



A previous case rears its ugly head when Dr. Jake Phillips and Agent Chad Allen receive a call. During the investigation they discover their lives are also in jeopardy. They are drawn back into the world of terrorism and murder. With the help of a hacker they uncover the unimaginable.

DIRECT LINES

by P. A. Stockton

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P.A. STOCKTON

A Jake Phillips, Chad Allen Novel

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First Edition

Brock sat at a corner table in the restaurant. It was a little neighborhood place. The walls were a pale green, six tables, and a counter for the register and pick-up orders. He could look through the cook window and see the back door. The place wasn't busy, but the aroma of fresh, warm tortillas and spices was making him hungry. He saw Cardenas walk through the door wearing jeans, gray shirt, and carrying a tan windbreaker. He waved to him.

"Mr. Brock," Cardenas said as they shook hands. "How can you sit here and not eat? It smells wonderful in here."

"Have you eaten here before?" Brock asked.

"I haven't been here in a long time. I chose it because no one would look for me here. Where is everyone?"

"Out near the parking lot. They wanted to be sure you weren't followed. They'll call when it's clear."

"I'm sure I wasn't followed, and I didn't drive my own car. I borrowed one from a friend in the used car business."

Brock's cell phone rang, and he glanced at the ID. They got up from the table, and Brock left a five dollar tip for the use of the table. As soon as they opened the restaurant door, Chad pulled up. The SUV was moving before the doors were closed. They left the area using the residential streets. When they were sure they didn't have a tail, Chad got on the highway to Edinburg. They stopped at the first gas station.

"This is the best place I could think of to show you the map," Chad said. "We wanted to do this away from town. It looks like this place is east of Rio Grande City. How well do you know that area?"

“Well enough to tell you that it’s a desolate place. There are a couple of ranches out there, three private airports, and a blimp station.”

“Would these guys be able to use those private airports?” Brock asked.

“No, they belong to the ranchers. They don’t let anyone use them. If the government needed to use them, I mean, if there are explosives out there, they would open them up for use.”

“Driver got us the GPS coordinates for the area that’s circled. It looks like we will probably have to go off road to stay out of sight,” Chad said. “I would suggest that if you have a weapon, be sure it’s on safety.”

They headed for Rio Grande City and Phillips gave out binoculars. “If we’re out there after dark, we only have one pair night vision. Our intention is only to get a look at this place, then maybe come back in the middle of the day. We want to see what buildings are out here and the layout. Since we know where these guys are most of the time, we can probably time our next visit for when they are elsewhere. By the time we get back to town, we should have the most recent satellite view available.”

“In the conversation we overheard, they are supposed to be making a trip out there, and may be there now. If we see another vehicle, try and look like a rancher,” Chad said, “whatever that looks like.”

Cardenas laughed, “Just set your jaw, look arrogant, but with a good ol’ boy attitude.” He looked at Brock, “Are you armed?”

“Yes, I am. Don’t worry, I won’t use it unless I absolutely have to.”

“What did you do with Sanchez and Bob?” Cardenas asked.

“We have them tucked away. We told them if they have to shoot anyone to just cover them up with a sheet until we get back,” Phillips said.

They drove down two lane roads with long straightaways followed by sharp turns. The surrounding land was dirt, brush, and small mesquite trees. There was not a building in sight. Sometimes a dirt road would intersect and lead to an oil pump operation or a water pump. Chad found a road with a cattle guard that would get them closer to the spot on the map. A mile from the main road the dirt road ended at a stock tank. He made a right turn and they went off-road.

“Shit,” Chad said as they drove out of a grove of tall mesquite trees. He threw the SUV in reverse. “We almost got too close.” He pulled into the trees again. “Okay boys, it’s time to get dirty.”

They climbed out of the SUV and made sure it was hidden from view. With the sun going down behind them they wouldn’t have to be worried about glare off the wind shield. They put their cell phones on vibrate, separated, and made their way closer to the house Chad had spotted. When they reached an optimal distance, Phillips and Chad would call the other phones. They would then converge and watch the house.

Brock had explained it as a field operation. “You don’t want to walk in clustered together. You’re a big black dot and easy to spot. If you separate, you’ll be harder to spot, if at all.”

They lay prone in the underbrush and under some small mesquite trees. Being so low they could see the distortion of the heat rising from the ground. The binoculars would cut some of the distortion, but not all of it. They could see the Spanish style ranch

house and a metal outbuilding off to the left. The metal had been painted a muted brown to avoid reflection and possibly detection. Their view of the house was at an angle, they could see part of the side and front. Brock, on the far left, had a better view of the front porch and out building. Chad, on the far right, had a clear view of the side and back.

“I’m catching the corner of something on the other side of the house,” Brock said.

“Let me move down further to your right and see if I can see it,” Phillips said. “If I get a clear view I’ll call you.” Phillips backed further into the trees behind them, then broke right, and ran close to the ground.

“I’ve got two people on the porch and...” Brock pause. “Look left. There are two vehicles coming toward the house.”

“Must be our friends coming in to check out their operation,” Chad said.

Cardenas moved closer to Brock. “Those aren’t people on the porch those are kids. It looks like two boys, early teens.”

Brock swung his binoculars back to the porch. “Yeah, kids. There’s another one coming out. I wonder how many are in there.”

Chad’s cell vibrated. “See anything?”

“We have a larger building on the other side of the house, but set further back. No windows, just the door,” Phillips said.

“I should have brought the camera. I’d like to see the front of it,” Chad said. “I’m calling Carl.”

“I have Driver’s little mini camera,” Phillips said. “Don’t know how good it is at this distance, but I’ll give it a try.”

“Stay where you are, Phillips. I want to see if these guys go into that building.”

“Roger that.”

They watched as the dust settled around the two cars in front of the house. Four men got out of the first car; two got out of the second. One of the men walked to the boys standing on the porch. The binoculars revealed it was Wafiq. He said something, and one boy went back inside. He came back out and was shortly followed by three more. All six boys walked off the porch and lined up, as if for inspection.

Wafiq spoke with each boy, sometimes patting them on the shoulder. He was joined by another man. “Colworth,” Brock said under his breath.

David Colworth stood six feet tall, pale blond hair, with a smooth angular face. He wore jeans and a white t-shirt, which showed off powerful biceps and a broad chest. His weight always varied, depending on the job. In Brock’s estimation, it looked like he was back up to his normal two hundred thirty-five pounds. Brock had seen him forty pounds lighter, but even at a low weight, Colworth was lethal.

Brock thought back to the time he had first met Colworth’s parents. His father was British and known for being a ruthless businessman, but in a social setting he was very likable. He also had no idea what his son did for a living. The mother, on the other hand, knew exactly what her son did and didn’t care. She held a deep hatred for the Russians. It was rumored that her son got his killing instincts from her. She went by the name Yoly, but no agency had been able to confirm her real name or birthplace.

Colworth walked down the line of boys. He took their hands, one boy at a time, looked at them, and made them hold their hands

flat out in front. He then looked in their eyes, holding their gaze waiting for them to blink.

“Shit!” Brock said. “He’s looking for a shooter.”

Cardenas looked at Brock, “Is that how it’s done?”

“In the field, when you need someone expendable. Yes.”

Colworth took one boy away from the rest and handed him a gun. Said something to him and the boy started walking around with the gun held out in front, as if looking for a target. The boy turned in Chad’s direction and continued to walk straight ahead. The whole time he walked Colworth was talking to him. The boy stopped, lowered the gun, and resumed walking. After a few paces he quickly raised the gun again. Colworth laughed as he walked over to the boy and patted him on the back.

Chad dialed his cell, “Phillips, get a picture of that kid.”

“I got three,” Phillips replied. “Those kids are thin, but not starving. Their clothes are almost new. Whoever they are, they’re being taken care of, but looks like they could use a good shower.”

“I’m going to ease back to my car and get my camera, it’s got a longer lens,” Chad said. “Better late than never, as they say.”

Chad was back in record time and moved up to Brock’s left. He started taking photos of every person, building, and car. He then moved down to Phillips and repeated the procedure. “It’s not that I don’t trust your ability. I’m just not sure about that little camera’s ability.”

They watched as four of the men and two of the boys went into the larger building. The two men from the second car went into the house. Fifteen minutes later the men and boys came out of the building and went into the house.

“Now’s our time to get out of here,” Chad said. “I don’t know how long they’ll be inside, but I want to be ahead of them.”

Chad pulled onto the main road before Cardenas spoke, “That was a strange way to pick a shooter.”

“Not really,” Brock said. “It happens a lot with terrorist organizations. They find themselves in a position where they need someone to make a hit, but they don’t want to use one of their good fighters. They go through that process to find steady hands and no fear in the eyes. That kid should have been afraid, but he didn’t blink.”

“But why hand him a loaded gun? He could have turned it on them.” Cardenas said.

“It wasn’t loaded. He wanted the kid to think it was loaded. People react differently when they think a gun is unloaded. If he hands the kid what he thinks is a loaded gun and the kid is comfortable with it, and he’s passed the hand test they have their new shooter. Their next sacrificial lamb.”

They drove back to the restaurant and dropped Cardenas at his car. “Thanks for the nature outing. I appreciate the information.”

“Don’t go back out there with any of your SWAT Team. Let us handle this. You’ll be with us when we move, but these guys will eat your guys for lunch.”

“There wasn’t anyone else out there except those kids, and I think we could handle them,” Cardenas smiled.

“If you think those kids are out there alone, you better rethink that. They have minders, and they’re armed. They’re inside unless the kids are outside,” Brock said. “Whatever is going on out there, it’s going on inside those outbuildings. Those kids are the laborers.”

“Hey, Cardenas,” Phillips said from across the car. “Why are those kids so dirty? Don’t they have water out there?”

“They have water, but probably not enough for showers every day. That rancho looks like it may have fallen on hard times. It could be from lack of well water.”

“Something else,” Phillips said. “I think you should find a way to get Padilla’s family out of town for a while, to be on the safe side.”

“What do you think they are going to do with a second shooter,” Cardenas asked.

Brock frowned, “They either found out about Padilla and the other guy or it’s for you.”

Cardenas put his car in gear, “That’s what I thought.”



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