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Allentown, New Jersey

I really didn't want to be here. Then again, who would?

Three o'clock in the morning, me and my partner Nick Aparo, in our unmarked SUV, parked on a dark street in the middle of nowhere with the engine off, freezing our nuts off, watching, waiting for the go signal, making sure our target didn't vaporize before we nabbed him.

Don't get me wrong. This is my job. I do it by choice. I do it because I believe in it, because I think what we do, as special agents of the FBI, is important. And the guy in our crosshairs on this particular night deserved our full attention, no question.

It's just that I had bigger fish to fry. But more on that later.

Right now, all I can tell you is that we'd spent countless hours staring through the condensation-clouded windscreen and the snow flurries outside at the single-story house up and across the street, the one with the hypnotic, mind-numbing Christmas lights twinkling along the edge of its roof, and I was exhausted. We'd been at it for days.

I watched my breath billowing out in front of my eyes as I zipped up my FBI parka, the cold metal of the zip reaching its endpoint against my nose. Any more coffee and there was zero chance of sleep when I finally made it home—in time to watch the sun rise as I zoned out against a deeply asleep Tess.

Nick, on the other hand, had no such concerns. He was pouring himself yet another mug from the five-liter flask before sipping the steaming, bitter liquid like it had been lovingly made by his favorite barista. He looked ridiculous in his big, Russian-style fur hat, the flaps of which he had pulled right down over his ears, but nothing I said was going to make him lose it. At least he was watching the house with me and not sitting there flicking through an endless array of female Tinder offerings while subjecting them to the incessant vocal critique

that usually accompanied his left- and right-swipes, which was his MO on previous stakeouts. Small mercies, I guess.

The subject of our impromptu igloo huddle was called Jake Daland. Daland was the founder and head honcho of Maxiplenty, which had taken over from Silk Road not long after we had shut that online marketplace down. Daland was an interesting target, a nice change from the Jihadist scumbags hogging our work load. Besides choosing a tongue-in-cheek twist on a Newspeak term from George Orwell's *1984* to name his site, he'd also come up with a neat way to try and avoid the fate of Silk Road by avoiding financial transactions altogether: no cash, no checks, no credit cards, no Bitcoins. Maxiplenty was a darknet barter-only site, an online marketplace where you could do anything you wanted—get drugs, guns, explosives, launder money, or have someone murdered—provided you had something you could trade for it. It was the hub of some pretty nasty stuff, which is why we were here, waiting for word that power had been cut to Daland's house before we stormed in and shut him down.

We weren't alone. The whole team, including a couple of specialists from Cyber Division, was waiting close by, equipped with night vision goggles and, with a bit of luck, a little less frozen than us. The aim was to disconnect all the computer equipment—along with any battery backups—before we turned the power back on and began the bagging and tagging. I didn't want Daland to have the tiniest window in which to hit some kind of nuke switch and wipe his hard drives.

"Heads up, Reilly," a voice announced through my earpiece. "Looks like it's feeding time at the zoo again."

I looked out through the near whiteout on the other side of the windows and saw the now-familiar pizza delivery car with half a plastic forty-eight-inch pepperoni sticking out of the roof glide past.

"*More* pizza?" Nick grumbled, peering out through the windshield. "How in God's name can he eat so much pizza and stay so thin? Bastard."

I turned to face him, a slight grin on my face. "Maybe he doesn't chase it down with a bowl of lasagna."

My partner was fairly legendary for his appetites, particularly when it came to Italian food and generously proportioned blonds. The former had provided something of a distraction when the latter ended up getting him divorced. Nowadays, he was happy to indulge in both, having finally come to terms with the court-appointed bi-weekly weekends with his eleven-year-old son. He'd also stuck with the spinning classes. I'd lost that bet, along with most of Twenty-six Federal Plaza.

"What's wrong with having a pizza as a starter? That's how they do it in Italy, you philistine."

I smiled. "Maybe he's got a gym in there."

His face got all bent out of shape. "At home? Alone? What's the point of that?"

"The point of exercise being to meet the ladies, right?"

"D-uh. But, hey, if I get to live a couple of extra years, that's cool too."

The delivery guy—a new kid, I thought, although it was hard to tell, what with his thick coat and his hood up—kept his engine idling as he hurried up to the door and rang the bell.

The snowflakes were getting meatier.

I adjusted the screen brightness on the laptop sitting at my elbow. Four video windows showed the feeds from the cameras we'd managed to set up on our target. I concentrated on the feed from the camera facing the house's front door, which was hidden inside a newspaper vending machine.

Jake Daland—elegant as ever in a short, silk kimono over a deep V-necked white T-shirt that exposed a mat of black chest hair—opened the door with the same calm, nonchalant demeanor. No stepping halfway through the door, no furtively peering to left and right. Zero interest in what was outside the house at all. Either he knew we were out here and didn't care, or—and though possible, it was by now fairly improbable—he didn't have a clue that he'd been under surveillance for days.

Daland took the pizza box and handed the delivery guy some money. The delivery guy seemed a bit thrown. They exchanged a few words as he struggled with his oversized puffer coat, fishing through its pockets, then shook his head, the cash in his outstretched hand.

“What’s he doing?” Nick asked.

“Daland must have handed him a large bill and the kid doesn’t have enough change.”

Nick shrugged. “We’re *so* on the wrong side of the law.”

They exchanged a few more words, then Daland waved the driver inside. The guy went in and the door closed behind him.

Moments later, the delivery guy re-emerged. He was holding a gift-wrapped box from his most loyal small-hours customer and was turning it over curiously.

Nick said, “Now he’s giving the guy a Christmas present?” He shook his head. “I’m telling you, Sean, we chose poorly. Poor-ly.”

The delivery guy got back in his car and drove away.

It was at that precise moment that my earpiece burst back to life. “We have a go. All teams: get into position.”

Nick and I climbed out of the Expedition. We were wearing Kevlar under our FBI parkas, even though I thought it was highly unlikely we’d meet any armed resistance. Four SWAT members were already skulking up to the house’s front door, while two other agents, Annie Deutsch and Nat “Len” Lendowski, climbed out of another unmarked vehicle and approached from the opposite direction. We had other men covering the rear of the house. The tech specialists would wait till the house was secure.

We fell in behind the SWAT guys. “One in position,” I said into my cuff mike.

“Two in position,” came the confirmation from the rear of the house.

“Hold,” the voice in my ear said. A brief moment, then it came back. “In five. Four. Three.” Two seconds later, the Christmas lights on Daland’s roof snapped off as the power was cut.

We flipped down our night vision goggles and drew our sidearms as the SWAT team leader swung his battering ram through the door, but just as we were about to follow them in, an alarm burst to life inside me as my brain spontaneously highlighted something I’d seen as I walked up to the house.

Something I’d barely noticed out of the corner of one eye.

Lying innocuously by the edge of the curb, obscured by the shade of some parked cars, barely noticeable: a flash of red ribbon.

The Christmas gift that Daland had given to the delivery guy. Discarded, tossed away like garbage.

I was electrified with the feeling that something was wrong.

“Nick! Car —now,” I shouted as I pulled off my goggles and stepped back, toward the sidewalk. I saw Deutsch and Lendowski looking at me, all confused, and just waved them on. “Go, go, go!”

They disappeared into the house as I passed the gift and jabbed a finger toward it, telling Nick, “The gift’s a prop. He faked us out.”

We hurried into the Expedition, Nick’s face shooting me a sizeable question mark as I slammed the big SUV into gear and floored it.

We fishtailed away from the curb, with me shouting over the revs, “The delivery guy’s still in the house. Daland drove off in the pizza car.”

Nick shook his head. “Bastard’s got a couple of minutes on us.”

The roads were covered with snow, but the four-wheel drive of the Expedition was rock solid as it ate up the miles. There were no cars driving around, not at that hour, and we soon hit an intersection. I stopped, clueless about which way to go.

“He knows he’s burnt,” I said. “Which means he knows everyone else is burnt too. So where’s he going?”

Nick rubbed his face, trying to force his brain into gear. “Daland knows we’ll be looking for the car and it’s not the most discreet ride. He needs to ditch it fast.”

“Yeah, but where? And swap over to what?”

The onboard satnav flickered through screens as Nick worked it. I couldn’t wait for it to suggest some answers. I scanned the road’s surface and could just about make out a set of thin tracks that turned left.

I followed.

Nick watched as I turned onto another residential street, then his attention went back to the navigation system. Thick walls of snow were now making it increasingly difficult to see where we were going. Even at full speed, the wipers were straining against the weight of the heavy flakes and the trail I was following was getting progressively more shrouded by the new snow.

We were going to lose him.

I adjusted the traction control. “He can’t stay out in this. Either he’s got somewhere to lay low nearby or he’s got a fallback drive stashed somewhere.”

Nick shook his head and said, “I can’t see him having that much foresight. Doesn’t seem in character.”

I nodded. “A cab, maybe? Or maybe he’s ordering an Uber.”

Nick grabbed the car radio’s mike. “I need the location of all twenty-four-hour cab companies around the target’s house.”

Moments later, the radio squawked, “Millpond Cabs, corner of North Main and Church.”

The radio squawked again, another voice this time. It was Lendowski. “Daland’s in the wind,” he said. “The pizza guy is freaking. Daland told him he needed to avoid an angry boyfriend. Told him the guy’s girlfriend was in the bedroom and gave him three hundred bucks. Reilly, where the hell are you?”

Nick nudged my arm and pointed urgently to the left. I swung the Expedition accordingly, heading west as Nick answered for us both. “We’re closing on him. You and Deutsch secure the house.”

“Already done. Power’s back on.”

“Are we good?” I asked.

“We’ve got several computers. The hard drives were already over-writing, he had battery backups. We got what we could, but there’s also a laptop here with a missing hard drive.”

“He pulled it. It must be on him. That’s what we need.” I gunned the V8 engine, the four-wheel drive now winning a one-sided battle against the fresh snow. The houses were larger now. Set farther back from the street.

Nick pointed up ahead. "Five hundred yards more, then we need to cross over North Main onto Church."

I was scanning every alleyway as we moved. I peered into a lot shared by a fitness center and a gas station. Nothing.

"Right there!" Nick shouted as he opened his window to take a better look. I slowed the SUV to a crawl.

A narrow street ran about thirty degrees off our position. Almost completely obscured by snow-covered trees was the top of a giant pepperoni pizza.

I swung the Expedition to the left, ready to turn right in another fifty yards.

Nick gestured toward the fast-approaching junction.

A single vehicle was midway through a left-hand turn onto North Main Street.

As we got level with the vehicle, a Toyota Camry, I registered the "Millpond Taxicabs" livery. The cab had pulled away before I could look inside.

I spun the wheel around, breaking hard. The Expedition skated a few feet in the original direction of travel, then completed the U-turn as the wheels regained traction.

"That's him."

Nick hit the siren as I swung the Expedition into the empty oncoming lane, accelerated beyond the Camry and swerved back into its path.

The cab's driver hit the brakes. Its wheels locked and the Camry slammed into Nick's side of the SUV, blocking his door.

I climbed out of the Expedition, pulled my sidearm, and edged around the front of the stationary SUV.

The shotgun-side rear passenger door opened and Daland emerged, both hands high over his head.

"Down," I barked. "On your knees!"

Nick had climbed over the seats and was now covering the taxi cab's driver, who had stepped out of the Camry, both hands in the air.

Daland dropped to his knees, shouting, "Easy with the guns! I'm unarmed."

I stepped toward him. “The hard drive. Where is it?”

“What hard drive?”

The taxi driver turned toward me, all panicked and jittery. “He threw something out the window as we turned out of Church.”

Daland lowered his head, then turned toward the taxi driver, his face tight with anger. “They watch everything you do, every website you read, every keystroke you tap in. They know everyone you talk to, everything you buy. They own you. And you’re no one. Imagine what they do with people who matter.”

I held my position as Nick moved to cuff Daland. “Save the rant for your Twitter feed.” I gestured at the taxi driver. “Show me.”

He led as we jogged back toward the junction with Church, our footfalls crunching in the snow.

The radio squawked as I called it in. “Target secure, repeat, target secure. We’ll meet you back at the house. And tell the pizza guy his car is safe.”

The snow was falling heavier now and sticking to the ground with purpose, but it didn’t take long. We found the hard drive, half-buried in the snow, by the base of a fence.

I brushed some snowflakes from my face, enjoying the sharpness of the freezing air as it hit my lungs.

It was good to be done with Daland. It always felt great to close out an assignment successfully. We’d done our part. From here on, the ball was in the DA’s court. Right now, though, that familiar euphoria was tainted by something else, a foreboding about some unfinished business I needed to get back to.

I looked up at the snowflakes, watched them cascade down onto my face which tingled under their gentle, cold stings, and shut my eyes, trying to breathe in the calmness.

The season, I sensed, really wasn’t going to be particularly jolly. And that was when my work phone rang.

I checked the screen. There was no number appearing on it. It was a private caller.

I took the call.

The voice was cavernous and artificially monotone. “Agent Reilly?”

I froze. The caller was using an electronic voice changer.

Never a good sign.

In these situations, my mind instantly goes to Tess, and to the kids. I don’t know why. I don’t usually deal with psychos or serial killers. The cases I normally work on rarely have the kind of personal angle that can spiral into a vendetta against my loved ones or me. But right there and then, I thought of them. And it sent a spasm of worry through me.

I just said, “I’m listening.”

“Are you interested in justice?”

I forced out a small chortle. “It’s really hard to take that question seriously from someone who sounds like he has a Darth Vader fetish.”

The man paused, then said, “I know things, Agent Reilly. Things you need to hear. Things I need you to do something about. Many innocent people have died because of this. The question is, are you ready to put your life on the line to do something about it?”

I didn’t know what to make of this. We get these whackos more frequently than you’d think, but they usually call the Bureau’s switchboard. Special Agents’ cell phone numbers aren’t easy to get hold of.

I said, “That’s kind of my job description. Who are you? How’d you get this number?”

“What I know, what I want to tell you about, goes way back. It involves a lot of people. Powerful people.”

“OK, I’m going to hang up now, cause we’ve hit our quota on scoops about Area 51 and—”

He interrupted me. “What about your father Colin? You hit your quota on that too?”

That got my attention.

I caught my breath as the savage image that had been seared into my mind ever since I was ten came bursting out of the cage I tried to keep it in, the image of my dad in his office at home, slumped at his desk with a gun by his hand and the back of his head blown off.

“What do you know about my dad?”

“The truth. Look, I’m prepared to tell you everything. All the information you need, proof to back it up. I’ve kept a record of it all and I’ll give it to you. But I need to know you’ll make sure it gets out.”

I was seething inside, but I knew how to keep it at bay and stay calm. I was fully aware that I was probably being played, but whoever it was was pressing some pretty nasty buttons inside me. “You didn’t answer my question.”

After a moment, I heard him cough—a weird, jarring sound, when it comes out through a voice box—then he said, “Let’s not play games and let’s not waste each other’s time. I can’t stay on this call much longer. All you need to know is, this is on the level and I need you to hear the truth—about your dad, about the others, about Azorian . . . just meet me.”

I didn’t have much choice. “Where and when?”

“Tomorrow. One o’clock. Times Square. By the Duffy statue. You know where it is, right?”

“Of course.”

“Come alone. I won’t show if I think you’ve got anyone else there. And, Reilly? Keep it quiet. I’m saying this for your own good.”

“Oh?”

“The last person I reached out to—the only person I tried to tell about it—he’s dead. And I’m sure it wasn’t pleasant, not that death ever is, but—burning to death in his own home because of some electrical fire the day after I called him? Give me a break. I told him not to look into it, but some of these guys, it’s just in their blood. They can’t help themselves.”

“Then why not cut the whole charade and come in to Federal Plaza? I can protect you.”

His voice stayed calm. “No. You can’t.”

“You’d be in federal custody. My custody.”

“No. The people I’m talking about—they’re your own people. That’s why I need you to hear it first. Alone. So you can think about what you’re going to do about it before they come after you too.”

I couldn't help but sense that he was telling the truth. He was scared. Even with the voice box, the fear was palpably there.

"OK," I said. "I'll be there."

"Good. Let's just both hope you stay alive long enough for it."

Then the line went dead.

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