

**FBI Agent**

*Fiction*

The FBI called on a Friday in August while Harris was at his desk in his office, a modest one-story craftsman on Harbor Boulevard in Anaheim. The city had rezoned the building for live/work several years ago, and nowadays he wouldn't be able to afford to buy the same building, but he'd bought it at the right time, before his kids had entered college. He was an accountant, and people expected him to make good decisions. He expected the same. His purchase of the craftsman had been one of them.

"The FBI called," his assistant said, handing him a note with a Long Beach number on it.

He raised his eyebrow.

"I looked him up online," she said. "Jeff Mair. Seems real."

She returned to her desk. He waited for her to sit before standing and closing the door. He routinely fielded calls from the IRS, but he'd never dealt with an FBI inquiry. He had a few clients who he imagined could run afoul of the Feds. Even so, no one stood out. He called the number on the note, and the call went to voicemail. "This is Special Agent Jeff Mair," the voicemail said. "Clearly state your full name and number and I will return your message." He did, leaving his cell.

Several minutes later, his assistant knocked on the door. He thought that the FBI agent was already calling him back. He was wrong.

"Mr. Joyce is here to see you," she said. "Walk-in. Do you have time to see him before lunch?"

On Fridays, he took a longer lunch than the rest of the week, but he had a few minutes.

"Send him in," he said.

Mr. Joyce, who'd been a client for over a decade, owned two liquor stores in Anaheim. They spoke about an IRS overpayment notice that the client had received and then about the liquor store business in general. By the time the meeting was over, the FBI still had not called back, so Harris took his lunch. He left the office and drove to the mosque.

He arrived early. His parents had brought him to this mosque when he was a kid, and in turn he'd brought his own children here when they were young. When his kids had become teenagers, they'd stopped coming. Now they were living their own lives, and as far as he knew, they didn't go to the mosque anymore. He entered the prayer hall, sat against a wall, and waited for *adhan*.



After prayer, he looked in the quad for Imran, an attorney with a one-man shop in North County. He and Imran had gone to college together. They usually spoke for a few minutes after Friday prayer, the discussion a mixture of business and personal — the business part being that Harris referred him clients and the personal part being that at the age of fifty-eight Imran was still a bachelor and dating. When Harris found him, Imran was talking to a young, bearded gentleman whom Harris recognized from news shows. Harris waited for Imran to finish his conversation before pulling him aside.

“The FBI called me today.”

“What did they want?”

“I don’t know. I returned the FBI agent’s call. I left a voicemail, but haven’t heard anything back.”

“Do you think it’s business related? A client maybe?”

“It could be.”

“Email me the agent’s info. I’ll check with my friend at AAIR. See if he knows anything about this guy.”

“Thanks. How is the lady?”

“She travels for business, which is hard, but when she is around, things are good.”

“Is she around this weekend?”

“Yes, thank God.”

On his drive back to the office, Harris picked up a sandwich. He ate at his desk while he read the news online. When he was done, he emailed the FBI agent’s name and number to Imran. He saw two more clients who walked in, worked on compilations, and left the office early. He knew his wife would still be at work, so he decided he would stop by the store to buy razors and soap. If she still wasn’t home when he got back, he would do work around the house.

Over the next several weeks, Harris forgot about the FBI. Special Agent Jeff Mair did not call him back, and Imran’s friend at AAIR knew nothing about the agent. Harris chalked up the contact as part of the agent’s completed or aborted investigation into something that had nothing to do with him. But in early November, the FBI agent called again. This time the agent called on Harris’s cell, and this time Harris picked up. He closed the door to his office.

“I finally got a hold of you,” the FBI agent said.

“I returned your first phone call. I never heard back.”

“I’m sorry. I got busy. Real busy. What is your availability to meet with me?”

“Regarding?”

“I have some general questions for you. We can meet in person and discuss.”



“Meet where?”

“This is informal. Nothing serious. We can meet where you want. You’re in Anaheim, right? We can meet someplace in Anaheim.”

“I’ll check my schedule and call you back.”

“Great. This is my cell. You can also text me at this number.”

They hung up. Harris didn’t have to check his schedule to know that work was slow this time of year. Work would be slow until the New Year when clients needed to compile year-end financials. He had availability. Yet he checked his schedule anyway. Tomorrow and the next day, he had continuing education sessions in Irvine. Next week, his schedule was clear. Wide open. He called Imran.

“The FBI agent called again. He wants to meet with me.”

“Took him a while. What about?”

“I asked but he didn’t say.”

“You don’t have to meet with him. You’re under no obligation.”

“I want to know what all of this is about.”

“A lot of the time, the FBI will ask about other people. They’re fishing for information. Inventing leads, per se.”

“I don’t know anything about anyone.”

“If you meet with him, I can join you. I’m not necessarily representing you, but at least I’ll be a third-party witness.”

“Should I tell him you’re coming?”

“You can. You don’t have to.”

“Where should we meet?”

“Not in your office and not at your house. Maybe a bar. A public place.”

“Is the FBI allowed to meet in a bar?”

“The Feds do what the Feds want to do.”

Harris texted the FBI agent. He offered to meet him next week at a coffee shop. Immediately the agent began to respond, but then the agent stopped, and the screen went blank. Nothing. During the rest of the workday, Harris kept checking his phone for a response, but there was none.

When his wife got home, she made dinner. While they were eating, she asked him if everything was all right. He seemed anxious, she said. He hadn’t told her about the FBI agent.

“I’m thinking about the kids,” he said. “Have you talked to them this week?”

“Abrar, yes. Bashir, yes. Calah, no.” She’d listed them by age. They’d joked to friends that they’d named their kids alphabetically.

“How are the boys?”

“Abrar is finally hitting his stride. Bashir still needs a little nudge.”

The conversation about the kids ratcheted rather than abated his



anxiety. He didn't like that Calah and his wife weren't close. Their lack of communication bothered him. But his wife said the same thing about him and Bashir, so he didn't press the issue anymore. Plus he was worried about Abrar. Abrar had been religious for a while in college.

"Has Abrar been going to the mosque?" Harris said.

"Mosque? Why? I don't know. Maybe. I know they have mosques in Portland."

"It was just a question. Anyway, I have continuing education tomorrow and Thursday. It goes until 3 p.m. Do you want to get out of work early? We can watch a movie."

"I'll try. If I can't, you can watch a movie on your own."

His wife cleared the table. The rest of the evening she did dishes and cleaned while he watched television in the family room. When he thought that Calah would be home from whatever she was doing on a Tuesday night, he texted her, asking her how she was. By the time he and his wife went to bed, she hadn't replied.

The FBI agent called Harris the following morning. Harris stepped out of the seminar into the hall to field the call. A few other accountants were also in the hall on their phones. No one paid him attention.

"Next week isn't going to work," the agent said. "I'm heading to Pakistan. Peshawar. Do you know anything about that area?"

"No. Why should I? I was born here."

"I'll be gone several weeks. I'll call you when I'm back. We can meet then."

They hung up. At least now he knew that the FBI wasn't focused on a client, although he'd already surmised as much. He returned to the seminar and sat in the back in a different seat. Why should he know anything about Peshawar? Now he was angry as well as anxious.

Later in the day, his daughter called, returning his text from the night before. He was still thinking about the FBI agent.

"Will I see you for Thanksgiving?" he said.

"I'm not sure yet, Dad."

"I hope to see you. Mom does too. We miss you."

"I have work due the week after."

"I can buy your plane ticket. So don't worry about it."

"It's not financial, Dad. It's just work."

"I would love to see you for Thanksgiving."

"I would love to see you too. I'll let you know."

As they hung up, he heard a guy in the background talking, the voice deep and muffled.

"She has a boyfriend," he said to his wife that night in bed. "I heard a boy in the background."



“And that’s why you think she isn’t coming home for Thanksgiving?”

“Yes.”

“It’s a horrible reason for her not to come.”

“Maybe I should’ve invited her boyfriend too. I could’ve said that if she was dating anyone special, we would love to meet him.”

“And then what? Have this man sleep in our house? Her boyfriend?”

“We have space. They won’t be in the same room.”

“I’m not OK with our kids dating just to date. They need to find someone.”

“The point of dating is to find someone.”

“No, it’s not. The point of dating is to date. We were introduced. Some people might even say arranged. We didn’t date around. We wanted to find someone.”

“It was strange what we did. This generation doesn’t do what we did. Even our generation didn’t do what we did.”

“It worked for us.”

“Hopefully, her way will work for her.”

She fell asleep turned away from him.

During the second day of the seminar he texted his wife. He asked her if the boys had finalized their plans for Thanksgiving. She replied that Abrar was aiming for a Wednesday evening arrival at LAX from Portland. Bashir was flying into Orange County from Oakland. She asked him if Calah had finalized her plans. He told his wife that she had not. His wife asked him if he would pick up Abrar from LAX and she would pick up Bashir from Orange County. Of course, he agreed.

At Friday prayer, he talked to Imran.

“The FBI backed out. He said he is going to Pakistan. He said he is going to be gone for a while.”

“So it is a Muslim thing.”

“He asked me if I knew anything about Peshawar. Pakistan.”

“What did you say?”

“I said I didn’t.”

“Why would you?”

“Exactly.”

“There are FBI agents here. At the mosque.”

“I know.”

“If your FBI agent ever calls back, let me know.”

“I hope he does call back. I want to know what he wants.”

Imran nodded, hesitated. “By the way, Bashir emailed me,” he said.

“My Bashir?”

“Yes. He wanted to know about evictions.”

“Why?”



When Harris got back to the car, he called his wife.

“Is Bashir getting evicted?”

“He is behind on rent. We’re going to help him catch up. He called you?”

“Imran told me.”

“Imran?”

“He emailed Imran about evictions.”

“I told Bashir that he is not going to get evicted.”

“How much is he behind?”

“Three thousand dollars.”

Harris knew that three thousand dollars was equal to the amount they were planning on spending for a trip to Eastern Europe in the summer. He also knew that his wife was going to send the money. They’d argued enough about their kids over the years. Only recently had they reached a comfortable truce.

“When are you sending it?” he said.

“I was going to discuss it with you this weekend and deposit a check into his account on Monday.”

“At some point, we have to let him stand on his own feet.”

“That job doesn’t pay him enough.”

“He needs to get a roommate. Probably two. Maybe three. Boys his age have roommates. I did.”

“We’ll talk to him about it over Thanksgiving.”

He had a long-time client waiting for him when he returned to the office. The client was a structural engineer whose firm had grown over the years. Now the client not only did work in southern and central California, but he’d also done several projects in Las Vegas. They shook hands and Harris led him to the office.

“Late lunch, Harry?” the client said.

“I take a longer lunch on Fridays. An hour and a half instead of an hour.”

“That’s good. Got to keep your sanity. I try to take a few winter Fridays off, although this year I don’t know if I’ll be able. If we don’t take time off, we get burned out, don’t we?”

“Anything new in the desert?”

The client needed bookkeeping services for a new project for one of the casinos in Las Vegas. Since the project was larger than his past projects, he would be spending most of his time there for the next year. He was worried about the cost. Harris reassured him. Harris would host an online account for the client. The client only needed to take pictures of receipts and invoices and upload them.

“Listen, Tom,” Harris said, “is there any old Vegas still around?”

“Old Vegas? Like the mob?”

“Yes.”



“I hear that there is. It’s a muted presence.”

They spoke for several minutes about old Vegas. As they did, Harris tried to feign belief that Tom could be under investigation by the Feds and that Tom was the reason why the FBI had contacted him. But he couldn’t quite muster genuine belief.

For Thanksgiving two weeks later, two of his three children came home. His daughter did not. He picked up Abrar from the airport on Wednesday evening. Abrar had a thick beard, new for him. Harris didn’t know if the reason was religion or fashion — so many men Abrar’s age had beards nowadays. Otherwise, as far as he could tell during the car ride home, Abrar seemed to be doing OK. Nothing seemed especially wrong. After a rocky few years trying to make a big life, he’d developed a modest one, barbering and dating and paying his rent on time. Abrar had been in Oregon for two years now. Harris thought that it was the right place for him. But the beard bothered Harris.

On Thanksgiving, he asked the family if anyone wanted to give a prayer before they carved the turkey. No one volunteered, so he said a short *du’a* on behalf of everybody. During dinner, his wife was talkative. She was happy.

On Friday, the day after Thanksgiving, Harris asked his wife and the boys if they wanted to go to the mosque with him. They declined. His wife went shopping and his sons went together to the track to work out. He felt lonely going to Friday prayers by himself on the day after Thanksgiving but also relieved. He felt calmer. Abrar did not want to go to the mosque. Abrar was not religious anymore. About whatever the FBI agent had been fishing, it wasn’t about Abrar. The beard didn’t mean anything.

After prayer, Harris looked for Imran, like he usually did. He couldn’t find him. He figured that Imran was spending the day with his girlfriend. He spoke with other people he knew and a few of their grownup kids who’d returned to the mosque while they were in town. Outside of Ramadan, today was the busiest Friday of the year.

Before he left, he texted his wife and the boys about lunch. They didn’t immediately respond so he picked up bagels for the family on the drive home. When the boys got back from the track, they ate them, but were still hungry afterwards and went in his wife’s car for burgers. They didn’t offer to take Harris with them but knew what he liked and brought him back what he wanted.

On Saturday night, Harris and his wife went to the movies while the boys did their own things with their own friends. After the movie, he called his daughter. They spoke for a few minutes, and he handed the phone to his wife, and they spoke as well. He listened to the conversation between them. They would never be friends, but they



were mother and daughter, and their conversation was several minutes longer than his and his daughter's had been.

On Sunday morning, he picked up coffee for the family. He left his wife's and Abrar's on the kitchen counter and gave Bashir's to him in his room. He loitered near the door while Bashir packed his duffle bag.

"Why don't you get a roommate?" Harris said.

"Mom talked to me about this already."

"And what do you think?"

"I'm working on it."

"Why don't you post an ad in the paper?"

"What?"

"Post an ad for a roommate."

"In the paper? People don't do that anymore."

"Online then. Anywhere."

"I will."

In the early afternoon, Harris dropped Abrar off at LAX, and in the evening, he drove Bashir to the Orange County airport. His wife stayed back to clean. As Harris pulled to the curb in front of the airline terminal, Bashir spread his palms out in front of his face. He closed his eyes and spoke to himself.

"*Du'a* for travel," Bashir said, when he was done and saw that Harris was looking at him. "I have a fear of flying. I would pray at the airport but it doesn't show well. People wonder."

"You were never afraid of flying before."

"I always was."

"Planes are safer than cars," Harris said, trying to assuage his son. But Harris himself felt nervous now. "Nothing will happen."

Harris helped Bashir get the luggage out of the trunk. Bashir entered the terminal and Harris got back into the car. When Harris arrived home, his wife already had cooked dinner. She was subdued. They ate, and then he and his wife did their own things around the house. She turned in early. He couldn't sleep. He went to bed late, watching movies on television until well after midnight.

The FBI agent called again in February, the start to the busy season at work.

"I'm back. When can you meet?"

"I'm not sure. This time of year is busy. Tax season."

"It won't take long."

"I'll check my schedule and call you back."

He did neither. Instead, that week at Friday prayer, he spoke to Imran.

"The FBI agent called again."

"It's been a while," Imran said. "He still wants to meet?"

"I haven't called him back though."



“Even if you don’t call, he’ll probably call you again.”

“Do you still want to come to the meeting with me if he calls me again?”

“I’ll go. Schedule it for a Thursday evening. Tanya works late on Thursdays. Any idea now what he wants?”

“None.”

Imran was right about the FBI agent calling again. Harris was with a client when he did. Harris did not pick up, letting the call go to voicemail. When he was done with work it was late, almost 10 p.m. He called the FBI agent the next day during a short lunch and left a voicemail.

He didn’t hear from the FBI agent for another month. At the end of March, after another back and forth, they finally spoke. Harris agreed to carve out time to meet at The Coffee Bean on Thursday evening.

That night, he told his wife about the FBI agent.

“You shouldn’t go,” she said. “Don’t meet with him.”

“Nothing will happen.”

“How do you know that? The FBI profiles. They try to make you into what you’re not.”

“I’m not going to do anything. I’m not going to become anything.”

“What do they want?”

“I don’t know. Maybe it’s just about work. A client.”

“Could it be about Calah?”

“Why?”

“She didn’t come home for Thanksgiving. What do we know about this guy she is dating?”

He knew nothing. “Do you think this is about Calah or maybe her boyfriend?”

Harris saw that his wife winced at the word “boyfriend.”

“I don’t know,” his wife said. “How could I?”

He’d never thought about his daughter. He called her on his drive into work the next day.

“Are you dating anyone?”

“Yes.”

“Mom and I both want you to be happy. We both want you to find someone.”

“Thanks, Dad.”

“Who is he?”

She was slow to respond to questions, but he didn’t relent, and with every response, he asked more questions and found out a little more.

When they hung up, he felt relieved. Her boyfriend wasn’t even Muslim. Before this thing with the FBI, he would’ve been disappointed, but now he was relieved. At least for a while. After a few minutes, the anxiety returned.



On Thursday evening, the FBI agent never showed. Harris and Imran waited a half-hour as people came and went and others came and stayed. He texted the FBI agent. The agent did not respond. They waited some more. Harris called the agent. The agent did not pick up. After more than an hour of waiting, they decided to leave.

They'd driven separately. They stood in the parking lot near Imran's car.

"Maybe he only wanted to see if you'd show," Imran said. "Maybe that's enough for him."

"So you think he actually came?"

"There's a good chance."

"If he calls again, I'll tell him I can't meet."

"That's reasonable."

They said goodbye and left.

When he pulled into his driveway, he sat in the car with the engine running. He was more anxious than before, more anxious than he'd been since the FBI first had contacted him several months ago. He waited for the anxiety to pass. It did not. At least if the FBI agent had shown up, he would've had an inkling as to what the agent had wanted. Now he was clueless.

He reversed out of the driveway and headed to the main street. After a few blocks, he called Bashir. Bashir picked up on the third ring.

"Dad?"

He took a deep breath. "Is everything OK, son?"

---

**HASSAN RIAZ** is a physician, financier, and writer. His fiction has appeared in *Slice Magazine*, *Paragraph Line*, and *Loud Zoo*, amongst a dozen others. He lives in Los Angeles. He can be reached via email at [hassanusc@gmail.com](mailto:hassanusc@gmail.com).

