

AMERICAN TERRORIST

a thriller

Jeffrey Poston

Lomas & Turner Press

American Terrorist

By Jeffrey Poston

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Lomas & Turner Press

www.JeffreyPoston.com

ISBN 978-0-9916194-0-5

1. Main category—Fiction
2. Other category—Thriller

First Edition

“Whoever fights monsters should see to it that in the process he does not become a monster.”

–Friedrich Nietzsche

Chapter 1

1204 hours MST Tuesday

Albuquerque, NM

Carl Johnson smiled at his interviewer because she didn't know yet that she was a hostage.

Anita Chapman said, "Mr. Johnson, can you share with our audience how you became the one whom the FBI is calling the American Terrorist?"

Not *an* American terrorist.

The American Terrorist.

When he hinted to the reporter in a phone call that he was ready to discuss his side of his violent, and now highly publicized, conflict with the US government, she jumped at the opportunity to make history. Very few reporters actually got face time with a terrorist of his magnitude while they were actually at war.

"Ms. Chapman, the world doesn't care about how I became who I am. What the world really wants to know is what I intend to do next, and I'm going to answer that question in a moment."

When Chapman and her crew entered the abandoned downtown jewelry store, Carl required that the two canvas director's chairs they brought in be positioned facing each other. He was very precise about them being ten feet apart, with the cameras stationed behind and to the side of their shoulders. The reporter was still smarting from losing that small battle for control over the interview setting. Normally, Anita Chapman wasn't a woman to be trifled with. If one wanted access to her global audience of hundreds of millions, one had to follow her rules.

It wasn't international exposure that Carl Johnson wanted, though. He was concerned only with an audience of one. He knew her father would be watching.

Anita Chapman was widely renowned as the most relevant news reporter of the current times, but Carl knew she wanted the interview as much as he did. His research told him she already had all the top credentials. She'd won multiple George Polk Awards for television reporting and George Foster Peabody Awards. She'd been granted an International Emmy, as well as multiple honorary doctorates from numerous journalism schools. She'd won the Walter Cronkite Award for Excellence and was on Forbes Magazine's list of the top one hundred most powerful women in the world.

Her interview with Carl Johnson would cement her reputation as not only the most relevant TV news reporter *now*, but *in all of history*. She'd be bigger than Anderson Cooper. Bigger than Barbara Walters. Bigger than even Oprah or Walter Cronkite.

The empty jewelry store was merely a large room of maybe twenty feet wide by forty feet long. Situated one block south of Central Avenue in downtown Albuquerque, the store was a victim of the recent recession and a testimony of unsuccessful attempts to revitalize the downtown area.

All the shelves and decor and counters and display cases had been removed long ago. The floor covering was gone also, though Carl suspected from the faded coloring under his feet that the last flooring design might have been an Art Deco stained concrete. In fact, the only furnishings in the room were what Chapman's television crew had brought in—two lightweight folding chairs facing each other, two cameras on sturdy tripods, six portable diffuse lights bracketing Carl and Chapman, portable curtain racks with beige fabric which served as an attractive, but featureless, backdrop behind the chairs, and the computer and cabling equipment to remotely operate the cameras and broadcast the interview.

Chapman and Carl each wore a virtually invisible wireless microphone clipped to their jackets, and they were each illuminated by three lights. One light faced each of them from their front left, just out of view of the camera. This was for primary illumination, according to the guy who set up all the equipment. Another was the fill light, which lit up the back drop and filled in the shadows caused by the primary light.

On Chapman, the third light was mounted in front of her and high above. The equipment guy called that one the hair light and said it was intended to add depth and prevent someone from appearing flat or two-dimensional. Since Carl was bald, the hair light for him was mounted in front of him near floor level to prevent a shiny reflection off his head.

Chapman wore a skirt and blazer, and she kept her legs crossed since they were facing each other. In fact, Carl had planned the positions of the chairs for precisely that purpose.

“So first things first,” Carl said. A faint glimmer of irritation flickered briefly across Chapman’s face, and she opened her mouth as if to regain control of the interview. Carl held up his hand and shook his head.

“There is really only one rule for this interview,” Carl said, pulling a small remote control from the left pocket of his windbreaker. He pointed the device at two thin-panel TVs mounted to the wall at his right and out of view of the cameras. Those were the only two items in the room that did not belong to the camera crew.

He pressed the PWR button, and one of the panels flicked on after a brief warm up. On the screen was the media feed that the entire world was watching. It showed a split-screen view of the interview. On the left half of the screen was the near-frontal view of Anita Chapman from the camera behind Carl’s left shoulder, and on the right half of the screen was the view of Carl from the camera behind Chapman’s right shoulder.

Carl slid the remote button to AUX 1, pressed the ON button again, and the other TV came on. On that screen was a man, a teen boy, two young children, and a baby. All except the baby were bound and gagged. The baby was asleep on the father’s lap. Anita Chapman gasped.

Carl said, “So the rule is this—and I truly hope your producers are paying attention—if this live feed is interrupted for any reason whatsoever, then my people will kill your family.”

He gave Chapman a few seconds to digest his message. At his hand signal, the camera man commanded his remote-control computer to pan the camera parked behind Carl. The view of Anita Chapman left the split-screen and was replaced by the TV that showed the bound family. He signaled the cameraman to pan the camera back to Chapman.

The entire world would now be sitting on the edge of their seats, glued to their televisions or Internet feeds, waiting to see if or when he would kill again. He’d given the world an opening hook, and now millions of viewers were waiting to see and hear the story of intrigue that he was about to tell.

He knew the police and local FBI SWAT teams would be mobilizing outside for a hostage rescue attempt as soon as they tracked her cell phone. That’s why he had not confiscated her cell. The HRT—Hostage Rescue Team—would hold as long as the threat against Chapman’s family was viable, but they’d make their move as soon as they were certain that he would kill Chapman.

It was part of his plan. Carl wanted her father to feel the effects of that particular terror event more than anyone else.

“So, let’s continue with the interview. While you take a few moment to gather your faculties, I’ll answer your previous question. You see, it was actually the US government that made me who I am. Of course, I understand that tomorrow everyone from the President down to local authorities

will deny this and will put their spin machines in motion. Tomorrow, though, the world will already know at least my version of the truth.

“As little as a month ago, I was just a regular guy, an ordinary, tax-paying citizen. Then, however unintentionally, the US government forged me into this terrorist that you see before you.”

“Why are you doing this?” Anita finally found her voice, but her question barely came out as a trembling whisper. “What do you want from me?”

Carl paused before answering. He inhaled the faint scent of her expensive European perfume. It had a pleasant aroma and maybe included a musky wood scent like the rare sandalwood from Africa. Or was that wood grown in India? Whatever.

“I don’t want anything from *you*, Ms. Chapman. I want something from your father. He took someone from me, so I’m going to do the same to him.” Carl glared into the camera because he knew the man was watching. “And the *whole world* is going to see it happen.”

Chapter 2

1302 EST Friday...One Month Ago

Arlington Heights, VA - Undisclosed Operations House

Almost before the driver stopped the car, Aaron McGrath exited the rear seat. He flung the door closed without acknowledging the driver and made the front door of the operations house his immediate destination. He'd run ops out of dozens of such houses across the country, so he already knew what he'd find inside. There would be three or four bedrooms upstairs, along with a couple of bathrooms, and the brain center of the current terror event operation would occupy the downstairs living and dining rooms.

By habit from over four decades of covert intelligence work, McGrath studied his surroundings as he followed the walkway from the street to the front door, careful not to appear too curious. He saw no threats on the residential cul-de-sac. Still, his heart began to race as he approached the front door. This particular terror event was no ordinary kidnapping.

McGrath reached into his front right pant pocket and pulled out his Department of Defense identification card. He never carried a wallet so he didn't have to waste time fumbling to find the card. He only carried two other cards in his pocket—his driver's license and a debit card, but never any cash—so the maneuver was fast.

He waved the DOD card in front of a scanner mounted on the wall beside the door, and the device scanned the embedded chip. Instantly, he heard a brief buzz as the lock disengaged. He entered and faced a serious-looking uniformed guard with a micro-Uzi pointed at his midsection. The guard was a big black man, maybe six-five and two-fifty, and his biceps stretched the fabric of his shirt tight. Sticking to procedure, McGrath let the door close behind him and turned to another wall-mounted scanner. He pressed his right palm on the fingerprint reader, looked into a retinal scanner, and uttered his personal ten-digit security code for voice recognition.

The scanner beeped and a green LED flashed once.

"Thank you, Director McGrath," the security guard said.

McGrath nodded and hurried up the hall. He turned left into the living room and froze in the doorway. On the wall monitors in front of him he saw the destruction that remained of the kidnap site as well as photos of the kidnapper and the girl who was taken.

"Sitrep," he said loudly.

Agent Nancy Palmer, his deputy for this terror event, turned to face him. She stood immediately behind the four analysts who sat at computer workstations in front of the wall monitors. She was orchestrating the analysts' data searches and coordinating the activities of other federal agencies—DHS, FBI, CIA—on her encrypted cell.

Palmer tapped an analyst on the shoulder. "Put up the video on the left monitor."

Almost instantly, McGrath saw the back of the limo from the dash cam of the following police cruiser. A flash of light streaked into view from the right, and the front end of the limo smashed into the pavement with a huge explosion. The back end lifted off the road a few feet, then crashed back down.

Another missile streaked into view, and the lead escort cruiser lifted skyward on a pillar of fire. It flipped end-over-end, before crashing down and exploding. Then suddenly, the camera view twisted and spun crazily as a third unseen missile blasted the trailing police cruiser into the air. The camera came to rest upside down facing the halted limo.

As Agent Palmer stepped over beside him, he said, “They used a low-yield RPG just powerful enough to stop the armored car.” She nodded at the monitor. “They clearly wanted the passenger cabin undamaged, but there’s no way the officers in the escorts could have survived.”

A large, black SUV drove into view and pulled alongside the limo. It stopped slightly across the adjacent lane, and two upside-down figures in black tactical gear got out. One man carried a black circular device. It was about the diameter of a dinner plate, and maybe six inches thick. He held it against the limo’s rear passenger window for a few seconds.

Agent Palmer said, “I’m guessing it’s a high-speed diamond-tipped drill.”

McGrath nodded and watched as the second man attached something to the center of the black plate, then both men stepped away from the limo a moment later, pulling the black plate with them. Smoke issued from the small hole in the window.

“They gassed them.”

As soon as he uttered those words, the door on the opposite side of the limo opened, and a man and woman in black suits stumbled out with their handguns up. Gagging and coughing, they pulled a teenager out with them. The two tactical aggressors made quick work of the suits, shooting both in the head. Then they dragged the girl over to the SUV. A man inside shoved the door open and for a brief moment, he faced the dash cam.

The video froze and the man’s face filled half the center monitor. His vital information filled the other half.

“Alfonso Reyes,” McGrath said as he scanned the info. “How does a mid-level Mexican drug lord pull off this kind of snatch-and-grab in the middle of D.C.?”

He glanced at the third monitor. It showed a high school photo of the smiling face of the sixteen year old girl who had been kidnapped.

She was Melissa Mallory, America’s darling daughter. He had to get her back.

Agent Palmer seemed to read his mind. “You’re too close to this, Aaron. Let me run this op.”

“I take orders from one person, and that’s the President. You also take orders from one person, and that’s me.” He paused. “Am I clear?”

The young agent hesitated for a moment. She was a slender woman with a lithe, muscular physique. Her narrow face was framed by short blond hair. She wore a hint of a sneer, like she had expected him to react that way, and she gazed at him through sky blue eyes.

“Of course.”

Palmer stepped back over to the analysts, but McGrath could tell from her body language that she wasn’t satisfied with his response. She was a tactical genius, though no longer a field agent. She was hard to read, but he got the feeling she considered him a dinosaur. He was old school, and she represented the new, modern, elite agent. She wasn’t shy about expressing her opinions during ops.

Problem was, she was extremely good at covert work, and she was rarely wrong. Still, this wasn’t the first time he’d bumped heads with her, and he knew it wouldn’t be the last. But there was no one he’d rather have as his second, especially on an op as important as this one. Unfortunately, that meant he had to tolerate her confrontations.

McGrath was very aware of how Palmer viewed him. He was sixty-three years old, but looked perhaps a decade younger. At six-foot-one, he was slender and fit, with salt and pepper hair that made him appear both wise and serious at the same time. He wore a neatly trimmed mustache and beard, which accentuated the hard features of his thin, angular face. With his piercing steel-gray eyes, he looked like a man who had “*been there and done that.*”

He wore fashionable, titanium, wire-framed, bifocal glasses because, no matter how fit he looked, he could no longer clearly see the data on the wall monitors or read an electronic pad in his hands without glasses, and there was no way he was going to let a doctor cut into his eyes with any kind of correctional laser beams.

Though the President had picked him to set up and run the domestic counter-terror agency because of his vast experience, he knew he was getting long in the tooth. Palmer could see it too. While he wasn't ready to retire just yet, he had recently begun to consider life after government service.

Still, the Terror Event Response agency—or TER—had a perfect performance record under his command during its brief one-year existence. Over a dozen domestic terror plots had been foiled by the highly mobile task force. If he was going to transition out, he wanted to go out at his peak, just like a pro athlete.

Administratively, McGrath reported directly to the President of the United States. Functionally, when a terror event was in play, McGrath basically answered to no one until the event was satisfactorily terminated.

A triumphant shout brought him out of his reverie.

“I got a hit!”

He didn't know the analyst's name. He was a chubby, black kid with a big 1970s Afro and a round, nonathletic body. As McGrath stepped over to the analyst's station, the young man's thick fingers flew over his keyboard.

The air in the room was stale with the scent of stress and belches, and the room was hot and stuffy from the cooling fans of multiple desktop computers, monitors, and data equipment. It was the middle of winter, so the air conditioning for the house wouldn't be turned on because the rest of the house would be uncomfortably cold for off-duty personnel. That was the only drawback of using civilian houses as op-centers. Since the operations house had just been activated that morning, the portable room air conditioner needed to counter the heat produced by the electronics was still en-route.

Aaron McGrath looked at the center wall monitor. It was the only monitor on which the picture had just changed. Now he stood looking at a flashing blip on a street map of...*what the hell?*

“Albuquerque?” he asked.

The analyst took a swig of his Red Bull and set the can dangerously close to his keyboard. McGrath waited patiently for the young man to continue. What was it about computer geeks and Red Bull, anyway?

“Is that a mistake?” McGrath said, pointing at the monitor.

“No, sir. The target is in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Our facial recognition algorithm just picked him up on a traffic cam. I've notified the local field office of the FBI.”

McGrath glanced at a wall monitor again. “How the hell did our guy get from D.C. to Albuquerque in under four hours?”

Agent Palmer was standing behind the two far analysts. “Private plane?” she asked.

The big-Afro analyst shook his head. “He'd have had to sneak out from a private airfield since all the local transport hubs around D.C. were locked down tight within five minutes of the snatch. Ronald Reagan, all the regional airports, Air Force bases, as well as train stations, bus terminals, even rental car outlets. Everything was locked down.”

“Unless our target anticipated our response and brought in his own support crew—logistics, transportation, fuel, supplies—so he could maintain operational security.”

Palmer put two other analysts on the task of researching logistics to find a financial connection to the cartel.

McGrath turned to the big-Afro kid again. "What's your name, analyst?"

"I'm Jimmy, sir." He swiveled in his seat and held his hand up for a fist bump.

McGrath ignored the gesture. "What kind of plane would Reyes need to get to Albuquerque in under four hours, and what airports can accommodate that aircraft?"

"Well, sir, it would have to be something like a Citation X or a Gulfstream 650. Those could make the fast trip. It's what? Sixteen or seventeen hundred miles as the crow flies from here to Albuquerque? Wouldn't take more than two and a half hours for the flight at seven hundred miles an hour, plus maybe half an hour for him and his people to actually get to the airport with the hostage, and then get a plane that was already prepped into the air, plus a few minutes on the ground in Albuquerque—"

"So find a private airport within a half-hour driving distance of the kidnap site during rush hour traffic this morning. Won't be too many of those with a runway that has a rated take-off length of five to six thousand feet."

"Naw, three thousand feet will do it, Boss. The runway rating means a plane has to get to full take-off speed and then be able to abort without running out of runway. If they don't plan on aborting—and these guys weren't—they can take off on a far shorter runway. They'd really only need three thousand feet to take off fully fueled with six to eight passengers."

Palmer turned toward McGrath. She had one arm wrapped across her belly like it was supporting the elbow of the other. Her fingers played across her chin thoughtfully.

"Aaron, they grabbed her on the George Washington Memorial Parkway just a few minutes north of Reagan International. There's a lot of off-ramps in that area and a lot of ways to get lost in plain sight among all the residential neighborhoods, shopping areas, and industrial complexes up there. If they changed vehicles, they could've even sneaked her back across the Potomac. And there are quite a few private airports within, say, twenty miles of D.C."

McGrath nodded and turned to Jimmy again. "Let's assume he took off after the lockdown. How could he do it?"

Jimmy worked his keyboard for a moment. "Well, he certainly couldn't take off from a major airport. But if someone wants a flight from a small airport to *not* be found, there's plenty of ways to hide or temporarily disable electronic traces of a takeoff—local radar signals and comm traffic and transponders—with the right amount of money." He held up a beefy hand and rubbed his thumb against his fingers.

McGrath removed his glasses and examined them for nonexistent smudges. "Nancy, continue tracing the logistics here in Virginia. Jimmy, your priority is finding that plane in Albuquerque. It has to be parked at the International Airport."

"Or Santa Fe," Jimmy added after consulting his computer screen. "They can handle a Gulfstream jet up there." His fingers flew over his keyboard. "Or Los Lunas. They have a suitable airport within a half-hour driving distance to Albuquerque." After a moment he added, "Looks like there's also an old airport on the west side of Albuquerque called Double Eagle that's closed-down. With some advance planning and logistics they could have landed there too."

Agent Palmer said, "If he's got logistics teams in the US, either here or in Albuquerque, then they've got local accomplices assisting them either as volunteers, or under duress, with housing, fuel providers maybe, radar jamming, or communications equipment—so we need to find them."

"Agreed," McGrath said. He tapped the analyst sitting next to Jimmy on the shoulder. "Tell me about the Albuquerque sighting."

The analyst was a big bald kid with a blond beard that reached to his lap. McGrath could tell if the fellow stood up and reached overhead, he'd easily touch the ceiling. His fingers tapped on his keyboard with a steady thrum.

"The traffic cam facing east from the interchange of I-40 and I-25 made a sixty-two percent identity match. He's driving an open-top Jeep Wrangler, an older, 1980s model. It's not a high-def camera, so a sixty-two percent match is as good as we're going to get. We got lucky."

"Put his image up on the center screen next to Reyes's photo."

Reyes's biographical data vanished and was replaced by a black-and-white photo of the man in Albuquerque. The photo was grainy from being enlarged from a distant camera shot, but McGrath had no doubt it was the same man. The still frame of Alfonso Reyes from the kidnap site showed the man wore a mustache and goatee, but the Albuquerque photo showed he was clean shaven.

"Why would he think shaving would throw us off?" McGrath paced the floor behind the analysts for a moment. "Do we have any other recent photos of him?"

A window opened on the center monitor, and McGrath watched pages from Reyes's charity website open. He saw photos of Reyes in various types of clothing, from expensive casual to formal. In some he was clean shaven, and in others he had facial hair. In every picture he wore designer glasses.

McGrath muttered to Palmer, "That's him." He paused. "Why in hell would he stop in Albuquerque though, especially after pulling off the biggest kidnapping in the history of the United States? In a Citation or a Gulfstream jet, he could have been out of the country by now. He *should have been* out of the country."

Palmer tapped the bald analyst on the shoulder. "What kind of surveillance assets do we have in Albuquerque?"

"Ma'am, it's New Mexico, not New York, and they're pretty low on the terror threat list. There are only a couple dozen traffic cameras on the city network with live feeds. Our standard Homeland hack can access the usual live cameras inside banks and airports and hotels large enough to host major conventions—those kinds of locations."

He worked his keyboard, then pointed at the center wall monitor. "Got him! He just pulled into the Hyatt underground parking structure. Picked him up on the parking garage surveillance camera."

McGrath narrowed his eyes. "Alright, people, we may have caught a break here. Looks like our guy got careless."

"Hmmm," the analyst said. "The license plate of the car he's driving is not a rental car. It's most likely stolen."

Palmer added, "He knew we'd be watching airports and car rental outlets. Maybe he stashed Melissa in the house where he commandeered the car. Maybe his plan is just to make a quick trade for cash. If he has the owner there, too—and he most likely killed that poor soul—then the car wouldn't be reported stolen."

"You are *not* going to believe this," the bald analyst said. He pulled up some more data and pointed McGrath's attention to the center wall monitor again. "That's actually *his car!* He's had a safe house right there in Albuquerque for almost twenty-five years! He's using an alias we haven't seen before, though. His house and car are titled in the name of Carl Johnson."

On the center monitor, everyone stared at the now-familiar face on the drug lord's New Mexico driver's license. Brown skin, no hair, pleasant disarming smile, slightly graying mustache and goatee. Five-foot-nine and a hundred-seventy pounds. Blood type B positive. Their target was a good-looking man.

McGrath nodded to himself. “Okay, get our team in the air. Inform the local FBI of a potential hostage situation and have their SWAT teams mobilize heavy assets, and tell them they can expect resistance. And make sure they know they’re on the clock.” He paused. “Maybe he’s meeting a customer for the trade.”

Palmer leaned over the bald analyst’s shoulder and examined the maps on his desktop monitor. “If he gets out of there, we’ll lose him. There aren’t any live networked traffic cams within half a mile.”

“Understood,” McGrath said. “Everyone, drop what you’re doing and concentrate on Albuquerque. Let’s see if we can get some eyes inside the hotel and find out who he’s meeting. Get me some live feeds of all elevator and hallway cameras inside the hotel.” He clapped his hands sharply. “Let’s go, people! If we lose him this time, Melissa is as good as dead.”

A sharp pang of dread gripped his gut, and he rolled his head back and forth to release his tension. With his new job he hadn’t been able to see Melissa much over the past year, and now he regretted that. McGrath refocused on the center wall monitor and tried to examine the motivations behind the smiling photos of the charismatic drug lord.

Why Melissa Mallory? And why Albuquerque?

“When we find the target, I want him immobilized immediately. Have the FBI sedate him onsite. I don’t want him bribing a disgruntled cop with a million dollars. No one speaks with him except our people.”

Agent Palmer pointed at the far right wall monitor where her analyst had put up an FBI bio.

“Special Agent Lenore Cummings. You called her in to interview with us earlier this year when she was an applicant to the Secret Service.”

McGrath scanned the agent’s no-nonsense photo. Dark blazer, light blue blouse with the collar open, oval face, minimal makeup, serious brown eyes, blond hair pulled severely back.

“She was impressive,” McGrath said.

Palmer added, “Strategic and tactical skills off the charts. She’ll make a fine addition to the TER agency.”

She said it like the decision was hers. Like hiring Cummings was a foregone conclusion.

McGrath said, “Assign her local command of the op and get her Special Agent in Charge on a secure video link. She takes control of the target. No one else.”

Palmer nodded, then looked away for a moment, as if she was concentrating on something else.

“Aaron, I have Pete Klipser on comm channel four.”

“On speaker.”

Palmer retrieved her cell from her hip holster and pressed a pad, then stuck the device back on her hip. She nodded at McGrath.

“Pete, your target is in Albuquerque. Take our plane at Andrews Air Force Base and get there ASAP.”

A subdued, gravelly voice floated from the desk phone speaker. “My rules of engagement?”

McGrath glanced over at Nancy Palmer, who had trained the former Special Forces soldier in the subtle art of *domestic* covert wet work. He had excelled, becoming the TER agency’s go-to field operator. In his short career since being recruited from the Army, his exploits rivaled the accomplishments of Agent Palmer. As usual, he didn’t ask irrelevant questions and always got straight to business.

McGrath said, “He’s a Tier One suspect. Full rendition protocol is authorized. If Melissa is not at the foothills house, interrogate Reyes onsite. Employ any means to discover her—”

“Negative,” Palmer interrupted. “Reyes is Tier Three, Aaron. We need him alive.”

McGrath glared at Palmer for a moment, then she said, "Stand by, Pete." She touched her Bluetooth earpiece to put the channel on hold.

"Aaron, you know how Pete can be. If he loses control of the interrogation or pushes too hard, we lose the only lead we have to Melissa's location. Let's bring him back here for experimental interrogation, where we control all the variables."

McGrath tried to find fault in her argument, but her assessment was flawless, as usual, unlike his own emotional state of mind. He nodded, and Palmer touched her earpiece again.

McGrath said, "Palmer is correct, Pete. Reyes is Tier Three. Nonlethal action only."

"And if we get in a firefight with his people?"

"Use of deadly force is not authorized. If you can't take him alive without a firefight, let him go, and we'll find another way to track him."

"Understood."

The analyst named Jimmy called out, "I got him on another camera!" He worked his keyboard. "And we've got a human asset in the lobby. It's an off-duty FBI field agent in plain clothes." He paused and scratched the back of his neck under his massive Afro. "Okay, now this is weird."

McGrath said, "Don't keep me in suspense."

The analyst swiveled in his chair.

"Uh, well, sir. It looks like he just stopped in for coffee."

Chapter 3

1108 MST Friday

Albuquerque, NM

Carl Johnson climbed out of his open-top Jeep Wrangler and pushed the door closed. Twice. It still didn't stay closed so he gave it a hard hip check, adding another dent under the door handle. It stayed closed.

"Piece o' shit," he murmured affectionately.

The 1980s-era Wrangler was his dream car and he'd finally bought one last year after procrastinating for nearly twenty years. The old car represented freedom and dreams come true. He always smiled when he saw the car, even though little things here and there were starting to break down with increasing frequency. It was dirty, but not the honorable off-trail dirty. It was pickled with dried raindrops and with residue from high-desert dust storms and air pollution. He hadn't washed the damn thing since he bought it.

He loved that car and his personal motto that it represented: "*And don't forget... Life is good!*"

He'd borrowed that motto almost twenty years ago from a friend who was a salesman. The guy could sell cars in a recession. At the time, his friend was the "*Life-is-good*" guy, and everyone knew it. He had that slogan on his stationery, on his license plate (LYFSGUD), and on his voice mail recording.

"Hey, this is Joseph. Leave a message. And don't forget... Life is good!"

At first, Carl used to say it because it sounded positive and affirming, and he'd been going through marital problems with his second wife. He said it to other people, but he really only said it to convince himself that life could get better.

Two years later, he realized if you keep saying something like that over and over again, day after day, year after year, until it became something more than just a cool slogan or motto, then eventually you actually start to believe it. It evolves into a fundamental part of your life and your belief system. Also, Carl found that there were a lot of people who needed to hear it too. So, he included his motto in the signature line of his cell phone text messages, his emails, and on his voice mail.

Now Carl was the "*Life-is-good*" guy. He even had the motto printed around the circular edge of the cover of the spare tire bolted to the rear gate of the Jeep so that everyone following him on the road could see it.

And don't forget.... Life is good!

He removed his gloves and thick thermal skullcap, and dumped them on the driver seat. He pulled a thin head glove from the left pocket of his well-worn, brown bomber jacket, fitted it on his hairless dome, and smoothed out the ripples.

He made his way over to the elevator and pressed the UP button. He waited a couple of minutes. Then a bell dinged, the UP button light went out, and the elevator door slid open to the right. He stepped into the box, did a one-eighty, and examined the panel to the right of the sliding doors. There were only three buttons, P1 for the level where he'd parked, and P2, plus one more labeled L for the lobby.

Carl pressed L, the light came on, and the door started to close. He pressed the button a couple more times, mostly out of habit, just like he did at crosswalk signs. That was just in case the

elevator light was lying to him, and the elevator wasn't really going to the lobby, even though he knew there were no levels between P1 and the lobby. Crazy.

The front wall of the elevator, the sliding door, and the ceiling were all reflective brushed steel with a subdued gray color. The back, left, and right walls were highly polished wood. There were posters on the left and right walls of the elevator. The one on the left advertised a new shop in the mall section of the lobby. The shop sold authentic southwestern art and jewelry—turquoise and silver and copper and Native American wall art—no doubt for out-of-state conference attendees looking for high-quality souvenirs, but lacking the time to find the same merchandise in Old Town or Santa Fe for half the price.

The other poster to Carl's right showed a stunningly beautiful plate of food. The color poster was so vibrant, he figured it could make a tourist get hungry on the spot and go immediately in search of the new restaurant.

A bell dinged, and the elevator slowed to a stop. The L light went out as the door slid open to the left. He stepped out into a wide hallway. Directly in front of him was the lobby bar, but it was closed at that early hour. To his left, the long wide hallway led to the elevators that serviced the south tower of the Hyatt Hotel complex.

Between his elevator and the south tower elevators were several offices that catered to business travelers staying at the hotel—a copy shop, a popular shipping outlet, a dry cleaning drop-off, and a rental car outlet. There were also a couple more tourist shops—jewelry, art, and other knickknacks. Two stores were vacant, but the front display windows were tastefully papered so the vacancies weren't glaring to hotel residents.

To Carl's right, the lobby opened up to its full splendor. It wasn't as extravagant as he'd seen in conference centers in larger cities, but for Albuquerque it was a top-tier hotel lobby. The space measured perhaps fifty feet by fifty feet, and had a step-down section in the center with couches and chairs for lounging, along with two long desks with power outlets and Internet access for computer work. All the furniture was arrayed spaciously around a seven-foot-high clay vase. Water gurgled from its top, slid down the exterior, and disappeared into a rock-covered grating in the floor.

Arranged around the upper edge of the lounging area were more chairs and small tables for one-on-one meetings. It was, in fact, in this area that Carl was to meet his eleven o'clock client, who had pushed back the meeting just fifteen minutes ago. Now he had an hour to kill.

Normally, he rescheduled clients who were late to meetings. He made them wait a few days. His cash-flow returns for commercial income properties were typically a hundred thousand a year, sometimes more, so he had the leverage of a valuable product that clients wanted.

The woman he was due to meet today had been referred to him by another investor in his network. She allegedly had access to several partners with significant cash reserves. She wasn't looking for small one- or two-million-dollar assets. She was shopping in the ten- to twenty-million price range, so that level of interest earned her an additional hour of Carl's time.

The direct route from the elevator to Starbucks in the northeast corner of the lobby was blocked by a janitor working on a stain in the carpet, so Carl took the scenic route to the coffee shop. He proceeded around the lobby, past the bar and the restrooms, the check-in counter and the valet entrance, the ATM, and two competing art stores—one of which was the new art shop advertised on the poster in the elevator. Then he stepped through the open door of the coffee shop.

The cream and sugar station was along the wall on his left and the pickup counter was just inside the door on his right. The order counter was just beyond that, featuring a glass case full of pastries, chilled water, and juices one could order if one wasn't in the mood for coffee. Beyond

that glass case, the order line stretched almost to the other entry door from the street on the opposite side of the coffee shop.

Carl walked across the shop and took his place at the end of the ordering line. When he got to the counter he ordered a “*tall house with room*”—Starbucks lingo for the store’s house-brewed blend in a *tall* cup, the smallest size available, *with room* meaning a half inch or so left at the top of the cup so he could add cream.

He got his coffee fairly quickly because the two servers had a well-rehearsed procedure. The first charged his debit card while the second, who had just delivered her customer’s fancy order—some kind of frou-frou “*Venti half-caf ninety-degree Brevi*” something or other—grabbed a cup and filled it with the house brew. She slid it into a cardboard sleeve and placed it on the counter in front of Carl, just as the first cashier finished ringing him up.

He thanked both servers, and they both told him to have a wonderful day. He made his way to the cream and sugar station where he waited behind two women in business suits as they dressed up their coffees. One of the women wore a two-piece, dark gray pantsuit, and the other wore a dark blue skirt suit. Both had small airplane carry-on bags on tiny wheels by their sides with the pull handles fully extended. He wondered if that was just a business fashion statement or if they actually had laptops and presentation materials stuffed into the small rolling cases.

They reminded him of his time as an Air Force engineering contractor, but that was back in the days when real men and women carried their stuff in briefcases without wheels and toted their laptops in over-the-shoulder satchels.

At fifty-three, though, that life was far behind him. He’d left the corporate world almost ten years back, gotten his real estate license, and opened up his one-man shop. Then he got bored with selling houses and moved into commercial brokerage, selling income properties.

As the women departed, Carl did the “*man thing*.” Almost by subconscious habit, he examined them both with a quick glance down their physiques and back up.

He stepped up to the creamer station and set about dressing up his brew. He carefully pried the plastic top from the cup, then grabbed three yellow packets of fake sugar. He pinned their edges together and shook the group with a couple of flicks of his wrist to get all the sugar away from the top edge that he planned to tear off. He ripped the tops off all three packets, dumped the contents into his coffee, then reached for one of the stainless steel jugs of half-and-half cream and filled the coffee cup almost to the rim.

He grabbed a thin wooden stirring stick, and on a whim as he stirred, he decided to steal another glance at the two departing business women to his left as they passed through the doorway into the Hyatt lobby. He just wanted to see how they walked. That was when he noticed the man in beige slacks and a black windbreaker eyeballing him from the lobby doorway. The man’s bearing and short-cropped haircut screamed, “Cop!”

Carl held the man’s gaze for a moment, then glanced to his right and behind him to see what the man was looking at, but there was no one else near him at the moment. The man had been clearly concentrating on him. He turned back to the cop, but the guy had turned away.

Carl pressed the lid of his coffee cup back on and took a sample sip before departing the cream station. He inhaled the bitter fragrance as he swallowed and decided his coffee was softened and sweetened perfectly. He took another long sip, gently slurping in enough air to cool the liquid so it wouldn’t burn his mouth.

Smiling to himself, he walked through the doorway and headed back into the hotel lobby. He glanced to his right and saw the cop window-shopping at the jewelry store—the new one from the elevator poster. Carl sat down in the lounging area and listened to the quiet trickle of the fountain

while he checked email on his smartphone and caught up on the latest tech blogs. After ten minutes, he started getting drowsy and decided to take a walk outside.

He stood and walked back through the coffee shop and made his way to the street exit that opened onto the corner of Third Street and Marquette. Knowing it was chilly outside, he stopped and put his coffee cup on an empty table near the door and pulled his head glove from his right coat pocket. He fit it on properly, then retrieved his cup. His right hand holding the coffee would be plenty warm enough, but he parked his left hand in his jacket pocket and used his butt to back his way through the glass door.

As soon as he turned around, cops in black tactical gear jumped him.