families, Angela. Our children. Our parents. Even our friends on the force. All of that is at stake right now. These guys go after soft targets. Shopping malls, concerts, airports, you name it. We are the target, Angela. Don't forget that."

Angela had no argument, but she still believed he was being extreme. "We just need to keep our eyes open. Do our jobs the best that we can."

"It's not good enough," Martinez said, launching up from his seat. The table shook, and it looked like he was now the one leaving. Angela was confused.

"I'm going to get to the bottom of this," he said with his hands flat on the tabletop. "That's what it's going to take."

"What do you want me to do?" she asked, looking up at him.

"Whatever you can to keep your family safe. We're at war, even if no one wants to believe it." He dug into his pocket and tossed a ten-dollar bill on the table. "Thanks for coming. We'll be in touch."

He walked away before she could say anything else, and went out the door without turning back. Angela sat for a moment, trying to gather her thoughts. Sausage and eggs sizzled in the kitchen, the inviting smell drifting past her booth. The waitress came back, surprised to see Angela alone.

"That all I can get you, hon?" she asked.

"Yes, thank you," Angela said, staring ahead. The waitress left a check on the table and went away with a smile. From outside the window, Angela could see Martinez's Jeep drive away. With everything he had said, she still didn't understand what he wanted her to do or why he had summoned her to the diner in the middle of the night.

Perhaps he just needed someone to talk to. He was a man on a mission, and there was little she could have said to convince him otherwise. She got up and walked out with more on her mind than she had counted for.

* * * * *

Angela arrived at the station the next morning bright and early. The fleet of black SUVs was still in the parking lot, but Martinez's Jeep was nowhere to be seen. She thought nothing of it, considering that he sometimes came in a little after she did. He might even have taken the day off, which she would have

understood. Doug had implored her to do the same, but she needed to be there. She didn't want to miss a single beat of the investigation.

She could feel the tension the moment she walked in through the double doors. Two different agents were beginning their day shift at the front desk, looking grim.

She walked through the lobby to the hall where all the chatter from the evening prior had resumed for a new day. Every cubicle and office was swarming with Border Patrol, FBI, Homeland Security, and some men in suits, whose affiliation she didn't know. At the end of the hall, she could see into Chief Drake's office. He was standing in front of his desk in full uniform with what looked like FBI agents around him.

Does he ever sleep? she thought to herself.

A coffeepot hissed in the breakroom as she walked by, and she saw Captain Reynolds sitting at a small table, pulling her red hair into a ponytail.

"Good morning, ma'am," Angela said, poking in.

Reynolds looked up with a nod and slight smile. "Morning, Agent Gannon. I hope you're ready for this."

Angela's boots clicked along the white tile floor as she went straight to the coffee machine. She grabbed a Styrofoam cup from a stack and poured herself a cup while turning to Reynolds. "Did they find Rex yet?"

Reynolds ran her hands down her face with a sigh. "Yes. Thank God. He actually came back for me. Can you believe that?"

"Smart dog," Angela said, taking a sip.

"He sure is."

Angela walked to the table but didn't sit. There was no one else in the room, and she thought there was no better time to clear the air. "Is everything okay? I mean, how are you holding up?"

Reynolds's blue eyes moved up, then back down to the floor. "As good as you are, I imagine. They're putting out some info today on his memorial service and where donations can be made."

The question was on Angela's mind. She didn't want to ask, but she had to know. "Did they... recover Agent Dawson's body from the fire?"

"What was left of it, yes," Reynolds replied. Her eyes were averted, and her elbow propped on the table holding her coffee cup, as if she had forgotten about it.

"It's terrible. I couldn't sleep last night," Angela said.

Reynolds put her coffee cup down and stood abruptly as her chair scraped against the tile floor. "You and me both, Agent Gannon." She paused. "You and me both."

She picked up her cup and walked out of the breakroom with her coffee, leaving Angela standing there. The thought of Dawson's charred body was the last thing she wanted on her mind. Why couldn't he have just gotten out of the truck like everyone else? Why did he have to search around some more? Then it hit her: how close they all had come to dying that day, and they would have died if they'd been standing in the wrong place at the wrong time. Never again, she thought, would she not wait for backup.

Angela sighed and looked outside the breakroom as agents rushed by. She hadn't heard the news yet, didn't know what they were saying—part of her didn't even want to know. She wanted to remain focused, and the best way to do that

was to try to pursue the station wagon. It was their only link, their only chance at getting to the truth. She dug into her pocket and pulled out her cell phone. No calls from Martinez yet, and it was already ten after eight.

She felt lost without him, not even sure how to start the day. Facing the chief first thing in the morning wasn't the most tantalizing idea. She left the breakroom with only one destination in mind. It was time to check in with the chief.

"Good morning, sir," she said, knocking on the side of his door.

Drake's worn face shot up, but his body remained slouched over his desk. The four FBI agents in the room were slow to turn and acknowledge her.

"Agent Gannon. Good that you're here," Drake said, straightening up. "Come in and close the door."

Angela walked in and slowly shut the door. All eyes were on her as Drake took a moment to introduce her to his guests, all wearing white, button-down long-sleeved shirts, ties, and slacks. He stood up and held an arm out toward the first FBI agent.

"This is Special Agent MacLauchlan."

A tall man with moussed black hair and a thin beard nodded.

"Supervisory Special Agent Sutherland."

A short blond-haired man with a square jaw and clean face waved.

"Agent Lynch."

A bulky man with wavy gray hair, pointy nose, and glasses nodded.

"And Special Agent Hopper."

A man with a crew cut, goatee, and wild eyes smiled and nodded.

Angela introduced herself, feeling a bit overwhelmed.

"It's a pleasure to meet you gentlemen," she said.

Glancing at the television, she could see that the news coverage hadn't stopped. The aerial view of the truck explosion had transitioned to daylight. In the darkness, the vividness of the scene had been lost, but in the bright daylight, everything was clear: the widespread destruction, the mound of smoldering ash where the truck used to be. The news banner read, *No Answer from Feds on Terror Bombing*. It was enough for everyone to know that things were serious.

"Please, have a seat," Chief Drake said warmly.

She smiled the best she could and sat in one of the chairs in the front of his desk, prepared to be questioned.

Drake looked among the FBI agents, each one giving him knowing glances. Angela knew little about the ongoing discussion they'd been having, but had a good guess. Drake rose, moved to the front of his desk, facing Angela, and sat on the front of it, legs swaying in the air, arms tucked at his sides, and looked directly at Angela.

"The media are expecting a response to all of this today, and from what we've gathered so far, this appears to be an isolated incident."

Angela disagreed, but she kept such reservations to herself.

"When was the last time you heard from Captain Martinez?" he asked, as the FBI agents studied her.

"Last night," she answered. "He called me very concerned about everything that had happened."

Drake rose his head and studied her closely through the thick lens of his glasses. "I don't doubt it. Seems he's gone rogue on a fact-finding mission of his own."

"Sir?" Angela said, feigning confusion.

"We have to get a handle on this thing, Agent Gannon. I think you can appreciate that. But what bothers me is when one of my agents, a damn fine agent, I might add, goes off the radar."

"I'm not sure I know what you mean," Angela said.

Drake hopped off his desk and began pacing his office, hands at his side. "We received a call from Captain Martinez's wife, Gloria, about an hour ago. She's worried sick. Apparently, he hasn't been home all night. His Jeep is gone. He didn't leave a note. And all attempts by his wife to contact him have failed."

Angela felt an intense worry building in her gut. She didn't like where the conversation was going. Now more than ever, she needed Martinez at her side, not off on some rogue fact-finding mission.

"I don't know what to say, sir. He expressed grief about Dawson and said that he had to do some investigating of his own."

Her comments piqued the interest of the FBI agents, and she immediately regretted saying so much.

"We need to find him," Drake said. "Do your best to get in touch with him. *That's* your mission for the day, Agent Gannon."

Angela remained still in the chair with her hands folded over her legs. "Yes, sir. I can do that."

"Great." He went to his desk and grabbed one of the many files sitting in a stack. "Now if you'll excuse me, I have to address the media in an hour."

Angela stood to leave when a knock came at the door.

"Come in," Drake shouted, gazing at the door and looking annoyed.

The door opened, and a tall, thin woman walked in. She had straight brown hair down to her shoulders and a tanned face that contrasted attractively with red lipstick and bright, bluish-green eyes. She wore a dark blue blazer, a white silk shirt, and black slacks. An FBI badge dangled from her neck on a lanyard. The other agents in the room seemed to stand more upright as she entered, obviously trying to put on a good face.

"Ah, Ms. Thaxton. A pleasure to see you," Chief Drake said with a smile.

The woman nodded back and then looked at Angela, pointing. "This is Captain Martinez's partner?"

"Yes," Drake answered, turning to Angela. "Agent Gannon, I'd like you to meet, Jennifer Thaxton, an assistant director with the FBI."

Angela shook Thaxton's hand with a friendly nod as the assistant director carefully studied her. "Pleased to meet you, Agent Gannon. I've been waiting to speak with you."

"Me?" Angela said, surprised.

Thaxton looked around the room and stopped at Chief Drake. "I'd like a moment to speak with her, if you don't mind."

Drake wasted no time. "Of course," he said, grabbing some files. "The office is yours. Take all the time you need." The other agents followed as he left the room.

Thaxton then closed the door slowly and walked over to Drake's desk, sitting in his chair.

"Please," she said. "Have a seat."

Angela felt a tinge of nervousness unlike anything she had yet experienced that morning.

Sensing her apprehension, Thaxton leaned forward. "Relax, Agent Gannon. I'm not here to grill you, although I am aware that there is an internal investigation underway of yesterday's incident."

Angela looked up with a smile, hands resting on the green fabric of her trouser legs, not sure what to say.

"Angela, I want to cut to the chase because time is critical," Thaxton said. "You don't mind if I call you Angela, do you?"

"No..." Angela said, her voice rising, as if asking a question of her own.

"Splendid. And you can call me Jennifer. Fair enough?"

Angela nodded.

"I'm concerned about your partner. He has a lot of crazy ideas, and I don't blame him. You see, Jorge and I go way back."

"Captain Martinez?" Angela asked.

Thaxton waved her off with a laugh. "Yes, of course. Captain Martinez. I'm afraid he may be in a lot of trouble."

Angela swallowed nervously, wishing she had just stayed in bed for the day. "What do you mean, ma'am?"

Thaxton smiled. "Jorge is my friend." She spread her arms across Drake's desk and talked as if she were a confidant. "Of course, we lost contact over the years. I'm sure he called you last night with a lot of theories."

Angela nodded while glancing at the television, which was displaying the image of an empty press room and a banner reading, "Border Patrol Chief Expected to Release Statement."

"I just want to find him," Thaxton said. "And I need your help."

"There's nothing I want more to do," Angela replied.

"Excellent," Thaxton said, folding her hands together. "Then I need to know exactly what he told you last night."

Angela hesitated. In the silence, Thaxton's eyes seemed to burn holes right through her. *This is it*, she thought. *This is the interrogation.*

Searching for Martinez

"We believe there are approximately fifty terror cells operating throughout the state of Texas," Assistant Director Thaxton began.

Angela sat quietly, trying to understand her role in the FBI's plan.

"Most of them are ISIS affiliated," Thaxton continued. "Al-Qaeda is still every bit a threat, but ISIS is growing at a much more rapid and dangerous pace."

Angela cleared her throat, determined to ask some questions of her own. "Why doesn't the government detain them?"

Thaxton pursed her lips, looking as though she was prepared for the question. “We’re monitoring as many as we can, hoping that they can lead us to their benefactor.”

Angela clasped her hands together, wishing she could wrap the conversation up, and took a trusting step. “Captain Martinez told me that the government hasn’t released a report on the number of suspected terrorists in two years.”

“Of course he did,” Thaxton told her. “And I’m as bothered by that as he.” She leaned back in the chair, rocking with both arms on the armrests. “Then again, I’m just the assistant director.”

Angela glanced at the television where an image of the first shooter, the one with the large forehead was being displayed. He was identified as Amadi Rahman, the brother of the London bombing terrorist, Sayed Rahman. The photo itself was several months old—taken from Amadi’s passport—and showing a clean-shaven man with trim hair and a smile.

“This is what I need from you, Angela,” Thaxton said, dusting the shoulders of her blue blazer. “We have some information on a safe house. A house that Jorge last reported on. He told me that he was going to investigate. Like you, I urged him not to do it on his own. Unfortunately, we haven’t heard from him since.”

Angela didn’t know how much to believe. Martinez had warned her about the FBI. Maybe some of his paranoia was rubbing off on her.

“I want you to accompany us to this safe house. Jorge’s current state of mind is not where I’d prefer it to be. But he trusts you. So we will need you with us once we get there.”

Angela stared ahead, studying Thaxton while trying to detect any bit of deception in her blue eyes. She was a startlingly attractive woman, and Angela found her mere presence intimidating. She exuded an air of confidence that Angela only wished she could achieve in her own career.

“I need to know what you’ve found out about this station wagon,” Angela said. “That’s what this all comes down to.”

Thaxton leaned closer to her as the chair squeaked forward. “We’re working on it. Police have issued an APB statewide on the vehicle. Though, I might say, a license plate would have been helpful.”

“The truck we were tracking didn’t have a license plate. For all we know, the station wagon was the same,” Angela said.

“Not likely,” Thaxton said, cupping her chin. “Now, are you game? Will you accompany us to the safe house to find Martinez?”

Angela thought to herself for a moment and then nodded. “Sure. If it means brining him home. Is he in any danger?”

Thaxton glanced downward then back at Angela. “We don’t know yet. But I can tell you that the house in question is on our list of hot spots.”

It was all Angela needed to hear. She’d agree to whatever was necessary. Thaxton seemed pleased and told her that, “woman to woman,” she wouldn’t let her down.

“But I expect the same from you,” she continued. “Don’t let us down either.”

* * * * *

Angela sat in the backseat of a black SUV as it roared along a rural stretch of desert road with four other matching vehicles closely behind. She was a part of something now. Something larger than before.

An FBI helicopter flew overhead, tracking them. Angela stared out the window, watching the vastness of the rolling hills and sand dunes pass by—cypress trees, rocks, and decaying weeds, plentiful and unending. Assistant Director Thaxton sat in the passenger seat, next to Agent Sutherland, who drove.

For Angela, it was hard to believe that anything worth finding was within their grasp, but she understood that the people they were looking for often operated in desolate areas where they could see who was coming and when. It was ten past noon, and she was already feeling overwhelmed. Gone were her superiors with the Border Patrol. Out here, she was completely on her own.

“About two miles more,” Thaxton said, staring ahead through a pair of thick sunglasses.

Angela scooted up and looked past the windshield to the road ahead. They were in the lead vehicle, and Angela had questions about how, exactly, the FBI knew precisely where to go. It all seemed too perfect. Were they after terrorists or Martinez?

“What do you want me to do when we get there?” Angela asked.

From the spotless confines of the sleek SUV, Thaxton turned to Angela with a smile. “Just standby until we need you.”

Angela was worried. She had texted Martinez multiple times but received no response.

An aluminum shack, no larger than a mobile home, came into view on the far right side of the road. It looked abandoned, a relic from another age. There were no vehicles parked outside and no people either. Angela figured they would keep going in pursuit of the real safe house, and was surprised when the SUV began to slow.

“There’s our target,” Thaxton said.

The SUV pulled to the shoulder, advancing over a mound, and gunning it toward the shack. Angela gripped her armrest as they rumbled forward, off-road, increasing speed. Trailing vehicles split off in different directions, surrounding the shack in what seemed an expertly rehearsed formation.

“*That* is the safe house?” Angela said with incredulity.

“You’d be surprised,” Thaxton said. “Not everything is as it seems.”

The cryptic comment made Angela curious. What exactly was the assistant director talking about?

Their SUV circled the target and then, with one hard stomp on the brake, lurched to a stop in the back of the building. Angela could see what Thaxton meant: a rusty red pickup sat parked behind the shack in a makeshift port with desert-tan camouflage netting overhead.

The wave radio under the SUV’s dashboard crackled with an incoming transmission.

“*All vehicles in position. It’s your call, ma’am,*” a man’s voice said.

Thaxton stared ahead, studying the shack. At the wheel, Agent Sutherland held a pair of binoculars up, looking through the only window in range, covered by a thin, tattered curtain.

"I see movement," he said.

The FBI helicopter hovered above, its blades thumping in the air while its turbine engine rumbled noisily. Whoever was in the shack must know by now that they had company.

"We need to move," Thaxton said. "They could see us coming a mile away. If there are any tunnels inside, they're no doubt scrambling."

Sutherland grabbed the hand mic. "It's a go."

Angela watched in astonishment as the doors of the surrounding SUVs were flung open and agents charged out, guns drawn, advancing toward the shack from all sides. Sutherland and Thaxton, however, stayed seated, patiently waiting and astutely observing the raid.

Angela put her hands on the back of Sutherland's seat and leaned forward. "Shouldn't you be using a SWAT team? This seems very dangerous."

"Time is critical," Thaxton said, looking forward. "We have to work with what we have."

"And trust me," Sutherland said, turning his head slightly. "Our team is every bit trained as SWAT."

From afar, Angela watched as Agent Lynch led the charge, his gray bouffant bouncing in the air. He wound his leg back and kicked the door open as two agents took positions and knelt at each side of the entrance with their pistols up. Shouts and running footsteps could be heard coming from inside.

Three other agents ran past them and circled around to the front as Lynch stormed inside through the back with MacLachlan and another agent behind him.

"Down on the ground!" he shouted.

"Get down! Right now!" MacLachlan added.

Thaxton turned and looked at Sutherland. "Let's get ready to move."

Sutherland nodded, took his Glock pistol from his side, and pulled the slide back, chambering a round.

The shouting continued from inside like some major bust.

"*We're all clear,*" Lynch's voice said from the radio.

"How many?" Sutherland asked, holding the mic.

"*Six. All unarmed.*"

"Ask him about Captain Martinez," Thaxton told him.

"What's the status on Martinez?" Sutherland said into the radio.

"*We don't see him. They could have him somewhere else. MacLachlan and Hopper are doing a search.*"

Thaxton sighed and then tilted her head back to Angela. "You ready back there?"

Angela nodded, though she was still unsure of her role. "Six men?" she said, amazed. "In that little shack?"

"Probably caught them at a meeting," Sutherland said, opening his door and stepping out.

Thaxton opened her door as well and took off her jacket, tossing it inside. A pistol rested in a side holster. She pulled at the sleeves of her white button-down shirt and fixed her hair in the window's reflection.

From the backseat, Angela studied her. Who am I dealing with here?

Thaxton opened the passenger door and poked her head in. "You coming or what?"

Angela snapped out of it and opened the door.

"Stay on the ground and keep your mouth shut!" a voice shouted from inside the shack, startling her.

She closed the door as Thaxton came around from the other side. Sutherland was already well on his way there, leaving footprints of his leather dress shoes in the sand.

"You heard anything from Martinez yet?" Thaxton asked, tucking the back of her shirt in.

"Nothing," Angela said.

"Nothing on my end either."

"I hope he's okay," Angela said. "I can't take much more of this. Especially after Dawson..." Her voice faded at the mention of his name. She took a deep breath and tried to toughen up as Thaxton's hand touched her shoulder.

"It's okay. The FBI is going to get to the bottom of this thing one way or another."

They strolled together toward the shack, and Angela was eager to see inside. She wished they'd found a station wagon parked near the shack, a sign that they weren't on a wild goose chase.

Thaxton walked in first. Sunlight shone onto the creaking hardwood floor, lighting the otherwise dim room.

Angela followed Thaxton carefully as the other agents flipped chairs and tables, searching for hatches or hidden compartments. Angela looked down at the six men who lay on their stomachs, their hands behind their backs, and agents Lynch and MacLachlan standing over them.

Their hands had already been zip-tied at their wrists. Their clothing was strangely identical: Gap-purchased polo shirts and beige slacks, like some kind of mall uniform. Their jet-black hair was short and their facial hair trim, making them look painfully out of place in such rural surroundings. Their feet were bare, and a row of leather dress shoes and sandals lined the wall next to the front entrance. A few men groaned in discomfort. Others seemed to be cursing.

"Shut up," Sutherland said, walking alongside them.

They could have been anyone from around the area, but Angela was pretty sure they weren't locals. An aura of mystery surrounded them, and Angela was eager to find out who they were, and what they had on Martinez.

A man at the front lifted his head with a panicked expression. "What have we done? We have done nothing."

"Well, you're trespassing, for starters," Sutherland said. "This abandoned outpost still belongs to the federal government."

The man lowered his head, saying nothing in return. Thaxton stood in the corner of the room, observing the area and keeping to herself. Angela walked around slowly, studying the room, hoping to find a clue, anything, but the floor and the ceiling, like the walls, were largely barren.

"Go ahead and get them up," Sutherland said to the other agents. "We're taking them in." The day was only getting hotter, and everyone wanted to get moving.

* * * * *

The FBI team returned to the Del Rio Border Patrol station shortly after the bust. Their six suspects had been taken to a secure holding room. Martinez was still MIA, and the men's capture only added more questions. The already tense atmosphere of the station was compounded by the detainees' arrival. Nearly every agent on site believed they had something to do with the truck explosion and the death of Agent Dawson.

Guards were posted outside the holding room to keep Border Patrol agents from interfering with the investigation. A crowd had formed outside the room and was largely made up of uniformed agents trying to get a look at their suspects through the one-way Plexiglas window.

Inside, the six men sat on a single long bench against the wall, now handcuffed and saying very little to each other. Even though they couldn't see beyond the window from inside, they appeared to be aware that they were being watched and listened to.

The number of onlookers outside the room grew to about twenty border agents, all staring in through the window as though they were at the zoo.

"Are we going to charge these assholes or what?" one mustached agent asked with his face burning with anger. He took a step forward and was rebuked by one of the guards standing by the door.

"That's close enough. Border Patrol are not allowed entry into holding by order of the FBI."

The mustached agent took a step back and threw his arms in the air. "Ah, what do they know? They can go back to D.C. for all I care."

A short female agent stepped forward to join the protest. "It wasn't one of theirs who was killed yesterday, it was one of ours!"

The crowd shouted out in agreement. "Yeah!"

The guard, a Border Patrol agent like themselves, raised a hand, asking for calm. "Not our call. Now please, go about your business and let the FBI do theirs."

But the crowd remained. No one looked as though they were going anywhere. The capture of the six men was blood in the water, and after years of bureaucratic red-tape that had made their jobs harder and harder to do, the Border Patrol agents wanted retribution. And the only things preventing them from taking action were two guards and a thick pane of Plexiglas.

* * * * *

Amid the commotion, Angela found herself back in Chief Drake's office with Assistant Director Thaxton and Special Agent Sutherland. So far, she had an insider's view to the investigation that none of her colleagues had been privy too. Chief Drake seemed concerned with her involvement, but beholden to the whims of the FBI. But had it not been for Captain Martinez's disappearance, Angela knew she wouldn't have been welcomed in the room.

* * * * *

The television in the corner played clips of the Chief's earlier comments to the media in a hastily put-together press conference. The story wasn't going anywhere. It's all they were talking about on the news. Drake stood in front of a banner

displaying the border agent seal and spoke at a podium with several microphones sticking out like a bouquet of flowers.

“I can’t release all the specifics on this incident, but I can say that HAZMAT teams conducted a sweep of the area and found no evidence of chemical agents released,” Drake said, adjusting his glasses. “We’ve cordoned off the area temporarily to conduct the investigation, but we want to stress that the surrounding communities are not in danger.”

A reporter in the back shot his hand up, speaking eagerly and out of turn. “Sir, what info can your agency release about the suspected terrorists who left the scene?” The reporter paused and then looked down and spoke as if reading from his notes. “The Starr County PD reports that they issued an APB on a blue station wagon connected with the vehicle explosion.”

Taken aback, Drake backed away from the microphone and placed both hands on the podium. He then leaned closer, zeroing in on the reporter. “Nothing has been confirmed at this moment involving a vehicle that fits that description or the activities of the Starr County PD.”

* * * * *

Chief Drake stepped in front of the television and muted it with a remote. “That son of a bitch. Did you see what he just did to me there?” he asked the room, turning around astonished.

Assistant Director Thaxton leaned against the front of Drake’s desk casually with her arms crossed. “He’s doing his job,” she offered without sympathy. “Just remember, Chief Drake. Things are going to get a whole lot worse before they get better.”

Drake walked back to his desk, tossing the remote across several open files lying about. He pulled his chair out and sat, sighing, as Thaxton stood up and walked to the window, examining the full parking lot. Angela sat in one chair across from Drake’s desk as Agent Sutherland stood by the door, turning toward the chief.

“Sir, the assistant director is right,” he said. “There’s a lot of loose ends out there, and someone has to tie them up.”

Drake placed both hands on his desk and leaned forward, notably perturbed. “Tell me what *your* team is doing here then? My people are supposed to be protecting the border, not fighting terrorists.” His eyes shifted directly to Angela as though he were sending her a message.

Thaxton calmly strolled from the window toward his desk. “To answer your question, Chief Drake, we’re only getting started.”

Angela said nothing, despite the questions swimming around in her head. She felt no closer to the truth, even with the recent bust. Something felt off-kilter, and each moment that passed made it seem as if she were being dragged further away from finding Martinez.

Drake then voiced his concerns on that very topic. “Where is Captain Martinez?” he asked Angela directly. “His wife has been calling the station all morning. He won’t answer his cell phone. He hasn’t been seen since last night.”

“He’s gone rogue,” Thaxton answered. “And we were hoping that his partner could help us find him.” There was a hint of something accusatory in her voice.

Drake looked at Angela and then rubbed both hands down his drained face. "I'm aware of why you have her tagging along, but I thought you'd have heard from him by now."

"We haven't," Thaxton said.

Angela spoke up for the first time, trying to get everyone back on track. "What do we know about the men apprehended today?" All eyes suddenly turned to her, even Sutherland's, who had seemed preoccupied with his phone. Angela paused, taking notice, and then continued. "IDs? Vehicle registration. They had to be doing something out there. That outpost was unlivable by any standards."

"We've run their information," Thaxton said, surprising Angela with a direct answer. "They're Syrians here on education visas."

"Guess class was canceled today," Sutherland added with a chuckle.

Thaxton moved in closer, inches from Drake's desk, looking at him with urgency. "We have only a small window here to question the men before Customs and Immigration and Homeland get involved."

Drake set aside a file he was looking at. "Okay? So what do you want *me* to do about that?"

"Just keep your agents at bay," Thaxton said. "And let us do our job."

Drake glanced over at his TV in the corner where they were still showing scenes from his earlier press conference. He held out both hands, giving up, and asked Thaxton if there was anything else.

"Let's go, Agent Gannon," Thaxton said, walking toward the door.

Drake's head jerked up. "Hey, where are you taking her?"

Sutherland opened the door as Angela stood, frozen, caught between her boss and the assistant director.

Thaxton said, "I told you that Agent Gannon's assistance is crucial to this investigation." She took a step out the door, and then turned around. "At least until we hear from Captain Martinez—our man in the woods."

Angela looked at Drake for confirmation.

"Very well," he said, looking down. He then pointed at Angela, speaking forcefully. "But I want to know everything that you're doing. You're to brief me periodically. Understand?"

"Yes, sir," Angela said.

He dismissed her, and she walked out with Thaxton and Sutherland at her sides. Offices and cubicles flanked the carpeted pathway before them, and standing outside their doors were Border Patrol agents, who turned in unison with their eyes on Angela.

She continued past them as conversations died out, leaving behind a vacuum of uncomfortable silence. There was much suspicion in the air. No one seemed to know why Angela was so important to the FBI all of a sudden, and the frustration of being left in the dark resulted in rumors and speculation.

Angela tried to make eye contact with her colleagues, even smiling at Captain Reynolds, who looked back at her stone faced. For the most part, she just kept her head down and continued walking.

Up ahead, however, the holding room came into view, where even more Border Patrol had gathered. It was time to investigate the first piece in the intricate puzzle they were desperately trying to solve.

Discovery

Angela followed Thaxton and Agent Sutherland into the holding room, entering as a group. Many of her colleagues had gathered at the window, watching, though once inside the room, she could not see them. She wished they would all go away, but such a scenario wasn't going to happen. All attention was on the suspected terrorists. On top of it all, the FBI had planted their own flag and set up camp.

The nearest FBI headquarters, in Houston, was more than three hundred miles away, and Angela knew they were in Del Rio for the long haul, or at least however long it took to find whatever it was they were looking for.

"Okay, gentlemen," Sutherland said, walking into the room as Thaxton closed the door behind Angela. "Who's the leader here?"

Sitting in line on a bench against the wall, the six men looked down, still handcuffed. No one was speaking. Sutherland walked down the line, close to the men's feet, staring each one down, his long white sleeves rolled up and red tie swaying.

He was about Angela's age. His freshly trimmed blond flattop looked similar to any military cut. With his booming voice and direct nature, Angela wondered if he had a background in military service like she did.

Thaxton took a seat on the empty bench across from the men and beckoned to Angela. As Angela sat next to her, Thaxton handed her a small notepad and pen. The implied task was clear: Angela was to take notes—anything, she supposed—to satisfy the curiosity of her colleagues about her role in the FBI's investigation.

"No one, huh?" Sutherland said, spreading both arms wide as if to embrace them. His pistol rested snugly in his side holster, his cell phone in the other. "Just a bunch of like-minded individuals meeting up along the Rio Grande border."

The men remained silent. Angela scribbled into the pad, noting that the suspects were recalcitrant. Sutherland seemed to be lost in thought, pacing, as Thaxton kept a careful eye on the men. The men stared down at the white tile floor, defiant, with deep, angry frowns on their faces.

"What's wrong?" Sutherland asked the man at the end of the bench. He had dark hair and a thin goatee, and when he raised his head, he refused to make eye contact with the two women in the room.

He answered in a thick Middle Eastern accent. "It is an insult to be asked these questions with *them* here," he said, briefly pointing across the room.

"You're just going to have to deal with it, all right, Mahmoud. Unless you want a one-way ticket back to Syria in the next five minutes."

The man's eyes widened, and he slunk back toward the wall, surprised that Sutherland knew his name and where he was from.

"Do I make myself clear?" Sutherland asked, leaning down right in the man's face.

"Yes. We will talk. But please." He stopped and signaled toward Thaxton and Angela dismissively. "Not with them here."

Sutherland turned to Thaxton, waiting for her response. She shook her head, not saying a word. He then turned back to Mahmoud. "Sorry, Charlie. They stay. You see, that woman there is the assistant director of the FBI. She's my boss. And she's the one calling the shots here. Not you. Not me. And certainly not your friends here."

Mahmoud looked away with a sullen defeated expression. His friends appeared just as despondent.

Angela scribbled away, beginning to understand the assistant director a little better: she did things her way.

"That's what I thought," Sutherland said. "Mahmoud, we checked your backgrounds—what little we could find—and discovered that you're all Syrians, here on expired student visas." He began pacing the room again like a defense attorney, his leather dress shoes tapping along the floor. He stopped and looked at his watch, then to Mahmoud. "How about we get you back home in about thirteen hours on a one-way flight? Sound good?"

The men remained silent as Mahmoud jerked his head up, galvanized with fear. "No! You can't send us back there. They'll kill us all!"

Sutherland stooped down right in front of Mahmoud's shaken face again. "Then tell me everything I need to know, Mahmoud, or I'll have no other choice."

"We were fleeing from ISIS!" Mahmoud said, voice rising. "They accused us of being spies—"

Sutherland smacked the wall, cutting him off. "You expect us to believe that? Where are your families? What are you doing meeting up in an abandoned outpost?"

"We're trying to get our families here. Trying to get citizenship first!"

"Bullshit!" Sutherland shouted. "You start telling me what I need to know, or we send you to your buddies back home."

"We are not terrorists," Mahmoud said. "I know that you have your suspicions, but I can explain everything."

Sutherland sighed and looked up at the ceiling panels and the two long, white fluorescent bulbs that illuminated the room. He pulled a picture from his pocket and held it close in Mahmoud's face. "This man. He's a Border Patrol agent. Very important that we find him." His finger pointed at Captain Martinez's official department headshot. "What do you know about him?"

Mahmoud's eyes tried to adjust. He opened his mouth and shook his head, trying to answer. Sutherland grew impatient and walked down the line of men, slowly walking the picture past their faces. "Answers, gentlemen. We know he was at your meeting place because he's the one who told us about it." Sutherland paused. "Right before he disappeared."

Mahmoud shook his head in disbelief. "I didn't... we didn't."

Sutherland lashed forward with his open hand and hit the wall just above Mahmoud's head. "Start talking, damn it! We've got one Border Patrol agent dead, one missing, and six Syrians with expired visas in an abandoned outpost."

"We were hiding!" Mahmoud shouted.

The eyes of the other men widened as they looked at Mahmoud, urging him not to say anything more. A man with a facial scar stood up at the other end of the bench, livid.

“That’s enough, Mahmoud!”

* * * * *

Thaxton’s hand went to her pistol as she rose from the bench across from the men. “Sit down,” she said.

Mahmoud froze and stared back at her with contempt.

“Shakir. Sit!” Mahmoud said in forceful tone.

The scar-faced man slowly sat as Thaxton stared him down.

“The truth is...” Mahmoud began. “We are all six of us friends. We came here together. And we are living in fear. Not only is ISIS trying to kill us back home, they have fighters here. There is a fatwa against each of us. We were meeting to discuss where we could go to be safe. There’s too many of them in this state.”

Sutherland crossed his bulky arms, not convinced, as Angela continued rapidly jotting down words on the notepad.

“Going into hiding from ISIS after staying past your visas? Not buying it,” Sutherland said.

“Don’t you see?” Mahmoud shouted, jerking at his handcuffs. “We are men without a country! We thought that we had chance here.”

“Oh yeah?” Sutherland said. “And what school do you attend? Where do you live? How do you know all these ISIS creeps?”

“We live together. All of us. We have little money,” Mahmoud said.

“What’s your major?” Sutherland asked.

“There is no school!” Mahmoud shouted, cracking.

Wary of all the back and forth, Thaxton stepped forward, pulled a digital recorder from her pocket, and pressed the stop button. Angela paused in her note taking and stared down at her efforts to keep up, wondering why she had even bothered.

“That’s enough,” Thaxton said. “We’re getting nowhere fast.”

“I don’t think that’s the case,” Angela said. As all eyes fell on her, she realized she had spoken out of turn. Thaxton stared back at her with near amusement on her face.

Having garnered their attention, Angela decided to continue. “I think all of this is pretty revealing.” She paused, trying to read Sutherland’s and Thaxton’s straight-faced expressions. “I mean, don’t you agree?”

Sutherland sighed and turned to Mahmoud. “I would if I didn’t think it was one-hundred percent bullshit.”

“I don’t lie...” Mahmoud said softly.

“What?” Sutherland asked, leaning in closer.

“I said I don’t lie. Are we here illegally? Yes. Are we Muslim? Yes. Are we Syrian? Yes.” He paused and took a deep breath. “Are we terrorists? No.”

Thaxton cut in, intrigued. “This ISIS mafia, as you referred to them. You know where they’re operating?”

Mahmoud shook his head. “Your agent, Martinez. He asked us the same thing.”

“Well?” Thaxton said, looking down the line of men. Their eyes remained averted from her deepening glare.

“Only I and Shakir speak English. And we met Captain Martinez outside a mosque service, trying to make new friends. Trying to weed out any ISIS who were

after us.” He paused, staring ahead. “We think Martinez was there for the same reason.”

At the end of the bench, Shakir grunted in anger while shaking his head. Sutherland looked up, annoyed. “You have a problem there, *Sha-kir*? Something you wanna add to the conversation?”

Mahmoud raised a hand. “Please. He is only afraid. We are all afraid.”

Angela scanned the faces of the men. They were groomed and dressed as Americans, but she could see a hopelessness in their eyes, a despondent, vacant look that didn’t seem bred in deception. They looked as though they had been through hell.

“Martinez...” Sutherland said. “Where is he?”

Mahmoud looked around, reserved and nervous.

“Eyes up here, Mahmoud,” Sutherland continued, pointing at his own eyes with two fingers.

Mahmoud began rubbing his hands together nervously. “There is a place we know little about. One of our friends. He went there. He volunteered to join the Islamic State so that we would know where they were. So that, when the time came, we’d have... something to offer.”

“To offer who?” Sutherland asked.

“The U.S. government,” Mahmoud continued. “People like you.”

“Interesting,” Thaxton said, cutting in. “And what is this information worth to you?”

Mahmoud made direct eye contact with her for the first time, not hesitant in his response. “To put us somewhere where ISIS cannot find us.”

Sutherland tilted his head back and laughed. “Ah. Sort of like Witness Protection for foreign nationals.”

Angela’s hand began to hurt from writing so much. She then glanced at the mirrorlike Plexiglas window, wondering about the reaction of her watching colleagues. The sound box had been turned off, preventing anyone outside from hearing what was being said in the room. She was certain that she’d be met with a barrage of questions when she left the room.

“You told Captain Martinez about this place? This ISIS hideout?” Thaxton asked.

“Yes,” Mahmoud answered. “He said he would help us.”

Thaxton turned around thinking to herself, holding one arm by the elbow as her hand rested on her chin. “His last known location was at your meeting place.” She then turned to Angela. “Did you get a call from him after that?”

Angela shook her head. “I didn’t even get a call about the first place. He just said that he was going to do some investigating.”

Thaxton turned to Mahmoud. “Why haven’t we heard from him since?”

Mahmoud shrugged, trying to come up with a good answer. “I-I don’t know. Maybe he got caught.”

Angered, Sutherland stepped forward. “And you better damn well hope that he didn’t and that nothing happened to him, or it’s your ass.” He glared down at the line of men. “All of you!”

Thaxton placed a hand on Sutherland's shoulder, calming him. "That's okay. We're good here." Her eyes traveled across the room to Angela. "I think our work is done here."

Sutherland looked around, confused. "Ma'am? I'm sorry, I don't know what you mean. They haven't told us—"

"I think Agent Gannon can take it from here." She then walked to Angela. "I want you to write down the location and description of this place they're talking about and report to Chief Drake's office when you're done."

Angela looked past Thaxton to Sutherland with a confused expression. Her head went down, nodding. "Yes, ma'am... I think I should be able to handle that."

"Good," Thaxton said, turning to Mahmoud. "You will tell her everything you know about this location, and I'll see to it that you're taken care of. Understand?"

After a long pause, Mahmoud said a faint "yes."

"Because you and your friends aren't going anywhere until we confirm every bit of information you give us. And once we have Captain Martinez back, then we can talk."

She beckoned Sutherland to the door, but he didn't look happy or convinced. He finally conceded, letting out a loud sigh, and left the room with Thaxton. The door shut again, and Angela felt a tinge of nervousness being left in the room with six men restrained only by their handcuffs.

Their reflections showed in the window, and Angela knew her every move was being watched, not just by her colleagues, but by the FBI duo who had just left the room. Her suspicion was confirmed the moment she noticed the switch to the room mic, located right next to the door, had been turned on.

She turned to the men and tried to sound her most confident. Their festering disapproval made her uncomfortable, but she let out a deep breath, smiled slightly and began. "So, Mr. Mahmoud. I believe you have some information to share," she said, pen in hand.

He said nothing and her heart started racing. Now what? A long silence followed. All the men looked away from her except Mahmoud. He slowly lifted his cuffed hands and pointed at her.

"You Martinez partner?"

She didn't understand whether it was a question or a statement but answered nonetheless. "Yes. I am."

"He told me about you. Said you were smart."

Angela smiled slightly. "Well, that's nice to hear. What can you tell me about this location?"

"El Paso, Texas," Mahmoud said. "Never seen it, but our friend. He sent an email about two weeks ago. Brief. Only one line of GPS coordinates."

Angela paused, fearing that whatever they gave her could turn out to be misleading, or a dead end. "Do you have those coordinates?" she asked.

"Yes," he said, placing his index finger against his forehead.

Angela waited, but Mahmoud seemed in no rush to disclose the information. He crossed his legs and leaned forward with a more casual tone than before. "Martinez also said that you can be trusted. That you are *loyal*."

Angela nodded. "To my partner, yes. To this job, absolutely."

Mahmoud smiled, exposing a missing tooth in his top row. "He also said that you were naïve."

Angela paused, unsure how to respond. "I don't agree. But everyone is entitled to their opinion."

"Yes," Mahmoud said, smiling. "Yes they are."

Shakir, however, seemed less than smitten with their exchange. "Quit flirting with this bitch and get us out of here!" he shouted, waving his hands in the air and jangling his cuffs.

Angela brought one hand to her side, hovering over her pistol.

Mahmoud's face flushed as he began to shout at Shakir in Arabic. Shakir shouted back.

"Gentlemen!" Angela shouted. "Enough!"

The men calmed as they turned their heads in her direction. Angela shuffled on the bench and brought the pen back to the notepad, waiting. "The coordinates. Now, please."

Mahmoud rubbed his tired eyes as he nodded. "Okay. Here you go." He paused, thinking to himself, then spoke. "31761970..."

Angela wrote each digit down as Mahmoud paused again to think of the rest. "1062960792."

"That's the latitude and longitude, right?" she asked.

"Yes," he said.

"And you're sure about those numbers?"

"I am."

Angela leaned back, studying him. "That's impressive," she said, smiling. "I don't think there would be any way I could have memorized all those digits."

Mahmoud nodded with a nervous smile that quickly dropped. "When you fear for your life, you'll memorize anything."

Angela said nothing, rising from the bench. She went to the door and opened it, only to find a group of Border Patrol agents outside the room, waiting for her. Surprisingly, Thaxton and Sutherland weren't among the agents. Angela quickly closed the door, locking it.

"What's next?" Patrol Agent Bernasconi, a muscular tank of a man asked from the group.

Angela held the notepad close to her chest, nervous at all the unwanted attention.

"Come on, Agent Gannon," Bernasconi continued. "You gotta bring us in on this thing."

"I'm working on it," she said, storming past them and trying to ignore their groans. As soon as she turned the corner, she nearly ran into Captain Reynolds, who was tossing her ponytail and standing directly in her way. She was holding a rolled-up newspaper.

"Here," she said, handing it to Angela.

Angela took the paper and unrolled it, revealing the front page of the Del Rio Post. Agent Dawson's official photo was in the side left corner under a headline that said, *Terrorist Bombing Rocks Border Town, Kills Agent*. Just seeing his boyish face nearly brought tears to her eyes. First Dawson, and now Martinez was missing. It was almost too much to take.

“They got it all wrong,” Reynolds said, brushing one side of her shoulder-length red hair back.

Angela scanned the article. She could see in the first paragraph that there was a lot of embellishment in the article. They spoke about the box truck as though it were a missile headed toward town, prematurely detonated while being intercepted by Border Patrol agents.

“That’s the media for you,” Angela said, reading. She then looked up at Reynolds, noticing her pained expression. “At least they make Dawson out to be a hero. That’s worth something, right?”

Captain Reynolds’s finger tracked across the article, pressing down. “It’s too much speculation. Did they call you or me or any of us to confirm this bullshit?”

“Not that I know of,” Angela said. “I mean, the chief gave his press conference earlier.”

Reynolds snatched the paper back and huffed. “Either they have a fiction writer on staff, or someone from this station is giving credence to this crap.” She turned and walked past Angela toward the lobby, while Angela remained standing there, stunned. She hoped that Reynolds wasn’t implying something with her comment.

What reason would Angela possibly have to lie? No one from the local media had tried to contact her yet, and for that she was grateful. Reynolds was upset, but instead of fuming around the station, Angela wished she would offer to help or just go home. There were terrorists out there, and now wasn’t the time to fall to pieces—or so Angela believed.

She continued to Chief Drake’s office at the end of the hall. The door and blinds were closed, and she wasn’t sure what game the FBI was playing. She knocked on the door and heard Drake’s voice call her in. As she opened the door, she could see him at his desk with the FBI team around him.

Thaxton turned around and welcomed Angela, asking her to close the door. Angela pushed the door shut and approached the desk, notepad in hand, as everyone watched her in silent hope.

“What’d you bring us?” Thaxton asked.

Angela stopped, ready to hand over the notebook, but it was clear something was troubling her. “Can I ask you a question, ma’am?”

Thaxton leaned back, surprised but agreeable, while Sutherland eyed her suspiciously. “Sure.”

“Why did you leave me in the holding room with those men? After all your work getting information from the suspect, it seemed strange that you and Agent Sutherland would just walk out.”

Thaxton crossed her arms and looked down, nodding. Her face then shot up, with her thin, straight hair swinging to the side and a slight smile on her face. “There are many moving parts to consider here, Agent Gannon. If we’re going to find your partner, we need to be able to trust each other and work together.” Not directly answering the question, she held her hand out for the notebook. “The coordinates, please.”

Angela slowly handed it over. Sutherland and the other agents watched from Drake’s desk as Thaxton pulled her digital recorder from her pocket and pressed play. Through its tiny speaker, Angela could hear Mahmoud’s faint voice.

“31761970... 1062960792.”

“Perfect match,” Thaxton said, turning the recorder off.

Angela looked at her in disbelief. “You... you recorded him. What is this, some kind of game to you?”

Chief Drake looked up at Angela, shocked by her tone. “Agent Gannon. Please.”

Thaxton waved his objection away smiling. “It’s quite all right, Chief. Agent Gannon is right to ask questions.” She stopped and then handed the notebook back to Angela. “I just wanted to make sure that we’re on the same page.”

“Have a seat,” Chief Drake said, indicating the chair in front of his desk.

Angela felt as though she had no choice. She sat down at the edge of the seat, hands on her knees, eager to go to the next step in finding her partner. “So we have the coordinates. What are we waiting for?”

Agent Lynch set a Toughbook laptop in the center of Drake’s desk and opened it as everyone gathered around, leaving a space for Angela to see the screen. A satellite image was displayed of lush green land, with spots of clear white all around it. There were numbered coordinates everywhere, listed in parallel and vertical lines like a graph.

“The numbers, please,” Lynch said, turning to Angela.

She handed the notepad to him, wondering why Thaxton had given it back to her in the first place. He took the pad and typed in the coordinates. The screen moved along and shifted to a new location. Lynch zoomed in closer with a scroll of the mouse as the image centered over a large desert area with a curvy line of mountains running through it.

“That’s El Paso, all right,” Lynch said with confidence. He typed some more, and the image moved in even closer to a largely uninhabited area far outside the city and close to the Mexican border.

“Starting to see a pattern here in how these guys operate,” Sutherland said. “Surprised they haven’t crossed paths with the cartels.”

“Who says they haven’t?” Lynch said. “Could be a mutually beneficial relationship.”

Everyone continued watching the screen as Lynch scrolled around, trying to get in close enough to see some kind of structure. But it was all desert.

“Keep in mind, it’s only a satellite image. Whatever is there might not show up.” He zoomed in closer on the hills and outlines of nearby roads. There was nothing that indicated a secret hideout or gathering place, even as Lynch pinpointed the exact coordinates.

“Well. I’m sure we’ll find something when we get out there,” Sutherland added, scratching his head.

“Wait a minute,” Lynch said urgently. He moved around the screen in deep concentration. “I can kind of make something out there.” He got in as close as he could get before the image began to get fuzzy and pixelated. “There!” he said, touching the screen with his index finger.

He was pointing to a lightly shaded area in the vast desert, barely noticeable. “They’ve got the place covered. Camouflaged,” Lynch said.

“Shit. Cartels do that all the time,” Sutherland said. “How do we know who we’re dealing with here?”

“Guess we’re going to have to go out there and find out,” Lynch replied.

Sutherland glanced at his watch. "That's a six hour drive. Not exactly a hop, skip, and jump away you know."

Thaxton backed away from the desk and walked to the window, staring out into the parking lot. It was already late afternoon of a very long day. Angela shuddered at the prospect of making that long trip.

"Who said anything about driving?" Lynch said.

"Ma'am?" Sutherland said, turning to the window where Thaxton was standing.

"I see a lot of red tape already." She turned from the window and looked at her team, all dutifully prepared to follow her every whim. "We might have to bring in some other teams on this. Not sure if going it alone is the answer here."

"Your call, ma'am," Sutherland said.

* * * * *

"Our department would like to help," Drake said, folding his hands. "But El Paso isn't exactly our jurisdiction."

Angela looked around the room, feeling helpless in trying to influence their decision. Or perhaps they were done with her. Either way, she wanted in. Nothing was going to settle right with her until they found Martinez. She had met with him just the night before; how far could he possibly have gone?

In a startling coincidence, Angela's cell phone vibrated in her pocket. She took it out, expecting a call from Doug but saw Martinez's name on the screen instead.

"Oh my God," she said, covering a cheek with her free hand.

"What is it?" Thaxton asked her from across the room.

Angela held the phone up, displaying the screen for all to see. "Captain Martinez... he's calling."

A New Mission

The room watched Angela anxiously. The cell phone buzzed again as she hesitated.

"What are you waiting for?" Sutherland barked. "Answer it!"

Thaxton moved swiftly from the window to the chair next to Angela, sitting and trying to listen in.

Angela swiped the screen and held the phone to her ear. "Hello? Captain Martinez? Are you there?" Her tone was hurried and eager. She so much wanted to hear his voice, but he didn't answer.

"Put it on speaker," Lynch said.

"Nah. He won't be able to hear her," Sutherland said.

"What about us? *We* can't hear *him*," Agent Hopper cut in.

"Gentlemen, please!" Chief Drake said. "Let Agent Gannon talk to him."

"Hello?" she said again.

"Angela..." a faint voice said.

"Captain Martinez. Sir. Where are you? We've been looking everywhere—"

“No!” he said. The static over the line was bad enough, but whenever Angela talked, her own voice echoed back to her, making it harder to hear or understand him.

“Keep them away. I’m close, Angela.”

Angela looked to Thaxton and spoke as clearly as she could. “The *assistant director* of the FBI is here, Jennifer Thaxton. You need to tell us where you are. Your wife. Your family. They’re all worried sick about you.”

“The FBI?” he asked.

“Yes. Are you in El Paso? If so, stand fast. We’re on our way.”

“The FBI have you?” Martinez asked.

Angela paused. “No... I mean they’re here, and they’re trying to find you.”

She heard some kind of background noise, like wind, but otherwise, only silence. Angela glanced again at Thaxton with a confused look, but then the call suddenly dropped. She held the phone away to see the number as it blinked across the screen. It wasn’t clear whether he had hung up or whether the call had lost reception.

“What?” Sutherland said, stepping forward after noticing Angela’s blank expression.

“Lost the call,” she said.

“Well, call him back!”

Angela pressed the callback button and held the phone against her ear. “I’m trying.”

It went straight to a message saying that the mailbox of the recipient was full. She tried to call again and got the same message. “Nothing...” she told the agitated group.

“What did he say?” Chief Drake asked, leaning forward in his chair.

As she looked across his desk, she could feel the FBI agents’ eyes on her, demanding and anxious. She held the phone in her lap and tried to summarize the conversation the best she could. “He said that he was on to something. Sounded like he was in hiding.”

“Did he say anything about El Paso?” Hopper asked.

“Or anywhere else?” Sutherland added.

Angela hesitated. “He didn’t.” She looked up and saw Thaxton standing behind the other agents, studying her intently. “Did he hang up on you?” she asked with a suspicious tone.

“I don’t know,” Angela replied defensively. “He just said that he was on to something and that he didn’t want our help.”

Hopper and Sutherland glanced at each other in disbelief.

“What?” Sutherland said. “Does he think he’s some kind of secret agent?”

Lynch snorted while shaking his wavy, gray hair.

Angela said nothing. She had no idea what Martinez was into or why he seemed so insistent on being left alone. “He sounded different,” she conceded. “Not like his usual self.”

“Paranoid?” Thaxton asked.

“A little,” Angela answered. She took a deep breath and then looked around the room, trying to figure things out. “I just don’t understand it. His wife is worried sick about him. Why is he doing this?”

Thaxton answered in a cool, collected tone that made Angela wonder how the assistant director of the FBI would know her partner better than she did. "He doesn't trust us. The government, I mean. Let's just say that he has some theories all his own."

Angela studied her back for a moment then spoke. "Ma'am, if you don't mind me asking, how do you know Captain Martinez? He mentioned a friend in the FBI before. Are you that friend?"

Thaxton smiled and backed away as the other agents turned around to look at her. From his desk, even Drake couldn't hide his interest. Thaxton ran both hands through her hair with a sigh. "I met Captain Martinez years ago at the academy. We were both recruits."

Drake seemed the most surprised. His eyes widened as he stood up from his chair. "Recruit? You mean to tell me that Martinez was FBI?" He looked around, astonished. "That's not on his record."

"He didn't complete it," Thaxton said with a kindly tone.

Drake looked beside himself. "*When?*" he asked, very curious now.

Thaxton glanced toward the ceiling, thinking to herself. "I was eighteen when I joined the academy. I believe he was too." She paused and noticed everyone staring. "I'm not going to tell you my age now, if that's what you're thinking. Perhaps you're thinking I'm someone too young to be an assistant director. And you'd probably be right."

"What'd he do, drop out?" Hopper asked with little tact.

"Something like that," Thaxton answered.

"And you've kept in contact with him this entire time?" Drake asked, still seemingly stunned by the revelation.

"From time to time. We were friends. Hadn't heard from him in years when I got a call from him the other week." She paused and looked at Angela. "He had a lot to say, and though it had been years, I noticed a change in his voice. He was tense. Paranoid even."

Angela nodded, wondering how much more she didn't know about Captain Martinez, her partner for the last year.

"So, Agent Gannon. Does that answer your question?" Thaxton asked.

"Yes," Angela said. "Thank you." She had plenty of more questions but held back. She wanted to know the connection between Martinez's suspicions of government officials and his relationship with Thaxton. And if Martinez was in fact old friends with her, why did he balk at the idea of the FBI assisting him? There seemed to be much more to this bizarre scenario, but she knew one thing: she didn't want to let these FBI agents out of her sight.

"I want in on the El Paso mission," she announced boldly.

Drake turned to her, surprised. "I'm sorry?"

"If we're going to El Paso, I want to be there," she said clearly.

The agents deferred to Thaxton, turning their heads toward her as she studied Angela with an admiring look. The chief, however, didn't seem too enthusiastic about the idea.

"I'd prefer not including Agent Gannon. We already have one of ours off the grid. Best not to risk another."

"But, sir," Angela began.

Drake shook his head, cutting her off, and spoke forcibly. "This is not something I want you involved in any longer."

Thaxton pushed through the other agents, standing directly in front of his desk. "I'm afraid we need her, Chief Drake."

The chief balked and pulled at the dark blue tie of his green uniform. "With all due respect, ma'am. I'm in charge of this station, and I answer to the Department of Homeland Security, not the FBI."

"I understand that, and your station has been more than cooperative to this point. However, like it or not, Agent Gannon is an integral part of this investigation."

Drake dismissed her with a wave of his hand. "She has your cell number, I'm sure. My answer still stands at no."

Thaxton placed both hands on the front of his desk and leaned toward him, inches from his face. His eyes blinked rapidly, revealing a brief nervousness.

"Your department will do whatever it takes to find these terror cells. Anything less is unacceptable. Now you can hear it from me or from the FBI or the Homeland director. Hell, we might even get the president on the line. What do you say?"

Drake looked around and saw only the blank faces of the other agents watching him, daring him to argue back.

"I don't want her placed at risk of any harm," he said, trying to gain back his authority and tamp down the anger rising in his chest.

"Of course," Thaxton said, nodding.

"And she can accompany you no longer than twenty-four hours."

Angela sat by as they negotiated her involvement as though she weren't in the room.

"Forty-eight hours," Thaxton added.

"That's simply too long. We have a border to guard here not in El Paso," Drake said.

Thaxton backed away from the desk and rubbed her forehead, sighing. The other agents stepped aside as she walked past them, going toward the window. "Time is critical, Chief Drake. We could be dealing with something larger than we can imagine." She stopped and turned back to him. "The only question is, can we stop it in time?"

"I'm not trying to impede that," he answered, as the lines in his face deepened into a concerned frown. "I just think that rather than whisking one of my Border Patrol agents going to El Paso on some wild goose chase, you search for the perpetrators who were behind the improvised truck bomb."

In the silence that followed, Drake knew from their expressions that they were not fully following him. "Not the dead ones, of course. You know, the ones who got away." He looked directly at Angela for confirmation. "The station wagon."

Angela had to admit, she preferred a closer search of the immediate area for the station wagon. She found it unfathomable that a car like that still remained unfound. However, she felt, for whatever reason, more on the side of the FBI. Perhaps the assistant director was being genuine in her requests. Stopping the terror cell and finding Martinez seemed to her the best bet for doing that. At the very least, it was something.

She didn't realize Drake was waiting for a response from her, and then suddenly she spoke up. "Yes. The blue station wagon."

Hopper laughed. "Hell. They're probably halfway across the country by now."

Thaxton walked away from the desk and toward the door, stopping once again to turn to Drake as she reached for the handle. "We're leaving for El Paso in an hour. I expect to have Agent Gannon on board." She opened the door and signaled to her team.

Not expecting to leave so abruptly, Sutherland and Hopper walked out. Lynch grabbed his laptop and followed. Thaxton waited as the others had left to deliver the final word. "I appreciate your support, Chief Drake. It means a lot to the Bureau."

Feeling left out of whatever the hell was going on, Angela stood up. "Ma'am. It's getting late and I have a family."

Thaxton's glacial eyes shifted over to her, unblinking. "The decision is all yours, Agent Gannon. The helicopter will be here soon. We leave in an hour."

Angela nodded.

"Is that a yes?" Thaxton added.

Duty called, and she had to listen to her gut. "Yes, ma'am. I'll be ready." She paused, thinking she could hear the chief's otherwise thinly veiled sigh.

"Excellent," Thaxton said. "Don't go too far." She then left the room and closed the door without asking if the chief wanted it open.

After having agreed to the mission, Angela dreaded having to look him in the eyes, but she did anyway, as he leaned back in his chair. She glanced at the television, seeing a weather report in process, the first time she had seen them stray from the truck explosion coverage.

"I hope you don't mind, Chief," she said, facing him.

Quiet at first, Drake adjusted the collar of his dark-green uniform, affixed with two silver stars. "If it will help get Martinez back, then I'm for it." He took his glasses off and set them on the desk then squeezed the bridge of his nose as though he had a sinus headache. "I'd have another agent accompany you, but we need all our resources here at home."

Angela thought to herself for a moment and then said, "What about Captain Reynolds?"

She didn't know why her name came to mind. Reynolds had understandably been a wreck after Dawson's death. Perhaps helping to find and stop a terror cell would bring closure—for both her and Reynolds. Maybe that was it.

Drake shook his head. "No. You keep your head down out there, and do your best. I'm not so sure about that assistant director. She's young and cocky. That might work in some areas, but out here we have to look out for each other. Understand?"

"Yes, Chief," Angela said.

Drake grabbed some files on his desk and began straightening them up. "Dismissed," he said, keeping his eyes down.

Angela thanked him and got up, relieved to be on her way out. She asked him if he wanted the door open.

"What does it matter?" he said, eyes still cast down.

"Chief?" she said, not understanding his answer.

He looked up, seemingly distracted. "Oh. You can leave it open."

Angela walked out to find border agents everywhere, walking to and from cubicles and offices on both sides of the hall. She zipped past, hoping to find some quiet. The breakroom was ideal, but she knew of a place even better than that. She passed the restrooms, eyes forward and away from the curious glances of Border Patrol agents, and then turned down a darkened, narrow hall with two doors at the end across from each other. She opened the door on her left and turned on the light, revealing the janitor's closet.

She stepped inside and closed the door to a crack, basking in the relative quiet. She could feel the warm glow of her cell phone in her pocket and was eager to make a call. She pulled the phone out and dialed Doug. A glance at the screen told her it was close to four. By committing her services, in whatever capacity, to the FBI, she knew that she was in it for the long haul. Maybe several days.

"*Hey, what's up?*" Doug asked on the second ring. He sounded like he was driving and had her on the speakerphone.

"Nothing much. Just getting into the thick of it at work," she answered, leaning against a concrete wall next to a large sink and hanging mop—anything for a little privacy.

"*Haven't watched the news since this morning, but I heard them talking about it on the radio,*" he said, sounding more serious than he had with his boisterous greeting.

"Yeah..." she said with a sigh. "It's a madhouse here."

"*When you coming home?*" He paused, then spoke before she could answer. "*I still don't think it's a good idea that you went in today. Dawson's death and all. You need time to decompress.*"

Angela didn't want to admit that Dawson hadn't been much on her mind since morning. She pondered how much to reveal to him about her day. He wouldn't have approved of her going to the abandoned outpost, and he most certainly wouldn't approve of her flying to El Paso. But she had to tell him something.

"*When's the memorial service, anyway?*" he asked.

Angela peeked out the door crack and was relieved to see no one coming. She also wasn't sure what question of Doug's to answer first.

"Soon," she answered.

"*Soon you're coming home, or soon on Dawson's memorial?*"

"That's what you get for asking me too many questions," she said playfully.

"*Har, har. When you coming home?*"

"Are you driving?" she asked, evading the question.

"*Yeah, I got off work a little early. Was going to pick up some pizza for the girls.*"

Chassity and Lisa were in the sixth and seventh grades, and they normally got home around three. They were good kids, overall as rambunctious as any eleven- and twelve-year-old.

"Sounds good," Angela said. She knew she was stalling, and she could sense that Doug knew it as well. It was fairly obvious.

"*And when can we expect you home, my dear?*"

"Doug..." she began. "Martinez went missing today."

A pause on the other end indicated that she had his complete attention.

“We think he might be in some serious trouble,” she continued. “The FBI is now involved in the search, and... I have to help them, Doug. I have to.”

“*Missing?*” Doug asked. “*Missing how?*”

“He went off on his own, trying to figure this whole thing out. He doesn’t trust anyone, it seems. Anyone but me.”

Doug spoke sternly, as though he couldn’t have disapproved more. “*I want you home, Angela. The kids want you home. Whatever he got himself into, I’m sure your partner can handle it himself.*”

“I’ll only be a few hours,” she replied. “I have to do this, and I refuse to wait for another memorial service to do something.”

There was little fight left in Doug. He knew when she was serious, and her utter conviction was evident to him.

“*If you have to do this, promise me that you won’t put yourself in any danger.*”

“I promise,” she said, feeling a surge of tears coming, though she held them back.

A long, defeated sigh came over the phone. “*I really wish...*”

“What?” Angela asked after his pause.

“*Nothing. I love you.*”

“Love you too,” she said. “Tell the girls I’ll be home soon.”

“*Sure thing.*”

She ended the call before the chance of Doug talking her out of it could come about. She tilted her head back against the cold, concrete wall and stood alone in the janitor’s closet with her thoughts. Something didn’t seem right with the mission, but she couldn’t put her finger on it. All she knew was that she had to go along with it. Martinez was counting on her, even if he didn’t realize it.

Closing In

Angela was patient despite her imminent departure for a mission she knew little about.

“So help me God, if we find Captain Martinez, I’ll hang up my badge and become a housewife, I don’t care,” she said to herself. She was due to meet the FBI outside near the landing pad in ten minutes, with tactical gear, a helmet, and her pistol.

Fewer Border Patrol agents were gathered outside the holding area as she passed, but she didn’t linger. She went straight for the locker room to grab her gear and take one last look in the mirror before facing unknown and threatening circumstances.

She arrived at the empty helicopter pad behind the Border Patrol building to find the assistant director waiting with her team, backpacks over their shoulders. The sun was setting in a tangerine glow. Daytime was quickly fading, and she worried that hadn’t even left yet, but perhaps that was exactly what the FBI had in mind.

“Just in time,” Sutherland said as Angela approached them, carrying a helmet and a backpack over her shoulder.

“Welcome,” Thaxton said. “Did you bring a vest?”

Angela stopped and set her bag on the ground. “A vest, ma’am?”

“A *bulletproof vest*,” Thaxton repeated slowly. On closer inspection, Angela could see that Lynch, Sutherland, Hopper, and the assistant director each wore vests under their dark-blue windbreakers.

Angela looked around as a few loose strands of her brown hair fluttered in the wind. “No, I didn’t bring one.”

Hopper, wearing a pair of aviator sunglasses, tapped his vest with a smile. “Well, you’re probably gonna need one.”

Angela stared at him blankly and then zeroed in on the assistant director. “What exactly are we going to be doing out there, ma’am?”

“These are just precautionary measures,” Thaxton replied, touching her vest.

“Think of it as a sort of reconnaissance mission,” Sutherland added while putting on a black helmet with a headset microphone built into it.

Angela didn’t understand the FBI’s own reluctance toward backup. They had even fewer agents than they had for their earlier raid, which had been less risky.

“Shouldn’t there be more of us?” she asked. “A SWAT team? I mean, these are terrorists, right?”

“Relax,” Hopper said. “We may not even have to get out of the helicopter.”

Not convinced, she asked the group how they planned to find Martinez and bring him back, especially considering that he didn’t seem to want to be found.

“This is how it’s going to go,” Sutherland said, stepping forward. A slight rumbling came from the sky. Angela looked up and saw a helicopter in the distant purple sky flying toward them, with its main and tail rotors beating through the air.

“As we fly over the coordinates, we’ll examine the scene using an onboard thermal video camera,” Sutherland continued. “We should be able to pick up whoever is in or around this location easy. From there, we make our decision.”

Thaxton zipped up her jacket and then looked up at Angela. “We want you to try to get in contact with Martinez again once we get close.”

Their assumptions about Martinez stunned Angela. “Ma’am, can I ask you a question?” she asked, moving closer to the assistant director. “Why hasn’t he contacted you yet? You are friends, right?”

Thaxton smiled, but her wide eyes showed irritation at the question. “As you know, he’s grown quite paranoid. Perhaps you’re the only one he trusts.”

Not wanting to push the issue, Angela let it go as their helicopter got closer and closer. The agents began backing up, clearing the way, as Hopper spoke into his headset mike, directing the pilot. The more Angela thought about it, the more she could see why there were so few of them. There was only so much space in the helicopter.

As she walked back to the cement partition, she pulled out her cell phone to try Martinez again. If anything, she hoped to give him a heads-up.

But there was no answer. Once again, an automated message told her that the recipient’s mailbox was full. The helicopter closed in and hovered over the platform at about five hundred feet.

Massive gusts of wind swirled as Angela put on her helmet to keep her hair from flying in her face. She was glad they had moved away. The helicopter dipped lower

and then gently landed in the center of the large slab of concrete, directly over a painted circle.

Sutherland shouted over the engine for the team to move, but Angela wasn't ready. She hadn't grabbed a vest yet, but there was little time to react. The FBI team, led by Sutherland, had already begun to file toward the helicopter with their helmets on and backpacks in place. She slung her backpack over her shoulder and ran after them across the pavement. The wind grew even stronger as she approached the side where Sutherland had opened a door.

Hopper, Lynch, and Thaxton climbed in and sat in one row in the back as Sutherland held the door.

"I don't have a vest," Angela said to him before getting in.

Confused, he leaned closer to her. "You don't have a mess?" His breath smelled like coffee.

"A vest!" Angela repeated. "Bulletproof vest!"

Sutherland nodded in understanding. "Don't worry! We should have a spare on board!"

She thanked him and climbed inside, hunched down and moving toward the row across from where the agents were sitting. There was no denying the lack of room.

As Angela sat down, she already felt constricted and nearly out of breath before Sutherland climbed in and shut the door. The agents buckled up, placing their backpacks at their feet. Angela followed suit and strapped herself in just as the helicopter lifted up in the air, rising high above the Border Patrol station.

She watched as the top of the building got smaller and smaller. Gravity pushed against her, and she could feel a sinking sensation in her stomach, reminding her again of Panama.

Rolling desert hills and sporadic patches of forest came into view as they ascended. She could hear little except the thick reverberation of the engine that kneaded the back of her seat like a massage chair. Her disposable earplugs were pressed tightly inside, and she could hear nothing of what the agents were saying to each other through their headset mikes.

For Angela, the mission ahead was unclear. And as they flew west, with El Paso an hour away, she hoped they would be able to bring her partner back quickly and that she would see her family by the end of the night.

* * * * *

Salah Asgar sat at a desk in a small, dimly lit underground room with his personal confidants, Bosra and Nabil, standing by, weapons at the ready. With their beards and bulky builds, the two men looked remarkably similar, but they weren't related.

The small room and its concrete floor and walls were nearly empty aside from Salah's table desk, a military-style cot, and a fully-loaded AK-47 machine gun against the wall behind him. The sound of Salah's fingers flittering across the keyboard of his laptop was the only thing to be heard.

The light from his MacBook glowed on his thin, bearded face. His dark eyes scanned the screen, carefully looking over a set of blueprints from an encrypted file sent to him just hours prior. He studied the floor plan with great interest,

scanning the various floors of the Dallas Nuclear Power Plant, one of the two plants located in the state of Texas.

He scribbled on a pad, noting the specific locations of the plant's reactors. The rush of excitement he felt was immeasurable. They were very close to launching a major attack, years in the making.

"This is wonderful..." he said to himself.

Bosra and Nabil kept their eyes forward, paying Salah little mind. They rarely said anything, and when they did, it was generally to shout orders at one of the men under them. Bosra pulled a *USA Today* from his jacket pocket and unfolded it, reading the day's latest.

There were other rooms within the underground facility stocked with weapons, food, and supplies. As the primary leader and strategist of Texas ISIS cells, Salah spent most of his time twenty feet belowground. Several of his lieutenants were positioned throughout the state along with recruits who, unlike Salah, lived in homes or apartments, blending in with their neighborhoods the best they could.

When called, lieutenants, advisors, and other ranking fighters would meet up in the desert, far from potential spies or the authorities. At one time, such a meeting house and resupply point was their hideout in El Paso, Texas, one of three clandestine locations throughout South Texas. Salah now operated out of this main hub, completely underground, its location known only to a few.

For three years he had been building his network, constructing the hideouts, establishing their perimeters and means of communications. Many of the tunnels and underground rooms had already been hollowed out and constructed decades ago by various cartels. But all of that had changed with the arrival of Salah Asgar.

As his terror network gradually embedded themselves throughout Texas and along the southern border, the message to the cartels was clear enough: territory claimed by the Islamic State belongs to the Islamic State.

A lieutenant of the Mexican Knights of Templar cartel named Juan Manuel Marquez had once been dispatched by his bosses to kill whoever had taken over their smuggling tunnels. But Salah was ready. A dozen suicide bombers had descended upon Marquez's house and on many others belonging to Knights of Templar cartel members in the city of Juarez. It was over before the cartel even had time to assemble against the ISIS invaders. There was a new army in town.

As Salah continued taking notes, someone knocked at the door. He stopped writing as Bosra and Nabil exchanged glances and came to attention. Bosra folded his newspaper back up and went quietly to the door, as Nabil pointed his rifle ahead. Bosra asked who it was.

"Mohammed," the voice outside the door said.

"Mohammed who?" Bosra asked with a booming voice while peeking through the tiny door slot.

"Mohammed Abdelslam. The driver," the man said.

Bosra turned to Salah for approval. Salah looked up from his notes and nodded. Bosra unlocked several deadbolts set into the thick, metal door and then pulled it open, revealing a man wearing a striped flannel shirt tucked into tight blue jeans and cowboy boots. His jet-black hair was disheveled and the mustache had been trimmed into a perfect arch.

He was hesitant to walk inside until Salah waved him in. Mohammed thanked Bosra and sheepishly walked toward Salah's corner workstation to the right. Salah's eyes went back to the screen as the man stopped ten feet away, arms folded in front of him.

"Did you get it?" Salah asked, typing.

Mohammed hesitated while shifting around uneasily with his head lowered. Salah quickly caught on that the news wasn't good.

"What happened?" he asked.

Mohammed raised his head, and a stricken look crossed his face. "I don't know. We had trouble. American agents. They interfered."

Salah's eyes widened as he slammed his fist onto the table, startling Mohammed in the process. He then stopped and backed away from the desk, scraping the legs of his chair against the concrete floor. He looked past Mohammed and began rubbing his forehead in frustration. "How many times have I told you to stay alert for the Americans? You have to plan your meeting spot days in advance. You have to check it first. Have I not said this?"

"Yes, my leader. I don't know where they came from. They—"

Salah stood up, cutting Bosra off. "Where are you parked?" Salah asked.

"In the port," Mohammed answered.

"How did you get here?"

"Assad drove me in the Gator."

Salah nodded and then signaled to his men, who went to the door. Bosra unlocked the bolts and opened it. Both men stepped out, scanning the area.

"Let us go," Salah said.

Mohammed turned and nervously faced the door. "I am sorry, my leader. We had no control of the situation."

"Tell me once we get there."

He guided Mohammed to the door with a hand on his shoulder. They stepped outside the room, where a long tunnel, six feet high and ten feet wide, waited them. Several doors were arrayed along both sides of the corridor. There was a gas-powered Gator mini-truck parked to one side with Assad, the driver, at the wheel, staring down the long tunnel, where a single ceiling bulb provided light every twenty feet or so.

Assad wore a black robe with white taqiyah cap. He turned around slightly to notice Salah's approach as Bosra and Nabil sat in the Gator behind him and started the engine. Salah went to the passenger side of the Gator and sat next to Assad. Behind them was a small, flat cargo bed that Salah pointed to while looking at Mohammed.

"Climb in," he said.

Mohammed nodded and hoisted himself in back, holding the sides as Assad started the engine and pulled out.

They reached a double-door entrance at the very end of the tunnel, both doors made of thick steel and only accessible through a concealed combination lock. Assad served as the watchman between entrances. In time, Salah hoped to build a larger security team, but at the moment, he needed his men spread out as far apart from each other as possible. That way, they would be harder for the authorities to find.

Assad stopped in front of the doors and stepped out of the Gator. Salah patiently waited, satellite phone in hand, eager to get to the bottom of whatever had gone wrong with the pickup in Del Rio. He had yet to grill Mohammed. He wanted to speak with both men and get the full story. Mistakes happened, that much Salah understood, but what he did not have patience for was carelessness. Such lapses were often met with swift and brutal retribution.

Assad spun the combination wheel back and forth until he heard a gratifying click. He then pulled open the creaking doors and walked inside. The car port had an extremely low ceiling, just high enough to fit a standard vehicle. Crates lay about the room under the low light of a few ceiling bulbs powered by several energy-saving generators, which made the underground dwelling livable.

A pallet of fuel cans sat in the corner of the room with another pallet of MREs, meals-ready-to-eat, across from it. Salah had been living off the grid for some time. It was necessary for operations and not much different than his conditions in Syria, where he had commanded rebel teams in similar covert surroundings.

He saw a station wagon parked in the center of the port with Hakeem sitting on the hood in his cowboy outfit. He felt even more simmering rage than when Mohammed had entered his room with a pathetic look of shame across his face.

Bosra and Nabil approached the station wagon with their rifles slung around their shoulders, staring Hakeem down and then taking positions at the rear of the vehicle. They never left Salah's side for any reason, it seemed.

Hakeem jumped off the hood and greeted Salah as Mohammed stood to the side with his eyes down, full of dread. Two large green military-issue generators hummed on both sides of the car port, in rhythmic unison in the otherwise dead silence.

Salah offered only a deep stare in return to Hakeem's friendly greeting. The tension was as obvious as it was regrettable, and both Hakeem and Mohammed seemed to feel unjustly blamed and at a loss for words.

"So, tell me now," Salah began. "What happened?"

Both men looked at each other, hesitant to speak up. To this Salah smiled. "Relax, brothers. Whatever it was, Allah will show us the way."

"We were ambushed," Hakeem said. "Two American agents. Maybe more. They came out of nowhere and just started shooting at us. Sayed was hit. Hussein next. They would have killed us. They would have killed us all if we didn't get out of there." He spoke fast, running over his own words, eager to shift the blame. "I don't know what happened. We were exactly where we should have been. I didn't pick the location. Neither did Mohammed. We did the best we could. We're sorry, my leader. We're very sorry."

"Relax," Salah said calmly. "Did you get the material?"

At that question, Hakeem froze, but the worried look on his eyes told Salah everything he needed to know.

"You didn't..." Salah said, answering his own question.

"Please forgive us," Mohammed said, speaking out of turn.

Salah turned to him with a stern, serious expression. "You were both armed, were you not? Why run? Why not stay and fight?"

"Because... because, we..."

"You didn't want to die," Salah said.

“Yes, my leader,” Mohammed said.

Salah took a step back, examining the dust-covered station wagon. He began to walk in a slow circle around the vehicle, crouching and looking underneath as Hakeem and Mohammed stayed in place.

“They saw the vehicle, yes?” Salah asked them with his back turned.

Hakeem looked at Mohammed, urging him to answer.

“We-we left right when they fired at us. I’m certain they didn’t get the license plate.”

Salah turned around and approached the men slowly as Bosra and Nabil stared them both down, hands on their rifles. “And you drove it all the way here. Right to our main operations hub?”

Neither man had an answer. Salah raised one arm and leaned against the passenger side of the car. The sleeve of his white robe swayed in the air. “Too many mistakes. And I’m sure you’ve heard by now that the Americans triggered the explosives in the vehicle.”

Both men’s eyes widened as Salah smirked in disbelief. “Surely, if I’ve heard the news living twenty feet underground, both of you are aware if this, no?”

“The car has no radio,” Hakeem said. “And we’ve had little signal on our cell phones out here.”

Salah nodded. “I appreciate your honesty in coming here empty-handed, despite the fear you must have felt for your failure.” He paused and held a finger to his bushy chin. “That is why I will only make an example of one of you. I’ll let you decide who deserves it more.”

Both men glanced at each other in panicked desperation.

“I’ll give you a few minutes to decide who that may be,” Salah said. Suddenly the satellite phone affixed to his pistol belt buzzed, its digital screen glowing. “Excuse me,” Salah said to the men, walking away and holding the phone to his ear.

He answered the phone to an urgent voice, crackling through the static. “What is it?” he said, not prepared for more bad news.

“We captured an American,” the voice said.

“What are you talking about?” Salah asked.

“About a mile from the safe house in El Paso. He was all alone. Maliki thinks he was trying to find our tunnels.”

“Who is he, FBI?” Salah asked.

There was a pause. “Border Patrol. All alone. Just him. He was on a dirt bike.”

Salah felt his heart beating rapidly. One American there, and who knows how many at the pickup site. They were closing in. “Find out what he knows,” Salah said. “We may have to push operations up. Unleash Phase One before more come.”

“Yes, my leader,” the man said. “By the time I’m done with him, he’ll tell us everything he knows.”

The Fury

Angela stared out the window into the night sky, where a blanket of tiny lights flickered forty thousand feet below. They had been in the air for nearly an hour, and El Paso was in close range. Rattling vibrations shook both bench seats in the back of the helicopter, and everyone on them. A red bulb above illuminated the hatch with an ominous glow.

While the agents continued to communicate through headset mikes, Angela hadn't said a word, and even if she had, it wouldn't have mattered. The helicopter's rumble, combined with her earplugs, made it difficult even to hear herself think. She did, however, have plenty of time to do just that.

Her cell phone was almost dead and losing signal, but she managed to send some messages to Doug telling him that it would be a late night. She observed the tight-knit FBI team around her, wondering what had happened to some of the others, Special Agent MacLachlan among them. She did feel a certain acceptance from them but wondered just how much they expected of her.

Thaxton had this air of guarded mystery around her, a face that never gave anything away, and a motive not clearly known. The presence of lights below was fleeting. They were flying deeper into the rural desert bordering El Paso. Shadowed mountain ranges came into view, eerily reminiscent of any Middle Eastern landscape.

Fort Bliss, one of the state's largest military bases wasn't too far from their current location. Angela could understand why military reserve units had often mobilized there during the height of the Iraq war. The extreme heat and cold mirrored the climates of Iraq and Afghanistan, along with the mountainous terrain.

The boldness of any terror cell setting up camp within the vicinity of a major military base was something to grapple with. Then something struck a nerve in Angela. Fort Bliss could very well be one of their strategic targets.

Captain Martinez's words came back to her. He had mentioned the safety of his family as well as hers as one of the reasons they needed to be vigilant as border agents. It seemed as though terrorism had always been a part of Angela's life, whether during her four years as a civil affairs officer or her first year with the Border Patrol.

But after two long wars, it seemed that there were more terrorists than ever. It was a new normal in the vein of crime statistics and traffic jams. Though the FBI agents around her appeared to be hell-bent on doing something about it.

Sutherland, seated next to her, turned and spoke loudly while holding his hands up, fingers spread. "Ten minutes!"

Angela nodded and gave him a thumbs-up. She would have been lying to claim she didn't feel nervous. Martinez seemed to have stumbled onto something big, and for whatever reason, he didn't want the FBI involved. But the very fact that she was with a high-ranking FBI team in pursuit of terror cells had her convinced she was on the right side.

As the helicopter descended slightly, Angela felt the push of gravity against her insides. She turned around to see the back of the pilot's helmet. His dashboard was fitted with dozens of lighted gauges and tiny glowing bulbs. In front of the empty passenger seat, Angela noticed a ten-inch screen displaying a thermal image of the land below, labeled with coordinates and radar tracking. She was

curious why no one sat up front but then saw the agents glued to the screen of Lynch's open laptop as it rested on his knees.

Angela turned around again to look at the screen near the pilot. The grainy image displayed a white land mass, with shades of gray and black indicating mountains, canyons, and hilltops. The body heat of anything living was yet to be seen, but she watched in anticipation nonetheless. The helicopter descended another couple hundred feet. Angela turned around to see the FBI team huddled together viewing the laptop, pointing and talking.

She unclipped her seat belt and rose with one hand pushed up against the ceiling for balance. "What's the plan?" she said loudly as she moved toward the others.

Thaxton took notice of her and said, "We land soon," but not answering the question. She leaned in closer, her helmet strap fastened tightly under her chin, and continued. "If the coordinates are correct, we should be able to find Captain Martinez before he puts himself in any danger."

"If he's already been captured, then we're looking at a rescue mission," Sutherland said with one hand cupped at this mouth.

Oh great, Angela thought to herself. She then turned and walked back to her seat, feeling the pressure of the situation in all of its enormity. She took a deep breath and closed her eyes as the pull of gravity intensified with their further descent.

She wanted to know what she had gotten herself into. She wanted to know why the FBI seemed so personally concerned with Martinez. She wanted to know everything and more. The answers, however, were not currently within her grasp.

* * * * *

Martinez's private team was well aware of his activities and waiting on an update, but he wouldn't be calling this particular team at the station, or talking with Chief Drake. The FBI wasn't included on the list either. Martinez's team was a militia group he had linked up with, mostly made up of vigilantes disillusioned by government inaction on the border.

The self-proclaimed Outlaws were also known as the Texas Border Recon Group. They had taken refuge in the area to control the influx of illegal immigration, drug trafficking, and terrorism. They weren't authorized to use force, but their leader, a man named Buck, did things his own way and had made an enemy in the U.S. government.

Martinez had reached out to an old friend who was high up the ladder of the FBI. He hadn't spoken to Assistant Director Jennifer Thaxton in ages. But when he reported his recent findings of terror activity to her in a hasty eleventh-hour call, she seemed much more interested in what he knew about the Border Recon Group than anything about terrorism.

Martinez then spoke to another friend from the academy, Victoria Swanson, who had been demoted to a clerical position with the FBI. The revelation had surprised Martinez. He recalled Victoria as being very smart and able.

"Don't ever cross Jennifer," Victoria told him one day over the phone. "She's ruthless. Trust me, I know. You simply can't trust her."

During their revealing phone call, Victoria confided in Martinez. “I don’t even know what this agency is doing any more. The growing number of all these sleeper cells. The lack of arrests, warrants, and everything else. It’s staggering.”

Before getting captured, Martinez had watched the valley below through his long-range binoculars. The compound was hidden, but he wanted to get a better look.

He left his position, climbed down the mountain, and traveled under the cover of dusk, low to the ground and closing in on the strange cement structure in the middle of the Sierra de Juarez desert. No one knew a thing about his mission beyond his inner circle. Buck, the gruff middle-aged leader of the Outlaws would receive word in due time.

He mounted his night-vision goggles to his head and fastened them. His grainy surroundings could then be seen in an illuminated bright green. He unzipped his leather jacket about halfway and pulled out his pistol while carefully creeping ahead.

The air was quiet except for a distant coyote howl and the rumble of an unseen airplane in the sky. A long black snake slithered past, startling him, and burrowed into the ground. Martinez kept his eyes forward while staying low to the ground. There hadn’t been a flicker of light, and he wondered if he had imagined it from the get-go.

“Don’t doubt yourself,” he said under his breath. “These bastards are close. I can feel it.”

He hurried along, his breathing growing more rapid with each step. The structure was suddenly in view and the coordinates close to matching. He reached the clearing where he could get a better look at the compound. There were no windows or doors. A large tarp was spread over it, held aloft upon several poles. Not a soul was visible outside.

“Where you at, Salah?” Martinez asked. He crouched and suddenly felt the ground beneath him give way. He dropped down in an instant, and his body smacked against the ground, deep in a pit surrounded by darkness. He lay on his side in pain. The goggles had flown off his head, and he still had little understanding of what had happened.

Sand poured into the hole from all sides like an hourglass. Martinez tried to stand, but he had twisted an ankle in the fall, maybe even broken something. He crawled around on all fours, searching for his pistol and goggles.

“What the hell?” he said to himself in a panicked breath.

He looked up into an opening about twelve feet above him as though he had fallen into a recently dug grave. He could see movement. The silhouettes of several men, casting shadows, moving around and looking into the hole. The shine of a flashlight hit him in his eyes as he stood frozen against the wall. A glimmer of hope that the recon team had found him entered his mind. But when one of the men spoke, the prospect of any such luck diminished as quickly as he had, falling into the hole.

“Who do we have here?” the man holding the flashlight said in a thick Arabic accent. Several others started laughing in a threatening way.

* * * * *

Martinez awoke at the shock of a bucket of cold water thrown in his face. He wasn't sure where he was or who was holding him. He gasped for air, trying to see, but everything was blurry, and the room was very dark. The laughter that followed was similar to what he had heard when trapped in the hole. If the people holding him were indeed terrorists, as he suspected, he was surprised that they hadn't yet killed him.

They had him in a metal chair bolted to the ground. An empty bucket was at his feet. He tried to move, but his arms were bound with rope behind the railing of the seat. His ankles were tied together as well. His leather jacket was gone, as were his shoes. His T-shirt was soaked and his jeans dripping wet. His bare feet touched the sandy concrete floor.

He blinked rapidly as water ran down his swollen face. His body ached, particularly his sides. It hurt to breathe. It hurt to move. It even hurt to think. He whipped his head around, trying to shake the water off and see who he was dealing with.

"Why am I here? What do you want?" he said, exhausted.

He could make out the figure of a man standing five feet in front of him. The man held up a flashlight and shined the light into Martinez's face again, blinding him.

"I ask the questions here," the man said, calmly. Martinez detected a Middle Eastern accent. They certainly weren't the border recon team he had hoped.

"What is your name?" the man began.

"Get that light out of my eyes!" Martinez shouted, squinting.

The man clicked it off. For a moment Martinez could see. Then his captor flashed it back on and off again repeatedly, while laughing to himself. "Your name," the man said.

Martinez could make out the man's thin face and dark sunken eyes. His trim beard seemed little more than a five o'clock shadow, mixed with shades of gray that matched his short hair. His beige pants matched a long-sleeved shirt with an open collar, worn under a black open vest. Martinez could also see that he was wearing sandals.

There were five or so men standing behind him, but Martinez couldn't make out their faces. He could, however, see that each and every one of them was holding a rifle. He moved his head around, scanning the small room. The walls were barren concrete as was the ground. Behind him, he glimpsed at chain hanging from the ceiling. To his side was a flat doctor's exam table with open leather straps lying out. Terror pricked at the back of Martinez's neck.

"We don't have all day," the man said. "Why don't you make this easy on yourself?"

Martinez turned his head to face the man who was speaking and the quiet, stonelike entourage behind him. As his eyes further adjusted, he caught sight of perhaps the most disturbing thing of all in the room: a table in the corner with a row of knives, a power drill, and a branding iron.

"My name is Jorge Martinez," he said, looking the man directly in the eye.

"Jorge Martinez?" the man said. He took two steps closer and then continued. "And just what were you doing around here, Jorge Martinez?"

“Nothing,” Martinez said. “I was lost. Truck broke down a mile off the freeway.” His mind raced with possible answers to the questions that were sure to follow. “I was looking for some help.”

“You really shouldn’t be walking around here, Jorge Martinez,” the man continued.

“Where is here?” Martinez asked.

The man turned his head slightly to one of the men behind and to his left. They spoke in Arabic as the headman was handed a long wooden cane. He turned to face Martinez, brandishing the cane, and looked at him with a stern, serious face.

Before Martinez could react, the cane came down with full force and wracked his legs with such intensity he thought the bones might be fractured. He felt hot, scorching pain and couldn’t help screaming, which only garnered hoots and laughter from the amused group.

“*What did I tell you about questions?*” the man shouted.

Martinez gritted his teeth, waiting for the searing pain to leave his legs. The man took a few more steps toward him, extended the cane, and playfully tapped him on the head with it. “Should we start at the beginning?”

“I’m Jorge Martinez,” he said through rapid breaths.

“You said that already.”

“I got lost. Wandered too far from the road. That’s all. I’m nobody. I live in El Paso. Work for a construction company.”

The cane struck his legs again with even more force, landing in the very same place where he was hit before. Martinez screamed again as he thrashed about, trying to get loose. But it did no good. The cane wasn’t going anywhere and neither was he.

The man placed a hand over his chest. “My name is Kareem.”

Martinez lifted his head. His eyes watered with tears. Kareem held both arms out and continued. “Now that we are no longer strangers, it’s time we got to know each other better.”

Kareem snapped his fingers, and one of the men leaned forward holding a backpack. Martinez could see that the man’s face was concealed by a black mask with an opening in the middle for his eyes. His dress was reminiscent of an ISIS fighter.

Kneeling, Kareem took the backpack and set it at his feet. He unzipped the bag and pulled out a pair of night-vision goggles—his pair of goggles. Kareem looked up, smiling, exposing slightly crooked and yellow teeth.

“You always walk around with these?”

He released the goggles and dropped them on the floor. Martinez stared ahead, not saying a word. Kareem reached into the bag again and this time pulled out a 9mm covered in dust with an attached silencer. “How about this? This belong to you?”

Martinez lowered his head again, feeling some relief that he had left his wallet back in his truck. Though Kareem was well on his way to assuming that Martinez didn’t just happen to be out looking for help in the desert. He reached into the bag one last time and pulled out the long knife that had been strapped at Martinez’s ankle.

“Bet this would come in handy right now, eh?” Kareem laughed and stood up, leaving the cane, pistol, and goggles at his feet. He approached Martinez, holding the blade out, taunting.

“You have a wife? Family?”

“Yes,” Martinez said, looking away. He felt control fading away—if he’d had any to begin with.

“And who do you work for in the government?”

Martinez looked down, hesitating. The sharp point of the blade was inches from his left eye.

Kareem told him softly, “If there were ever a time to tell the truth, now would be the time.”

As the blade got closer, Martinez flinched. “I’m a Border Patrol Officer! Del Rio sector.”

Intrigued, Kareem lowered the blade. “I see... I knew it was something. I thought FBI.” He then brought the blade back up and pressed the tip against Martinez’s cheek, drawing blood. “Are you sure you’re not FBI?”

Martinez clenched his eyes shut. “Yes!”

Kareem released his pressure and lowered the blade once again. “Great. Now let us make you a little more comfortable.”

He snapped his fingers, and two masked men from the shadows stepped forward and walked over to the chair. Kareem handed the knife to a tall masked man who then stood behind Martinez. The man sawed at the rope around his ankles until he cut it loose.

Martinez’s eyes darted around the room. He wasn’t sure what they had planned for him or why. He didn’t know if he was ready for it. Would it even matter if he told them anything? Would they simply kill him then? The man cut the rope at his wrists, and Martinez’s hands slumped to the side. For a moment, he was free. And it was an opportunity that he wasn’t going to let pass.

Martinez leapt from the chair, punching the masked man in front of him square in the nose. Following a pop, the man jerked back with his hands to his face. Martinez knew one thing and one thing only: his pistol was only a few feet away from him.

He pushed Kareem and charged forward. The taller man ran, the one who’d been behind the chair, ran after him as the remaining men swarmed him like moths to the light.

Martinez leapt to the ground toward his pistol. His chest hit the concrete, knocking the wind out of him. A dozen feet were moving toward him in unison. Kareem shouted from the sidelines to stop him. The muffled cries of the masked man continued in the background.

As Martinez reached for his pistol, inches from his grasp, a large weight fell on top of him, pinning him down. The tall man dug his knee into Martinez’s back and yanked both arms behind him, dislocating one of his shoulders.

Martinez screamed just as a boot from one of the other men kicked him right across the face. An intense white flash left his head rattling and his ear throbbing with a high-pitched ringing. Within moments, he was hoisted up by multiple masked men and carried across the room in a frenzy. His vision was blurry again

and his senses disoriented. They tossed him flat on the doctor's table—hard. Blood spurted from his mouth like a sprinkler.

Some of the men backed away as hands grabbed both his arms and legs, holding him down and fastening the leather straps at each end. He screamed out in anger, trying to move, but they had him fastened, arms at his sides and legs bound at each ankle. They tightened straps over his chest and stomach, and he could hardly breathe. Movement was impossible. They had been rendering him defenseless and at their mercy.

The hard metal surface of the table seemed to dig into his back, as if he were lying on spikes. The men dispersed, leaving only Kareem standing over him, staring down, curious. The ceiling light cast a shadow on Kareem's face, and for a moment, he just examined Martinez as if he were a science project.

"That's one way to speed up the process," Kareem said with a smile. "We weren't going to jump right to this, but you seem to be in one big hurry. So let's begin..." He paused and then held up Martinez's knife, taunting him. "It's always the hardest at the beginning, but then the body does this thing. It tries to suppress the pain and numb the body by releasing endorphins."

"Listen to me!" Martinez said, cutting in. The side of his face was badly swollen from the kick, and he could hardly speak. "I don't care about this place or you. I was looking for drug traffickers."

He had already determined that they weren't cartel. They were, in fact, the very terror cell he was looking for. But he had screwed up. They weren't supposed to catch him. He had been so careful, or had he?

"Whatever reason you have for being here, we are going to get to," Kareem began.

Martinez jerked his body, testing the straps and trying to gauge whether it might be possible to loosen them and break free.

Out of the corner of his good eye, he saw two men from the corner of the room begin to push the wheel table in his direction, displaying instruments of pain and torture.

Kareem leaned in. "Let me tell you a little about myself. I went to school in Jordan to become a surgeon." He turned to the table as the two masked men parked it and walked away.

Kareem set Martinez's knife on the cart and picked up an X-Acto knife about the size of a writing pen. "I had a promising career ahead of me. But then war broke out back home. Civil war, they called it. And I had to return from school at the behest of my family."

He ran the knife down Martinez's chest. "Your government got involved. They backed the rebels. *My people*. We hated Assad and wanted him gone. But what the U.S. didn't understand—or maybe they did—was that Assad was at war with the Islamic State. That's why we wanted him gone."

"Please. Kareem, listen to me. You don't want to do this," Martinez pleaded.

Kareem brought the knife back up and pushed it against his chin. "I've heard many men scream, and I've heard many men beg." He pressed the tip into Martinez's neck as Martinez struggled to prevent himself from shaking. "I've lost count of how many I've cut up and mutilated as they lay screaming until their last

conscious breath drained away. As an executioner for ISIS, sometimes I have had to keep men alive as long as possible so they can feel every last moment of pain.”

Martinez couldn't hold back any longer. “Stop this!”

Kareem gave him an indulgent smile. He pulled the knife away and tossed it onto the cart. He then studied the other instruments, trying to make up his mind. His eyes stopped at the power drill. He couldn't think of any better way to send his message.

“Ah, here we go.” He held up the blue cordless power drill, admiring the four-inch, blood-stained silver drill bit. “Americans like their power tools.” He pulled the trigger and held the drill close to his ear, listening to the whirring sound of the motor and glancing at the spin of the drill bit.

He lowered the drill, slowly bringing it closer to Martinez's face. Martinez jerked his head, but there was no escape. The drill was moving steadily toward his eye. He closed them both, squeezing tight. Then the sound of the drill stopped, and when he opened his eyes again, Kareem was hovering over him, looking down and smiling

“Del Rio, you said?”

“Yes.” Martinez's heart was beating so fast that he felt like it was going to explode.

“The same Del Rio where we lost our truck?”

“Yes,” Martinez said.

“And you had something to do with that?”

Martinez didn't respond. Either answer could get him a drill in the eye or somewhere just as painful. In his moment of hesitation, Kareem brought the drill to the thick of his shoulder, pulled the trigger, and drove it through his flesh—all the way until it hit bone.

Martinez screamed from an intensity of pain he had never experienced in his life. He had no idea such pain was possible. The drill continued to tear into his arm as Kareem pushed it farther in with glee. Blood gushed from the open, ravaged wound, and at the height of his anguish, Kareem yanked the drill out, and to Martinez's horror, presented him with bits of his own flesh still clinging to the tip of the drill. He was gasping and weeping with pain.

“Where,” said Kareem, “are those endorphins when we need them most?” He laughed with a calm cruelty, and began to wipe the drill clean before turning back to Martinez. “I want the names of who was there. My boss told me that we're looking for two federal agents. A man and a woman. I'm guessing you're the man, so who's your bitch partner?”

Drenched in sweat, Martinez looked around in a state of delirium. He thought of Gloria and the boys. If he could just see them again...

Kareem lowered the drill and leaned against the table, inches from Martinez's face, speaking as though he were a confidant. “Jorge Martinez. This is not going to end well for you if you keep withholding information.” He raised two fingers in the air. “You have two choices here. Tell me what I want to know and die quickly, without pain, or keep stalling and have the longest, most painful death you could ever imagine.” He paused and leaned in even closer, talking not above a whisper. “I can go as long as you can. My most stubborn patient lasted for seventy-two hours.”

Martinez's petrified silence only encouraged Kareem more. He brought the drill back up. "You know why *we* are here?" He paused, waiting for an answer. "No? Well, your stupid government brought us here. They brought us here by the thousands. Can you believe that?" He shook his head and laughed. "We applied for refugee status. All of us! Not a woman or child among us!" He calmed down and caught his breath. "Wouldn't you know it, we're war refugees!"

He turned the drill back on and brought it to a different spot along Martinez's arm.

"Sarah!" Martinez shouted. "Sarah Jones!"

Kareem stopped and studied Martinez's pale, terrified face. "Not convinced..." Without turning it on, he placed the bit against Martinez's arm, and pushed it in slightly. "Is the suspense killing you?" he asked, "or should I do that?"

Then he pulled the trigger and drilled through Martinez's soft flesh, right at the bicep. Martinez screamed until his voice went hoarse. Then the drill came out, leaving a quarter-inch hole and a trail of dark blood leaking down his arm.

"Stop screaming or you will wake the dead," Kareem joked. "Now, try again," Kareem said. "I want her name. You can lie, risk it if you want. See if I don't catch on." He then brought the drill right to Martinez's left eye. "Tell me another lie, and this is gonna go right in. Just enough to pop your little pupil into goo."

Martinez closed his eyes, trying to hold back the tears. Aside from primal fear, he felt confused and disoriented. Had he any chance to escape?

"Five seconds," Kareem said, causally.

"Angela!" Martinez shouted.

Kareem kept his finger at the ready, caressing the trigger. "Angela who?"

"Angela Gannon. Border Patrol Agent Angela Gannon!" Martinez's voice echoed throughout the room, and when he opened his eyes, he saw that the drill was no longer there. Seeming convinced, Kareem set it aside and grabbed a pair of pliers. "That time I believe you."

He stopped and signaled one of his men over as Martinez began to fade in and out of consciousness. Kareem spoke quickly to the man in Arabic, saying the name Angela Gannon several times. The masked man nodded and then left the room as though he had been dispatched to deliver a message. Once the man was gone, all of Kareem's attention was back on Martinez.

"There's some more questions I have for you, and then we'll be done." He held up a pair of rusty pliers to the light, flashing his perpetual smile. "But first... I'm going to have to ask you to open wide."

He pushed Martinez's head down, squeezing his nose shut. Martinez shut his mouth and tried his best to resist, but breathing was getting more difficult by the second. The moment his mouth opened, gasping for breath, Kareem went in with the pliers, squeezing them against his front teeth. Martinez pleaded with him to stop, but Kareem was far too determined.

Suddenly a rumbling could be heard outside—something large and alarming. He pulled the pliers away from Martinez's mouth and stood frozen listening. He spoke quietly and with urgency to his men. No one, it seemed, knew what was going on.

"It's him," one of the masked men shouted, pointing at Martinez. "He brought more of them here!"

Martinez tried to look around to understand what was going on, but the men seemed in a panic. He could hear the noise as well: whopping helicopter rotors with an engine that sounded as though it was descending fast.

“Call headquarters!” Kareem shouted. “Tell them everything this man told us. We have to act now!”

The men scrambled and ran out of the room with Kareem following in a panic and leaving Martinez with the most immense sense of relief he had ever felt in his life.

Wolves to Slaughter

With the compound in view, the FBI helicopter touched down near their set coordinates. The quick plunge startled Angela, and she gripped the seat but the FBI team, night-vision goggles affixed to their helmets, seemed calm and ready as could be.

The red light inside the helicopter only made it more difficult to see anything within their dark cabin. They landed with a tremendous shake that nearly tossed Angela out of her seat. Next to her, Sutherland wasted no time. He adjusted his night-vision goggles, stood up, and opened the door, calling to the team, “Let’s move out!”

Lynch and Hopper rose, but Thaxton remained seated, ready and waiting as she had been in their previous raid. Angela grabbed her night-vision goggles and unbuckled her seat belt, moving toward the door and looking for the spare vest. Hooper and Lynch jumped out. As she moved to the door, Sutherland blocked her way.

“You stay here with the assistant director. If we need you, we’ll let you know.”

Surprised, her mouth dropped open. “He’s *my* partner!”

“We don’t know who or what’s in there at the moment, if anyone! If there are people inside, they certainly know we’re here.”

Angela went for her pistol and pulled it from her side holster. “I know how to use this.”

Sutherland shook his head. “Negative. You sit tight. This won’t take long.”

She turned to the director, who was busy monitoring the laptop resting on her legs. Sutherland jumped out and shut the door before she could respond. Thaxton looked up at Angela and shrugged then patted the spot next to her.

“Have a seat, Agent Gannon.”

Angela huffed and sat down, as the helicopter’s rotors continued to spin. She held the night-vision goggles to her eyes and looked over the pilot’s shoulder beyond the windshield where she could see the FBI team racing toward a large, square compound. An all-encompassing tarp supported by several poles covered it entirely.

“We can watch it all on here,” Thaxton said, pointing to the screen.

Angela glanced at the screen to see three open windows displaying live video feeds from the agents’ helmet cams. She had not even been aware they were

wearing cameras. The images showed the compound getting closer as they moved to one side, looking for an entrance. There were no entrances and, from the looks of it, no doors.

As much as she wanted to watch, she felt deeply conflicted about having to wait behind. Thaxton noticed her silence and turned to her, speaking close to her ear. "I'm going to level with you. Captain Martinez may be a little over his head here."

"Tell me something I don't know," Angela snapped. She then realized who she was talking to. "Sorry, ma'am."

Thaxton waved her off. "What I mean is that our mutual friend may have fallen in with the wrong group."

Angela looked at her, stunned. "*What?* The terrorists?"

"No," Thaxton said. "Not the kind you may be thinking of. These are homegrown vigilantes, and the government wants to clamp down on them. I'm sure you've heard of them in your profession."

Angela shook her head.

"The South Texas Border Recon. Call themselves *the Outlaws*," Thaxton continued. Noticing Angela's skepticism, she elaborated. "I'm not talking good ol' American boys. These guys are dangerous." She held her hands ten inches apart from each other. "We've got a file on them this thick. Administration wants them stopped."

"And Captain Martinez?" Angela said in disbelief.

"We're hoping that he'll lead us to them."

"But the address?" Angela said. "That man, Mahmoud. He said this was an ISIS location."

"Look around where you're at," Thaxton said, trying to talk over the engine. "We're not in Kansas anymore."

Angela glanced at the screen. The team had circled to the other side of the building, stopping at a metal door sealed shut. One of the agents attached a digital cube-like device on the door and then set a timer on it, crouching for cover.

Angela stood up, ready to give the assistant director a piece of her mind and damn the consequences. "Is ISIS in that building or not? Who in the hell are we looking for?"

Thaxton remained calm and collected as always and then spoke, barely raising her voice. "We don't know just yet. This location was not on our radar before. It's the first we've heard of it. Either way, we're going to set up camp and wait for Captain Martinez and his border recon team."

"And then what?" Angela shouted. "Arrest him?"

"With you here, that may not be necessary," Thaxton said as her eyes went back to the screen.

Angela stood frozen. She felt sick inside, like someone had punched her in the gut. The entire mission was a crapshoot, based on the assumption that the FBI could intercept Captain Martinez. Thaxton showed little, if at all, concern about a terror cell. Astoundingly, her priorities seemed skewed far in the other direction.

Angela scanned the helicopter and saw a bulletproof vest lying on the floor at the end of Thaxton's seat. She walked to the end of the seat, and grabbed the vest, hoisting it over her head and onto her shoulders.

Her quick movements gained Thaxton's otherwise distracted attention. "What are you doing?"

Suddenly, a brief explosion lit up the side of the compound like a firecracker. Angela ran to the door, pulled the handle, and swung it open.

"Get back here!" Thaxton shouted.

Angela jumped out and slammed the door behind her. She sprinted off without looking back. Something was going on, and she wasn't going to allow herself to be used any longer. She was well aware that Thaxton was running after her, but she had already gained a sizeable lead. Whatever the FBI was up to, she planned to be right there with them. Her partner needed her.

* * * * *

Kareem ran out of the room behind his panicked men and into the otherwise empty hall where ten other sleeper cell operatives flew off cots, startled awake by the commotions.

"Get up, you lazy goats! We have to leave. Now!" Kareem shouted.

"No!" said a bald man with a light shade of stubble on his face. He grabbed the AK-47 from under his cot and pulled the charging handle back. "We must stay and fight." He stood defiant in his thin, baggy white pants and matching white top. The other men scrambled around, unsure of what to do.

"That is not the plan!" Kareem shouted back.

The men got the message and moved quickly to a corner room that looked to be little more than a closet. "Salah told us if we were to be found to destroy any sensitive documents and leave. This place is compromised. We have to go underground and escape while we can."

The other men stood half awake and uncertain of what to do.

The bald man hurried toward Kareem with his rifle pointed upward. "What do you think Salah will do to us if we run, brother? He will make an example of us, like all the others."

"Then that is Allah's will. Stay here and you will die," Kareem said. "Grab your things. Escape while you still can!" He then pointed to the room where Captain Martinez was being held. "First there was one American. Now there are more. It's over if we stay. If they capture us, they will surely torture us for information."

The men seemed convinced as they grabbed their packs and rifles and ran toward the escape room. The bald man, however, remained in place.

Kareem narrowed his eyes at the man and shook his head. "You're going to ruin our entire operation with this foolishness, Salazar."

"I'm not scared of the Americans," the bald man said. "Let them come."

A loud burst erupted at the end of the hall, sending Kareem to the floor on his chest. After an instantaneous flash, they could see smoke seeping into the room.

"They've breached the door!" Kareem said, jumping up. "Run!"

The other fighters were halfway to the escape room when two men kicked the door open and charged in, firing into the air without warning. A third man rushed inside and threw a flash grenade which exploded instantly, sending the fleeing men into a frenzy.

Salazar flew to the ground under his cot, as the intruders aimed their pistols at the confused, blinded men and shot them dead, one by one. Kareem ran past the carnage into the escape room just as bullets whizzed by his head.

He threw himself into the tightly confined room as more gunfire erupted, shaken to the core. His loyal security team was at the shelved wall behind him, revealing their secret exit. He could hear Salazar yelling at the men in Arabic, cursing them to hell. The AK-47 erupted with a hail of bullets only to be met with more gunfire from the Americans. Then, for a moment, everything was quiet.

“Clear!” he heard one of the Americans yell.

“Where are the others? I saw more,” another one said.

Kareem stood up, balancing himself against the wall as his legs shook. “Hurry up!” he said to the men in a panicked whisper, as they pushed the heavy wall open.

“Did you kill him?” one of the masked men asked.

“Who?” Kareem asked back.

“Who do you think? The American! He’s seen your face.”

At that moment, panic gripped Kareem’s rapidly beating heart. In his haste, he couldn’t believe he had been so careless. But it was too late to turn back now. His only option was to escape or die.

“It’s opened!” one of the masked men said, pushing against the wall.

“Hurry!” Kareem said, rushing past them. “We have to seal it back up before they find us!”

His men rushed down the darkened tunnel, leaving one man behind to pull the bookshelf wall closed. But it was too late. Another man rushed into the room and shot a round through the ISIS lackey’s head.

From down inside the cramped tunnel, Kareem led the way. The final entry underground was near. Kareem was too concerned with his own life to think about the underground weapons caches and military uniform storage that the Americans would surely find after a search of the perimeter. For Kareem and his men, martyrdom awaited, whether they were ready for it or not.

* * * * *

Angela rushed toward the compound just in time to hear a barrage of shots fired from inside. Her heart jumped as she remained close to the windowless wall to her side, near the place where the FBI team had breached the door. While running, she looked behind her to see Thaxton gaining on her and shouting for her to stop.

Too close to turn back now, she told herself.

She reached the end of the compound, exhausted, and glanced around the corner, pistol drawn, to make sure no one was there. The door in back was open, with light spilling out onto the desert sand from the inside. She could hear shouting followed by more gunshots, which caused her to flinch.

What in the hell was happening in there?

She took a deep breath, her pistol pointed up and close to her chin, and then ran around the side and toward the breached door. She stopped at the side of the door and peeked inside just in time to see Lynch, Sutherland, and Hopper run into a room in the distance. As she examined the open hall before her, she saw several low-hanging fluorescent lights interconnected by extension cords.

How the building lasted in the middle of nowhere was beyond her. Knowing that Thaxton was hot on her trail, Angela took another deep breath and stormed inside, pointing her gun in each and every direction. A thin cloud of smoke permeated the air, and what at first looked like piles of clothes strewn on the floor in the distance came into focus as bodies.

A man lay under a cot with an AK-47 near him in a pool of blood. His head was spilt open in multiple spots, brain matter exposed. Most shocking of all were the men lying on the floor in contorted poses, maybe ten of them, riddled with bullets, their blood splattered all over the concrete floor.

The sight was shocking, but Angela knew she had to keep pushing forward before Thaxton's inevitable arrival and interference. She moved around the mass carnage of dead bodies—young Middle Eastern-looking men—and examined them only to see if Martinez was among the dead. He wasn't.

She had no idea if he was anywhere near or why he would be there in the first place. The dead on the ground hardly looked like members of the South Texas Border Recon.

She trusted her instincts and charged forward into a single darkened room, where she immediately came to a wall pushed open and another dead body, masked but with a hole in his head.

"Agent Gannon!" she could hear from afar. Thaxton had arrived.

She ignored her and crouched to enter a five-foot hole where a vent had been removed and proceeded on, feeling as though she was on a hunt of her own. With her night-vision goggles, she navigated the cramped confines of the tunnel until reaching a wall and, oddly enough, finding a drain cover that had been removed, leading to an underground ladder. She listened for voices or gunfire but heard nothing. There was no turning back then either.

She climbed down the ladder, breathing the damp and stale air, and reached the bottom, twenty feet below, enveloped in total darkness. Down the tunnel ahead, there were men running. The back of their jackets said FBI. She was close.

She ran forward with her pistol drawn. Beyond the FBI team, she could see several other men running down the long corridor of a tunnel. No telling how long it was or where it might end.

The FBI team was gaining on its quarry, and before she could make her presence known or say anything, she watched as they fired multiple shots into the fleeing men, taking each one of them down. The gun bursts were loud and alarming, and she instantly backed against the wall for cover. The gunfire ended, but she remained in place, frozen, goggles at her side. Surrounded by complete darkness, she tried not to make a sound.

"No! No, please!" a man's voice shouted out.

Gunshots followed in three white flash bursts, and the pleading man said no more. She instantly brought the goggles to her eyes and saw Lynch, Hopper, and Sutherland ten feet ahead standing over several bodies, their guns pointed downward. At that moment she wanted nothing more than to run back up the ladder and never turn back.

Hopper whipped around, scanning the area. "Who's there?" he shouted, raising his pistol.

Angela threw her hands in the air. "It's just me, Agent Gannon!"

The men stopped and looked at each other.

“What the hell are you doing here?” Sutherland asked.

She felt angered by his question and approached the men defiantly. “What am I doing here? Watching you shoot fleeing suspects in the back. *That’s* what I’m doing!”

“Did we get all of them?” Lynch asked, cutting in.

“I don’t fucking know,” Sutherland said. “You see anyone else alive?”

“What... is... going... on... here?” Angela asked with each hardened step she took toward the men.

“Relax,” Sutherland said, raising a hand. “We were given specific instructions to neutralize the situation.”

“Do you even know who you’ve killed?” Angela shouted. She couldn’t see them very well, but it didn’t matter.

They grew silent. Then Lynch spoke up, but in a calmer way, setting a new, friendlier tone. “Looks like we got the terror cell to me.”

“Was that *really* who you were looking for?” Angela asked, closing in. “Or is Captain Martinez the real objective here?”

“We were trying to rescue him, Agent Gannon. I don’t know what else you’re trying to imply.”

Angela pointed at the men, unconcerned that they were still holding loaded pistols. “This is not the way things are done, and I’m not going to be a part of whatever the hell this is.”

“What are you trying to say, Agent Gannon?” Sutherland asked.

“I’m saying that I’m reporting every bit of this operation to my chain of command. This wasn’t a rescue mission. This was a massacre!”

The men said nothing, and Angela lowered her finger. Their silence had her reconsidering her words. What had she gotten herself into? Before anyone could respond, Thaxton’s voice shouted from the ladder above.

“I found Martinez! Get up here, now!”

* * * * *

For a moment, nothing else mattered to Angela. She ran back down the dark tunnel without saying a word.

“Agent Gannon, wait!” Sutherland said. “Let us cover you.”

“Stay away from me,” Angela said, with her anger rising. She didn’t know just how far the tunnel went in the opposite direction toward the outside, and she no longer cared. All that mattered was finding her partner and leaving. “Please let him be okay,” she said under her breath, and grabbed hold of the wooden ladder, leaning against the wall.

She climbed up in no time, ignoring the increasing weight of the medium-size vest that was gradually wearing her down. Sutherland was right behind her, and the ladder creaked with their combined weight as she reached the top.

Thaxton was nowhere to be seen, but Angela pushed on through, familiar with the intricate fortifications of underground tunnels commonly used by the cartels. Martinez had been on to something. There was a new threat in town.

Reunited

Once emerging from the tunnel, Angela rushed past the lifeless, blood-soaked bodies that lay about the open hall of the compound.

“Assistant Director Thaxton!” she shouted, looking around.

“In here!” she called from a room to Angela’s left. The air was a noxious combination of fresh gunpowder, misty smoke, and the stench of blood and death, but she continued and went straight to a dimly lit room, hopeful that her partner was okay.

She stormed inside, mortified by what she saw. Thaxton was standing at a table where Martinez was strapped down. He was moaning, barely conscious, with his left arm mangled and bloody.

Thaxton turned around with a stoic, pale expression. “Help me get him loose,” she said, pulling on the leather straps that bound him to the table.

Angela ran over, pushing out of the way a rolling cart that displayed a series of knives, drills, and pliers. She noticed a chair in the middle of the room bolted to the ground with rope lying nearby, and an empty metal bucket, a backpack, and a long cane. She couldn’t imagine what Martinez had been through and at what cost.

She started working at his ankles, unfastening both straps as Thaxton worked at his chest. Their brief time alone together gave the assistant director a moment to get a reprimand in.

“It was unacceptable for you to run off like that. You put yourself and this entire team in danger.”

Angela said nothing, just moved her hands up to the straps around his waist. Martinez’s eyelids flickered with another moan. He was pale and losing a lot of blood. His left arm lay in a large puddle of blood that dripped onto the floor.

“You’re to tell no one about what happened here tonight,” Thaxton continued. She expertly unfastened the strap on his other arm and another over his chest. “You’ll be signing some documents to attest to that as well, understand?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Angela said, not wanting to argue. With Martinez free, she looked around the room for a cloth or rag—anything. “We need to stop the bleeding,” she said, pointing at his wounded arm. One glance at the rolling cart and it was evident what had happened. A blue power drill lay among the knives, its bit stained a dark red and speckled with tiny pieces of flesh.

The rest of the FBI team rushed into the room, guns drawn. They froze when they saw Martinez’s battered appearance and wretched condition. They swarmed the table as Sutherland turned to Lynch. “Grab a blanket or one of those cots outside. We need to get him on air transport, immediately!”

Lynch and Hopper ran out of the room to see what they could find. Sutherland opened a pouch connected to his belt, revealing a first aid kit, much to Angela’s relief. Thaxton took a backseat and began taking pictures of the room with her cell phone.

“Here, hold this. Put pressure on it,” Sutherland said to Angela, placing a gauze pad over one of the wounds.

She placed her fingers on the pad and pressed down as Sutherland wrapped the gauze strip around Martinez's arm, covering the wound. They did the same thing to the other hole as Lynch and Hopper came into the room, Lynch holding a thick blanket.

"Perfect," Sutherland said. "Now let's lift him out of here and get him on the helicopter." He gently nudged Angela out of the way as they took positions around the table to lift Martinez.

Hopper was at his ankles, Lynch at his shoulders. Sutherland did a countdown and the two men lifted Martinez up and carried him to the blanket on the floor, barely getting a reaction from Martinez as he faded in and out of consciousness.

"We've got more medical supplies on the helicopter. Let's move!" Sutherland said. Lynch and Hopper lifted him up, and the team left the room with Sutherland covering them. Angela turned around to find Thaxton surveying the room with grave interest.

"Your team works well together," Angela said.

Thaxton nodded, not making eye contact.

Angela turned to the open door and then back to the assistant director. "Are you coming, ma'am?"

Thaxton walked slowly toward Angela as though she were distracted or just trying to take everything in. When she spoke, her voice held an unmistakable threat. "Remember what I said, Agent Gannon. This mission is classified. I'm sure you understand."

Angela could hold back no longer. "I watched them shoot men as they were running away." She paused and took another step toward the assistant director, confronting her in a way that she knew was unwise and imprudent. "They shot them in the back. Clearly, you can see it all on the video feed."

"No one is going to see that video feed," Thaxton said, flippantly. She glanced at Angela's reddened face and tried to calm her with a squeeze on the shoulder. "But you did well, Agent Gannon, despite your insolence. Your partner was found and the terrorists were killed. I'd say it's a win-win."

Angela didn't feel the least bit comforted. "We may never know who these men are. And if any of them got away, well, this could blow up right in your face."

Thaxton smiled, as though she were half-amused. "Judging from their attire, these men are affiliated with the Islamic State. And we hope they get the message. We want them to see that the United States isn't messing around anymore."

"You can't silence both me and Martinez," Angela said. "Sooner or later we're going to have to tell our superiors what happened."

Thaxton turned from Angela, surveying the room. "I'll make this real easy for you, Agent Gannon. You do not want to rile things up with this administration. You have a secure job with great potential and a loving family. Same thing with Martinez. The FBI has a job to do, and you will either work with us or get out of our way."

Angela stared back as their ferocious eyes locked. She swallowed, trying to look brave and not the least bit intimidated, though she was.

"Do I make myself clear?" Thaxton asked.

"Yes, ma'am," Angela said after a moment of brief hesitation.

"Good. Now let's get Martinez to medical."

Thaxton stormed out of the room, not saying another word and leaving Angela to examine the room of horrors: the various blood-stains on the floor and wall, some fresh and others dry. She then left the room with an overwhelming weight of mixed emotions. In the end, all she wanted to do was to go home.

Angela climbed into the helicopter to find Martinez—his arm wrapped in bandages, on the first bench seat, and starting to come to. Thaxton climbed in after her, followed by Sutherland. He closed the door. Angela turned around, looking for the others.

“Where’s Agent Lynch and Special Agent Hopper?” she said.

“They’re staying behind,” Sutherland said, placing his helmet back on his sweaty head. “Another team has been dispatched to clean up while we MEDEVAC Captain Martinez.”

Something about the phrase “clean up” didn’t settle right with Angela, but she took her seat nonetheless at the end of the bench seat across from Martinez. Thaxton sat next to her. Sutherland leaned near the pilot, giving him a thumbs-up.

The pilot nodded and took the helicopter up. Angela adjusted her helmet and strapped in as the cabin shook and rattled with their quick ascent. Martinez snapped awake and began looking around in a panic.

“Where the hell am I?” he said hoarsely, wide-eyed.

Angela leaned close and ran her hand across his head. “It’s okay, sir. We’re getting you out of here.” She had a million questions but didn’t want to overwhelm him. It was good enough that he was finally conscious. Both Thaxton and Sutherland were eyeing him intently.

“He’s awake!” Angela said, turning to them with relief.

“That’s good,” Thaxton said. “We’ll get him taken care of.”

A brief glance out the window, and Angela could see the desert getting larger and more spacious as they reached higher altitude, trailing off and leaving the mysterious and isolated terror compound behind. A place, according to the assistant director, where they had never been.

* * * * *

It was early morning by the time Angela returned to the Del Rio Border Patrol station, where she was bombarded with questions from other agents about the mission. The most she would confirm was that they had found Captain Martinez. That morning, she was immediately summoned to Chief Drake’s office. The sun streamed in through his blinds as she sat across from his desk, exhausted and feeling a pounding headache, despite having just taken two aspirins.

Her green uniform was dust covered and dirty, with spots of dried blood. She assumed it had come from Martinez’s wounds. Loose strands from her ponytail covered the sides of her smudged and tired face.

Angela couldn’t recall if she’d been up for two or three days. It seemed like forever since she last saw Doug and the kids. Eager to let her get home, Drake had sat her down in his office to get a recap of events.

Gone were the FBI assistant director and the other agents. They had vanished from the station like ghosts. Martinez had been taken to the Del Rio Regional

Medical Center, where he was rushed to intensive care, just to make sure, and listed in stable condition. Angela was immensely relieved. She could breathe again.

However, she had been whisked away from the hospital and flown to the Border Patrol station before she could speak with her partner. She'd have to give it time. The next day perhaps. She knew where he was, and she planned to get their stories right as soon as he was better.

With Martinez safely in the hospital, Angela found herself alone with Chief Drake, the morning news playing on his office television with the sound muted. They were talking about a local home invasion that had occurred earlier but nothing too out of the ordinary. As he sat across from her, pen in hand, Drake seemed a little more at ease too.

"The assistant director gave me a brief rundown of what happened. She said that you had acted heroically in assisting in Captain Martinez's rescue."

Angela nodded, unsure of what to say. Before Thaxton had left the station, all she told Angela was to "remember what she said." Telling the truth was always the most obvious choice for Angela, but without Martinez to advise her, it wasn't clear what to do.

Drake scribbled on his pad and then looked up. His stubble had grown in the past day or two, and the bags under his eyes were second only to hers. A steaming mug of coffee rested right next to him, and Angela wondered if he had rested in the past couple of days.

"For your efforts, Agent Gannon, I'm going to recommend you for a Meritorious Service Award."

It was the last thing she needed or wanted, but for the time being, she played along. "Thank you, sir."

He rubbed his eyes and groaned. "Of course, we still have to get things in order for Agent Dawson's memorial service."

"Yes, of course," Angela said. "Any new developments with that investigation?"

Drake set his glasses on the desk and shrugged. "I was hoping that you could tell me. I mean, I thought we'd find some kind of link between all of this: the chemical agents, the explosion, Martinez's disappearance. But right now, it's just business as usual until the FBI puts it together."

"I understand," she said as her eyelids grew heavier under the cool air blowing from the vent above her.

Drake looked past her, peering through his blinds and all the activity going on outside his office. He took a sip from his coffee mug and then zeroed in on her. "Listen carefully. A lot of people are going to be asking you what happened. You're suddenly very popular around here, and that's not always a good thing. Mum's the word, you got it?"

"Yes, sir."

"But as far as this sector is concerned, I want a full report of the when, what, how, and why. I'll expect the same from Martinez when he's ready. I'm happy that you're both back, but I'm very concerned about the entire shit-show."

"Yes, sir."

Drake leaned in closer and spoke low and softly as though the FBI were listening at the door. "The assistant director told me that Martinez was found in an abandoned outpost in El Paso. What was he doing out there?"

Angela gripped the armrests of her chair.

“Don’t worry,” he continued. “I’m sure we’re found out from the horse’s mouth once Martinez comes to.”

Angela sighed. “As far as I know, sir, the FBI thinks he was being held there by an ISIS sleeper cell.”

Drake rubbed his temples with both hands. “Okay, got it.” He reached for his mug and took another sip, pointing at Angela. “I want you to go home and get some rest. Need you to fill out a statement before you leave, but you can work on the report in the next day or two.” He paused for a moment and scanned his scribbled notes. His head jerked up as though something had just come to him. “Did you call your family yet and let them know that you’re okay?”

She was surprised at his question and all the more surprised that she hadn’t. Her phone, however, had died hours ago.

“No, sir. But they’re just getting up, so I’ll see them when I get home.”

“Okay then. You’ve got your marching orders. I want a full report after you get some rest. We’ll get to the bottom of this, Agent Gannon, if it’s the last thing this department does. Dismissed.”

“Thank you, sir.” She slowly rose from her chair, her body sore and aching. On her feet, she stopped and glanced at the disheveled gray hairs and the wrinkles that creased his face.

“What about you. Are you planning on getting any rest?”

He paused, looked up at her, and smiled faintly. “One day, when you’re in my position, you’ll understand.”

Angela smiled and went to the door, opening it and pausing. Other agents walked by and glanced at her as she hesitated to leave.

“Chief Drake,” she said, turning back to him.

He looked up with a curious expression. “Yes?”

“About the recovery. Well, the raid didn’t go exactly like they said it did...” She couldn’t believe her words as they came out. But a battle with the FBI was inevitable, she believed, no matter what she did.

“What are you talking about?” Drake asked.

“The terror cell. We...”

Suddenly Drake’s office phone rang. He held a finger up, asking her to wait, and then picked up the receiver.

“This is Chief Drake, how can I help you?” He stared ahead, listening, while Angela waited with her hand holding the doorknob. She looked down the hall, thinking that it was her moment to leave without facing any questions and forget that she had brought anything up. The longer she waited, the less chance she had to reconsider exposing the truth behind the FBI raid.

“*What?*” Drake said, suddenly rattled, his mouth wide open.

Angela grew nervous. Perhaps he was learning the truth already. What would she say then?

“What do you mean live web stream?” He grabbed his MacBook and flipped it open, typing wildly, with the phone wedged between his shoulder and ear. He looked up in a panic at Angela and waved at her to come inside and shut the office door.

Confused and worried, she walked in and gently closed it.

“Yeah, send me the link, okay?” he said with urgency.

Angela pulled her chair closer to his desk and sat. Whatever the conversation was about, it didn’t sound good.

“Okay, I’m on,” Drake said. “Yeah. Some kind of live leak site. It’s loading...” He froze as his eyes locked on the screen. “Oh my God...”

Angela couldn’t take the suspense. She stood up and walked around the desk to see what all the commotion was about. The phone fell from Drake’s shoulder as he stared at the screen, petrified.

“Chief? What is it?” Angela asked.

He tried to answer her, but seemed to be in a state of shock. “Terror cell. ISIS video. It’s real-time shit here.”

Angela walked behind his chair and squinted her eyes to see the screen as her heart seized with fear. There was streaming video of a person on their knees in an orange jumpsuit with a burlap sack over their head. Standing behind them was a man with a tan face mask, eye slits, and an ammo vest over his camouflaged clothing. Behind him hung the black flag of ISIS mounted on the wall.

The masked man then spoke with a muffled British accent.

“Americans... today is the day of your reckoning. We are on you streets. We are in your neighborhoods, and we will only attack if provoked. Today, you provoked us. You killed our brothers. Attacked our home. Slaughtered us like animals. And now we must strike back.”

The man stepped forward and pulled off the hood of the person in the center of the first group. Angela grew dizzy as the room began to spin around. It felt like a dream or some kind of out of body experience. The exposed man looked eerily like her husband, Doug. But his normally neat hair was all messed up, and besides, it couldn’t possibly have been Doug.

“We have the family of one your agents,” the masked man said, pulling his captive’s head by the hair and holding the knife to his throat.

He then pointed at the camera with his gloved hand. “You have twenty-four hours to meet our demands, or we will kill Doug Gannon and his two daughters.”

Chief Drake whipped his head around to see Angela quickly losing color in her face with tears already streaming down her cheeks. She couldn’t breathe. She grabbed the side of his chair as her vision became more blurry.

Drake jolted up from his seat. “Angela!”

For Angela, the room went black, and before he could catch her, she was on the floor, briefly safe from the new nightmare that was now her world.

