

## Chapter Three

*4:52 AM*

*FBI Headquarters, Washington D.C.*

Special Agent-in-Charge Ryan Sharpe lowered his head all the way to surface of his cluttered desk, and exhaled deeply, running his hands through thick brown hair. He heard a knock and pulled his head up quickly.

"Yes?" he barked.

His direct assistant, Supervisory Special Agent Frank Mendoza stepped into the doorway of the office and nodded.

"Everyone's ready. Need any coffee?" he said, and walked all the way into the office.

"I've already had three cups," he said grimly.

Ryan turned his head slightly, and glanced out of his window onto 9th Street. The traffic had already started to thicken, and he saw a long ribbon of light blue over the vast sea of buildings. He wished the chaos in D.C. didn't start so early. He could use just a little more time today to figure out exactly what had destroyed his three yearlong investigation. He looked at his notes on a yellow legal pad and shook his head.

Task Force Hydra was finished. The damage done to his investigation was permanent, and unrecoverable. All eight heads had been cut off at the same time, and he needed to figure out what happened quickly. He had solid evidence linking all of them to Al Qaeda's financing arm, and their sudden termination sounded an earth shattering alarm. He didn't have long to come up with answers. The city was springing to life, and it wouldn't be long before someone connected the dots.

He stood up from the desk and walked out of the office, pulling the door closed. Mendoza fell in behind him as they approached the door to his task force's operations center. He heard considerable chatter behind the door and paused for a second, before opened it. The room fell silent when the door swung open, and Ryan Sharpe walked to a desk that had been reconfigured to serve as a makeshift podium. The air quality in the room had deteriorated significantly from the hallway. Rank and humid, the room reeked of bad coffee and faint cologne. The building's air circulation system was unable to compete with a room stuffed to nearly four times its intended capacity.

He glanced behind him and saw that one of three enormous, side by side mounted plasma screen monitors showed a map of the east coast. He faced the center screen for a moment. The map stretched from South Carolina to Maine, and contained markers that indicated the location of each murder. Charleston, South Carolina; Virginia Beach, Virginia; Annapolis, Maryland; Long Island, New York; Manhattan, New York; Rye, New York; Newport, Rhode Island; Cape Elizabeth, Maine.

"Alright, so what do we have?" he said, and turned back to face nearly sixty agents, hastily assembled hours ago to start unscrambling the mess.

A few minutes after one in the morning, Ryan received a call from Operation Support's duty section head with news that one of his red flagged profiles had been murdered. When his cell phone rang again before he had even reached the bathroom, he

knew this might be the shittiest day of his career. The second phone call confirmed his suspicions. Two of eight key targets in his ongoing investigation had been murdered within the span of a few hours. He didn't have high hopes for the remaining six, and by the time his car passed through the security station at the J. Edgar Hoover Building, he had received four more ominous calls.

A young agent steps forward with a few sheets of paper in his hands.

"Sir, as you can see, we're dealing with what appears to be a coordinated strike on all eight of our key surveillance targets. Most of the murders appear..."

"Please. James, are you going to tell me anything I don't already know?" interrupted Ryan.

The young special agent looked to his supervisory agent for support.

"I'm not trying to be an ass here. I just don't have time for a recap of events. Thank you Jeff, but we need to move this investigation forward at a record pace, and I don't need to remind everyone here of the implications surrounding these murders."

"These guys," he stated, pointing behind him at the screen, "were conduits of financing for some nasty, dangerous people. We need to figure out exactly why this coordinated attack occurred. Investigative section, what's going on at each site?"

A female agent sitting on the edge of one of the closest desk stands up. Her suit looked crisp and her face appeared unaffected by early wake up. She stood in stark contrast to the several of the agents clustered near her as she spoke

"Sir, Supervisory Special Agent Olson. Agents from the closest field offices were dispatched a few hours ago to each site to assist local law enforcement in their initial assessment of the scene. I've taken reports from each site's lead agent. So far, we don't have any known witnesses, and evidence appears scant. I think we'll start piecing this together once the sun is up, and we can take a close, hard look at each site. Start knocking on doors. Looking for anything that might have seemed out of place last night. We'll get this moving fast. I've also requested additional agents from other field offices within each region. I want to establish a second tier of FBI support at each site."

"Let's get a third tier in the works. I want to send a headquarters team to each site. Four agent minimum. Let's make sure we have one member from Terror Financing in each group, then a good mix of agents from Investigative and Counterterrorism. We need our own agents at scene ASAP. We can't afford to miss anything," said Sharpe.

"I'll work with Agent Mendoza to get the teams assigned and out the door with the necessary field support," she responded immediately.

"Great. I want those teams on site by mid-morning," he added, and both Mendoza and Olson nodded vigorously.

"Next. Comms. Anything?"

Special Agent Keith Weber walked forward a few steps from a position against the left wall of the room. He flipped open a battered pea-green government issued log book, which barely looked more weathered than he did. Ryan saw that he had a sizable coffee stain on his light blue oxford shirt, which could not be hidden by fully buttoning his rumpled suit jacket. Weber pushed up a pair of wire rim glasses to squint at the log book through puffy, red eyes.

"I've been on with Fort Meade for the past few hours. Nothing unusual prior to the murders. We've been pouring over this for hours, and we don't see any chatter, or patterns that I would classify as suspicious or even remotely interesting..."

"It didn't go dead before the killings?" Sharpe interrupts.

"Not that we could tell. We traced the patterns back a month, and we're seeing the same level of activity," he said.

"And this morning?"

"We've seen a growing increase in communications. National and overseas. In my opinion, news of the murders is starting to spread through these networks. We're doing everything we can to scan for more meaningful information, or patterns, but so far, we haven't detected any direct previous link between our targeted communications and the coordinated attack. There is clearly a growing response to the event," Weber stated, and moved back to the wall.

"I can't stress the importance of figuring this out. If Al Qaeda pulled the plug on these guys, we could be looking at an imminent attack on our country, or U.S. interests abroad. Or, this could be a routine housecleaning event. From what we could tell, the fundamentalist liked their ability to channel funds, but didn't like dirtying their hands dealing with rich Americans. Until we figure it out, we need to treat this like an imminent threat."

He looks over at Supervisory Special Agent Olson and added, "Get those teams out the door before this investigation is hijacked by National Security. Our liaisons will have the best chance of uncovering something useful."

He is interrupted by Agent Mendoza, "Ryan, I just took a call from the lead agent in Newport. They're pretty sure they just captured the shooter alive. He apparently slipped on some rocks and knocked himself unconscious trying to climb down the seawall behind Umar Salah's mansion. They think he's been lying among the rocks all night. They're moving him to the Newport police station."

"Get back on the phone and tell him that I want the suspect transported to the Boston field office. Just make sure they don't piss off local law enforcement. We'll still need their cooperation on scene at the house. And tell him I want that guy in an armored personnel carrier."

"I'm not sure they'll be able to..."

"I'm just trying to underscore the importance of his safe delivery. Did they say whether the suspect was Arab?" interrupted Sharpe.

"Dark skinned. That's all I got. I'll get more details," he said, and stepped out of the room to make the call.

"Agent Olson, I want you to oversee this personally. Call Gregory Carlisle in Counter-terror, and tell him to bring his special interrogation team with you to Boston. He'll know what I'm talking about. I want this guy talking."

"Yes sir," she said, and pulled out her cell phone, sitting back down on the desk.

"Alright, that's it, let's get the teams organized and out of here. Support, I want full links set up to each site. Mobile links for the teams. Data, voice, video...the works. I want to be able to process everything as quickly as possible," yelled Sharpe, as the room erupts into a chaos of multi-tasking FBI agents.

"You got it boss," yelled a dark haired, slender male agent from the back of the room.

"Agent Weber," he yelled.

Weber barreled through the gaggle of agents breaking for the door.

"Yes, sir."

"How long have you been up?" he asked.

"I never went home yesterday. I took the duty section first shift last night. I was on my way home when I got recalled at about one forty."

"I wish I could tell you that sleep was in your near future, but it doesn't look that way. First thing I need you to do is prepare a media-withhold request for immediate distribution to local law enforcement. I need this in ten minutes. I want to shut down all publicly available information, until we have a handle on what we're dealing with."

"I'll have it for you ASAP," he said, and started to leave.

"And Keith. The coffee works better when you drink it."

Special Agent Weber smirked and bolted out of the room.

Ryan Sharpe turned and approached Heather Olson, who had started to dial her phone to contact Counter-terror's on duty section lead

"Heather, I want you to lean on this guy. Tell Gregory to give me a call immediately. I don't want him to hold back on this one. The stakes are potentially too high. We might have to push the envelope here. I hope that doesn't bother you."

"I'd hate to think I've developed a reputation for being squeamish," she replied, with a smirk.

"On the contrary. That's why I woke you up at one-thirty in the morning, instead of your boss. Keep me updated. Frequently. Good luck."

"Understand sir. Thank you," she said, and started to dial her phone again.

She was interrupted by Special Agent Justin Edwards.

"Agent Olson. Can I take the lead on the Newport case? I have considerable experience leading high profile case investigations..."

"Justin, I'm familiar with your background. The Boston team is already too top-heavy with Greg Carlisle in the mix. I need you at one of the other sites," she says, and starts to focus on her phone.

"Yeah, but I have a solid interrogations background. I'd be more help in Boston than at any of the other sites..."

"I don't need another interrogator in Boston. I need investigators. Do you want to go to Newport? I can let you take Newport, but you stay in Newport."

"Anything that mattered in Newport is on its way up to Boston," he said, and glanced to the side with a look of disgust.

"Pick your team for Maine. You'll get travel arrangements, a tech support package, and background information on your murder victim within the hour. Turn something up in Maine, and you can join us in Boston. I need to make a call," she said, and turned away to dial Counter Terrorism's duty desk`.

"I don't want to go to Maine," he protested.

"Then stay here and work a phone," she said over her shoulder.

A few seconds passed, while Justin stared contemptuously at her back.

"I hope they have sushi," he said, and turned to walk away.

Agent Olson glanced over her shoulder with high hopes that the arrogant prick had finally moved on. He was a talented FBI agent, but she couldn't stand him. Movie star handsome, impeccably groomed, Harvard Law degree, wealthy and influential parents. She could list another ten reasons why Justin Edwards would rocket up the career ladder at the FBI. Sheer competence and raw intelligence stood at the top of the list, but she couldn't hack her way through his perpetually arrogant and smarmy

demeanor. This almost bothered her as much as the amount of time he spent staring at her breasts. She saw him closing in on an attractive, blond female special agent in the center of the room. She thought about intervening, but the duty section head for Counterterrorism Operations answered the line.

"This is Supervisory Special Agent Heather Olson, I need to contact Agent Gregory Carlisle immediately."