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## “What Dots?”

*September 11, 2001.* “Hi, Heather, how are you?” I was speaking on the phone from an office in the U.S. Embassy in Sanaa; Heather was in New York. We had finally been allowed to return to Yemen a week earlier, and I was busy with my colleagues reestablishing our operation against al-Qaeda members responsible for the USS *Cole* bombing.

As I asked that question, Joe Ennis —Alabama Joe—rushed into the room. “Ali, a plane hit the World Trade Center,” he said breathlessly. “We’re watching the news in the ambassador’s office. Come quickly!”

“You mean a helicopter?” I asked Joe.

“No, they said a plane,” he replied.

“Ali,” Heather said into my other ear, “the TV is showing smoke coming out of the World Trade Center.” I repeated that to Joe and he let out an expletive.

“Switch on the TV,” she replied. “One of the buildings is on fire.”

My gut told me that it was something bigger, but I didn’t want to alarm Heather. “I have to go and see what’s going on, and I’ll call you back. I love you.”

“I love you.”

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I dialed John O’Neill’s number in New York. He had just started his new job in the World Trade Center. His phone rang and rang and then went to voicemail. Joe Ennis rushed into the office again, screaming: “Another plane just hit the World Trade Center!”

“What?”

“It’s a passenger plane. Oh my God, a big plane.”

I tried calling John again. Once again the call went to voicemail, and again I hung up without leaving a message. I tried yet again and got his voicemail, but this time I left a message: “John, it’s Ali, I just heard what happened. I’m in Yemen, give me a call.”

I ran into the ambassador’s office. Ambassador Bodine had left the country, and the new ambassador, Edmund Hull, had not yet arrived, so the office was empty, but the television was on, and all the agents, the entire team from the New York field office, had gathered to watch the breaking news from New York. For about a minute we stood silently, in shock, unable to look away from the screen, as images of what had just happened were shown again and again: The first plane flying in . . . the burst of flames . . . and then the second plane.

Forcing myself to look away from the screen, I picked up the phone on the ambassador’s desk and tried calling the FBI’s New York office. The call wouldn’t go through. “Are you speaking to New York?” a colleague asked me, seeing the receiver in my hand.

“I’m trying,” I said. “Lines are tied up.” Being unable to reach headquarters only increased the tension and fear people felt. I kept trying to get through, but again and again I heard a busy signal. On the tenth attempt, my call went through to one of my colleagues in New York.

“We’ve just seen the images here,” I said. “Do you know what’s going on?”

“We’re trying to find out. At the moment, we’ve got about thirty agents who were in the vicinity missing. We’re treating this as a terrorist attack.”

After checking the embassy’s security and loading our own personal weapons, we all gathered in a secure conference room and waited

for news from New York. More bad news reached us by television: bomb threats in DC, more planes allegedly hijacked, and finally the tragic news of United Airlines Flight 63 crashing over Shanksville, Pennsylvania.

Tom Donlon waited on the phone for fifteen minutes and at last was patched through to headquarters. The call lasted only a couple of minutes, and Tom didn't say much other than "yes, I understand."

"Okay," he said, putting the phone down, "the instructions are for everyone to evacuate Yemen immediately and get on the first plane back to New York. Yemen is deemed unsafe. We don't yet know who was behind the attacks in New York and Washington, or if more attacks are coming. But given the problems we've had in Yemen in the past, we're to get out. Pack up and be prepared to leave in a few hours."

For once none of us disagreed with an order to return home. As important as our mission in Yemen was, it could wait. Thousands of Americans were reported killed, and our colleagues were missing. We wanted to get home to help. We packed our bags, shredded documents that we weren't taking with us, and, the next day, September 12, we headed to the airport.

"Ali!" The CIA ██████████ in Sanaa came up to me as I waited in the airport with the rest of the team to board the plane.

"What's up?" I asked.

"FBI headquarters is trying to reach you. You need to speak to them."

"Who at headquarters? What do they want?"

"I don't know, but they've sent a number." I asked Tom Donlon if he knew why I was wanted, but he was unaware that headquarters was trying to reach me.

Tom and I went to a quiet corner outside the airport terminal, where our team's communication technician mounted a portable dish and established a secure satellite line. The number belonged to Dina Corsi, the FBI analyst in headquarters who had clashed with Steve Bongardt during the June 11, 2001, meeting in New York. "Ali, there has been

a change of plans,” she said. “You and Bob McFadden need to stay in Yemen.”

“What do you mean?” I asked. “We have been attacked back home; we need to figure out who did this. Whatever is going on here can wait.”

“We do need to figure out what just happened, which is why we need you to stay in Yemen. It’s about what happened here. Quso is our best lead at the moment.”

“Quso? What does he have to do with this?”

“The [REDACTED] has some intelligence for you to look over.”

“Okay, I’ll talk to Bob. We’ll stay.”

“One final thing, your instructions from the top are to identify those behind the attacks, and I quote, ‘by any means necessary.’”

“We’ll find them,” I replied.

“One more thing, Ali,” Dina said.

“Yes?”

“Be safe.”

I ran to Bob, who was waiting for me to board the plane, and repeated the instructions I had just received. “By any means necessary,” I said, giving him the exact command I had been told. He nodded gravely. We assembled our FBI and NCIS colleagues who were also waiting to board and told them about our change of plan. Tom Donlon and Steve Corbett, the NCIS supervisor on the ground, decided to stay as well to help with the investigation, and two New York SWAT team agents also volunteered to stay and provide protection. Everyone else got on the plane, and we returned to the embassy.

“Let’s go to my office,” the [REDACTED] said. He and I were alone, and he closed the door. He took out a file and silently handed it me.

Inside were three pictures of al-Qaeda operatives taken in Kuala Lumpur, [REDACTED] and photos were all dated January 2000 and had been provided to the CIA by the Malaysian [REDACTED] agency.

For about a minute I stared at the pictures and the report, not quite

believing what I had in my hands. We had asked the CIA repeatedly during the USS *Cole* investigation if they knew anything about why Khallad had been in Malaysia and if they recognized the number of the pay phone in Kuala Lumpur that we suspected he had used. Each time we had asked—in November 2000, April 2001, and July 2001—they had said that they knew nothing.

But here in the file was a very different answer: they had in fact known since January 2000 that Khallad had met with other al-Qaeda operatives in Malaysia. They had pictures of them meeting and a detailed report of their comings and goings from Malaysian ██████████.

As for the phone number, ██████████ listed it as being assigned to a pay phone that the al-Qaeda operatives were using to communicate with colleagues everywhere. The phone booth was across from a condominium owned by an al-Qaeda sympathizer in Malaysia, which was where all the al-Qaeda members had stayed. Our deduction that Khallad had been using it was right.

The ██████████ Khallad's travels: ██████████ he had attempted to fly to Singapore but had been rejected because he hadn't had a visa. He had returned to the Kuala Lumpur condominium and then had traveled to Bangkok. The ██████████ that Khallad had been using a fraudulent Yemeni passport, under the name Sa'eed bin Saleh.

██████████ given to the CIA by the Malaysians in January 2000. None of it had been passed to us, despite our specifically having asked about Khallad and the phone number and its relevance to the *Cole* investigation and to national security. I later found out that the three photos ██████████ that the ██████████ gave me were the three photos shown, with no explanation, to Steve and my *Cole* colleagues at the June 11, 2001, meeting in New York. The *Cole* team had asked about the photos—who the people were, why they were taken, and so on—but ██████████, the CIA official present, said nothing.

Also in the file ██████████ that Khallad had flown first class to Bangkok with Khalid al-Mihdhar and Nawaf al-Hazmi. We soon would learn that they were listed as passengers on American Airlines Flight 77, which had hit the Pentagon. Based upon the chronology in the report, it

was clear that the day after Quso and Nibras had met Khallad and given him the \$36,000, Mihdhar and Hazmi had bought first-class tickets to the United States. Was that \$36,000 used to buy their tickets? And had the rest of the money been intended for their use in the United States? My gut told me yes.

My hands started shaking. I didn't know what to think. “They just sent these reports,” the ■■■■ said, seeing my reaction. I walked out of the room, sprinted down the corridor to the bathroom, and fell to the floor next to a stall. There I threw up.

I sat on the floor for a few minutes, although it felt like hours. What I had just seen went through my mind again and again. The same thought kept looping back: “If they had all this information since January 2000, why the hell didn't they pass it on?” My whole body was shaking.

I heard one of the SWAT agents asking, “Ali, are you okay?” He had seen me run to the bathroom and had followed me in.

“I am fine.”

I got myself to the sink, washed out my mouth, and splashed some water on my face. I covered my face with a paper towel for a few moments. I was still trying to process the fact that the information I had requested about major al-Qaeda operatives, information the CIA had claimed they knew nothing about, had been in the agency's hands since January 2000.

The SWAT agent asked, “What's wrong, bud? What the hell did he tell you?”

“They knew, they knew.”

Another agent came in to check what was happening, and I told him what had just happened and why we had been ordered to stay in Yemen. We hugged and walked out.

I went back down the corridor to the ■■■■ office to get the file. “Ali?” he asked as I walked in. I looked him squarely in the face and saw that he was blushing and looked flustered. He clearly understood the significance of what the agency had not passed on.

I didn't have time to play the blame game. New York and Wash-

ington were still burning, colleagues of ours were missing, and we all had to focus on catching those responsible. “Is there anything else you haven’t passed along?” I asked.

He didn’t say anything, and I walked out, file in hand.

I went to the room where Tom Donlon, Bob McFadden, and Steve Corbett were working and dropped the file on the table. “The █████ just gave this to me,” I said.

Bob looked up and saw the anger on my face. He didn’t say anything, just took the file. Bob knew me well enough to know that something was very wrong. He looked through the contents and then turned to me in outrage. “I can’t believe this.” Those were his only words.

Tom and Steve’s faces also dropped once they looked through the file; it was too much for any of us to take. “Now they want us to question Quso,” Bob said, his voice rising in anger. “They should have given this to us eight months ago.”

FBI special agent Andre Khoury had been stationed elsewhere in the Middle East when the planes hit the twin towers. He was reassigned to join us in Yemen, and after he arrived and saw the file, he wanted to confront the █████. I held Andre back.

“They knew! Why didn’t they tell us?!” Andre said.

“You’re right,” I said, “and I’m just as angry. Believe me. But now is not the time to ask these questions. One day someone will ask the questions and find out, but right now we have to focus on the task at hand.”