Trust Me

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Extract

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SPHERE

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1

The old man had spent his entire life surrounded by unimaginable power and wealth – except for today. He was dressed as if for regional theater, playing the part of a retiree who'd failed to save for the long stretch of old age, wearing decrepit khakis and a threadbare jacket, mud sliming the heels of his boots, sitting on a park bench in the gray London afternoon, tossing crumbs to the pigeons. The crumbs were tiny, the size of diamonds.

The man in the gray suit, standing near him, pretending to talk on a cell phone, didn't look at the old man; instead he watched the people strolling in the park, his eye keen for an enemy. A young couple walking hand-in-hand; two teenage boys ambling, trying to look cool and tough and failing; a well-dressed mother pushing a stroller, laughing on a cell phone, tucking a blanket around a baby; a pair of old ladies, clutching purses close to their coats, one talking in monologue, the other listening and nodding. No danger here.

The man in the gray suit fought the urge to smile at the disguise the old man had chosen but to laugh would be fatal. One had to indulge people with money. And one did not laugh at a billionaire, no matter how eccentric.

'I hardly recognized you, Your Majesty,' the man in the gray suit said. He cast his gaze around the park again, the silent phone close to his ear.

'Look at them go to war,' the old man said in soft Arabic as the pigeons battled over the bread, pecking at each other and the bare ground. 'They dance for me. As if I have strings on their wings.' He threw another scattering of food to the flock's left, laughed as they scurried for the crumbs.

The birds aren't the only ones, the man in the gray suit thought. But he waited for the old man to speak again. The old man loved the sound of his own words, like most bullies.

'All is prepared?' the old man asked.

'Yes,' he said. Nearly so would have been a more exact answer but the old man had never cared for details. Everything would be ready soon enough. Then he could start to change the world.

'Your people are ready for the money?'

'Yes. Your banker has been a great help. He's set up accounts, he's covered our trails so as to not raise suspicion.' It was an effort to control his temper, to not say, yes you old fool now just give me what I want and get out of the way. The man in the gray suit asked the question he'd come there to ask. 'I need only to know the amount you're willing to invest.'

'Fifty million dollars now.' The prince dressed as a pauper tossed his last handful of stale bread to the ground, watched the pigeons dart and peck for the leftovers. A smile played across his face as the birds battled. 'If your proposed attacks succeed over the next five years, then another fifty million for further work.'

The man in the gray suit felt a heaviness seize his chest, felt the thud of blood in his ears. A hundred million dollars, to flow through his hands. But he showed no emotion. He kept the cell phone up to his ear. '9/11 didn't even cost a million dollars to carry out.'

'Yes, but it was not a long-term investment. I offer you

much more. I give you many times the resources of 9/11.' The old man glanced up at the man in the suit and for a moment he smiled, an awful flexing of skin and teeth. 'Give me many times the results, for years to come. Make them bleed for a lifetime.'

'I will.'

The old man paused, and for a moment there was only the whisper of the nearby traffic, of the wind creaking through the branches of the trees. 'It is an investment. In the future of a better world.' The pigeons pooled around the man's feet, hungry for more. He kicked them away from his foot with a disgusted snarl.

'You are generous.'

The old man looked up. 'If you fail me, you and anyone you care about will die.'

The man in the gray suit said, 'Threats and kicks work on a dog, sir. Not on me. You needn't worry.' He didn't like being threatened. But he didn't let his feelings show.

'You have selected the right . . . people? I don't wish to trust fools or amateurs.'

'Yes. We have a willing cadre and we are recruiting more. There will be a first wave of attacks. To distract, to confuse, to panic. Then those fighters who successfully carry out those initial operations will get the honor to participate in the second phase, which is actually a massive attack. We call it Hellfire. Heavy loss of life, devastating economic damage. I promise you will get your money's worth, sir.'

The old man smiled again at the man in the gray suit. 'Spend my money well.' He rose from the bench, dusted the bread from his lap, and walked away through the rising cloud of the birds.

Fifty million, the man in the gray suit thought. It was

everything he had hoped for. Enough to make the world pay. Enough to make him respected. He turned and left the park, folding the unused cell phone, dropping it into his pocket.

Fifty feet behind him, the mother with the stroller giggled into her phone. She leaned down and eased the blanket around the sleeping infant she pushed in the baby carriage. She'd offered to take her friend's baby for a stroll – give the friend a much-needed break. The young mother had barely slept in the past few days and the offer nearly made her cry with gratitude. 'I know you're not in town long, Jane. Don't you have things to do?'

'Nothing important. Darling, please, take a break from nappies and crying. I'll take her for a long walk.' And Jane had, giving the baby a dropper of allergy medication as soon as they were out of sight of the house so the darling would sleep the whole time.

The baby, nestled in its stroller, made for perfect camouflage for Jane's afternoon.

Jane checked the settings on the parabolic microphone and digital recorder that lay next to the dozing baby. Holding a modified cell phone, she heard the old billionaire's and the man in the gray suit's words with a clarity as if they stood a foot in front of her. They both spoke Arabic, but that was not a concern to her. She understood every word.

The money would be on the move. It was time for her to put her plan into action. A tingle of anticipation and fear tickled her spine.

She turned on her real cell phone and dialed. She steered the stroller away at an angle from two approaching older women, walking arm in arm. Old ladies liked to look at babies. She didn't want them to notice her eavesdropping gear.

'Yes?'

'It's Jane,' the woman said in English.

'And?'

'The money is headed to America. Fifty million. We start tonight. Rock and roll.'

'Rock and roll.'

Jane hung up. There was nothing more to be said.

Jane pushed the stroller out of the park, humming a jaunty tune to the sleeping baby. The sky was going gray but Jane thought it the loveliest day she'd ever seen.

Fifty million dollars, for years of 9/11s to come. Her throat went dry behind her smile.

She dropped off the microphone and its gear at her hotel room. She had a flight to catch tonight, a report to write for her bosses. It would not mention the fifty million, or the impending attacks, and she would have to edit the recording she'd made. The baby began to wake and cried. Jane sang to her softly, all the way home.

2

Luke Dantry was now the most dangerous man in the world. He had no idea of his status, of course; right now he wanted only a mind-clearing jog.

Luke ran. No one watching him could have guessed the danger he represented; they would only see a lanky twenty-four-year-old, curly dark brown hair a bit long over his ears, his strong build clad in shorts and a T-shirt that read *Psychologists do it on the couch*. He didn't much like the shirt, a gag gift from an old girlfriend, but it was the only clean one he had for today's run along Lady Bird Lake, in the heart of Austin's downtown. His blue eyes focused on his path through the crowd. He did not pause to linger on the faces of pretty girls, or the shine of the light on the water he ran alongside, or the shifting shadows cast by the oak branches, jostled by the wind. He dodged slower runners, faster bicyclists, leaping dogs tethered to leashes. He had to hurry, get back to work. The work possessed his thoughts, day and night.

The Austin air was cool, not too humid: it was mid-March, and the long steamy summer bake hadn't yet gripped the city. The breeze felt delicious on him, clearing his head of his worries, if for just a few moments.

Luke crossed the bridge into downtown, slowed his pace. He bent over, breathing hard. His medal slipped free from

under the tacky T-shirt, the silver of the angel's sword cutting the sunlight. He was careful to tuck the medal back under his shirt; it lay cool against the sweat of his chest. He stood and walked the last three blocks to the high-rise condo his stepfather had bought him when he'd moved back to Austin for college. He waved at the doorman, who gave Luke a slightly disapproving look as he waited.

'How many miles?' the doorman asked.

'Only two.'

'Only two? Get your lazy butt in gear.' The doorman was a more devoted runner than Luke.

'I was up late.'

'Why you bother to live downtown if you never go to the clubs, go out and party?'

'How do you know I don't?' Luke gave the guard a half-smile.

'On night shift, I see who parties, who's been down in the Warehouse District, who's been on Sixth Street. You never stagger in late.'

'I'm on the internet most of the time right now.'

'Well, get the hell off.' The guard gave him a grin. 'Life's too short.'

The elevator arrived and Luke said, 'I'll try to fix that partying deficit.'

'Not tonight. Your stepfather is waiting for you. Got here a few minutes ago.'

'Thanks.' The doors closed and Luke punched the tenth floor button. Henry was back again, all the way from Washington, and Luke hadn't finished the project. He took a deep breath.

The elevator door slid open and he walked down a short hallway to his condo. The door was slightly ajar; Henry had

forgotten to shut it. Typical. He opened the door and called out, 'Hey, it's me.' Luke closed the door behind him and he could hear the scratch of pen on paper, the sound he always associated with Henry.

Henry sat at the dining room table, his luggage at his feet, writing on a yellow legal pad, a thick book open in front of him. Luke knew better than to interrupt Henry when he was thinking, and Henry's thoughts could be long, tortured affairs. Henry raised one hand slightly from the table as he wrote, begging for patience, and so Luke went and got a bottle of water from the refrigerator, drank deeply, listened to the scratch of Henry's pen, looked at the stunning view that faced the lake and the green stretch of Zilker Park beyond.

'Sorry, Luke,' he said with an embarrassed smile. 'I'm working on a dozen position papers at once, and all my ideas are sprouting like weeds.'

'That's too many.'

'I think a lot of change is in the wind. Did you have a good run?' Henry looked up from the paper. Fiftyish, lean, but with slightly mussed gray hair – standing in stray stalks from his fingers constantly running through it as he spoke – and an equally rumpled suit. Henry never traveled well.

'I only sweat in front of the computer these days.' He went over and Henry stood and gave him an awkward embrace.

'Well, go get showered and I'll take you out for a decent dinner. You've got nothing edible in that fridge.' He leaned back, studied his stepson. 'You're pale, thin and you need a shave. I've been working you too hard.'

'I wanted the research project to go well. But I worry I'm not delivering what you need.'

Henry sat down, put his glasses back on his face. His nose

was slightly crooked – he'd always kidded Luke that it had been broken in a bar fight, but Luke knew Henry had never set foot in a bar. 'The data you've sent me has been extremely . . . compelling.'

'I'm afraid it's nothing more than the crazy internet ravings of vicious losers.'

'But you never know when the crazy raving is the seed of something bigger. Something dangerous.'

'Collecting crazy ravings isn't necessarily going to help identify and stop extremists before they turn violent.'

'That's for me to decide.'

Luke finished his water. 'I would like to know who your client is. I want to know who wants to find potential extremists on the internet.'

Henry folded the paper he'd been writing on, tucked it in his pocket and shut the book. The title of the book was *The Psychology of Extremists*. Henry's own masterpiece; he'd written it some years before in the aftermath of the McVeigh bombing, to little acclaim, until 9/11 changed everything and his theories about the mental makeup of terrorists bore fruit. After holding a series of professorships around the world – sort of a traveling scholar, much like Luke's own father had been – last year he had set up a small but successful think tank in Washington called The Shawcross Group. They studied and wrote about psychology and the role it played in governance, in terrorism and extremism, in international crime and in a host of other topics. His clients were the movers and shakers in Washington, London, Paris and around the world: key government decision-makers and multinational companies who wanted to protect their operations from terrorist and extremist threats.

'I can't tell you. Not now. I'm sorry.'

'I just think . . . we should give this information to the police. Or your client should.'

'Have you found evidence of actual criminal activity?' Henry took off his wire-rim glasses.

'Um, no.'

'But you've found the potential for criminal activity?'

'Come see the latest from the Night Road for yourself.'

Luke sat down at his computer.

He had a list of more than a hundred websites, discussion groups and online forums to survey, where he would try to draw in and talk with people who had extreme and even violent responses to the world's problems. A window opened to report on the responses to his many varied comments from before he'd gone on his run. He kept his user names and passwords in a text file on his Mac because he could not remember them all. He logged onto the first online discussion group, where topics ranged from immigration reform to privatization of Social Security. This one tended to be far right wing and multiple retorts to his mild comments had sprouted up since yesterday. Luke scanned them; mostly, the contributors agreed with each other, but they fueled each other's anger. He signed on as MrEagle, his pen name, and posted a far more moderate view of the immigration issue. It would not take long for venomous arguments against his position to flow in for him to collect and measure. He would also post under other names, agreeing with those who attacked his initial postings, seeing if they were interested in violence as a solution.

Sometimes they ignored his prods; other times, they agreed that violence was the answer.

Luke jumped to another forum, found another pot to stir on a far-left discussion group. His middle-of-the-road comments,

left last night on the issue of military contractors, had produced everything from abrasive disagreement to incoherent fury that practically blazed fire through the computer screen.

'The Night Road?' Henry asked. 'Oh, yes. Your nickname for these people.'

Luke had been using the nickname for weeks, but typical of absent-minded Henry to forget. Henry had been traveling a lot in the past few days and apparently the jet lag weighed hard. 'I used to call them the Angry Bitters but that sounded like a punk band. I dreamed one night that an angry mob of extremists of every stripe were chasing me down a long road into an endless night. So I call them the Night Road.'

'The Night Road. Right. Rather dark of you.' Henry had an odd look on his face, as though a light had suddenly shut off behind his eyes. Then he smiled.

'So far this evening my masculinity, my patriotism and my intelligence have all been called into serious question.' Luke shrugged, let a smile play across his face. 'Then the ones I pretend to agree with, I have to get them talking to see if they really are interested in violence.'

'The troublemaker, as always.' Henry flicked a smile. 'So you're continuing to get a lot of responses.'

'Fifty per cent more than when I started back in November. I think it's the anonymity of the net; people express themselves a lot more strongly. And these people, they're looking for others to reinforce their views. So the anger, the perceived injustice, ratchets up, higher and higher.'

'How much data do you have so far?'

Luke glanced at a screen. The most interesting and extremist ravings on the websites and forums were scanned, copied and uploaded into a database. 'Close to ten thousand comments

now, from roughly six thousand individuals, over the past four months.'

'Wow.'

'It's weird. I feel like a cop who pretends to be a thirteen-year-old girl luring the old perverts. But instead I'm trying to draw out the next Timothy McVeigh, or the next Madrid bomber, the next al-Qaeda wannabe here in America.'

'You really think some of them are that dangerous?'

'Look at today's batch.' He pulled up a comment from the day's database. 'Not surprising a lot of them are anti-government.'

Let's start fresh. End their lifetime appointments; kill all the judges.

'Now, maybe this guy's just venting, maybe he's harmless. It's the first time he posted, I have to wait and see if he amps it up. If he does, then he's a possibility to follow.'

Henry rubbed at his lip. 'Prod him harder. See what else he says.'

'Here's one from one of my more consistent correspondents,' Luke said. 'ChicagoChris. He's on a number of discussion boards for anarchists . . . '

'Organized anarchists. I love the concept,' Henry said.

'. . . and he loves to talk about eco-terrorism.' Luke hit a button and a long series of comments made by ChicagoChris over the past few days rolled up the screen:

Burn every McMansion to the ground, that's the start. A serious attack on a gated community would send a message. Don't kill people, warn them first, but level the houses. Sabotage the construction equipment. Get busy to save the Earth.

People who destroy the earth deserve whatever bad stuff happens to them.

Killing our environment is akin to the greatest murder ever committed. I blame the oil and construction companies. I know those guys, what they're like when the attention isn't on them, and they're scum. Kill them, kill all of them, and there would be change. A change is in the wind, I know it. It's coming, fast. I want to be a part of the storm of change.

'He's a charmer,' Henry said.

'And he believes every word he says. He emails me a lot, through the boards. I'm his new best online friend. And he's not just crazy, Henry, he's *focused*. That's what's scary.'

'You said in last month's report you think he's one of the most likely to go violent.'

'Yeah, he's promising.' Luke made a face. 'But crazy.'

'I'm not interested in the crazy ones. I'm interested in the committed ones. There's a big difference.'

'I can't really diagnose these people, I can only catalog their comments. I hope this is enough data for your research.' Looking at all the hate made him tired. 'For your client.'

Henry heard the stubborn question in Luke's voice. 'I told you, I have to keep my client confidential.'

'Let me guess. It's the government. They want to watch these people, make sure they're only hot air and not actually acquiring weapons or putting bombs on buses or targeting politicians.'

'I can't say. But I know my client will be extremely pleased with your work.'

Luke said, 'I'm surprised you don't trust me. You always have.'

'And I always will. But the client set very specific parameters for me. If you worked for me full-time, were officially on the payroll, then maybe . . .' Henry gave a shrug, a half-smile.

'I'm not a think-tank kind of guy.'

'Please. We're academics, just in nicer suits,' Henry said. 'Let me guess. You would like to get a paper out of this data yourself. Maybe the foundation of a doctoral dissertation.'

Luke nodded. 'Yes. I would. But I respect that you hired me to do the research. It's your data, not mine.'

'Luke. I understand why you're driven to dissect the minds of those who think violence is a solution to every problem.' The silence between them felt suddenly awkward. 'But understanding why violence happens, that's the puzzle that can never be solved. And it won't bring your father back.' Henry cleared his throat, looked at the picture of Luke and his father. His lips narrowed and he bowed his head slightly, as if under a weight.

Henry was a giver of speeches, and his phrases worked at podiums, not at dinner tables. He'd spent so much time with his books and found his family so late in life that Luke had gotten used to his stepfather's well-meant but flat-footed phrases. 'I know. But I would hope this research would find the next asshole who wants to kill innocent people for a cause.' Luke didn't look at Henry. He didn't look at the photo of his father, the one decoration on the fireplace mantel. A photo of Warren Dantry and Luke, age seven, holding a freshly caught bass, dripping from a Virginia lake. He could remember the smell of the clean fish, the scent of the pines, the warm sun against his skin, his father's quiet laughter. A happy memory of a rare time with his dad, long before evil in the form of a cold-blooded airplane mechanic named Ace Beere stole his father away from him. Evil that Luke felt compelled to understand.

Reading Ace Beere's rambling, incoherent suicide note – left at the airport hangar after he had killed Luke's father and several others – had fueled Luke's desire to understand the psychology of the violent mind. *I did it because God said I must, the only way to get my pride back, to strike back at my employer and I had to pick a flight to kill and since they were professors, they were useless to society, no one will miss them.* Rambling garbage, but inside the long letter there must have been the seed of an answer, a cogent reason why. Luke had never found it.

'Tell me this,' Luke said. 'Your client. Whoever it is, they want to find nascent terrorists before they move from ideology to violence. This isn't just a fancy profiling project.'

'Luke. Identifying terrorists is far bigger than simply drawing out the disaffected on internet forums.'

'But we already know that plenty of extremists connect through the internet. If we could narrow in on them, discourage them before they take those final steps, make the choice of violence unappealing or impossible . . .' Luke got up from the computer, went to the window. 'Any of these people might be harmless or be a time bomb. Ten thousand comments, hundreds of people, but I can't *prove* any of them will turn terrorist. Really, the next stage of the project should be to follow them, to see if there are ways to convince them that violence isn't an option.'

'You've done a fantastic job, and my client will sift through all the data. You never know, maybe you did find the next McVeigh or the next person who'd mail anthrax to Congress or decide to take up the mantle of al-Qaeda. But you've spent so much time on it; I'm starting to think this is an unhealthy obsession.'

'No. I want to finish the project. But.'

'But what?'

'The mail accounts I had to set up – the emails make clear that these people all think that I'm ready to join their battle . . . I'm worried they might find me. Even though I post from different addresses, use a bunch of fake names. I could be traced if someone tried hard enough.'

'But they're on the other side of the glass, in Wonderland.' Henry tapped the computer monitor. 'You don't exactly live in a dangerous world, Luke.'

'I suppose not.' Not any more. He never spoke with Henry about the time after his father died, when he ran away and lived on the streets for two months. There was no point; that was a darkness in his life where he'd long ago shut the door.

'I wonder if you might take me to the airport tomorrow. My flight's in the afternoon. I have meetings at the university all morning.' As though his stepfather hadn't heard his concerns. Henry, he thought, had just moved on to his next idea.

'Sure.' A response to one of Luke's fake comments popped up on the screen: *Your right, A race war is in-evitible in this country. What's got to be done is get all the un-desirables to leave this country. Killin em will encurage em to go faster. Maybe you and me can get together and talk about it. I could see if your serius or not.*

Henry read the message. 'You bait your hooks well, Luke. Very well. I want you to listen to me.' And Luke thought, with affection, *Here comes Henry trying to be a dad. Here comes the hand on the shoulder . . . yep. And now here comes the fumbling advice.* 'Luke. You know I loathe sentiment. But . . .'

'I'm the only family you've got.' Luke paused. 'And this greeting card moment is brought to you by The Shawcross Group.'

'Now, Luke.' But Henry offered a rare smile. 'I promised your mom when I married her that I'd take care of you if anything happened to her. To me that was a solemn vow.'

His mother. He put up the photos of her when he knew Henry was coming for a visit; it was too raw, too painful for Henry. The car crash had been only a year ago.

'Henry, don't treat me like a child. You don't have to watch out for me.'

'Habits are hard to break.' He cleared his throat, as though preparing to deliver another speech or presentation. He seemed to have trouble looking at Luke. 'Aside from you, the think-tank is my life. Come work for me. I would love to pass the think-tank on to you one day.' The final words came in a rush.

'Henry, wow. I don't know what to say.' He felt touched. Honored. Henry was a bit of an oddball – all into his researches, his pondering about the political trends of the world, his books and papers, but he was the only family Luke had. A world without family was a lonely place, and Luke thought it had been an unbearably lonely place for Henry before Henry married Luke's mom. It had not always been an easy road for him and his stepfather but Luke never doubted that Henry, in his own way, loved him.

On the screen a comment appeared: *you're right, what we need in America is a nice dirty bomb set off in the beltway, clean up the whole act, make the Potomac a toilet for all the human waste in DC, start fresh*. Another loon chirping to be heard. A *nice* dirty bomb, as opposed to an awful dirty bomb. These people made his blood run cold.

'My God,' Henry said, blinking at the comment. 'This is the other reason I want you working with me. You get results. Say yes. Please, Luke. Please.'