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I awakened in a cold sweat, my breathing labored and coarse, the way it had been in the explosion.

And now I see where decisions I made placed me on certain paths heading in specific directions. Sometimes, I knew my life would be altered the moment I'd made up my mind, such as when I chose to major in computer programming at Vanderbilt University instead of working on my family's tobacco farm. Or when I sold the farm after my parents died from carbon monoxide poisoning, I knew my path would change again when the FBI recruited me as a Special Agent. Those choices are ones I refer to as "life intersections", sometimes lovingly and sometimes not, because I was consciously making a ninety-degree turn at the time. Those are the kinds of decisions I laid awake at night and mulled over, knowing my life would be changed because of them.

Then there are those quirky little turns that I never saw coming and sometimes didn't specifically recall making... what to wear, when to leave for work, where to go for lunch. The kind of choices that I don't give much thought to, and certainly would never have believed such a small decision could alter my life forever.

I was soon to learn differently.

I'd arrived in Virginia after an extended summer hiatus at my Aunt Jo's house in Sunnyside, Tennessee, where I experienced

a much-needed rest from a stressful job that I was thankful was over.

Fall was in the air—a beautiful crisp November day with clear, pale blue skies—the kind of day that's best spent watching the leaves slip away from their branches and flutter to the ground on puffs of wind.

That evening would be one of those turning points in my life, my first glimpse of the FBI Academy at Quantico. I was scheduled to report there before nightfall where I would be assigned a dorm room and a roommate. The next day would be my first official day as an FBI employee.

I'd originally expected to join the New Agents Class scheduled for September, but it was already full. Normally, I'd have had to wait until the winter class began, but because of the high terrorism alert, the FBI was building up and building up fast. They placed me into a special group of computer and foreign language experts that would run simultaneously with the other class. My foreign language skill was limited to Spanish, a necessity as my parents often hired Latino laborers to work their tobacco farm. But my computer skills were the best they could have hoped for, even if I did say so myself.

My best friend and roommate from Vanderbilt University was settled into a wonderful little house in Richmond's Fan District, a mere fifty miles or so from Quantico, so naturally I stopped by Margaret's house to visit for awhile. And naturally, she suggested we go shopping. Shopping for clothes and particularly shoes was Margaret's favorite pastime, and used to be one of mine, too, until that fateful day.

I was anxious to get to Quantico but I had a few hours to kill, so I agreed to go shopping and delay my arrival primarily because I knew once the Academy started, the last thing on earth I'd have time to do was relax.

So I followed Margaret's BMW in my Honda Civic, up Interstate 95 to a point a bit more than halfway between Richmond and Quantico, to a nice new mall on the outskirts of the Washington suburbs.

We shopped until late afternoon. Having not eaten since breakfast, I was famished by then. By the time we made it to the

*RICOCHET* by *p.m.terrell*

food court, I had a new pair of Nikes in tow, along with at least a half dozen of Margaret's shopping bags. Not that she wasn't carrying her share; she was so burdened, she would've looked like a bag lady had she not been so beautiful. I still remember her outfit—a bright yellow sweater that had guys turning their heads as she passed, her blue jean jacket tied fashionably around her waist. She towered above most guys—when she put on those three-inch heels, she was over six foot.

The odd mixture of odors reached our nostrils even before we reached the food court—fried chicken and oriental rice, pizza, tacos, and freshly baked cookies.

The food court was packed. We had too many shopping bags to go through a line and come out with a tray full of food, so we opted to wait until a table was available. Then two tables were emptied at once—one right beside the door and the other one smack dab in the middle of the room. For some reason I can't put a finger on now, we both lunged for the one by the door. As we piled the shopping bags and my worn leather aviator jacket into two of the four chairs, I glanced back at the other table. A young mother with two children, one in a stroller and the other clinging to her mother's tunic, had descended upon it. I see the three of them to this day, every time I close my eyes and try to sleep, and I wonder—I wonder.

We didn't flip a coin to decide who stayed with the packages and who went for the food. I tried later to remember how we decided something so mundane, but the memory never returned. Margaret went to Popeye's to get some good fried chicken and some New Orleans-style rice for us while I sat at the table, grateful to take a load off my feet and watched her in line, twirling her hair and looking as if she didn't have a care in the world.

The door to the mall was opening and closing on a regular, if somewhat brisk, basis, letting gusts of autumn wind inside as shoppers struggled to straighten their windblown hair and shed their coats.

I spotted the man as soon as he walked through the door. He hesitated not four feet from my table; looked around as if he didn't quite know what to do. Medium height, black hair, olive complexion. He looked foreign, but it was difficult to tell. The

Washington area was a melting pot. It was his coat that grabbed my attention: a faded green parka that appeared to have a thick layer of down, and a band of fur around the thrown-back hood. It was more in line with what one would wear in the middle of a Midwestern winter than a mid-Atlantic autumn.

His hands grasped it tight around his abdomen as if to fit over a bulky physique, but his head appeared too small to match the wide chest and wider abdomen.

He moved away from me, through the crowd, to a point halfway between the table with the young mother and Margaret, who was still standing in line. She turned and half-waved to me, a wide grin on her face. She appeared to be talking to a handsome fellow in line behind her.

At that moment, the man moved his arms and his coat gaped open. It was then I saw it: something rigid under his coat: vertical sticks of dynamite strapped side by side around his middle.

He turned and stared directly into my eyes. His face was expressionless, his eyes a gunmetal black. Then he clasped his hands together and raised his head toward heaven.

I opened my mouth, a scream on my lips, when the world collapsed around me.