



LEFT OF BOOM

HOW A
YOUNG CIA CASE OFFICER
PENETRATED THE TALIBAN
AND AL-QAEDA

DOUGLAS LAUX AND RALPH PEZZULLO

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ST. MARTIN'S PRESS  NEW YORK

[Begin Reading](#)

[Table of Contents](#)

[About the Authors](#)

[Photos](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

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Dedicated to my brother, the only one who truly knew until now....

1

ATTACK ON KHOWST

We will get you CIA team. God willing, we will get you.

—HUMAM KHALIL AL-BALAWI
JORDANIAN SUICIDE BOMBERS

It was ten o'clock the morning of December 30, 2009, as I slid into a booth at the State Lake Tavern in downtown Chicago, focusing on my girlfriend Kate, who literally glowed in the overhead halogen light. She was everything I'd ever dreamed about and more—beautiful, vivacious, caring, fun to be around, sexy, and intelligent.

“You look great this morning,” I said, pouring on the Midwest charm despite feeling anxious about meeting her BFFs in the afternoon, which was meant to serve as an introduction to the big blow-out celebration we'd planned for New Year's Eve.

“Thanks,” she cooed back.

“I'm a damn lucky guy.”

“I know.” Her smile never failed to amaze me—the way it transformed her face and seemed to light up the space around her.

Part of me told me to grab her, take her up to our room, and rip her clothes off. Another part of me suggested that I order a Bloody Mary first, then consider the day ahead. I wanted Kate's friends to like me.

Kate and I had been introduced by her mother, whom I met while watching an Ohio State football game at the Rhino bar in Georgetown. Her mom was there in her role as a lobbyist, entertaining some business associates. I was there with some of my rowdier friends cheering on the Buckeyes. She ended up buying us shots, and let drop that her daughter would soon be moving to DC. Cool lady.

A year later, Kate and I were two twenty-somethings in love. I sipped the Bloody Mary as she studied the menu. “I think I'll order eggs Benedict,” she announced.

“Great,” I said, while my mind searched for the word for “egg” in Pashtu.

What?

It was a natural response. For the past ten months I'd been studying the language full-time. Just last Friday I had passed my competency exam with a 3/3 ILR (Interagency Language Roundtable scale) which was pretty surprising considering that up until the attack on the World Trade Center I couldn't pick out the country of Afghanistan on a map. Nor had I left the Midwest at that point. I certainly didn't know that the Pashtuns were the most populous tribe of Afghanistan, and that there were an additional twenty-nine million Pashtu speakers in Pakistan.

Kate knew nothing about the language training, or the identity of my real employer. I had told her I was a [REDACTED]. I used the same cover with my parents and close friends.

“What are you having?” Kate asked.

“Let’s see.”

As I picked up the menu, I felt something vibrate in my pants pocket. Although I hate people looking at their phones while they’re sitting with others in a restaurant, something told me to check it.

On the little iPhone screen I read four words that would dramatically change my life: “Dude, you got hit!”

The message was from my buddy Ben Z., who had recently deployed to [REDACTED] Afghanistan, right in the middle of the shit. Something inside me released a burst of adrenaline, which caused my brain to spin.

I texted back, “What the hell happened? Explain,” through the Google text program (Google Voice) that transferred my message to the other side of the planet in a matter of seconds.

“Camp Chapman. Initial reports, bad. Lots of our guys.”

“KIA?” I texted back.

“Don’t know yet.”

Forward Operating Base Chapman was located just outside the town of Khowst, in an area controlled by the Taliban, close to the border with Pakistan. Named after Special Forces sergeant Nathan Chapman—the first US serviceman to die in combat in Afghanistan—it sat on an arid three-thousand-foot-high plateau and was surrounded by high mountains. The area was under the political and military control of warlord Jalaluddin Haqqani, who had spent years during the Soviet war on the CIA payroll and was still a close friend of Osama bin Laden. Haqqani, as I had learned, was a complicated and difficult character, less interested in ideology, theology, and nation building than in maintaining his lucrative drug-smuggling empire. In a land of shifting allegiances and vendettas, he was currently our enemy.

The CIA station in Khowst was tucked inside the much more expansive military base, separated by its own high-security fence, and patrolled by ex-Special Forces civilian contractors armed with automatic weapons. I knew several young CIA officers assigned there and had trained with them at the Farm—the Agency training facility in southern Virginia, where we had all been sent to learn the basics of running clandestine operations.

I was currently in Chicago, not DC, so I couldn’t march into headquarters and offer my assistance. Nor was I geared up to deploy. In fact, HQ had me scheduled to ship out in June 2010. In the intervening six months, I was slated to receive the weapons and other types of training required before going to a forward base.

So I sat amid tables of people drinking, eating, conversing, and watching college football on TV and considered the implications of an attack on a place they had never heard of, and probably couldn’t pronounce.

Most likely they thought, like most Americans, that the Agency had thousands of officers deployed all over the globe. But they were wrong. Even in a hot spot like eastern Afghanistan we had only a handful. So losing even one or two would be a severe blow. There were sources to run and valuable intel to gather on the Taliban and al-Qaeda. The safety of tens of thousands of US and NATO troops depended on it. Political pundits might argue and would be correct to assert that an attack like the one at Khowst could actually compromise the security of the United States.

Kate, who had been rambling on about the Kardashians, noticed the change in my demeanor and stopped.

“Is everything okay?” she asked.

I lied: “Yeah.”

“You don’t look okay.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, Doug. What’s wrong? You feeling nervous about meeting my friends?”

“No. Not at all. I guess my stomach’s feeling a little funny.”

“Who are you talking to?” she asked with a little more edge.

I lied again: “My brother.”

“What’s he want?”

I knew where this was going, so I lied a third time. “He wants me to come see my niece, at some point while I’m in Chicago.”

“Oh.”

The suspicion in her eyes told me that she thought I was carrying on with an ex-girlfriend. That was what usually happened when I was caught in situations like this where I had to dissemble in order to maintain my cover. James Bond didn’t have these problems.

I tried to steer the conversation back to the reality show she’d been telling me about, even though part of my mind was occupied with the logistics of getting to Khowst. The truth was that I was dying to get into the field and finally do what I had signed up to do—take the fight to the enemy.

September 11, 2001, I was a freshman at the University of Indiana starting to pursue a course of study to become an optometrist. That night, as all of us were in shock and trying to process what had happened, I discussed the attacks on the World Trade Center with my roommate. I remember him saying, “It’s probably the work of bin Laden.”

I responded (believe it or not), “Who’s that?”

I knew nothing about the bombings of the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, or the attack on the U.S.S. *Cole*, and I had never heard of al-Qaeda. 9/11 became a major turning point in my life, and it caused me to do a one-eighty, change my major to political science, study Japanese and Chinese, and dedicate myself to learning more about the world around me.

Suspicion lingered in Kate’s eyes.

“So they’re interesting, huh?” I asked, referring to the Kardashians.

She gazed past me to the TV over the bar, where a TSU running back had just scored a touchdown. The camera panned across exuberant faces painted white and blue and cheerleaders bouncing up and down. “Who?”

“The Kardashians,” I answered as people near the bar high-fived one another.

“Yeah.”

“What’s the name of the show?”

She still wouldn’t look at me. “*Keeping Up with the Kardashians.*”

“So you keep up with them?” I asked, trying to inject a bit of humor.

She didn’t even crack a smile. “Yeah,” she said, giving me the proverbial cold shoulder.

What had promised to be a fun day was turning into a headache.

“What’s your mom doing for New Year’s?” I asked.

“Going out.”

“Really? That’s a surprise.”

Sarcasm didn’t work, either. Then the food arrived. She tore into her eggs. I had no appetite for mine. Here I was sitting in an upscale bar drinking Bloody Marys, while my buddies were on the other side of the world piecing bodies together.

Part of me wanted to grab her by the hand and explain the whole situation—the fact that I was a CIA operations officer ██████████ ██████████, and was worried about my colleagues. But I couldn’t because Kate wasn’t much interested in foreign affairs (she wasn’t), but because I was under orders not to reveal the truth about my employment to anyone.

So I tried to console her, and in so doing pretended to be the self-deprecating boyfriend who had been withholding embarrassing information that wasn’t true—a role I hated and made me feel like a total douche.

I said, “Hey, Kate, sweetheart, look at me and stop watching television. Hey, you know I love you and I’m not trying to be difficult. I’ll be honest with you, it’s a little embarrassing, and I haven’t told you this because I’ve been fighting with my brother a lot lately and it’s really upsetting me, because he’s ignoring our most recent fight and just expects me to forget about it and come visit him.”

It was a total lie—a self-inflicted punch to the gut. My brother and I never fight, nor do I let things like that upset me. But I delivered the words with conviction and they worked, because now she turned her beautiful blues eyes toward me and asked, “Really?”

“Yes, sweetheart. But I’m going to turn my phone off now, and focus on you.”

“Okay,” she answered sweetly. I loved her. I did. Two years earlier, I had lost another girlfriend when I had to leave abruptly ██████████, and couldn’t tell her where I was going or how long I’d be gone.

I didn’t want to lose Kate. She was special. One day I hoped to marry her and start a family.

Slowly, Kate warmed up to me again and we started to talk about meeting her friends later at possible places for dinner.

But Afghanistan kept nagging me like a bad rash. Every twenty minutes or so, I excused myself to go to the bathroom to check my phone. Ben Z. didn't have much to add, except the fact that the attacker had been a CIA source.

My head was filled with questions: How had he managed to smuggle a bomb onto the heavily fortified base? Who was running him? Who at headquarters had authorized the meeting?

I texted a couple of my other colleagues to find out what they had heard. Most of them didn't even know about the attack, which had happened only a few hours earlier, and hadn't been reported by the media yet.

After brunch, Kate and I returned to our room in the Wit Hotel so she could freshen up. As soon as the door closed, she threw her arms around me and kissed me on the lips. I kissed her back. We were two young lovers anxious to release the earlier tension. Soon we were on the bed pulling each other's clothes off.

The trouble was that part of me wasn't in a romantic mood, and the one thing I couldn't fake was a state of arousal, which was not happening in my highly distressed state of mind. A psychiatrist later explained that in order for someone to perform sexually, their sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems have to be operating at the same time, which isn't possible when your brain is in operational overdrive.

I didn't know that then, so I suggested instead that my unresponsiveness was probably a result of the three Bloody Marys I had sucked down at brunch.

A frustrated Kate started to scold me for drinking too much. Awesome. Now she had pounced on my least favorite topic.

I felt an impulse to grab a beer out of the mini fridge and down it. As that would only add fuel to her argument, I considered fleeing the room and walking the frigid streets of Chicago.

"Doug, you need to face it!" Kate shouted.

Not now. Thanks.

Retreating to the bathroom, I reminded myself that I was with the woman I loved and told myself that I had to focus for the next two days on making her happy.

* * *

Somehow, I managed to make it to the bar on Sheffield Avenue and put on a friendly face for Kate's friends. I usually look forward to meeting new people, but this day was difficult, and the celebratory frivolity clashed with the dark force field of death, fear, and expectation that followed me wherever I went.

As much as I tried, I couldn't pretend that everything was cool, because it wasn't. Even as Kate's pretty, enthusiastic friends pressed around me to ask perfectly reasonable and innocuous questions like "How do you like living in Washington?," "What's it like working as a contractor?," "Where did you go to school?," I kept glancing up at the TV where I saw Wolf Blitzer's serious face against the

background of a map of Afghanistan. The legend running along the bottom of the screen read, “Attacked on U.S. base in Afghanistan.”

I heard him say something about American casualties. Reflexively the muscles in my chest and shoulders tightened.

“So, you must be a Hoosiers fan,” one of Kate’s friends said.

“I am. Yeah.”

“You miss Bobby Knight?” She had big light brown eyes, flawless pale skin, and a smile to melt the hardest of hearts.

On the TV, I overheard a Pentagon spokesman say something about a man wearing a suicide vest. Dozen questions burst in my head simultaneously like fireworks. How thoroughly had the source been vetted? Had anyone met with him before? Who the fuck allowed him through the CIA perimeter without searching him thoroughly?!

“You know who Bobby Knight is, don’t you?” Kate’s friend asked.

“Of course I do,” I countered with a smile. “I was just glancing at the report on TV. Sorry.”

“I know. I noticed. Afghanistan,” she said with a shrug. “I don’t understand it. Yuck.”

I could have explained its torturous history—including invasions by Alexander the Great, Genghis Khan, China, Pakistan, the Ottomans, the British, the Soviet Union. Now we were trying to “secure” it and prevent it from being used as a base for Islamic terrorists. According to the Obama administration, we were also working to stabilize the wobbly Karzai government, rebuild its army, and bring its people out of the thirteenth century where they had gotten stuck after centuries of fighting, repression, and neglect.

Now to make things even more difficult my ex-girlfriend Hannah started texting me. She was the only person besides my brother who knew what I did for a living. I had never informed her directly but the ██████████ ██████████ who introduced us had told his girlfriend about ██████████, and she had blabbed to Hannah.

Hannah texted: “Please God, tell me you’re safe and not in A right now.”

I texted back: “No. I’m still Stateside.”

Less than a minute later, my phone pinged again. “You know any of the people killed?”

According to Wolf Blitzer, the names of the dead Americans hadn’t been released.

I texted back: “Don’t know. You know as much as I do at this point.”

I started to worry about Kate. She had met some of my colleagues who had been sent to Khowstak. When their names were released, she might put two and two together and figure out where I really worked. I saw her across the room waving me over to the jukebox, where MGMT’s “Electric Feel” was blaring. She wanted to dance.

I pointed toward the bathroom to indicate that I had business to take care of first. Checking to see that I was alone in the green-tiled room, I proceeded to delete the text messages from Hannah. Figuring that Hannah would probably continue texting me throughout the night, I changed her name

on my cell-phone contact list to Tom. That way if Kate ever looked at my phone she'd think I'd been texting with one of my buddies back in DC.

The following day—New Year's Eve—more dire news trickled out of Khowst, and I did my best to secretly process it while maintaining an upbeat demeanor. That night as I was dressing in my rented tuxedo, I saw Kate step out of the bedroom in a skintight blue gown.

"Wow. You look beautiful," I said.

Our eyes met, and it hit me: What was I going to tell her when we returned to DC? If HQ decided to send me to Khowst immediately to replace one of the officers who had died, how was I going to explain?

In that moment, I realized I was probably going to lose her. Even though Kate was an amazing person and I loved her, and was hoping to marry her someday, I'd be gone for a long time, maybe years. All I could hope for was that when I returned from Afghanistan and was ready to quit the Agency, she hadn't married someone else. Then, maybe, I'd get a chance to explain and set things right.

Possibly because Kate sensed the heaviness in my heart, she walked over, bussed me on the cheek and said, "I expect to be kissing you in a few hours when the ball drops, so I want that face smooth."

I retreated to the bathroom and confronted the reflection in the mirror. What I saw looking back at me was a paler, less confident version of myself. I had lobbied to be sent to the tip of the spear, and now I was going to get my wish.

"Hurry up," I heard Kate say through the door. "I want to get there early so we can find the best table."

"I'm coming, love. Just a minute."

As I lathered up and put the razor to my skin, I remember thinking that this was probably the last time I'd be doing this for a while.

I was right. I didn't shave again for two and a half years.

2

ONBOARDING

The untold want by life and land ne'er granted,
Now, Voyager, sail thou forth to seek and find.

—WALT WHITMAN

I grew up a studious kid in a rural county in eastern Indiana—home to twenty-two thousand people. According to the 2014 census, 98.1 percent of the population was Caucasian and only 9.5 percent of residents over twenty-five graduated from high school. So the odds of a kid from there becoming a CIA officer and deploying overseas were roughly the same as the Chicago Cubs winning the World Series.

My family was large, white, and German Catholic. Dad worked as the plant manager at the local steel factory, where they turned molten steel into smaller forgings. He had thirteen brothers and sisters and grew up so poor that all they got for Christmas was socks and underwear.

My father was a quiet Vietnam vet who rarely spoke to us until we turned sixteen. Weekdays, he'd return home from work at 4:30 p.m. in his industrial clothes with his name sewn on the pocket, and sit down to dinner. Barely a word was said as we ate. After dinner Dad would go off to his shed alone, and take my brother and me outside to chop wood. It fueled the furnace that burned from September to April.

He would fell trees with a chainsaw, and my brother and I would split the wood, load it into a truck, stack it, load in it a wheelbarrow to take into the house, and stack it again. It was monotonous, hard work, and I hated it, even though it made me strong.

During baseball season, Dad would lie on his bed in his shorts and listen to Joe Nuxhall and Marv Brennaman broadcast the Reds games on the radio he'd owned since he was sixteen.

When she wasn't cooking or minding the house, my mother took odd jobs at nearby Bear Creek Farms, which was a rural theme restaurant with a small amusement park. When I turned thirteen, I got my first job there busing tables. Then I graduated to dishwasher, making three dollars an hour. And after that I became a carney and ran the Tilt-a-Whirl ride, which was fun except for the times groups of Amish visitors, stuffed with fries and hot dogs, puked all over it, and I'd have to shut the ride and hose it down.

At sixteen, I got my driver's license and a stock-boy gig at Walmart. My redneck buddies would come in while I was on duty, stand right in front of the security cameras, say, "Hey, Doug, look," then stuff DVDs down the front of their pants. I had the choice of either turning them in or not saying anything to my supervisor and risking getting fired. I choose the latter.

When I wasn't working or going to school, I got drunk with my friends or read books. Most of my buds lived in trailer parks and were always getting into trouble. I didn't want to end up in jail, married with a child at the age of nineteen, farming, or working at the steel plant.

My mentor was my eighty-nine-year-old grandmother, who had sixty-three grandchildren. I spent many a Friday night with her eating tenderloin sandwiches at the local American Legion hall. Even though she could barely read a newspaper, she had lived through wars, death, marriages, and even other human travail and had gathered some hard-won wisdom along the way.

I once asked her what it was like having three siblings in World War II and three sons serve in Vietnam. She said, "I had to stay calm and move on so my six younger daughters didn't panic and the chores on the farm were completed."

By my senior year in high school, I'd never flown on an airplane or seen an ocean, but I knew I wanted to do something that got me out of rural East Indiana. At that time, 2001, the iPhone and Facebook were nonexistent, so the aspiration of becoming a Palo Alto entrepreneur like Steve Jobs wasn't on my radar. Instead, I saw myself becoming a more typical doctor or lawyer.

One night a few months before graduation, I was sleeping on the ground floor of our house when I woke up surrounded by smoke and flames. I managed to roll out of bed and climb out a window. My dad fell through some rafters trying to put out the fire and almost died. Both he and my mom suffered from serious smoke inhalation.

Our house burned to the ground because squirrels had gotten into the attic and eaten through some wiring. My parents were badly shaken, so I tried to be the strong one as friends and relatives gathered to help us pick through the ashes for personal mementos.

I remember breaking away from the group, taking a long walk into the woods, and saying to myself, *You're over it, Doug. What did you lose? A Nintendo and some other dumb shit? You're alive. Stay calm, move on.*

The opportunity to move came a few months later. Despite the poor quality of my schools and the incompetence of my public-school teachers, I managed to gain admittance to the University of Indiana. I was there about a week planning to pursue a course of study that would lead me to become an eye doctor when the September 11, 2001, attacks occurred. I remember seeing kids from the East Coast around me crying and thinking, *Wow, this is a lot bigger than I thought. Doug, you need to amp up your shit and learn about the world.*

I changed my major to political science. Four years later I entered my senior year and started attending interviews with prospective employers—large global companies like Chase, Pricewaterhouse, Nikko Salomon, and DHL. I even spoke with a marine recruiter about entering the officer training program.

One day after class I stopped to look at the listings on the job board and I saw a notice from the Central Intelligence Agency. I submitted my name, and a few days later received an invitation to attend an information session on campus. At the appointed time I sat with thirty or forty other seniors

listening to an overweight guy in a black suit. He told us that ops officers work overseas, collect information, and are an important part of national security.

It sounded bureaucratic and abstract. All I knew about the CIA was what I had learned from Jason Bourne films. At one point one of the students asked about the CIA's Predator-drone program.

The sixty-year-old guy answered gruffly, "That isn't what this is about." He invited those who were interested to apply online.

Sometime in March, I checked out the CIA website and applied online. A [REDACTED] later I got a call from a woman named Mary who left a message [REDACTED].

I called back and left a message on her machine. "Hey, Mary," I said. "I think you got me confused with someone else. And in the future you might want to leave a more detailed message, because I have no idea who you are."

Fifteen minutes later my phone rang.

"Hi, it's Mary with [REDACTED]," the voice announced. "Is this Doug?"

"Yes. But I don't know who you are." "Wheelz of Steel" by Outkast was blaring over my stereo.

"My name's Mary, and you filled out an application online at [REDACTED]. Do you want to let me that refresh your memory?"

"No. Not really."

"It was for a position in Washington, DC."

"I think you have the wrong person," I insisted. "It wasn't me."

"We're actually situated outside of DC in McLean, Virginia," Mary offered.

She must have thought I was an idiot, because I still didn't know what she was referring to.

"I'm with an organization in McLean that some people refer to as [REDACTED]."

"Oh," I blurted out. "You mean you're with the CIA. Yes, I did fill out an application. Yes." I muted the music.

Mary said, "Why don't I call you back after you've had some time to think about it. I'll call you tomorrow [REDACTED]. But we're not going to mention the name of the organization. Okay?"

"Okay, Mary. Fine."

[REDACTED] my phone rang. I answered hungover from a frat party the night before.

Mary immediately started peppering me with questions: "[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]?"

I answered the best I could, but floundered in places.

At the end, she said, "Doug, you sound like a nice guy, but you don't seem up on current events. So I would suggest that you start reading the *Economist* and visit some of the top news websites like the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*."

Finally, she said, "Your file says that you've been assessed as someone who is capable of thinking fast on his feet. But you failed today, Doug. I was expecting you to do better. Why do you think you didn't do well?"

"I guess I wasn't prepared." I was being honest. "I don't know anything about the State Department or CIA, and I don't understand how these operations work."

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

She frowned. "Haven't you read any books about the CIA and how we operate?"

"Not really."

"Well, you failed [REDACTED], Doug. But you never [REDACTED] [REDACTED].

. So I'm going to recommend that you be moved to the next stage. But in the interim I suggest that you read some books." Then she handed me a number to call if I had any questions.

I called every two weeks for the next three months. Each time I'd leave a message and get no response.

[REDACTED] later, I was about to give up and called one last time. This time a woman answered.

"How can I help you?" she asked.

"My name is Doug Laux. I've been calling for over [REDACTED] to find out if my application has been accepted, and nobody has told me anything."

"Oh," the woman at the end of the line said. "I've got you scheduled for an interview in Washington, DC, next week."

"Come again?"

"Didn't anybody call you?"

"No, ma'am. I had no clue that my application had moved forward."

"Well go ahead and [REDACTED] [REDACTED]. When you get here, call this number and we'll tell you where to meet."

I lied and told my boss at DHL that my dad was sick and I had to return home. Once in DC, I called the [REDACTED] number [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] was [REDACTED] told [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED].

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

He said, "You've failed, which is too bad, because everything you've been through so far has been for nothing."

Part of me thought he was bluffing. Another part of me wondered if he just wasn't very good at the job.

I left thinking, *Fuck them. If they call me, fine. But I'm not going through any more bullshit like this.*

[REDACTED] passed before I got a call informing me that they were going to initiate [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED].

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

That's when I realized that I had to start building a cover on my own. And I had to do it fast.

Since I was still employed by DHL, I told my friends and family that I had filed for a security clearance to ride as an unticketed passenger on DHL cargo flights. It seemed to work.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

“You?”

“Yeah, me. The *Economist* wants to make sure I’m not a total douchebag who is going to ruin the credibility so they’re doing a quick [REDACTED].”

It sounded lame the moment I said it.

“Really?” she asked. “That sounds like a lot to go through for a magazine article.”

“Have you read the *Economist*?”

“Well, no. But the gentleman said you were applying for a job with the US government.”

“That was an excuse. The article is about national security.”

She thought about it, then said, “That kind of doesn’t make sense.”

“I don’t understand it, either. [REDACTED].”

My lie ended up working even better than I ever imagined. In fact, my boss spread the word throughout the company that I had written an article that was about to appear in the *Economist*. My story was picked up by the company newsletter and got the attention of the big bosses. Undoubtedly this was part of the reason I was named District Salesman of the Year.

Luckily, none of this reached the *Economist*. As the weeks passed and I heard nothing from the CIA, I had to explain to my bosses why the article wasn’t out. So I told more lies.

Finally, in [REDACTED], I received a phone call from a woman from [REDACTED] telling me that they were offering me a job. She said, “We’re going to send you a letter saying that we’re offering you a job with [REDACTED]. It’s going to say we’ll pay you [REDACTED] a year and move you to DC. But it’s up to you to establish your own cover.”

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

Now I had to tell my friends and parents that I was leaving my six-figure job at DHL to work for [REDACTED] (company) that doesn’t exist. My parents looked at me like I was stupid.

I couldn’t blame them. It sounded ridiculous to me, too.

3

TRAINING

Life is what you make it. Always has been, always will.

—ELEANOR ROOSEVELT

Langley wasn't what I expected from reading Robert Ludlum novels. I'm not talking about the architecture or the impressive, state-of-the-art hardware. I thought I'd be entering an organization that was super organized and efficient in terms of the way it trained its personnel.

Instead, managers spent a couple of days showing me and the other new recruits around the building, then pointed to a cubicle in a large room where I was to learn what operations officers do in the field and how to support them. My boss, whose job was to train me, was responsible for covering a whole region of countries and didn't have the time or inclination. So I sat behind a computer wearing a suit and a new pair of leather shoes, thinking, *I didn't sign up to be a glorified clerk.*

People stopped by from time to time and said, "Doug, I need you to do a [REDACTED] search for me."

"Doug, send this report over to [REDACTED]."

"Doug, I need you to make copies of this for me, pronto."

I'd seen the Colin Farrell movie *The Recruit* and thought that in two months I'd be sent down to the Farm (the CIA training base in [REDACTED]), where I would learn to kick ass like a ninja and transform myself into a version of Jason Bourne.

What I found out is, one, Jason Bourne doesn't exist. Not even close. And, two, it generally takes recruits [REDACTED] to get to the Farm. [REDACTED]! And all new recruits were lobbying hard to get there sooner. I wasn't a hot chick who could blow someone to get pushed to the top of the list—which happened.

Trying to stave off boredom, I went to the internal library in my spare time and read everything I could get my hands on about conducting real operations—how to run sources, create explosives, conduct interrogations, stage ambushes, and ascertain if people were telling the truth. And I taught myself how to speak Arabic.

Around my clerical duties, I wandered the halls looking for someone who wasn't wearing a suit and could advise me on how to get a job in the field. One day I ran into a grizzled-looking guy who'd just returned from the war zone. I told him I wanted to be doing the kind of stuff I was reading about in the newspapers—like recruiting sources and tracking terrorists.

He said, "Doug, you've got to think about your career. You need to get the desk experience you're getting now in order to advance."

"Fuck the career," I responded. "I want to do exciting, tip-of-the-spear kind of stuff. Send me"

Iraq or Afghanistan.”

“All right,” he said, looking me over. “I’ll put you in touch with a couple of people in [REDACTED].”

When I met with them, they told me, “The chances of you going to a war zone with us are slight.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re not a SEAL or Delta, which means you don’t have tier-one operations experience.”

What the fuck is that?

I learned that the CIA would rather take a guy who had been a Navy SEAL and teach him how to become a case officer than select someone like me who was learning to become a case officer and give him weapons and combat training. I found out later that this was completely ass-backward. It’s a hell of a lot harder to teach charm and empathy than it is to instruct someone how to fire an M4 at a target.

In other words, if you’re a friendly, open-minded person who generally likes other people it’s pretty easy to adapt to a foreign environment and get along. On the other hand, if you’re an emotionally shut-down individual, you’re going to have problems relating to some Taliban dude on the Afghan border.

I was disappointed. I didn’t sign up to spend most of my time sitting behind a desk answering cables and trafficking reports. To my surprise, I found out that most of the new recruits around me loved what they were doing and thought they were the coolest people on the planet to be working for the CIA. They wanted to do what most case officers do—be assigned to an embassy overseas, work the cocktail circuit, and maybe [REDACTED].

For them, establishing a cover was easy. They told their friends and family that they were working for the State Department. And they rarely socialized or dated outside the Agency.

I made up my mind that I was either going to a war zone to do black ops or I would quit. And I didn’t want to hang out with my coworkers and talk about work. I was a twenty-three-year-old dude who liked to get a little rowdy sometimes, drink some whiskey, and pick up chicks. Because of the drug and partying restrictions for selection into the Agency, most of my colleagues were straitlaced and boring. There were a smattering of bookworms and lots of Mormons from Utah.

Since their religion forbids drinking, smoking, or doing drugs, and they’ve usually served an overseas mission where they learned another language, Mormons perfectly fit the CIA profile.

The problem is that they generally make shitty ops officers, because they have no experience dealing with a wide range of people, especially the lowest-common-denominator types who generally become sources and are willing to trade their deepest, darkest secrets for cash.

Determined to lead my own life, I found a roommate named Austin, who was a wild man from Ohio. Six nights a week we went out to bars and partied. But every time the drugs appeared, I had to split.

The fun nights in Georgetown weren’t enough to make up for the boredom I experienced at work. After a year as a [REDACTED], I decided to take all of my accrued leave at once and go somewhere as far

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