

THE LUNATICS

John Boston

Thomas Valenti was sipping his coffee at a gas station just outside of Las Vegas when his phone rang. It was his personal cell, not his work cell. He didn't recognize the phone number. He hoped it wasn't a telemarketer who had gotten a hold of his number. He figured it might be somebody worth talking to, so he answered.

"Hello?"

"Thomas Valenti?" said the man on the other line.

"Speaking."

"We have your daughter. If you ever want to see her alive again, you better do as we say. You got that?" said the man.

Tom nearly dropped his coffee. He ran inside his truck and sat down in the cab. His heart was racing, both from anger and adrenaline.

"Okay.....yes, please.....please don't hurt my daughter, I'll do whatever you want. She's just a kid," he said nearly out of breath.

"So you'll co-operate?"

"Yes, yes, of course. Can I speak to my daughter please?" he said

There was a brief pause. A moment later, his daughter came on the phone.

"Daddy?" she said.

Thomas's heart sank. He felt like he had just been shot. His entire world had just been turned upside down in a matter of less than a minute. All his success and accomplishments in life suddenly didn't matter at all. He was sinking fast without a life preserver.

The man on the other end came back on the line.

"So, we have your attention?"

"Yes.....look, I'll do whatever you ask, just don't hurt my little girl," he said nearly in tears.

"Don't worry, Tommy. I'm a businessman, not a rapist. You play ball with us and do what we ask, I promise you, no harm will come to your daughter. Now, shall we discuss specifics?"

"Go ahead, let me write this down," said Tom, pulling out his little notebook and pencil.

"Two hundred and fifty thousand dollars cash. I'll give you 48 hours to get the money together. I will call you at your house on Rancho two days from now to tell you where to drop the money." he said.

"Okay....look, I'll give you the money, just don't hurt my daughter."

"Don't give me a reason to hurt your daughter and I won't. I expect you to call the cops Tom. They won't be able to do very much. We've been planning this for a long time. It's simple. Give us the money, you get your daughter back."

"Okay....okay.....I'll be at my house two days from now."

"See you then Tommy," he said and hung up the phone.

Tom frantically dialed his daughter's cell number. It went right to voicemail. He tried again and got the same answer. He then called his wife who was at home. He didn't want to tell her that their only daughter was taken hostage by some psycho over the phone, so he raced home, past the gated walls and security at his luxury housing development. The walls, the cameras, the gates, the key cards. It was all an illusion, designed to entice buyers into thinking that they were safe inside its perimeter. Truth is, as soon as you open your eyes every morning, you take risks and chances. There is no such thing as safety. Today was proof of that.

He met his wife in the driveway. She was cooking dinner and was totally oblivious to what was happening. He sat her down in the kitchen and told her what had just happened. Hard to believe that just over an hour ago, he was installing a new central air unit, and here he was, nearly in tears, telling his wife that their daughter was kidnapped. His wife Laura sat down on the couch. She was shaking.

"Tom, I think we better call the police," she said softly.

Tom dialed 911 and as best he could tried to tell the 911 operator what had just happened. He had tried dialing his daughter's number over a dozen times and got no response. The operator had dispatched units to the house before Tom hung up the phone.

Ten minutes later, two black and whites from the Las Vegas Metro Police Department showed up at their front door. Ten minutes after that, two detectives from the Metro Unit showed up.

"Mr. and Mrs. Valenti, I'm SGT. Trevor Willis, I'm a detective with the Metro Police Division. Can you sit down and tell me what happened?" he said.

The entire group went into their living room and sat down. Willis and the other Officer, Detective Martinez took their statements. The rest of the units went through the house and outside, looking for anything out of the ordinary.

Tom tried as best he could to calm himself and explain in detail what the kidnappers told him.

They both frantically took notes and took Tom's cell phone. Trevor opened the back of it and took out the battery.

"What are you doing?" asked Laura

"Just want to make certain that the kidnappers didn't put any kind of a tracking device on your phone. Some of them are very hard to spot," said Trevor.

"How would they get my phone? I keep it with me at all times."

"At this point, we can't assume anything. We have to assume that the kidnappers have been watching you and your daughter....I'm sorry, I didn't even get your daughter's full name?" said Trevor.

"Jennifer. Jennifer Anne Valenti. She's 20 years old."

"I'm going to need a complete list of all her friends, associates, and boyfriends. Tom, I'm going to need a full list from you as well. Including work associates and employees. The sooner we start eliminating suspects, the faster we can find your daughter." said Trevor.

"Of course. Honey, you know her friends better than I do. I'll call Maggie at the office and get that list for you."

It took over an hour, but the list was compiled. During that time, Trevor briefed his co, who called the captain, who called the chief, who then called the mayor. The chief decided to call in the FBI. He called back Trevor, who told him the news.

"Yes sir, I'll let them know," he said.

Trevor called them into the living room. He told them that a decision has been made to call in the Las Vegas FBI field team to assist in the investigation. Tom knew full well what this meant. The FBI doesn't assist, they run the whole freggin show, from start to finish. His wife seemed somewhat relieved. Neither of them had much faith in the Las Vegas PD to do anything right, except hand out tickets. The FBI wasn't called in because they do any better than the locals. The real reason was that kidnappings rarely end well for the families of the victim. There's usually a lot of public outcry when the police can't save them. Public officials have to worry about re-election. If the FBI takes over, it's on them if it goes to shit. They can disappear on a plane back to Washington and never be seen again. The local police are off the hook.

An hour and eighteen minutes later. The entire Las Vegas FBI team arrived at the Valenti's house. Vegas PD had sealed off all access to the house and was doing its best to keep everyone away from the Valenti house.

Trevor had UNLV Police check on his daughter's dorm room. She was not there. Her roommate said she should be at gymnastics practice. She had not arrived for her scheduled session. Her coach thought it odd that she didn't show, but didn't do anything about it. UNLV police determined that she was last seen at a job interview on Anne Road at a sports facility. They confirmed that she had an interview at 1:30 that afternoon, but never showed up. At that point,

Police put out a BOLO alert for Jennifer Anne Valenti. An amber alert was issued as well. Within three hours of the phone call, all of southern Nevada was looking for her.

"Mr. and Mrs. Valenti, I'm Special Agent in Charge, Brian Marshak of the FBI field office," he said, shaking their hands. "I know this is a very difficult time for you both, but we need to go over as much information as we can. Tom, you got the call, correct?"

"Yes."

"Okay, I need to go over everything you can remember about that phone call," said Marshak.

The technical services division of the LVMPD was already trying to trace the number on Tom's phone. They doubted that the kidnappers would be dumb enough to call from the location where they had the girl, but it was worth a try. Half an hour later, Trevor got a call back from an IT specialist with the PD. He told them that the call was routed to a switching station in Toronto, where it was transferred to a network in Florida, where it went to Tom's phone. The IT specialist told them it was a calling card, issued by a company called Horizon Networks. Horizon could only confirm that the call had been made and had indeed gone to Tom's cell phone. They would try and find out anything else they could about the number and would call them back as soon as they found something.

Trevor gave the information to Marshak. He had already forwarded the number to their office in Washington, DC. He knew finding out any information about the number was a long shot, but he would take all the help they could.

Vegas PD received an anonymous call that a black Toyota Four Runner was seen speeding away from a parking lot across the street from the Sports Facility where Jennifer had the job interview. The caller was specific about the time, 1:22 pm. The LVMPD put out an APB for a Black Toyota Four Runner. No license plate information was given. Slowly, but surely, information would begin to come in. The public did seem very much interested when the victim was a pretty twenty-year-old girl who was as white as snow. In his experience, having the public on your side, acting as your eyes and ears was invaluable. Several victims had been returned simply because someone had taken the time to notice that something just wasn't right.

This was not Marshak's first kidnapping. He knew he had to follow bureau procedures when dealing with kidnappings, especially when the victim was a pretty, white girl, whose father was loaded. Unofficially, Marshak had to rely on his gut. Both of the kidnappings he had dealt with before were done by spouses who were simply trying to be reunited with their children. Not a kidnapping like this. He was certain of one thing: If they called before the time and date, they gave Tom, he was dealing with rookie criminals, who were getting nervous. That was both good and bad for him. Nervous kidnappers made mistakes, they also were far more likely to do something reckless, like kill the girl. He knew from experience and training that the chances of Jennifer being returned alive to her parents were slim. The FBI manual on kidnapping put the chances at twenty percent, based on decades of observation and experience. As difficult as it was, the only thing they could do was wait for the kidnappers to call. Brian desperately wanted to talk to the kidnappers. Not to get them to turn in the girl, but to get a feel for who and what he was dealing with. He spoke to several other agents, including his wingman Agent Christopher

Lee. He was one of the best and brightest he had ever seen. It wouldn't be too long before he was skyrocketing on the FBI ladder. Unlike others he had seen over the years, Lee was a total team player, whose first and only mission was to stop the bad guys. Lee was a by-the-book Agent, at least on paper. On the street, however, Lee did whatever it took to win.

"Regulations don't catch scumbags.....brains do." he once said.

He went over what they knew about the case so far, outside, away from earshot.

"My gut tells me it's a former employee or business associate. I don't think you get a house like this by being a nice guy all the time. This just seems a little too personal to me." said Lee.

"I was thinking the same thing. We got that list of everyone who has worked for him over the last five years. I've got the rest of the team going down the list. I think it's time we put old Tommy boy in the hot seat. I have a feeling he knows a little more than he's telling us."

"It won't be that easy."

"Why not?"

"The family lawyer just showed up," said Lee.

In the chaos and confusion of the first four hours, no one noticed that Laura had called a family friend, Keith Spassky, ESQ. Brian would rip his fellow agents for letting a mistake like that be made, but that would come later. He wasn't sure what to make of the call. Were the Valenti's doing this because they knew they were in trouble, or just to help ease their state of mind? He hadn't spent more than fifteen minutes with Tom and Laura since he got their statements about the phone call. It was too early in the whole mess to get a read on either one of them. Right now, he had to take everything they told him at face value until it could be proven otherwise. He called the southwest regional commander of the FBI and briefed him on what was going on. He was on the phone for less than five minutes. Brian knew him too well. It wasn't that he had faith in Brian or his staff, it was the simple fact that if something went horribly wrong and the girl was killed, he'd let Brian fall on the sword and just claim it was all his doing. Once the lawyer arrived, he figured it was time to "beat the sticks" as his father would say. Tom, Laura, and Keith all sat down in the living room. Brian and Agent Lee sat across from them on the couch. Tom made it very clear that Keith was not just his family attorney, he was his friend as well. They go back to when the two of them played football together at UNLV.

"Tom, Laura....it's important that we all be on the same sheet of music here. I have a daughter of my own, I can't even imagine what you two must be going through. With that said, I need to be clear, that if either of you is withholding any information from us that could be used to recover your daughter, you will be charged in connection with her kidnapping. I hope I'm being clear on this."

"Of course," said Tom

"Well Tom, I didn't want to do this as soon as we arrived, I wanted you to calm down and maybe clear your head before we interview you. I must ask you two again: can you think of anyone who would have any reason to kidnap your daughter?"

"We've been asking ourselves that question ever since I got that call. Look, I've had disagreements with people over the years, even physical ones, but it was always over the business, never personal. I've never pissed off anyone so bad that would harm my only daughter."

"Laura, how bout you?"

"I'm a trophy wife, Agent Marshak. I wake up, go to the gym, go shopping, look good for my husband when he comes home, that's it. I have no idea who did this." she said

"Okay, fair enough. Tom, my gut is to say that you probably know the people who kidnapped your daughter. It could be an ex-employee, an ex-lover, somebody who you have had dealings with recently."

"Excuse me Mr. Marshak....look, I realize you're the FBI Agent and all, but how on Earth can you possibly assume that since it's so early in the investigation?" asked Keith.

"Thousands of kidnappings over seventy years, that's how. The FBI has studied them, lots of them. Different reasons, different races, different income levels. We noticed very similar patterns in nearly 90 percent of all kidnappings, the victims knew their kidnappers."

"And in those thousands of kidnappings and cases, what percentage of the victims were returned safely to their family and friends?" asked Keith.

"About ten percent," said Brian.

"Ten percent? Jesus Christ, we're supposed to hold out hope for ten percent?" asked Laura

"I'm not going to lie to you, the chances of your daughter being returned safely to you are not very good, but it does happen and we're getting better and better each day. I want you to understand that our policies and procedures are based on situations like this one that have happened over the years to families like yours. The FBI has put together a policy and procedure book on kidnappings that we have found leads to the best possible outcome, which is the release of your daughter unharmed."

"You really think we know who did this?" asked Tom.

"Yes, Tom....I do. I'm not asking to think of someone you deal with who is evil or a criminal, I want to think of anyone you know who is reckless and unstable enough to do something like this....please, any information, no matter how unimportant it may seem could be the crucial bit of evidence we need."

"Agent Marshak, I must ask, Isn't it possible that Jennifer knows her kidnappers as well?" asked Keith

"Possible, yes. We have agents looking into that as well. They're interviewing her friends and classmates right now at UNLV." said Brian

"What do we do on Friday? What happens when they call?" asked Tom

"If they call from a phone in the United States, we'll be able to trace it. We'll pretend to comply with their requests. I can tell you, Tom, that right now, the only thing keeping your daughter alive is the belief that her attackers will get money for her release. We pay them the ransom, they have no reason to keep her alive."

"We don't pay them, they could hurt her," said Laura.

"That is a possibility. I have a feeling they will call before Friday, once the reality of what they have done begins to sink in," said Brian.

"What happens when they do? Do I talk to them or do you?" asked Tom

"You talk to them. Get them talking. They may sound confident and in charge over the phone, but they're probably sweating bullets. They want to talk to you, to see you as someone who can help them. No matter what they ask for, no matter what they say, do not get upset, or lose control. Just agree and listen to them. Now, I'm told there is a news team here from Channel 8. They want to interview you. I've agreed. I think the more you talk about your daughter and get the public on our side, the better our chances, okay?"

"Fine," said Tom

"It's just going to be you two. No police or FBI. We want the public to see them as doing this to just you. Maybe even her kidnappers as well. We want them to see you as people, as a family. Not as you and the FBI trying to get your daughter back."

"Yeah, I understand."

"We'll go outside in five minutes, okay?"

"Yes, just give my wife a few minutes to clean up," said Tom

"Laura, I don't want you to clean up. I want you to look like a mess. You go outside with makeup on, it's not going to look right. Tears and runny mascara are exactly what we need right now." said Brian.

"He's right guys. We want everyone to see what they have done to us. Go outside, just like that." said Keith

As soon as the Agents left the room, Tom sat down next to Keith.

"Tell me you got something, buddy."

"I'd bet my left nut that these guys are gambling junkies, trying to pay off a big bet. I've got two private dicks working every casino and sports betting shop in Las Vegas, trying to turn over

names. As soon as we can connect one of them to you, we'll make our move. You let the FBI idiots run the show, Jen's as good as dead. Tom, I have to ask you, not just as your friend, but as your lawyer as well.....you didn't have anything to do with this, did you?"

"Fuck you!" said Tom in disbelief.

"Just had to be sure buddy," said Keith.

Tom and Laura tried to compose themselves as best they could for the News 8 interview. Tom noticed that the news anchor had tears in her eyes when they were done. Brian thought it best to go unscripted, as it would seem more natural and make them look more sympathetic. When it was over, there was a small army of friends and neighbors offering their love and support. People they hadn't seen in years stopped by to offer hugs and prayers. The minister from their church stopped by with his worship team to offer their support as well. Jennifer wasn't just taken from the family, she was taken from the entire community and the community was not happy at all.

The call came in exactly half an hour after the interview. Brian had been right all along. These were rookies, who weren't calling to demand anything, they were calling to remind themselves they were still in charge. Tom's cell phone had been hooked out to a special machine that would allow anyone to hear and see what was being said. Several people had called offering their support, so there were several false alarms. At 8:13 PM, the kidnappers made the call to Tom's cell.

"Hello?"

"Tommy? That you?"

"Who is this?" he asked

"The guy who has your daughter."

"How do I know you're the real kidnappers?" he asked

There was a brief pause and Jennifer came on the line.

"Daddy, it's me," she said softly

"Jen.....have they hurt you?" he said with tears of rage in his eyes.

"No.....they keep me handcuffed to a radiator in this room, but they haven't hurt me. They say they won't hurt me if you pay.....daddy, these people are crazy.....totally fucking nuts." she stopped and was yanked away from the phone.

"Look, Tommy. Like I said before, I'm not some sick asshole that likes hurting people. I just got into a little trouble and I need some money, that's all. You give me the money, you get your daughter back, it's that simple."

"You'll get your money. I'm just asking you not to hurt her."

"Tommy, I'm not going to hurt her. Just don't fuck me here Tommy. Any bullshit with the cops and all bets are off."

"Look, let's just get this over with. Just tell me where you want me to drop the money off."

"You came up with two hundred and fifty thousand pretty quick Tommy. Maybe there are some cops there with you?"

"Yes, there are cops here with me. The bank called them when I withdrew the money," said Tom

"Well, I figured at some point they would be involved. I don't really care. Most of them are too stupid to be any problem. No feds there I hope." he said

"No, just Vegas Metro."

"Alright, Tommy. Here we go, you ready?"

"Go ahead."

"In Los Angeles, there's a metro station on Wilshire and Le Brea, right near the tar pits. You drop two hundred and fifty thousand dollars in a white briefcase, next to the green garbage cans on the platform at exactly 8:45 tomorrow morning. Someone will pick up the briefcase and deliver it to us. If I see one cop, if I even smell a cop, she's dead. If you put a tracking device inside the briefcase or the money, she's dead. I have a device that can pick up even the weakest GPS signals so don't try me. You got all this Tommy?"

"Yes, I'm just writing it down. Okay, train platform at Wilshire and Le Brea, 8:45 AM. It will be there. Now, after you get your money, when do I get Jennifer back?"

"As soon as I have the money, I'll call you and tell you where she is."

"Come on man, I gotta have more than that," said Tom

"No, you don't. You just do exactly what I say and you get her back.....don't fuck this up, Tommy. I don't think I have to remind you what will happen if I don't get my money."

"You'll get your money, don't worry about that."

"Okay, Tommy, I'll see you then," he said and hung up the phone.

"Did you get it?" asked Tom as soon as the line went dead.

"We got it." said one of the FBI Agents.

"Did you trace the call?" asked Tom

"Tom, it doesn't work that way. The phone system is millions of separate networks. It takes time to trace the call. It's not like on TV. It's going to take some time to trace the call. My guess is they called with a calling card or two of them from a payphone."

"That's not the same guy who called me yesterday," said Tom

"You're sure of that?" asked Marshak.

"Positive. The guy who called yesterday just sounded, well.....a lot smarter and more in control. This guy sounds like a junkie or something."

"So, we know we're dealing with more than one person. We kind of assumed that."

"Ten percent huh? That means a ninety percent chance we'll never see Jennifer again," said Tom

"Tom, I know this is difficult, but you can't give up hope. Not yet. We're still in this fight."

Tom's heart sank. Brian put his hand on Tom's shoulder. They had a lot of work to do before tomorrow morning.

No one in the Valenti House slept much that night. Tom went with the FBI Team to LA where they would meet with a team from the FBI Field office in Los Angeles. They had LAPD SWAT as well as half a dozen plainclothes detectives already set up, doing surveillance at the train platform. As soon as the drop was made, the suspect would be followed. When it was safe to do so, they would arrest him. Both the LAPD and the FBI had officers and agents on the trains that would come and go for the next hour. A total of fifty FBI and LAPD personnel were involved in the operation. It was a very busy area, with lots of people coming and going. Brian wondered if it was going to be enough. It would be easy to lose him and the money. A decision was made by the regional commander not to put any tracking device in the money, which Brian thought was a giant mistake, but he was overruled. It was quite easy to detect a GPS signal and the commander didn't want to take the chance of the suspect walking away. Brian spent most of the four-hour trip talking on his phone, with the LAPD and the Los Angeles Office. Brian figured he was dealing with dangerous idiots, not criminal masterminds. Once they picked up the bagman, he figured and hoped the entire operation would simply fall apart. He put the odds of the Valenti girl's release at about fifty percent. He also had to tell Tom that in no way, shape or form could they let the pickup man take the money. Tom had deluded himself into thinking his daughter would be released as soon as the money was in their hands. It was understandable, given his situation, but Brian didn't want him to come unglued in the middle of the operation.

"Tom, you do understand that we cannot let this suspect get away with the money," said Brian once they were over Cajon Pass.

"Why not? They have the money. Why hold onto Jennifer at that point?"

"See Tom, that's the problem. If they have the money, there really is no point in keeping Jennifer alive, unless they want more money. Jennifer is a major liability to them at that point."

"I understand that Brian, but you said yourself that every kidnapping is different. That doesn't mean they are going to kill her. They might want to release her unharmed. Show the public that if you do what the kidnappers ask, no harm will come to the victim."

"That's possible Tom, but not very likely. More than likely, Jennifer could identify one or more of them. Maybe she overheard them talking and knows specific things about her kidnappers. As insane as these people are, we cannot assume they are stupid. The decision wasn't mine. It was made by my boss. I just follow orders like everyone else."

"She's my daughter.....don't I have some say in how this operation is run?" Tom asked

"Tom.....if we let the suspect go and you never heard from Jennifer again, would you be able to live with that?"

"No, probably not."

"This is a shitty situation. Like I said earlier, the chances of her safe return are slim. All we can do is up her odds of survival. Once these scumbags realize just what they're up against. I have a feeling they'll release her and run."

"Or kill her and run," said Tom.

"That's always a possibility Tom. You have to prepare yourself for it."

"Are you always this honest with people, Brian?"

"Just with people I like." He said.

Brian and his team met the other Agents from the FBI Office in two motel rooms that had been temporarily converted into a headquarters for the operation. It was two blocks away, but out of sight from the train platform. Brian met with Lieutenant Macy of the LAPD who was running their end. Brian would have control over the FBI's end of things in the city. The plan was to let the suspect pick up the briefcase. He'll more than likely board one of the trains. He will be followed until it is safe to take him down. There were five black and whites parked on the ends of the streets in case he slipped through and got in a car. Helicopter surveillance was standing by. This guy was not going to get away. He briefed everyone in the room on what was known about the kidnappers at this time, which was not very much. He gave a recent photo of Jennifer to everyone in the room and said it was unlikely that she was with them, but to be on the lookout nonetheless. With half an hour to go, Brian got dressed in shorts and a tee shirt. He was wearing a backpack with his 9mm strapped inside for easy access. He would be on the platform within sight of the briefcase at all times, pretending to talk on his phone. Four other Agents would be on the platform as well. It was getting close to 8:45. They had to put the money in the white briefcase. He figured the pickup man would at least open to check if he had any brains at all and then take off with it. There was always a chance that someone other than the attackers could grab the briefcase, so they had another white briefcase with two hundred and fifty thousand inside just in case. Brian had been in some tough spots before and was cool under pressure. He prided himself on being good in a pinch. At the end of the day, that was all that really mattered.

Brian sat down on the bench and pretended to be talking on his cell. He never looked directly at the briefcase, but never took his eyes off it either. Another agent dropped the briefcase next to the green trash cans at 8:40 and walked back several feet. He pretended to be reading a newspaper. Two young men stood in front of the briefcase, but neither one touched it. Just as the train was

pulling onto the platform, a man wearing a jogging suit walked quickly up the briefcase. He never even opened the briefcase. He knew they had their guy. He hopped on the train with the rest of the passengers. They had another briefcase put in its place, just in case he wasn't one of the kidnappers. He and two of the agents boarded the train. He found the two other undercover detectives on the train and sat down next to them. They were only a few feet from the man, who was holding onto the briefcase for dear life. He got off at the next stop on Wilshire. He and the team got off with him. The platform was packed with rush hour commuters. They lost him for a brief few seconds but found him walking up the steps to the street, still carrying the briefcase. They lost him once again, this time for over a minute, but found him on the train platform. Brian knew it was now or never. They couldn't play cat and mouse with his guy all day long, they had to make their move.

"All Agents, apprehend suspect, repeat, move on the suspect!" he shouted into his radio.

There were several bystanders and commuters on the platform, who quickly got out of the way when they saw a dozen people rush toward the man carrying the briefcase. They all had their badges out and the man was in handcuffs within seconds. Brian grabbed the briefcase and followed the man down below where everyone was waiting. Once he had been thoroughly searched, Brian sat next to him in the FBI vehicle and started talking to him.

The man looked very nervous.....very nervous. He liked that. People tend to be very honest when they're nervous.

"Start talking," said Brian. Agent Lee was in the front seat.

"Look, man.....I was just told to pick up a white briefcase on that platform at 8:45 and hop on the train. I was to go to bus stop number 27 on Wilshire, got to the payphones at the next stop and someone would call me."

"Somebody paid you to pick up the briefcase?"

"Yes....they gave me five hundred bucks. It was in my pocket but the officers took it when they searched me. Guess I'll never see that money again."

"What's your name?"

"Michael Clark."

"Michael Clark, you are some serious shit here," said Brian.

"Yes, I can see that."

"Do you know why we are all here and why we were following you?"

Michael just shook his head.

"That white briefcase has the ransom money that was going to be delivered to the kidnappers for the release of their hostage. That makes you an accomplice. I don't think I have to spell out the rest for you, do I?" he said

"Whoa.....whoa man, I didn't kidnap anybody.....look, I'm a homeless junkie. I haven't had a job in two years. Somebody walks up to you and offers you five hundred dollars to do a simple job for them, you take it, but I sure as hell didn't have anything to do with the kidnapping or anything." he said starting to shake.

"So, let me get this straight, some random stranger asks you to pick up a white briefcase and gives you five hundred dollars cash and you have no idea who he is or why he wants you to do this?"

"He was very clear: do not open the briefcase. He said he'd be watching. If I opened the briefcase, I wouldn't get the rest of my money."

"How much was that?"

"A thousand dollars. I would answer the pay phone at the bus stop and he would tell me where to pick it up. He said to make sure I switched them out, otherwise, I'd never get the rest of my money."

"Wait, what do you mean switch them out?"

"At the next stop. I was to drop the briefcase I picked up and grab the new one next to some recycling bins," said Clark.

Lee spun around and looked right at Brian. They both flew out of the SUV and ran over to the LAPD van where the briefcase was being held. He quickly realized it was not the same one with the money. He opened it up and saw that it contained old books. The money was gone.

"JESUS CHRIST! NONE OF YOU THOUGHT TO CHECK AND SEE IF THE MONEY WAS STILL IN THERE?" he shouted.

"Dude, it's your operation, not ours." said one of the officers.

"GODDAMN IT!" shouted Brian as he slammed his fists on the hood of the car.

He quickly assembled the team and informed them of what had happened. How on Earth none of the agents or officers saw Clark switch the briefcase was almost incomprehensible, yet it had gone down exactly as he had described. Dozens of officers and FBI agents had raced back to the train platform with Michael Clark, who showed them exactly where he had left the money. He looked up and realized why they had chosen this exact spot. There was extensive work being done to the platform, with lifts, ladders, and equipment everywhere. It would be very easy to drop something off and have it hidden, even with thousands of people walking by. The surveillance cameras were out of service due to construction. They searched the whole area. They found the briefcase on the next level with the money gone.

Brian sat down on a bench and put his face in his hands. He had been played and played good. He had underestimated his opponents and it cost him dearly. The Valenti girl was as good as dead now. These guys had just beaten the FBI at their own game. Now they would be confident enough to try and kidnap someone else. He had to go and tell Tom the bad news, but he never got the chance. As soon as Tom had found out what had happened, he and Keith Spassky took off and headed back home to Vegas to wait for the attackers to call, which was probably their best move at this point. He hoped and prayed that they would call again and ask for more money. He had broken his one and only rule when dealing with bad guys: Never, ever underestimate your opponent. He actually thought he would have the rest of the kidnappers in custody by lunchtime. Now, he had to call his boss, the regional commander, and tell him what had happened. He knew it was going to be a difficult call. The guy was an asshole even when things went well. His boss was a politician who just happened to be an FBI Agent as well. All he cared about was how good he looked to his superiors. Right now, he would not look very well.

Brian and Lee drove back to Las Vegas in near silence. Each of them knew what the other was thinking, but saying it out loud would just make things worse. What bothered him most of all was that he felt like he had let down the Valentis. They might not ever see their daughter again and it was his fault. Maybe not completely his fault, but it was his show and he blew it.

"Chris, did these guys get really lucky, or did we just underestimate them?" he asked as they pulled away from Primm after filling up.

"I'd say a little bit of both. We were watching the suspect, not the briefcase. It was so crowded on that platform.....I have a feeling, this isn't the last we've heard of them."

"Me too," said Brian

Keith and Tom weren't just racing back to Vegas to wait for the kidnappers to call, Keith;s PIs had turned up some hot info about the kidnapping.

"I just got off the phone with my PI. He says that two brothers, the Woznaik brothers, lost two hundred and fifty thousand on the playoffs to a bookie in Vegas named Jimmy Robinson. Robinson sent his goons out to collect a down payment four days ago. Told him that unless he came up with twenty-five thousand by Friday, they were going to start breaking things on his body. The very next day, Jennifer is kidnapped."

"Wozniak.....why do I know that name?"

"He was one of your employees. You fired him three months ago," said Keith.

The more Keith told him, the more clear it became. He remembers meeting him once at a job in Henderson. His company had grown so big over the last five years, that he had employees he had never met. He dropped off a compressor at a house and met Mike Wozniak. He remembers he had Jennifer with him and Mike never took his eyes off her. He was told that several parts had come up missing and that Mike was the last person to have signed them out. They questioned him about it, but he denied any wrongdoing. Tom had no choice but to fire him when they couldn't be found. They were later located on a website for sale. He remembers looking Tom in

the eye and telling him "*he was making a huge mistake and would regret it*" Tom had completely forgotten about it until now.

"So, a guy I fired just happens to owe the exact amount of money the kidnappers wanted, who owes the money to a bookie? I'd say that makes him a pretty good suspect," said Tom

"We just have to find a way to get to them without those FBI idiots getting involved. Tom, you must realize at this point that Jennifer's best chance for survival is if we don't involve them. I can't believe they screwed this up. You know buddy, we could do all this for nothing, but at least we have a strong suspect. That's more than the FBI has at this point."

Keith and Brian took an almost immediate dislike to one another. Keith had dealt with the FBI before and found them to be a bunch of well-dressed robots, who seemed more interested in getting FBI awards than actually stopping criminals. He and his father were both living in Fort Lauderdale back in 1986 when two bank robbers shot it out with the FBI and killed several of them. The FBI was good no doubt. But they were only good until something they never planned for or expected happened. Keith could not believe they lost the money. It was inexcusable. His opinion of Brian and the FBI was in the toilet. He knew it came to dick measuring contest with Brian, he would come up short. The FBI is the boss, but that didn't mean he was going to abandon his best friend, not when he needed him the most.

Brian had dealt with enough lawyers to know that most of them aren't any better than the criminals they're defending. Once in a while, he would meet a public defender with a heart of gold, who genuinely wanted to help people, but they were few and far between. He had prosecuted 2 mob bosses a few years ago and spent days dealing with mob attorneys, one of whom he later discovered had actually ordered the hit on one of the FBI's star witnesses. The further Brian ventured into his career, the less and less respect he had for lawyers. How in the hell can a lawyer defend someone, when they know full well their client is guilty? Didn't really make much sense to Brian. At the end of the day, he realized that a successful lawyer must put their convictions and beliefs aside for a paycheck. If they didn't, they would never make it as a lawyer. These guys would sell their own mothers for a paycheck. He wasn't which one was scarier: the murderer or their delusional attorney who believed they were innocent. Both of them made Brian's skin crawl.

The Valenti house had now become a media circus. The police had to block off all access to the house. Living in a gated community had its blessing in this case. Every time they left, the media was right there, wanting information. Keith was now running the show at the house. Managing interviews and controlling every press release. Brian had made a brief appearance and then left. No one wanted him there anyway. Both Brian and Keith had been right about one thing: the kidnappers would call back, much sooner than they expected. They called at exactly 8:43 PM that night. Keith almost had to chuckle to himself. If nothing else, these guys had a sense of humor.

"Hello?" said Tom.

"Tommy.....the fuck happened today?" said the man on the end of the line.

"You got your money. I did what you wanted. I'd like to have my daughter back, in the same condition she was before you took her."

"There were Feds there today Tommy. Didn't I tell you no Feds?"

"It's not my call to make. You know that. This is completely out of my hands at this point. Why don't you just talk to the FBI, they're running the show."

"Tommy, I hate the FBI. I'd much rather talk to you. Now look, today could have been a real disaster. I know I said I would release her, but I'm going to need just a little bit more money. Fifty thousand. That's all. Just to cover my expenses and all the trouble this has caused me."

"You brought this trouble on yourself."

"No Tommy, you brought it on yourself. If I recall, didn't you get a recall notice on the air compressors you bought from China? They caught on fire. People have died because of those things, but you chose to ignore the warning and install them anyway, knowing full well they were dangerous. I think that's called criminal liability by your FBI friends."

"What the hell does that have to do with my daughter? What did she ever do to you?" asked Tom.

"Climb down off your cross Tommy. You're no better than I am, you stupid asshole. I see that big beautiful house you and the wifey poo live in and I really have to wonder, just how many people like me did you have to step on to get something like that?"

"Again, what does this have to do with my daughter?"

"Children inherit the sins of their parents. Fifty thousand cash in a regular cardboard box. Put it at the corner of Tropicana and Decatur at exactly 11:28 tomorrow morning. A van will stop and pick it up. If I even smell a cop or a Fed, the girl goes in the ground, got it?"

"Yes.....may I ask you just one more question?"

"Fire away?"

"Is your name Mike Wozniak?" asked Tom

There was a slight pause on the line. Tom knew instantly who the caller was.

"Can I just call you Mike from now on? That is your name isn't it?" asked Tom.

The Three FBI Agents in the room, listening to the call, looked nervously at one another. They had no idea what to do.

"If that's what you want to call me," he said.

"Well Mike, do you really think you're going to be too hard to find when all this is over? Think you're just going to up and run away and everyone will forget what you've done. I remember when I hired you, you told me all about your sick mother.....how's mom doing?"

"Mom is taking a dirt nap, thank you for asking," he said.

"I'll give you your money. I'd better get my daughter back after this."

"You will Tom. I want this thing to be over just as badly as you do."

"See you then," said Tom and hung up.

"You want to tell us what that was all about? We told you exactly what to say," barked one of the Agents.

"Jesus, you idiots could screw up a wet dream. Look, while you guys were busy losing the ransom money in LA, I was working on a solid suspect here in Vegas. We know who the kidnappers are, at least one of them." said Keith taking the phone.

"And just when were you going to tell us about this suspect?"

"I wasn't. After that fuck up today, I wouldn't trust you guys as far as I could throw you," said Keith

"You're a criminal lawyer, you know it's a felony to impede a Federal Investigation."

"I'm assisting, not impeding. I wasn't a hundred percent sure it was him until just now. His name is Mike Wozniak. He's a gambling junkie on the hook for two hundred and fifty grand to a bookie here in town. He is also a former employee of Tom's and had a major hard-on for his daughter. That seems like an awful lot of coincidences, doesn't it?" said Keith.

The FBI Agents gave Keith a dirty look. One of them went outside and got on the phone with Brian, to tell them what they had just discovered.

"I figured he was working on this from his end as well. I didn't want to stop him. He can get information much more easily when he doesn't have to follow laws or field manuals. I'll be right there." he said

As exhausted as he was. He knew he had to move. He had to get the Valentis to trust him again, even if that meant working with the enemy.

Keith told Brian what he knew so far about Wozniak. Brian was intrigued but wasn't completely sold. He was definitely worth talking to. He called Vegas PD and asked that he be picked up for questioning. He figured if the guy co-operated and went willingly, he wasn't involved. He listened to the phone call several times. When Tom said his name, it seemed to throw him off guard. The more he listened, the more convinced he became. They really did have a strong suspect. No sooner had he gotten off the phone with the Vegas Detectives than Agent Lee came running into the room with some papers in his hand.

"Brain.....you're not going to believe it?"

"What?"

"We got a hit on the calling card used to make the phone calls," he said

Brain nearly shit himself. Turns out the company that made the cards, Horizon Communications had flagged the card number in case it was used again. Not only were they able to trace where the call was made, they also gave the FBI the location and date of where the card was sold and activated at the register. The card was purchased at a Save Mart in Las Vegas. He called and spoke to the Company's IT manager who was able to find the transaction that happened only a week ago. Incredibly enough, the person purchasing the card had used a VISA card to pay for it. Brain thanked the man and then called the credit card company. It took almost an hour, but he was able to finally get a name from the credit card number.

"Tom, does the name Richard Stavanger ring a bell?" asked Brain

"Not off the top of my head, why?"

"He's the guy who bought the calling card that was used to make the calls to your house. We also know where the last call was made using the card. It was at a payphone in Pioche, a few hours north of here."

"There are still payphones around?" asked Laura

"I guess so."

As hard as it was to believe the kidnappers could have made a mistake like this, they did. There were a thousand different variables that could come into play. Any single one of them could make or break the case. They had just gotten lucky.

The house had suddenly come alive. A second wind had just been found and the Agents were frantically working on gathering as much info as they could about their new suspect, Richard Stavanger. Lee pointed out that just because he bought the card, it doesn't mean he made the calls. He could have bought it for someone else. At least they had something to go off. Brian hated involving local law enforcement, especially for something like this, but he had no choice. He had to have eyes and ears watching that payphone. He spoke in detail to the undersheriff of Lincoln County and brought him up to speed. Agents were racing out to Pioche, but it would be a few hours before they got there. The payphone would be under constant surveillance until then. The undersheriff had interviewed one of the cashiers and asked her if she had seen anyone using the payphone.

"Yeah, I saw Richard using it a little while ago. He bought a coffee afterward." the cashier said.

The undersheriff quickly called Brain and told him what the cashier had told him. At that point, an APB and BOLO alert went out for Richard Stavanger, age fifty-three of Panaca, NV. The undersheriff also told him that Stavanger was a miner, who owned an old gold mine about ten miles outside of town called the Jackrabbit Mine. Brian asked the sheriff to have some units set

up observation around the mine. Under no circumstances was the sheriff's department to make a move until there were FBI Agents on the Scene. They would also be watching the payphone in case Stavanger made a call. In a matter of two hours, the case had turned around on its head. They knew the identity of one of the kidnappers and his general location. Brian reminded the undersheriff that under no circumstances were they to move until they got there.

"Sheriff, you screw this up and I will fucking crucify you," said Brian as he got in the van and sped towards Lincoln County.

The Lincoln County Sheriff's Office was small, with only about a dozen deputies. They were well trained and took their jobs seriously. The sheriff was Jeff Donaldson, who had been a lawman for over twenty years. He had also seen extensive combat in the first Gulf War. He did exactly as the FBI instructed. They set up a defensive perimeter around the mine and reported back what they had seen. As soon as they had daylight, it became much more clear. They witnessed Stavanger going in and out of the mine along with two other people whose identities were unknown. They reported that they could see a black Toyota 4x4 and two other trucks parked in front.

"Guys seem to be way overdressed for going to work in a mine," Donaldson told Brian on the phone.

"They're just wearing regular clothes."

Brian called his commander and briefed him on what they had discovered at this point. His boss ordered HRT to the scene. Bravo Team of the FBI's elite Hostage Rescue and SWAT Unit just happened to be in Las Vegas for training. They were boarding a Blackhawk Helicopter at Nellis Air Force Base en route to the mine. His boss ordered them not to do anything until HRT arrived. From this point forward, this was going to be an HRT operation. Brian and his team were now overpaid coffee getters.

Lincoln County Sheriff's Deputies blocked the entrance to the mine from the Highway. Six Nevada highway patrol officers were on the scene to assist. The Sheriff had activated all reserve deputies. They had a total of sixteen officers on scene. They set up a command post at a ranch across the street. The sheriff had already called the rancher and informed him what was going on. Brian just had to hope and pray the rancher would not call Stavanger and tell him what was happening.

By the time Brian arrived at the ranch house, HRT was airborne with twenty agents ready to storm the mine. No one had seen the girl, at this point. The sheriff and his deputies had done exactly what they were instructed to do. No one had gotten in or out of the mine.

Basically, all Brian and the rest of the officers could do was sit and wait for HRT to arrive. They would make an airborne drop and rappel right out of the helicopter. Donaldson reported that no one had been at the payphone since they started the watch.

Brian had no idea if the girl was inside or not. Tom had not been allowed to go with the Agents. He figured he and Keith were probably en route right now. At the very least, they would have a

big piece of the puzzle solved when they arrested Stavanger. They just had to hope he talked and sold out everyone else to save his own ass.

The minutes ticked away and seemed to go on forever. Brian was called when HRT was ten minutes out. The HRT commander briefed Brian on what he wanted and how it was going to go down. In a nutshell, they would land, storm the mine and blast the shit out of anything that moved.

"Try not to kill the girl, okay," he added and hung up.

Brian knew that HRT operations and procedures called for Aerial surveillance, which nowadays usually meant a drone. He didn't have time to contact Creech AFB and jump through the necessary hoops to get a drone in the air over the mine. He didn't see the point. Once HRT arrived it was pretty much game over for Stavanger and whoever else was inside.

HRT was the best of the best of the FBI. They were what the SEALs were to the Navy. The selection process and training is brutal. They weren't just interested in physical ability, you had to be able to think on your feet and act as a team. There was no cowboy shit allowed at this level. He knew the regional commander was eager to use them. He was probably on his way out here to have his photo taken with the HRT commander.

Brian tried to keep everyone else informed as to what was going on. Most of them were in awe of a group like HRT and were eager to see them in action. Most of the officers had only seen a group like this in the movies.

At T-2 minutes, Brian was alerted. Everyone ran to their staging areas. Lincoln County had a sniper deployed on a nearby hill just in case the shit hit the fan. He was told to stand down and not to even fart unless instructed to do so by the sheriff.

Brian heard the whine of the Blackhawk engines as they sped towards the mine. A minute later the giant Blackhawk helicopter was hovering above the touchdown site which was a road used for the haul trucks.

Brian never saw the rocket, he only saw the explosion. His heart nearly stopped. The helicopter was about a hundred feet in the air when the LAW rocket slammed into the side of it, punching a hole through and turning the helicopter into a massive fireball. The pilot tried to steady the helicopter and land, but it was no use. A second rocket was launched and hit the helicopter as well, sending it plummeting to the ground. Within 30 seconds, all but one of the twenty Agents of HRT's Bravo Team were dead, burning alive on the ground below. He had just sent the team headfirst into a trap. In an instant, Brian realized what had just happened.

"Jesus H Christ." said the Sheriff in shock.

"That was a LAW rocket, Brian....I know, I fired one in the Army," said Lee softly.

Everyone in the group looked at Brian for some kind of guidance, but he had none. His phone rang. It was the Regional Commander.

"Brian, what the hell is going on out there, I just lost comms with the HRT commander?" he screamed.

"They're dead sir." he muttered

"What? What do you mean they're dead?" he shouted

"The chopper was hit by two SAMs. They're burning to death sir, I have to help them," said Brian with tears in his eyes.

"That is a negative Agent Marshak,, under no circumstances will you engage. You and the local law enforcement will hold the perimeter around the mine until reinforcements arrive, is that understood.....IS THAT UNDERSTOOD?" he screamed.

"I can hear some of the men screaming sir. I'm sorry, we have to help them. I just can't sit here and watch them die."

"MARSHAK!"

Brian hung up the phone and ran over to Donaldson.

"Either you're going in or we are. Take your pick," said Donaldson

"We could be walking right into an ambush," said Brian

"Those are cops down there, I'm not just going to stand here and do nothing," said Donaldson and ran over to his car.

Within a minute, the highway patrol and all of his deputies were lined up, ready to do whatever they could to assist. All of the emergency services of the county, which wasn't much were speeding towards the mine to assist. Brain and Lee, along with two other FBI agents would take the rear.

"Buddy, I do not have a warm fuzzy about this one," said Lee

"Me either."

The sheriff was in the lead car. Brian had to admire the old man, who had more balls than brains. The convoy was headed right to the crash site, in an open dirt area in front of the main building, where the crusher and conveyor belt were located. To get there, they first had to pass through a narrow area that was surrounded by canyon walls on both sides. Perfect place for an ambush. Brian realized what he was driving into and immediately stopped.

"DONALDSON.....GODDAMIT, STOP, STOP!" he screamed over the radio.

No sooner had he said that than the flame from the rocket shot out from behind the launcher and the rocket slammed into the sheriff's vehicle going almost five hundred miles an hour, turning the vehicle into a pile of molten metal, killing him and his two occupants instantly. A moment later, the vehicle in front of them carrying the two other agents was hit by an RPG, destroying the

vehicle and killing the two agents inside. Brian put the car into reverse and floored it straight back, out of the canyon. He lost control and slammed into a rock, impaling the car. Both he and Lee got out and took cover behind some rocks.

Seconds later the machine gun fire from the SAWs ripped through the rest of the vehicles. Thousands of rounds were being fired a minute, with no way for the officers to escape. Most were killed within seconds. Brian and Lee began firing furiously at the sides of the hills, but it was useless. They only had their sidearms.

The battle lasted for a total of four minutes. They ran back to the staging area and began frantically calling for help. The devastation was immense. Not counting the dead HRT, a total of twelve law enforcement officers and two other agents were killed in the second battle. The entire sheriff's department of Lincoln county had been wiped out, along with five highway patrolmen. Brian and Lee, still could not go anywhere near the scene, the fires from the vehicles and helicopter were burning out of control. A minute later a massive explosion came from inside the mine, blowing it to pieces, sending metal and shrapnel in every direction. Brian and Lee, along with one remaining deputy from Lincoln County were frantically trying to call anyone to help. They had no idea what to expect next.

Over 30 vehicles from Clark County and Vegas PD were on their way to assist. Ely NV, over an hour and a half away, was sending help, as was St. George UTAH. Units were coming in from Eureka County, NV. Las Vegas Emergency services were the first to arrive by helicopter. They set up a perimeter around the mine and waited for more units to arrive. It took over five hours. The governor had ordered the National Guard to assist. By nightfall, they felt they had enough firepower to proceed, which they did very carefully. Sappers from the national guard were on hand to check for mines and booby traps. This was not a hostage rescue, it had turned into a ferocious battle, which the FBI was woefully unprepared for. The units made their way toward the mine, which was still on fire and when they felt it was safe enough, the fire trucks and medical personnel went in to look for survivors. One HRT officer was still alive when he was transported to ST George, but he died on the way. Brian helped pull what was left of the officers' bodies from the wreckage. No one said a word. Everyone worked in silence. The charred remains would be burned into consciousness forever. The smell of burning flesh was one he would never forget. The next day, everyone from the FBI Director to the governor was on hand to assist. There wasn't much left to do, but clean up the mess and wipe away the tears. In all 34 police officers and FBI Agents died on that day. The worst day law enforcement in the country ever had. The President declared a day of national mourning. Brian was put on a plane and flown back to Washington, along with Agent Lee. He was silent on the flight, as was Agent Lee. His shock had given way to something else, a new emotion, one he had never felt in his life before. It was pure unadulterated rage. He was both angry at himself and even more angry at Stavanger and the rest of the people responsible for this massacre. He had been played and played good. This never was about ransom money, it was simply a ploy to get as many police officers into one area at a time, then massacre them. Clearly, these were not your average shit bags. Your average shit bags don't have anti-tank weapons and fully automatic machine guns. Whoever had done this had some major connections, powerful connections as he would later discover. He wanted to talk to his boss. Brian had a feeling the guy knew just a little more about what was going on than he led him to believe.

The only bright spot in the news that day was the hostage, Jennifer Valenti was released unharmed that afternoon. She was dropped off at a truck stop outside of Las Vegas with a message for the FBI director. She was told to personally deliver it to the FBI, which she did. She was reunited with her parents an hour later. One bright spot on an otherwise very dark day. She told The FBI that she was not hurt or sexually assaulted. They even got her the food she asked for and bought her magazines to help pass the time. She was sure there were two of them, possibly even a third. They wore ski masks the whole time and never spoke to her at all. All she could tell them about the place where she was held was that it was old and hot. She had no idea where she was held. They drove around for two hours, seemingly going in circles before they released her. The only thing she could say for certain was that one of them had been wearing expensive cologne, like the kind that sells for hundreds of dollars a bottle.

Brian sat in a hotel room at Dulles Airport, waiting for the inevitable. He knew he was going to be the fall guy for this horror show. He was the agent on the scene, even though he had to run everything by the Regional Commander, it would be Brian that would be blamed for the fiasco.

Slowly, bit by bit, the entire ordeal was beginning to hit the airwaves. Lincoln County SO used an open, unscrambled two-meter repeater system for their communication. It could be heard by anyone with a two meter radio. Local hams had been listening and recording the traffic. Someone recorded and released the entire ordeal as it was being heard over the radio, including the frantic minute, when the HRT Helicopter was hit by the SAMs. Brian wasn't just going to have to face the FBI brass, he knew eventually congress and the rest of the Washington circus was going to demand answers as well. A special congressional committee was being put together to investigate what went wrong. They would eventually discover that no mistakes were made, but no one could possibly have seen this coming. This wasn't just some bad guys who started shooting, it was a carefully planned ambush, by some very experienced people who obviously had combat experience. There is no way the FBI could have seen this coming. They knew that eventually the card would be traced. They knew the name Richard Stavanger would be linked to the mine. They most likely made the anonymous call about the black Toyota Four Runner. Everything was meticulously planned, right down to the last detail. The only loose end was Mike Wozniak. Vegas Metro had found him in a motel room with a bullet hole in his head. They found a small handgun on the floor with a suicide note that read "GOD FORGIVE ME FOR WHAT I HAVE DONE."

What role Wozniak had in all this is still not clear. The FBI interviewed his brother and mother extensively. All they could tell them was that he had joined some kind of anti-government group that was very secretive. He wouldn't even tell his brother the name of the group. His mother and brother were both very clear the man who called the Valenti house and gave instructions was not Mike Wozniak. Voice print analysis would later confirm this as well. As difficult as it was to believe, 34 people were dead, murdered and the FBI had no idea who they were. Every informant and rock or stone was being turned over to find out something about what went down that day at the mine. No one came up with anything. The light anti-tank weapons that were used to bring down the chopper and vehicles were traced back to a missing shipment of weapons from the Afghan army. Disappeared over six years ago. Another dead end. The only name they had at this point was Richard Stavanger. Everyone in the country was out looking for him, but he was

as mysterious as the events that day. He showed up in Lincoln County two years ago. Bought his house and paid for the mine in cash. No one bothered to ask him where he got all that money, no one cared. The only people he even talked to were the girls who worked at the local gas station a few miles away from the mine. He would buy a coffee and make small talk with the girls. They said he was always polite and seemed very intelligent. The vehicles at the mine were totally destroyed in the blast. Some of the best forensic specialists in the country were combing over the wreckage, trying to find anything that they could use to get prints or DNA. After two weeks, they gave up. Whatever evidence had been there was gone, engulfed in the blast. Whatever info Wozniak had died with him. The FBI was back to zero. Brian had a meeting with the FBI director and his lackeys that afternoon. He had two other FBI agents in the room with him. He wasn't sure who was protecting who at this point. Everyone was looking over their shoulder, wondering if they would be next. He didn't sleep at all that night. He would have trouble sleeping and eating for quite some time after. Every time he closed his eyes, he was back at that mine, watching everyone around him die and being powerless to do anything about it.

"Agent Marshak, please.....come in." said Deputy Director Kellog, who met him at the main entrance.

Brian had only been to the FBI headquarters once in his ten-year career. It was a massive building with floors that seemed to go on forever. The fifth floor was where the director's Office was located. He was going to brief the director and everyone else on what had happened. He had spoken to him on the phone the day of the attack, but it was brief, less than five minutes. The director was in shock, just like everyone else. He had no idea where he stood at this point.

"Agent Marshak, just tell Director Lang everything that happened, from the kidnapping to the shootout at the mine. Don't leave anything out, no matter how trivial. You're a lawyer, you know how this works." said Kellog.

Brian rode in silence up to the fifth floor with Kellog and someone else he had never seen. He knew he probably belonged to one of the numerous intelligence agencies that secretly ran the government. Brian hated these types of people. For all he knew, they were the ones responsible for all this.

Kellog knocked on the director's door. He heard someone shout and they all went inside. The FBI Director was a field agent with over twenty years of experience. Director Lang was respected by everyone in the FBI, even the criminals he helped put away. Brian extended his hand out for a handshake. Lang pulled him in and gave him a hug, which caught Brian completely off guard. He hugged him back. He looked around the room. He recognized Senator Moseby sitting on a couch. There were 2 other generals in the room. Brian shook all of their hands, then sat down, directly in front of the director's desk, next to Kellog.

"Jesus, Brian.....I'm so sorry. I can't imagine what that must have been like. Everyone in the room is anxious to hear what you have to say." said Lang

"Well, sir.....unfortunately, there's not a whole lot I can offer today. I'm sure you have all read my report. We thought we were going to rescue a young girl that was being held against her will

for a ransom. Turns out we were just lured into an ambush. It was bad. We were slaughtered out there."

"The only lead we have in the case is this guy.....uh Stavanger?"

"Yes sir. At this point, I wouldn't even be sure that's his real name."

"We're trying to find out as much as we can about him. Bank records, driver's license, online shopping habits, credit cards, hell anything at this point. All we have been able to find out is that Richard Stavanger did not even exist up until two and a half years ago."

"Didn't exist? What do you mean?" asked Brain

"The driver's license number he used to verify his identity is fake. Nevada DMV has no record of a driver's license being issued to anyone named Richard Stavanger in the last five years," added Lang

"How on Earth did this guy buy that mine with a fake ID?"

"No one bothered to check anything. He was polite and charming. Most of all he had a boatload of cash. Papers were signed and the deed was recorded. Turns out a few shortcuts were taken that shouldn't have been."

"Sir.....I must add here. Nothing about this thing is right. Nothing went as it should have. Nothing ended as it should have. This guy was always one step ahead of us. No matter what we did, he had already thought of it. My gut is this isn't just some redneck with a grudge against the government."

"Agent Marshak.....I'm General Crowder of the NSA. My job is to track people that don't want to be tracked. To find people that don't want to be found. This guy is good, no doubt. But isn't it possible you've overlooked something up to this point?"

"I don't know what I would have overlooked?"

"Psychos like this don't just appear out of nowhere, and not want something. Yes, obviously Stavanger has military or professional training. I've listened to the recordings of that Valenti house. Now, someone who has never dealt with this type of thing before could easily overlook it."

"Overlook what?"

"His accent. It's very faint, but it's there. I used to spend hundreds of hours listening to Soviet communications when I was younger. I can spot a Russian accent a mile away, even a fluent English speaker of Russian descent. That man that called you was Russian, or Slavic."

"So, what if he was?"

"Look, Russia and the US are in the middle of a cold war that could easily go hot at this point. Maybe he's a Russian immigrant, or maybe he's not. This entire operation was probably put together by the FSU, that's Russia's new KGB. The entire operation from start to finish."

Brian looked at the General in disbelief. How in the hell could this guy possibly know that? Unless of course, there was something he wasn't being told.

"That note that the Valenti girl had with her when she was picked up? What did it say?"

"What does it matter?" said Kellog

"Maybe nothing, maybe everything.....what did it say?"

Lang looked uncomfortably at Kellog, who just nodded his head. Lang seemed very reluctant to talk about it, but figured at this point, it didn't really make any difference either way.

"The note contained names and Social Security numbers of a dozen of our undercover Agents working covertly here in the United States. Some of them had been undercover for years."

"Jesus.....how the hell could they possibly get information like that?" asked Brian

"Because these bastards have penetrated the FBI Brian, that's how," said Senator Moseby.

"How the hell could the Russians possibly get information like that?" asked Brian.

"Everyone and everything is for sale nowadays.....even the FBI unfortunately," said Lang.

"Is that all?" asked Brian.

"What do you mean?"

"I doubt you'd have all these people from various agencies and backgrounds here if this was the end of it. What else is there?"

Lang put his arms on his desk. He took a cigarette out and lit it up. He looked out the window.

"Brian...I got a phone call yesterday while I was at the FBI academy graduation. Right after the ceremony, my phone rang and the person on the other end told me to go and look under the stage where the graduating class was sitting. When we took apart the staging we found enough C4 to kill everyone on that stage.....all ninety-one graduates. How these people managed to get C4 in there we have no idea, but they did. The initiator was still armed when we found it. If it had detonated.....well. That would have been the end for us."

"They could have killed everyone, but they didn't?"

"Exactly. I think they want the public to see they are capable of anything, but still won't do certain things. It's one thing to kill a bunch of cops on their way to shoot you. It's another thing to kill a bunch of people about to graduate, who are totally defenseless. I think they realized the

public would turn against them. They accomplished their goal without killing anyone. They're getting smarter." said Lang

"Holy shit.....and we have no idea who these people are.....none?" asked Brian.

"None."

"How in the hell did these people get your personal cell number? Isn't your cell one of those special phones they only hand out to VIPs?"

"Not my personal cell, no. Only my wife and immediate family have that. Brian, we are going to release a full media blitz in the next few hours and link a rogue Russian group to the killings at the mine. We will find the evidence.....we just need to you co-operate." said Lang

"These people weren't Russian. Certainly not all of them. Mr. Lang, with all due respect here, I am going to have to ask: is this guy Stavanger one of ours?"

Lang looked uncomfortably again at Kellog. It should have been the other way around, but it wasn't. Lang was too honest a person to try and lie. It really is true, honest people make terrible liars.

"Brian, if the real identity of the attackers was made known.....well let's just say it would be extremely embarrassing for the FBI and the entire US Government," said Lang.

He looked at him, then looked around the room. Nothing about this meeting was right. They weren't here to grill him, or tell him what he did wrong. They didn't care. This was something else, something much worse. Brian stood up out of his chair and leaned over Lang's desk.

"Tell me that this son of a bitch is not a former FBI agent....please Mr. Lang....please tell me."

"Would it make any difference at this point Brian?" he said, almost too ashamed to look into his eyes.

"You son of a bitch! You knew who this guy was and what he was capable of and you let me walk right into it. You let HRT walk right into it, not to mention all those other poor bastards that were slaughtered out there!"

"Agent Marshak! Calm down!" said Kellog, putting his hand on his shoulder.

"We didn't know for certain it was them until they started firing at the mine. Three months ago, one of the agents was killed in Panama....Agent Danny Marquez, remember?"

"Yeah, they said he died in a training mission, with the Panamanian army."

"Well, he didn't. He was found in a dumpster the next day with a note attached to his body. It said that unless the FBI pays five million dollars a month into some bank in Jakarta, they are going to begin killing FBI agents every month until we pay them to stop. Obviously, we did not comply."

"None of you people thought to inform me that the man I was speaking to on the other end of the phone line just might be an FBI agent? You guys didn't think that was something I should have known?"

"We had no idea it was them, Brian. If we did, of course, we would have told you."

"And you guys are going to blame this whole thing on the Russians? Why the hell would the Russians want to kill FBI agents?"

"They want to create as much chaos in the United States as possible. They want us to know they can get to us at any time they want." said another General.

"They don't need to kill FBI Agents to do that."

"Brain.....we think their plan is to blackmail the government into forcing us to stop arming the Ukrainian government. Russia and the Ukraine came within minutes of a full scale war over the Donbass region. They can't come right out and say it, but it will be made clear, that unless we comply, they will continue to kill agents and God knows who else." said Moseby

"Brian, we think that a right-wing militia group calling themselves: THE SONS OF LIBERTY is being fully backed by the Russian government. Our two worst enemies have aligned and together, there's no telling what they are capable of."

"What proof do you have of this....other than the Russian speaker on the phone?" asked Brian.

"Officially nothing. Unofficially, we have a lot. We can't expose our proof, we'd be exposing our undercover agents in Russia." said Moseby.

"I don't know guys, this just seems like a stretch. I don't know if I can go along with this," said Brian.

"Of course, you can Brian. We aren't asking you to lie, we're just asking you to let us take all the questions and not to say a word about what we have discussed with anyone, ok?" said Kellog.

"Brian.....look. This formal Inquiry tomorrow will be headed by myself and Mr. Lang. Now, this could go a few different ways for you. On the one hand, you did disobey a direct order from your commanding officer, ordering you to remain where you were and not to proceed further. You ignored him and as a result, fourteen people are now dead.....on the other hand, you were only trying to help your fallen FBI brothers. You see where I'm going with this?" said Moseby

"Yeah, I think I get it," said Brian. He never did care for Moseby or anyone like him. They didn't give a rat's arse about the dead officers, just how they could spin the result in their favor. People like him made Brian almost nauseous. Brian was upset, but he wasn't oblivious either. He knew that when that many powerful men in one room tell you to do something, you damn well better do it.

"Brian, officially right now, you are suspended, pending further investigation. Of course, your cooperation in this matter could go a long way with the committee. You might even get to keep your job. Now, what do you think?" said Moseby

"They're going to get away with it, aren't they?" he asked in disbelief.

"Of course, they are not going to get away with this. I wish I could tell you everything Brian, but I can't. This thing goes over even my head." said Lang.

"Brian, if we out Stavanger and his group and back them into a corner, there's no telling what they will do or how many people they will kill. We don't know how far they've penetrated into the government. We don't know if they have military units on their side. There are just way too many unknowns at this point. We can't treat this like any other case file." said Kellog.

"This is how Kennedy's killers got away with it, isn't it? How many men in this building knew the truth and didn't have the balls to say anything?" he asked

"Brian.....sometimes in this job, telling the good guys from the bad guys isn't always as easy as we might like. It's not always black and white. Sometimes we have to make decisions we don't feel a hundred percent about, because they are better than the alternative. You're certainly smart enough to be able to understand that." said Lang.

"I guess I just figure that when we convince ourselves that lying is better than telling the truth, we've already lost. Look, I'll do whatever you ask of me. You want me to say that it was the Russians or the Syrians or whomever, fine. I'm not going to rock the boat. I just want the bastards who did this brought in, dead or alive." said Brian.

"I can promise you, they will be. We are just asking for your cooperation. It would go a long way with us." said Kellog.

"Of course sir," said Brian. He knew at this point that he may as well be cleaning Lang's carpets for all the good he was going to do. It was out of his hands. He just prayed these guys knew what they were doing. Nowadays that seemed like asking too much of people.

The meeting ended with brandy and cigars. Brian wanted to shove Lang's cigars straight up his rear, but he knew better. He was one of the good old boys now. He knew he didn't have to worry about the Inquiry at this point. Someone else was going to fall on the sword. Sure enough, that's how it all went down. Two days later, the FBI and several members of Congress who are supposed to be on some kind of FBI oversight committee blamed the pilot of the helicopter for the crash that resulted in the deaths of the HRT team. They actually blamed the deaths of the rest of the officers on miscommunication between the Lincoln county sheriff's office and NHP.

Brian was about ready to lose his lunch. The fact that Lincoln County SO used an open repeater for their communications and that the scanner traffic of the entire incident was recorded and flew in the face of their findings didn't matter, this was the way it was. They brought in some helicopter engineer or expert to say that the flash they all saw was not a missile, but a leaking fuel tank that caught fire.

"Happens all the time." the expert said.

Brian was interviewed for nearly an hour, with everyone in attendance believing he had done the right thing.

"Agent Marshak, I think I can speak for everyone in this room when I say that I wouldn't want anyone in the FBI if they didn't try and do something to help their fellow agents," said Moseby

The fact that he disobeyed a direct order was never even mentioned. Brian knew at that point that the fix was in. The results had been agreed upon before the committee interviewed anyone. Somehow, the committee ended up blaming "shadowy Russian operatives" for the massacre.

Brian had to compose himself and fight back the urge to vomit. His dislike for these men had turned into hatred. The same day, the entire "Russian narrative" came out by the FBI and military. The evidence they presented was so absurd, it belonged with something right out of SCOOBY-DOO, but the media just ate it up. Their job not being to question what they were being told, just to question those who question the government. At this point, Brian knew he was done with the FBI. At this point, he wouldn't believe the FBI if they told him water was wet.

Michael Clark, the homeless man, was shown a picture of Stavanger from a local newspaper. It was a pretty good photo of him, taken in daylight for the mine's re-opening. Clark was certain that the man who paid him was not Stavanger.

When the fake Inquiry was wrapped up. Brian was cleared of any wrongdoing. He was transferred the next week to the Minneapolis Field Office. He sat at a desk and did nothing most days but surf the web and occasionally go out and look for bad guys. The rest of the Agents were friendly and cordial, but he knew after what he had gone through that he was a hot potato no one really wanted to touch. He lasted six months and then handed in his resignation. No one tried to talk him out of it. He shook a few hands on his last day in the office, had lunch, and never came back.

A man like Brian with his experience and resume was not going to be unemployed for very long. He took a job as head of security for the largest casino on the Las Vegas Strip. Casinos were now big business. They had to at least look like they were being honest. He met several people from the Nevada Gaming Commission. It was all a joke. Most Casinos had been ripping off customers for years with a blind eye from the gaming commission, as long as the state got their cut, everyone was happy. The money these casinos generated was almost unimaginable. The casino he worked for employed seven thousand people, working round the clock to make sure their players were pampered and comfortable. Legal, illegal, semi-legal, no one cared. He met employees that couldn't even speak English. They were repairing lights and doing wiring in the building.

"Can't speak a word of English, but somehow can pass the National Electric Code Test...kinda makes you wonder," he told his subordinates.

The more Brian saw, the more disillusioned he became, not just with the casino, but with society in general. Everything was a scam, most people knew it, they just didn't know how to fix it. He took the money, which was more than he made at the FBI, and never said a word. Some idiots

tried to rob the cash cage on the main floor but never made it out of the parking lot. Brian had paid informants all over Las Vegas, who tipped him off. There was a big media circus when the suspects were apprehended. The Casino boss loved Brian and had him out to his house with his family to celebrate. At this point, he could pretty much do just about anything he wanted in that place and no one was going to care.

He took the paycheck and pretended like he gave a shit, but in reality, he was a broken man. Every time he closed his eyes, he was right back at that mine, in the middle of the battle. As difficult as it was, as often as he went over it in his mind, he really wouldn't have done anything differently. It was going to end badly, no matter what he did. His wife asked him several times to see a therapist. He figured he probably should, but knew with national secrecy laws, he just couldn't talk to anyone. If he told them what had really happened, he'd probably be placing their lives in danger. He just couldn't live with that. As the days melted into weeks, which melted into months, slowly he began to adjust. He kept in contact with several people in the Bureau, including Agent Lee, who was heading up the Boston Field Office.

"I haven't heard a damn thing. This Stavanger guy just vanished. It's just hard to believe that they didn't leave one single piece of evidence behind. One fingerprint, one little piece of DNA, just something to give us a lead."

Brian knew if there was any evidence, the FBI would probably destroy it. The more he spoke to his former colleagues, the more convinced he became that he had done the right thing. He could easily have ridden out his time in the FBI and taken early retirement, except he was a man of principle. You shouldn't be arresting someone for doing the exact same thing you and your superiors are doing. Lang and Kellog hugged every single one of the widows at the ceremony for the dead agents. It was nationally televised. Seeing that made Brian quit. He just couldn't work for people who were that morally bankrupt and depraved. Lang was right. Sometimes telling the good guys from the bad guys isn't always easy, but in this case, it was and nobody was the good guy. Someone murdered 34 people and got away with it, but it was inconvenient for the government to go after them. 34 lives were destroyed. 34 families in ruins and our government looked right at every one of them and told them they didn't matter. All that mattered was how the tragedy was spun. Maybe that's always how things worked, but it just wasn't the way he worked. He wanted those people and he wanted them badly. He would have given up everything just for a name, a clue as to who they really were. Anything that might reveal who they were. Anything that might make his nightmare finally end.

In the weeks that followed the attacks, the FBI and the government doubled down on their stupidity and continued to blame Russia for the massacre. Although not one real piece of evidence was presented linking the Russian government to the attacks, the blame continued. Russia recalled its ambassador to the United States at one point. Relations between the two countries reached a new low. Everyone was expecting war to break out at any minute. Brian stopped watching the news. He desperately wanted to tell the families what really happened that day but knew full well what would happen if he did. His life and his family's life would be in danger. His job used to be to protect good people from psychopaths. Lang was right, sometimes telling the good guys from the bad guys isn't always easy, especially when the bad guys hold powerful positions in the government and the FBI. One night, he broke down and told his wife everything. She never questioned his decision to leave the FBI and the lifestyle it afforded their

family. When her husband became an FBI Agent, he was so proud, now he couldn't even bring himself to have anything to do with the FBI. At some point, the lunatics took over the asylum and no one seemed to notice.

He was sitting in his office watching a video on the internet of a robbery in the city when his phone rang. It was the pit boss. He sounded nervous.

"Brain can you come down to the cash cage immediately, we have a little situation down here," he said

"Be right there."

It took about two minutes to get down there. He was met by the pit boss and two other cash cage employees. They told Brian that a young girl had changed in fifty thousand dollars for casino poker chips. She lost forty-eight hundred dollars at the tables, then came back to the cash cage and cashed out forty-five thousand, two hundred and left.

"We didn't know until after she had left." said the cash cage supervisor.

"Didn't know what?"

"The money she gave us was flagged. The serial numbers on the bills were flagged. Not all of them, but some of them."

"What do you mean flagged?"

"We have a database of money that has been flagged as being used for criminal activity. If someone tries to wash the money with the serial numbers that have been flagged, it sets off an alarm. For some reason, it didn't go off when it should have. It's a brand new system, it's never gone off before." said the supervisor.

Brian was amazed. He had no idea the casinos had anything like that.

"Let's have a look at the video," he said

Brain and the ladies sat in his office and looked at the surveillance video from the exchange. Nothing looked out of the ordinary. The girl's face was partially obscured by a baseball cap.

"Did she use ID?"

"No, we don't check Ids for just a cash exchange." said the supervisor.

"Well, we have to separate all of her money. Even the bills that weren't flagged."

"We already did that. She was a cute girl. She looks familiar too. I could swear I've seen her face someplace before." said the other cage employee.

"She did look familiar. Maybe she just has that kind of face."

Brian didn't think much of it. He called their accounting and finance department and informed them of what had happened. They had already gotten a call from someone at the gaming commission who was alerted as soon as the alarm went off. They called the FBI, who called the casino.

Brian didn't get the call. It went to the accounting dept for the cash cage. They were just instructed to separate the money and someone from the FBI or police would be in to get it.

"It's crazy, Brian. A few thousand dollars of that girl's money was used in a kidnapping a few years ago in Los Angeles. The FBI lost the ransom money when they were chasing the suspect. Can you believe that?" said the accounting manager.

"Imagine that," said Brian. He hung up the phone and went back to look at the surveillance tapes. He watched them for over two hours. He noticed the girl had some kind of flower tattoo on her neck. The hair on his neck stood up. He almost had a heart attack.

"I'll be out of the office for the rest of the afternoon. I've got some personal business to attend to," he said. He made a copy of the camera footage, put it on a disk, and raced home. He needed to check his notes on the Valenti kidnapping.

He told his staff he'd be out of the office for a few hours. He raced home and ran upstairs to his office. He was glad his wife and kids weren't home, he didn't want to have to explain this to them. He pulled out his field notes on Jennifer Valenti. Sure enough, she had the same tattoo on her neck, on the same side as the girl in the video. He grabbed a few pictures of her and drove back to the casino. His phone rang twice. He ignored both calls. He was sweating, even though it was on in the mid 50's in the Las Vegas valley. He managed to stop the cashier manager, the one she had spoken to. Brian showed her the picture.

"Is this the girl with the flagged money," he said showing them Jennifer's picture.

"Yeah, yeah that's her."

"How sure are you?"

"I'm a hundred percent sure. I remember the same tattoo on her neck. That's the girl."

He felt like he had just been punched in the gut. He sat down on a chair in the office and ignored everyone for over an hour. He wasn't sure what to do. He was only sure of one thing: he had to know who else was in on it. He had to know who had set him up. He knew just who to ask.

"I've got some personal business to attend to. I won't be back in the office this afternoon. Don't call me unless the building is on fire." he said as he grabbed his sidearm and put his shoulder holster on. It felt good to be wearing it again. To him, it was more personal than a wedding ring. He checked the chamber and grabbed a spare magazine. He hoped he wouldn't have to use it, but if the past two years had taught him anything, it was that you had to be ready for anything.

He was lucky. He caught Keith Spassky just as he was leaving his office. Spassky drove a red corvette with a personalized license plate that read "LAWYRD". He pulled in behind him to block his escape.

"Hi Keith, hope you haven't forgotten me," said Brian.

"Marshak? What the hell are you doing here?" he said, getting out of his corvette.

"Keith.....when did you know?" asked Brian

"What do you mean?"

"You know exactly what I mean. At what point during those four days did you realize that the Valenti's staged the kidnapping?" asked Brian.

Keith looked right at him. When a career lawyer is at a loss for words, it's truly a remarkable sight. Brian was almost enjoying this.

"I guess up until this moment I wasn't completely sure."

"But you suspected."

"Yeah.....yeah I did suspect that something wasn't right," said Keith

"When was that?"

Spassky sat on the hood of his car and took out a cigarette. He lit it and took a puff before he spoke again.

"That day at the truck stop, when they released Jennifer, it was the happiest day of my life. I mean, I saw her and threw my arms around her. She's like a daughter to me too. You know, I'm her godfather. I was there the day she was born. As happy as I was to see her and I was, I felt like something was wrong. It didn't hit me until all the excitement that night, but when it did, it really did."

"What was that?"

"Brian.....there was no way she should be alive. It just didn't make any sense. As smart as these people were. As careful as they were. They just couldn't let her go. They should have killed her, but they didn't. I know the FBI says it was because the group that did this wanted to be seen as soldiers who were fighting an enemy, not as kidnappers, but that never made any sense to me. I mean, they just killed god knows how many people at that mine. I don't think they gave a shit about public opinion at that point."

"So then, up until that point. You had no idea that something was wrong."

"No, Brian....I didn't. In fact, I even asked Tom if he had anything to do with the kidnapping."

"What did he say?"

"He told me to fuck off."

"Interesting. Maybe it means nothing, or maybe it means a whole hell of a lot," said Brian.

"What?"

"Well, he never exactly told you no, now did he?"

Brian and Keith went back into his office. As upset as Brian was, he knew the real piece of the puzzle was to find out how Tom was linked to what had occurred that day at the mine. It would be easy enough to link Wozniak to Tom, but how did Tom fit into the massacre at the mine? That was the million-dollar question.

"I don't get it, Keith, help me fill in some blanks here. I spent three days at Tom's house. The guy certainly isn't hurting for money. I didn't know the plumbing business was that good."

"He does okay. It's mainly just a hobby for him. Tom and his first wife bought stock in Amazon when it went public in ninety-seven. Took out a second mortgage on their house to pay for it. At the time, I and just about everyone else thought they were nuts. Turns out they were a whole lot smarter than the rest of us. They made more money off that stock than I'll ever see in a lifetime."

"Anything else?"

"Well, the money from the settlement of course."

"What settlement?" asked Brian

"From the shooting."

"What shooting?"

Keith looked at Tom like he had two heads.

"You mean you don't know that his son was killed by a cop in Phoenix?"

"No, I did not know that. I didn't even know he had a son," said Brian more than a little intrigued.

"Yes. Three years ago. His son pulled into a convenience store to buy some smokes. He matched the description of a robbery suspect. He exits the store wearing those earbuds, playing music. He never even heard the cops. They just shot him. No warning, no nothing. Shot him in the back as he was walking away. Those idiots murdered his only son. God, it was bad."

"I can't believe we didn't know this. How did we miss that?" said Brian getting more upset with himself and the FBI the longer they spoke.

"I didn't think to mention it, because I figured you guys already knew. It was his son from his first marriage. He used his ex-wife's last name. How did you guys not know that?"

"I'm sorry to report I didn't. Most of the agents on my team that day had less than six months of experience in the field. Not making excuses, but this was their first kidnapping."

"The Coroner's Inquest cleared the officer, as ridiculous as that sounds. Killed a kid who was not armed and had no reason to even be arrested, yet they are cleared. The deal was they would give Tom and his ex-wife five million dollars as an out-of-court settlement. The Inquest meant the cops would not face criminal charges, but could still be sued. I convinced Tom to take the settlement, rather than leave it up to twelve idiots who couldn't come up with an excuse to get out of jury duty. Tom didn't want to settle at all. He would have killed that cop if he had the chance. I think he resented me for pressuring him into taking the settlement, but I really believed and still do, that it is best for everybody. He gets the money, signs an agreement not to talk about it and everyone goes on their way, except for his son, who is still deadlier than a doornail."

"Jesus, I almost feel sorry for him."

"You can imagine how I felt when he calls me almost hysterical and says his daughter was kidnapped. I was afraid he'd lose her too."

"Keith.....you know what happened that day at the mine, right?" asked Brian.

"Just what I heard on the radio and saw on TV. Looked like a total cluster fuck."

"Keith, I could go to jail for telling you this, but I think you have a right to know. The media lied through their freggin teeth about what happened that day. It was no accident. It was an ambush. Some unknown group of people slaughtered 34 Agents and police officers. 34 people, good people, murdered and the FBI is either unwilling or unable to do anything about it."

"What? The media said the helicopter blade got caught on a cable used to transport rock or something."

"Oh, it got caught in something alright, except it wasn't a cable. It was a surface-to-air missile."

"Holy shit," said Keith

"The entire operation was a setup, designed to get us out there in the middle of nowhere and slaughter us. The kidnapping was only a ruse to get the FBI out there. What I need to know from you is how Tom ties into all of this?"

What does Tom Valenti have to do with what happened there that day?"

"Brian, I don't know. Honest, I don't. I mean I know Tom was in a bad place after his son was killed, but Jesus, to think he could be mixed up in something like this is a little hard to believe. You better be sure Brian, not just 90 percent or 99 percent sure, but 100 percent sure you are right on this one. I don't want to see my best friend spend the rest of his life in prison for something he didn't do."

"Keith, Jennifer passed about ten thousand dollars of the ransom money used in the kidnapping at a casino today. She was obviously trying to wash the money. As soon as the serial numbers were scanned, they were flagged. It's the same money we lost that day in LA."

Keith sat down in his chair. He was completely, totally caught off guard. He never expected this. Even now, hearing it, he had a hard time believing it.

"I figured maybe she fucked her kidnappers or something to save her life. She'll fuck anything that moves. She had an abortion last year. That's what I thought. I just couldn't bring myself to think otherwise."

"Keith, how does Tom, a plumber, tie into somebody launching an anti-tank weapon at an FBI helicopter? There has to be a connection, somehow, somewhere, there has to be. Have you ever heard Tom mention a group called the SONS OF LIBERTY?"

"No, why?"

"I think they're the ones who pulled the trigger that day."

"Brian, I'm sure there's a whole lot of people that would love to take a whack at the FBI. Maybe it's somebody you put away."

"I've been through this a thousand times in my head. Every tiny detail was meticulously planned out. They knew we would trace the card. They knew we would find the name. Once we had the name, it was only a matter of time. They knew we would be at the mine. I think they timed the whole damn thing to coincide with the HRT Team being in Las Vegas. It was all so perfect. It was right in front of us and we never even saw it."

"Did you ever think Jennifer staged the whole thing herself? I mean she was the one passing the money, not Tom."

"Come on. Jennifer would have a hard time walking and chewing gum at the same time. Pulling off something like this was a little out of her league."

"Don't be so sure. She's smarter than she looks. She had us fooled all this time. I don't know Brian. Is it possible that maybe, someone found out about the kidnapping plot and sort of took it over somehow?"

"Whoever we were dealing with, they've done this before. They knew exactly what we would do. They were always one step ahead of us. It's like they were former FBI Agents or something."

"Well, I would pick up Jennifer. You know she'll want me there when you interrogate her. I want to be there Brian."

"No problem, except I'm not in the FBI anymore Keith. I can just pass on what I learned and hope they move on it."

"You're going to talk to Tom, aren't you?"

"Yes, as soon as I leave here," said Brian.

Keith looked out the window and lit up another cigarette. Brian could tell he had something on his mind. He just needed to give him a little bit more time.

"He and his son were very close. Tom would fly down there to watch him play soccer every weekend. When he died. I don't know, something inside of him changed. Some kind of switch got flipped. He wasn't the same man I had known all these years. He would just sit and stare at a picture of his dead son for hours in his office chair. Sit and stare at it, like if he concentrated hard enough, his son would come back to life. Sometimes, he scares me. He's like an Atom bomb just waiting to go off. I wonder if maybe he did and no one realized it."

"Is Laura involved too?"

"I doubt it. Laura is a diversion. She's 13 years younger. Getting through spin class is the hardest thing she deals with. I can't imagine she had anything to do with this, then again I couldn't imagine Jennifer having anything to do with this as well. Goes to show you how much I know." said Keith, looking out the window as he spoke.

"Don't tell him I'm coming. Give me at least that much."

"Please don't kill him, Brian. Give me at least that much," said Keith

"I'll do my best," said Brian as he left the office.

Brian knew full well that Keith was going to call Tom and tip him off, he would if he were in Keith's shoes. The drive over to the Valenti house took over thirty minutes in Vegas rush hour traffic. Tom lived in a gated community near Lake Las Vegas. The gate was manned by security, who didn't let just anyone in. He still had his FBI badge but didn't dare use it. Strangely enough, none of his superiors ever asked for it on his last day. He decided to keep it. He figured after over ten years of service, he deserved it.

Tom alerted the guard at the gate that Brian would be on his way over. The guard waved him on through, once he showed him his ID. He recognized Brian from a few years back.

"Agent Marshak, good to see you again sir. How are you?" asked the guard.

"Woke up on the right side of the dirt, how bout you?"

"Fine sir. Mr. Valenti is expecting you."

He drove into the courtyard and down the street to the Valenti house. He parked his car in front of their house. He took out his 9mm and chambered a round. He prayed he didn't have to use it. He figured he ought to let someone know what the hell was going on. He called Agent Lee who was now heading Boston's Organized Crime Unit. Brian still had his number in his cell. Lee was in the office when Brian called. He didn't waste any time and got right to it.

"Bud. You're not going to believe who came into the casino today and tried to wash fifty thousand dollars?"

"Who?"

Miss Jennifer Valenti. We flagged the serial numbers. I guess the FBI gave the numbers to local casinos in case someone tried to show up and wash the money. Sure enough, about ten grand of it was the ransom money. The same money we lost in LA."

"No shit....wow. What do you want me to do?" asked Lee

"Just give me an hour before you pick her up. I'm not going to waste my time questioning her. I couldn't anyway. I'm at the Valenti house. I've got to question him before he gets picked up. He knows more than he's telling us. I've got to find out how he was linked to what happened at the mine. This might be our only chance. If you swoop in and grab him he'll just lawyer up and we'll get nowhere. I'm not even sure if we have enough to hold him."

"Yeah, was it both of them, or just the girl when they were at the casino?"

"Just her."

"I doubt we could even take him in then. The girl seemed like kind of a ditz. I don't think she'd be too tough to break." said Lee

"I can't imagine she would have done this without running it by her father. If they got popped, they must have some kind of alibi. I doubt they would be this stupid."

"Better be one hell of an alibi. You think he's connected to the mine?"

"I don't know. Chris, I can't just let this go. I can't. Every day for the last two years, I wake up and it's still on my mind. It's like it just happened an hour ago. Maybe it's a waste of time. I guess there's only one way to find out."

"Be careful buddy. You won't get much help on my end. My overlords are still sticking to the whole "bad Russians did it" bullshit. They won't go near anything that goes against the official story. I can call the Vegas field office and fill them in on what's going on. They can pick up the girl tonight if you want?" said Lee.

"May as well. You might want to call Vegas PD and fill them in as well in case the shit hits the fan."

"Will do buddy, watch your ass," said Lee

"Thanks, bud. I miss you. How's Boston?"

"Uh, not so bad. One shit show or another I guess." he chuckled.

"Ain't that the truth. Take care bud. If I don't call back in an hour, send in the cavalry."

"Will do."

Brian hung up and walked up the steps to the front door and rang the bell. Laura answered the door.

"Agent Marshak? Hi, what are you doing here? This is a pleasant surprise." she said and hugged him.

"I'm not an FBI Agent anymore, Laura. I run security for a casino downtown. Pays better and I don't have people shooting at me, trying to kill me."

"My God, we never did get to talk to you after that day. We watched it on the news. I can't imagine what you must have gone through."

"Yeah, it's definitely a once-in-a-lifetime experience I hope. Is Tom here, I just need to talk to him for a minute.

"Yeah, he just got home. Come on in. Would you like something to drink?" she asked

"No thanks, I'll just be a minute," he said.

Tom came down the stairs from the second floor. As he got nearer, Brian could see he was wearing an ankle holster. It was well hidden, but he recognized the slight bulge. He wore one for years. Maybe after what had happened, he felt the need to be armed at all times. You could hardly blame him.

"Agent Marshak? To what do we owe this honor?" said Tom extending his hand.

Brian shook it and squeezed as hard as he could. Tom squeezed back. For a split second, Brian felt some kind of weird energy between the two men.

"Well, since I have you both here. I guess you should both know. Jennifer exchanged ten thousand dollars for poker chips at our casino this morning. About five thousand of that money was flagged with the serial numbers we used to pay her kidnappers. It's the same money we lost that day at the train station.

Laura and Tom looked at each other. Their look said more than enough.

"Come on in Brian. I owe you an explanation," said Tom.

As soon as their backs were turned, Brian reached into his holster in his jacket and turned off the safety on his 9mm. His heart was racing, but he had enough experience to know he must remain calm and in control at all times. Especially now, since he was no longer in the FBI. One false move here and he could spend the rest of his life paying for it.

Tom and Laura went into his office on the ground floor. Tom poured himself a drink. He offered one to Brian who politely declined.

"I knew we should have turned in the money. It was stupid of us to keep it. It's just.....I feel like I failed my little girl. I felt like a total failure for not being able to protect her. I told her to keep the money and do what she wanted with it. Should have known those bastards weren't just being nice." he said sitting down at his desk.

"How did she get the money?"

"Last week, someone dropped off a package on her doorstep. She lives in a condo on the other side of town. She opens the package and inside there is fifty thousand dollars. There was a note attached to it that said something to the effect of: *here's some money for your trouble*. As crazy as it sounds Brian, that's what happened. She came home from work and there it was, just sitting on her porch. I read the note. It said to exchange the money for poker chips and then cash them out. I should have known better. You'd think after all we've been through, I would have known better. It's not like we needed the money. I just thought she deserved it after what she's been through. I can tell you it hasn't been easy for her. Did you know she hasn't been in a relationship since the kidnapping? For her, that's amazing. She told me she wants to be a police officer. She's majoring in criminal science at UNLV."

Brian didn't know what to think. He had to take them at their word until he could prove otherwise. If fifty thousand dollars showed up at his doorstep, he probably wouldn't have called the police either.

"Those bastards knew you had the serial numbers. They just did it to get Jennifer in trouble. Like they haven't ruined her life enough already. Said Laura.

"Guys, there's nothing I can do for her at this point. It's out of my hands. I'm sure Vegas PD will pick her up soon. I just wanted to stop by and give you a heads up." he said

"Thank you, Brian. It's our fault. We'll face the music."

He got up to leave and he noticed a gold nugget in a plastic case. He stopped and looked at it.

"That real gold?"

"No....it's Pyrite. Fool's gold. Sure does look real, doesn't it."

"Yes.....it's amazing how sometimes things can look very real and yet they're fake. I guess most of us just see what we want to see in other people and don't look for the bad. Somebody give this to you?" asked Brian.

"No, I mined it. I used to be a miner, years ago. Pulled it out of a vein underground in Ely. You can imagine my sheer horror when I discovered it was not real gold. A giant mine of fake gold. Odds are like one in ten million, but there it was. A giant vein of totally worthless yellow rock." said Tom.

"I didn't know you were a miner," said Brian.

"I haven't mined in years. Good money, but far too dangerous," said Tom

"Tom, the FBI said that Russians were behind the attack, is that true?" asked Laura.

"No, of course not. Truth is, the FBI still has no idea who killed all those Agents. If they do, they aren't saying."

"Why would they say that if it's not true? Didn't Russia recall its ambassador over it?"

"Yup. They sure did. It's been almost two years since the day I got the call about Jennifer. Not a day goes by that I don't think about it. I think of watching those LAW rockets slam into the side of that helicopter and listening to the men screaming on the ground as they were being burned to death. Watching those poor bastards getting cut to pieces by machine gun fire, right in front of me. We treat animals with more dignity. I went into this thing thinking It was a hostage situation. Turns out it was the first battle in a war. A battle that the FBI lost badly. I guess at the end of the day, I have to ask myself just what kind of a person could do that, you know? What kind of a person can murder 34 people, who were just trying to save your daughter? I wonder how well they sleep at night. I know I haven't had a decent night's sleep since that day."

"I don't know Brian. You know, maybe, just maybe I do know," said Tom

"Well, Laura and I were as shocked as anyone. I mean we were asking ourselves if we did anything wrong. We asked ourselves the exact same question. We came up with this theory, would you like to hear it?"

"Sure."

"Well. What if all the families and friends of people who have had a son or a daughter or a father killed by the police were to suddenly band together and decide to get even with the police? What exactly would they do? I mean if there were enough of them and they had enough money and brains, just what would they do, I wonder? Maybe they would decide to take on the best of the best. The cream of the crop of law enforcement. Teach them a lesson they won't soon forget. Show the rest of the world how easy it was to bring the mighty FBI to its knees. For one brief second, all the families all over the country would be even. The FBI could feel what these families have been feeling every day since their loved one was killed. What do you think of that?" said Tom.

"I don't know Tom, I guess I never really thought about it."

"Yes, my son was killed by some retard with a badge. Shot him in the back. My son never even had a speeding ticket and there he was, lying face down in a pool of his own blood. Do you have kids Agent Marshak?"

"Yes, two of them."

"How would you feel if a police officer executed one of them? Then got cleared of any wrongdoing by his superiors?"

"I guess I would be very angry," said Tom

"Maybe, just maybe, you might get even with them," said Tom staring into Brian's eyes.

"I guess I would want to get even with the person that killed my son. Not 34 people who had absolutely nothing to do with it," said Brian

Brian looked at the rage in Tom's eyes and he knew. Both of them knew. He saw Tom reaching down for his pant leg. Brian reached into his jacket. For a second both men thought about it, but Brian pulled out his business card and put it on Tom's desk.

"If you need to get a hold of me," he said, pacing the card on Tom's desk. Tom looked up at him with a look that made even Brian recoil. This was not the same Tom Valenti he had seen at the house during the ordeal, this was someone else. Someone that scared even a seasoned veteran like Brian.

"Thanks, I'll walk you out," said Tom.

The two of them walked to the front door. Brian wanted more answers, but he knew now was not the time or the place. Right now, he just had to get out of the house alive, without having to shoot his way out.

"Thanks for everything Brian. We never would have made it without you," said Tom grinning.

"You're welcome," he said and walked outside.

His heart was still racing. He didn't even turn around until he was in front of the car. Tom and Laura were both looking at him waving goodbye. He waved back, got in his car and drove off.

As soon as he could, he stopped and called Agent Lee.

"How'd it go?"

"Chris. He did it. It was him. I don't know how he did it, but I know why he did it. If you could have seen what I saw.....did anyone pick up the girl?"

"Yeah, about that. The Vegas Office called off the locals. They are claiming jurisdiction on the case. Vegas PD didn't really care, one less report they have to file. The office told me they will send someone out tomorrow to pick up the rest of the money."

"Jesus, well don't hurry whatever you do."

"Did they mention how she got the money?"

"They claim it was dropped off at her front door with an apology and a note that told them to exchange it at a casino."

"Did it say which one?"

"I don't know. I want to believe the girl isn't a part of this Chris, I really do. I don't think she chose my casino out of the blue. They knew the money was flagged. They knew I'd be calling. I think they were going to kill me."

"Why didn't they?"

"They want me to know. They want me to know they pulled off the whole thing and there isn't a damn thing I can do about it. They just want to gloat."

"Seems a little extreme, doesn't it?"

"So is killing 34 police officers."

"Good point."

"We made a lot of mistakes during those three days bud. We didn't realize what we had right in front of us. We weren't looking. They wanted to keep an eye on us at all times. They wanted to savor every minute of it."

"I didn't find out about his son until the following week. I don't know how we missed that."

"We never asked, that's how," said Brian.

"What happens next?"

"I don't know. I don't know if they're done with me or not. I guess I'll just wait and see. I have a feeling though you haven't heard the last from THE SONS OF LIBERTY, that much I am sure of. I think the next one is going to be even worse."

"You really think this guy is involved with all of this?"

"I know he is. That look in his eye. It cut through me like a knife. That was hatred and rage focused like a laser."

"If I hear anything else, I'll keep you updated. Look, stay away from them Brian. If they are involved, they're dangerous as hell. The fact they've made it this far unnoticed is even scarier." said Lee

He hung up the phone. He knew he had made the right decision to leave the FBI. Twenty of its best agents were murdered and they can't be bothered to investigate the only link. It had become an agency of professional yes men that cared more about their careers than stopping men like Valenti. He had fooled everyone, including himself. No one realized they were sitting next to a monster. Sometimes monsters look just like us. He needed a cigarette but quit five years ago. His wife would beat him if he started smoking again.

He pulled into a sports bar and ordered a drink. He hadn't had a sip of alcohol in years. Just as he was about to take his first drink, he put the glass down and looked out the window. He had no idea how a man like Tom Valenti managed to put C4 at the FBI graduation ceremony. How could

anyone pull off something like that? They had extra security that day at the ceremony. They even checked the food and snacks that were served to check for traces of poison. How did he acquire all the weapons that were used on the FBI that day at the mine? Tom Valenti never served in the military. He had no military training. None of it made any sense and yet, Brian was certain he was behind all of it. Who in the hell was Richard Stavanger? Was he the one responsible? He wasn't sure if he was the man calling the shots, or just allowing the shots to be called, but it was his doing. The more Brian thought about it, the more he wanted to take that drink. How in the hell were all of these people connected? He'd figure it out in time but now was not that time. He paid for his drink and left the bar. He wanted to get home to see his wife and kids. They were his oxygen.

Of all the mistakes that had been made in the Valenti kidnapping, Brian had learned one valuable lesson, something he had never realized before. The most dangerous person in the world isn't a Green Beret, or a CIA spook, a combat veteran, or a serial killer. The most dangerous person in the world, the one that really needs to be feared, is a parent who lost their child. The person that the parent becomes afterward is something that gave Brian nightmares for years afterward. 34 people felt that parent's rage in one brief ten-minute period that day at the Jackrabbit Mine. What kept him awake at night, was wondering how many more police officers would also feel that rage. All he could do was sit back and wait for another attack. His government was blaming a country that had nothing to do with it and letting the real killers go free. Made you wonder who the real lunatics really were.