



**THE
SECOND
SEVEN**

CHAPTER 60

EL PASO, TEXAS



AS HE HAD BEEN INSTRUCTED, Richard Cruse arrived on time at the El Paso FBI field office, dressed in the standard bureau uniform—gray suit with white shirt, muted tie, and wing-tip shoes. He was cleared by building security personnel and ushered upstairs to the office of Jimmy Thompson, the special agent in charge.

“Not sure why they sent someone with your expertise to us,” Thompson began. “With all that’s going on in the Middle East, I would have thought they’d keep you in New York.”

“You know how it is,” Cruse shrugged. “You can never tell what the FBI will do.”

“That’s true,” Thompson laughed. “Well, anyway, we’re glad to have you here. We do a lot of immigration work. Have a joint task force with Border Patrol, another with DEA. And we also do a lot of organized-crime work. Lots of guys from New York find their way down here. I’m sure you’ll feel right at home once you get to know your way around.” Just then a man appeared in the office doorway. He was dressed in blue jeans, a black T-shirt, and white sneakers. Thompson gestured for him to enter. “Casey Griffin. This is someone you need to meet.”

Griffin entered the room. Thompson introduced him to Cruse. “You two will be working together. Casey works with the DEA Task Force.”

“Certainly looks the part,” Cruse observed.

“Yeah, well,” Griffin nodded, “you’ll get the hang of it before long.” He

looked over at Thompson. "Got an address I need to check out. Can I take him with me?"

"Yes," Thompson agreed. "Good idea. The two of you can get acquainted while you work." He smiled at Cruse. "Ride with Casey. See what you can learn about the work we do here in Texas."

Cruse followed Griffin down the hall to the corridor. They took the elevator to the first floor and walked to the parking deck out back. A late-model Mustang was parked on the second row. Griffin pressed a button on the key fob to unlock the doors. "Standard government car?"

"Seized it in a raid a few months ago," Griffin smiled. "Hasn't found its way to the auction yet."

From the office downtown they rode out to Turf Road, an unpaved street on the north side of town. Griffin turned the car onto a drive that led to the right and came to a stop in front of a double-wide mobile home. Cruse looked around warily. "This it?"

"Yeah." Griffin cut his eyes in Cruse's direction. "Tomorrow when you come to work, leave the suit at home."

Cruse stepped out on the passenger side and glanced over the top of the car in Griffin's direction. "You got something against suits?"

"No. But these people do," Griffin said, gesturing toward the rows of mobile homes that lined both sides of the street. "They see that jacket, they run for cover before we even get a chance." Griffin pushed the car door closed. "Take the back. I'll get the front."

Cruse moved to the left and made his way to the end of the trailer. He ducked low and stepped past a window, then checked around the back corner. Satisfied it was safe, he moved to a spot near the back door. From around front, he heard Griffin knock on the door, then heard his voice as he called out, "FBI. Open up!"

Seconds later the back door flew open and a kid darted outside. Cruse caught him with a forearm across the chest that sent the kid crashing to the ground on his back. When the boy started to move, Cruse put his foot on his chest. "Stay right there," he whispered. He drew his pistol and craned his neck to see inside. Seconds later, Griffin appeared in the doorway.

“What you got?”

“I’m not sure.” Cruse reached down with his left hand, grabbed the boy by the shirt, and lifted.

The boy scrambled to his feet. “I wasn’t doing nothin’,” he protested.

Cruse turned him toward the wall of the trailer. Instinctively, the boy leaned forward in an arrest position. Cruse patted him down. “Who are you?”

“I ain’t got to tell you nothin’.”

“Then you must know, I’m about to advise you of your rights.”

“Diego Sanchez,” the boy sighed.

“How old are you?”

“Seventeen.”

“What were you doing inside that house?”

“Nothin’. I already told you that.”

Griffin came down the back steps and took Diego by the arm. “What kind of nothing were you doing in there? A little grass?”

“Are you crazy?”

“Cooking some meth?”

“You was just in there,” Diego retorted. “Did you smell anything like that?”

“Then tell me what were you doing in there.”

“All right,” Diego grouched. “A group of guys lived there. I seen them around here. Coming and going. Then I didn’t see them no more. So I figured they moved on. Few days ago, I came over to see if they left anything.”

“I hear this is the place to score whatever you want.”

“Where’d you hear that?”

“Around.”

“Well, you need a new snitch. Ain’t nobody ever scored nothin’ in that place.”

“What makes you so sure?”

“Because the place to score is across the street.”

Griffin looked deflated at the very real possibility he’d been given the wrong address. He let go of Diego’s arm and stepped back. “You sure about that?”

“Of course I’m sure,” Diego replied. “Everybody around here knows you go over there. Drugs. Women. I heard you could even get men if you wanted them.”

“How about you become my new snitch.”

“Uh-uh,” Diego said, shaking his head slowly from side to side. “You start talking about those dudes and you’ll wind up with a bullet in your head. They don’t play.”

“Well, I don’t play, either. And if I find something in your file, I’m gonna be back to find you.” Griffin started toward the end of the trailer. “Come on,” he growled to Cruse. “Let’s go.”

But Cruse was curious now about who actually lived in the trailer and why they’d been given a wrong address. He looked over at Diego. “Who lived here?”

“I don’t know. Just some dudes.”

“How many?”

“Five or six,” Diego shrugged. “Maybe a couple more.”

“White guys?”

“No.”

“Latinos?”

“Nah. I don’t think so. Looked like they was from somewhere else. Spoke some kind of strange language. Somebody said it was Arabic or something. I don’t know. They mostly kept to themselves.”

“When did they leave?”

“About a week ago. I come by and saw the back door was open. Wasn’t nobody here no more, so I went inside. Looked around.”

“What did you find?”

“Nothin’ much. Just some loose change. Few cans of food in the cabinet. I didn’t really get to see it all ’cause a lady pulled up in a car and came to the door, so I ran. I came back today to see if I missed something. See what I could find. Just scrappin’, you know.”

Griffin was standing at the corner of the trailer. Cruse caught his eyes. “We need to take him in and see what else he knows.”

“Why?”

“Trailer full of guys. Speaking a language that sounds like Arabic. In El Paso, Texas. That doesn’t strike you as odd?”

“Hey,” Diego argued, “I ain’t goin’ downtown with no feds.” He shook his head. “No way.”

“Why not?”

“Folks around here see me ride off with you, won’t nobody talk to me again.”

Cruse reached beneath his jacket and brought out a pair of handcuffs. “What if we take you in these?” Before Diego could respond, Cruse slipped the cuffs over his wrists and locked them in place. “Come on.” He took Diego by the arm. “That ought to protect your reputation.”

When they reached the office, Cruse put Griffin in an interrogation room. After a few more questions, he brought in a sketch artist. An hour later, they had two sketches. Cruse gave them to a technician to run through the facial-recognition software program.

In the meantime, using Diego’s earlier statements about activity in the neighborhood, Griffin obtained a search warrant for the house across the street. He returned to the location with a team of agents and rounded up three suspects with connections to a Mexican drug cartel. Cruse and Diego were seated in Griffin’s office, eating a hamburger, when Griffin returned.

“Make yourself at home,” Griffin said sarcastically.

“No one seems to know where my office is,” Cruse replied. “So we took yours.”

Griffin dropped onto a chair. “The least you could have done was bring me a burger.”

Cruse reached into a paper sack beside his chair, took out a hamburger still in the wrapper, and handed it to him. “Would’ve gotten you a shake but I didn’t know when you’d get back.”

“That’s all right.” Griffin took a bite of the burger. “I’ll make do.”

A bite or two later, Griffin rose from his seat on the chair and nodded for Cruse to follow. They walked out in the hallway.

“I went back inside that trailer,” Griffin said, his voice little more than a whisper.

“What did you find?”

“I found this.” Griffin took a slip of paper from his pocket and handed it to Cruse. On the paper was a phone number. “I ran a check on that number. It’s a cell phone in Juarez. Registered to Miguel Murillo.”

“You know him?”

“Yeah. Murillo works for Jose Lazcarno. Head of the biggest drug cartel in Juarez.”

An office assistant appeared from around the corner. She looked over at Cruse. “We have a hit on the face-recognition software from one of those sketches.”

Cruse and Griffin followed her to her desk. They watched over her shoulder as she brought the results of the scan onto the screen of her monitor. “Your sketch got a hit on someone named Ahmed Haza.” She changed to another page. “We found a file on him in our database. Born in Yemen. Ties to Hezbollah. Disappeared in Lebanon during the last Israeli invasion. Thought by some to be dead.”

Cruse looked at Griffin. “This isn’t good. Islamic terrorists with ties to Mexican drug lords.”

“You thinking they are coming into the country illegally?”

“I’m thinking that part is obvious. The real question is why?”

“The 9/11 attackers came with visas,” Griffin replied. “Why wouldn’t these guys?”

“That’s what worries me most.”

“I think I know how to help.”