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The Murders Before the Marathon

Waltham, September 11, 2011: Three men, throats slit, cash and drugs left on the bodies. Two years later, two dead suspects: Tamerlan Tsarnaev, and a friend who the FBI says was about to confess. One haunting question: Could solving this case have prevented the Boston Marathon bombings?

By Susan Zalkind | Boston Magazine | March 2014

A collaboration with This American Life, airing Fri., March 7



It's nearly midnight in a nondescript condo complex a few blocks from Universal Studios in Orlando, and Tatiana Gruzdeva has been crying all day. Though neither of us knows it yet, as she sits on the corner of her bed and sobs in tiny convulsions, the fact that she's talking to me will lead to her being arrested by federal agents, placed in solitary confinement, and deported back to Russia.

Next to us on the bed are nine teddy bears. Eight of them came with her from Tiraspol, Moldova. The ninth was a gift from her boyfriend, Ibragim Todashev. Today would have been Ibragim's 28th birthday, but he is not here to see it, because in the early hours of May 22, 2013, a Boston FBI agent shot and killed him in this very apartment, under circumstances so strange that a Florida state prosecutor has opened an independent investigation. According to the FBI, just before Ibragim was shot—seven times, in two bursts, including once in the top of the head—he was about to write a confession implicating himself and alleged Boston Marathon bomber Tamerlan Tsarnaev in a brutal triple homicide that took place in Waltham, Massachusetts, in September 2011.

I'm sitting awkwardly at one end of the twin bed. She's crying quietly, cross-legged at the other end, wearing shorts and a white shirt with sequins. Most of her outfits have sequins or rhinestones. She's 19. I'm 26. We both have long blond hair. We've both been close to men who were in trouble with the law, and lost them violently. We've been talking for about an hour, mostly about men, and parties, and moving forward after a tragedy. Ibragim was a good man, she says. He could never have committed a murder.

"I'm here alone," she cries. "I hope it never can be worse than this."

I try to comfort her, but it's complicated. We both want to know why Ibragim Todashev was killed. She wants to clear his name. For me, and for the families of the Waltham murder victims, Ibragim's shooting may have snuffed out the last chance at finding out what really happened that night. In the back of my mind is this question: Did her dead boyfriend kill my friend Erik?

September 11, 2011 was a Sunday, and at twilight Erik Weissman was looking for somewhere to spend the night. That afternoon he'd visited his younger sister Aria at a diner down the street from their parents' home, but he didn't have a place of his own—he'd been couch-surfing since the cops busted him on drug charges back in January. He kept his belongings at his friend Brendan Mess's apartment on a dead-end street in Waltham, and that's where he usually stayed. Erik and Brendan were established pot dealers who occasionally worked together and shared an interest in sports, personal fitness, and designer weed. But Erik had cleared out of the apartment while Brendan was going through a dramatic breakup with his live-in girlfriend, Hiba Eltilib. He had recently been staying with a friend in Newton. "That chick is crazy," Erik had repeatedly told the friend.

That night his friend in Newton was busy, so around 7:30 p.m. Erik drove his Mercedes SUV back to Brendan's place in Waltham. It was a warm night, cloudless. Brendan and Hiba had finally broken up, and Hiba had split for Florida, so the coast was clear. Brendan had invited another friend, Rafi Teken, to come over, too. Like Erik, Rafi had been avoiding Brendan's place while Hiba was there. Rafi and Hiba were known to get into arguments of their own.

At 7:30, Erik sent a text to his friend in Newton. Shortly thereafter, all three men stopped answering their phones.

The bodies were found the next day. Erik was 31. Brendan was 25. Rafi was 37.

It was Hiba who found them, of all people. On September 12, she returned unexpectedly from Florida—most of Brendan's friends were under the impression that she wasn't coming back—and after she couldn't reach Brendan on her cell phone, she showed up at the apartment and asked the landlord to open the door. The bodies were inside. One news report says that Hiba left the house and screamed, "They're all dead!" Another says she went outside, crying, with blood on her feet, and calmly asked for a cigarette.

Their throats had been slashed with such force that their heads were nearly decapitated. A veteran Waltham investigator called it "the worst bloodbath I have ever seen," and compared the victims' wounds to "an Al-Qaeda training video." About a pound and a half of high-grade marijuana covered two of the corpses. Rafi Teken's face was left untouched. Erik Weissman had a bloody lip. But Brendan Mess, an experienced mixed martial artist who trained in jujitsu, had real fighting wounds. His arms were covered in scratch marks. He had puncture marks on his temple and the top of his head, another mark by his ear, and he was bruised around the lips. It didn't scan like a robbery: There were eight and a half pounds of pot left in bags and glass jars, and \$5,000 dollars left on the bodies—enough for a cheap funeral, for one of them.

Hours later, Middlesex County District Attorney Gerry Leone stood amid a scrum of reporters on the dead-end street outside Brendan's home at 12 Harding Avenue. State police had found a "very graphic crime scene" in the second-floor apartment, he said. "It does not appear to be a random act." He told reporters that there was no evidence of a break-in—that it was likely the assailants and dead men knew one another. Assailants, plural? a reporter asked. Leone replied that there were "at least two people who are not in the apartment now, who were there earlier."

“This is a fluid, ongoing investigation,” he said. “We will have information as we develop the facts.”

But they didn’t.



FROM TOP LEFT, PICTURES RELEASED BY IBRAGIM TODASHEV'S FATHER SHOW HIS WOUNDS—BULLET HOLES IN HIS TORSO AND THE TOP OF HIS HEAD—AS WELL AS THE BLOODY SCENE AT HIS ORLANDO APARTMENT.

From the beginning, investigators failed to follow up on seemingly obvious leads. They didn't visit the gym where Brendan trained, and Tamerlan Tsarnaev, one of Brendan's best friends, was never questioned—even though several of Brendan's friends say they gave his name to the police. Ten days after the murders, a state police detective essentially told one victim's mother that investigators were waiting for the case to solve itself.

It would take 18 months and two homemade bombs before FBI investigators exhumed the case—and once they did, they were able to move with uncanny speed. It took them mere hours to link Tamerlan to the Waltham triple homicide. The day after Tamerlan was killed in a shootout with Watertown police, plainclothes FBI agents detained his friend, Ibragim Todashev, at gunpoint. Although the FBI seems to have initially been looking for evidence of a wider terrorist cell in connection with the marathon bombings, within weeks its agents were questioning Ibragim about the Waltham murders. According to the FBI, agents were able to bring Ibragim to the brink of a written confession by pressuring him with circumstantial evidence.

If you believe the FBI's account, then you must also believe this: If Waltham police had figured out who hacked three men to death on September 11, 2011, there's a good chance we would not be talking about the Boston Marathon bombings. Tamerlan Tsarnaev and Ibragim Todashev might be alive and in jail. Dzhokhar Tsarnaev might be just another mop-headed, no-name stoner at UMass Dartmouth. There would be no One Fund. Krystle Campbell, Lu Lingzi, and Martin Richard would still be alive. Sean Collier would have graduated from the MIT police department to the Somerville Police Department by now. And for the friends and family of the three men who died in Waltham, perhaps their grief would not still be paired with such haunting questions.

I met Erik Weissman in the summer of 2006, after my freshman year of college. I was 19. He was 26. He'd come to sell us some high-end weed. I was with my friends from high school in a Newton attic, and it felt less like a drug deal than a Tupperware party. Erik had spotless sneakers, wire-rimmed nerd glasses, and a contagious smile. He produced a series of glass jars from a black duffel bag, each filled with a different strain of headies: Blue Dream, Grand Daddy, Alaskan Thunder Fuck. My friends were easily impressed; I teased him for talking game. My father, Norman Zalkind, is a criminal defense lawyer, and I grew up discussing his cases and clients at the kitchen table.

A few days later, Erik picked me up and we drove around in his blue Audi, taking turns playing Lil Wayne and Buju Banton on our iPods and smoking Erik's Sour Diesel. We did that a few times that summer: driving aimlessly, talking, smoking. He was one of the few friends who encouraged my cheesy freshman-year poetry. He thought of himself as an entrepreneur and a connoisseur of pot; he would fly to Amsterdam regularly to buy seeds of a particular variety that interested him. He talked about selling pot as if it were a community service, and told me repeatedly that he didn't operate in violent circles. I told him about my father and his clients. I told him his line of work always ends badly. He laughed.

Over time I stopped smoking pot, and we grew apart. The last I heard from him was sometime in January or February of 2011. He wanted my father's number. He'd been busted when his landlord went into his apartment, saw his stash, and called the cops. Boston police had seized more than \$20,000 in cash and tens of thousands of dollars' worth of marijuana from his Roslindale home. He had always told me that he sold only pot, but in the raid police also seized cocaine, Vicodin, and OxyContin.

I gave him the number for my dad's law firm. He sounded scared.

Soon after my dad took me out for oysters to thank me for the referral. He told me there was a problem with Erik's warrant, and he didn't think the case would go to trial.

I never spoke to Erik again.

There was a lot about him I learned only after his death. The drugs and money he lost when he was arrested left him \$50,000 in debt to his Sour Diesel connection in California, his friends told me. He'd invested in a California bong company called Hitman Glass, but his money woes kept him from moving out West. In the months before they died, Erik and Brendan were working together to expand their pot business, trying to buy in larger quantities and purchasing equipment to grow marijuana on their own, according to another dealer who sometimes worked with them.

Waltham is often described as a small, quiet, suburban town, but in 2011 it was teeming with much bigger drug operations. A few months before the murders, federal investigators indicted a steroid-popping Syrian national named Safwan Madarati, the Waltham-based head of a violent international drug ring. Madarati, the indictment revealed, hired thugs to assault and intimidate his enemies, and maintained "personal connections with members of the Watertown police department." A former Watertown officer was among those charged in the case. In an unrelated case only a few months later, police arrested a former Watertown council member after they found \$2 million worth of hydroponic pot in his Waltham warehouse. They were all convicted.

Police quickly seized on Erik and Brendan's pot dealing, and theorized that the murders must have been connected to a drug dispute or robbery. "Whose toes were they stepping on in Waltham?" one friend remembers being asked. Investigators grilled the victims' friends about Erik and Brendan's drug sources, and asked with whom they had financial disputes. "They were telling us that it could've been a drug deal that had gone wrong," recalled Bellie Hacker, Erik's mother. "But then it didn't make sense because there was money left behind, and the marijuana."

For Bellie, the aftermath of the murder was excruciating. In addition to the cops' theory about a drug deal gone wrong, there were other dark rumors circulating, some of them concerning Brendan's ex-girlfriend, Hiba. "One of the theories was that Hiba hired someone to kill Brendan and just Erik and Rafi were there and they got killed, too," Bellie said. According to news reports, police questioned Hiba on several occasions. Before dropping out of sight, she gave anonymous interviews to the *New York Times* and the *Boston Globe* disavowing any involvement in the crime. Bellie didn't know what to believe. "Nothing really made sense," she said.

It didn't help that police seemed to save their toughest questions for the victims' families and friends. A few days after the murders, Erik's sister, Aria, learned that her brother had kept a storage unit, and called the company to ask if she could get access to Erik's belongings. They didn't call back, and instead she got a hostile phone call from a detective, State Trooper Erik Gagnon, assigned to the Middlesex County DA's office. What did she think she was going to find in that box? Gagnon asked. Drugs? Money? She remembers that Gagnon called her "deceitful" and threatened to prosecute her for interfering with the investigation. "How many murders have you solved?" he barked. (When I asked Gagnon about the conversation, he wouldn't comment on it directly, but said, "If someone said I was being accusatory, maybe ask *them* why.")

Friends of Erik's who spoke to the police after his murder had similar experiences. One friend, who did not have a police record, told me he was questioned by detectives just hours after carrying Erik's casket at his funeral. "They were treating us less like friends and more like drug dealers," he said.

Then there were leads that the detectives seemed to ignore. They never visited the Wai Kru gym in Allston, where Brendan practiced mixed martial arts several times a week, according to gym owner John Allan. They never spoke to his training partner and best friend, Golden Gloves champion Tamerlan Tsarnaev, even though several friends gave the police his name in a list of Brendan's closest contacts. Meanwhile, detectives called Aria into the police station and accused her of knowing who killed her brother. She broke down in tears as her mother defended her.

Ten days after the bodies were found, detectives told Bellie that they were not actively pursuing leads in her son's murder. Instead, she remembers state police detectives explaining, they were waiting for a suspect to shake loose. "They were basically waiting for someone to come forward and say who did it," Bellie recalled. "They said, 'Someday down the line, someone is going to need a plea bargain.'"

It was September 22, 2011. The case would go cold for 582 days.

There was a time, just after the bombs went off on Boylston Street, when it looked like the families might finally get some answers about who killed Rafi, Brendan, and Erik. On April 19, media outlets made the connection between Tamerlan and Brendan. Friends recalled that Tamerlan had acted differently after Brendan's death, and hadn't attended his memorial service. John Allan, the owner of Wai Kru gym, recalled approaching Tamerlan to offer his condolences, only to have Tamerlan laugh him off.

Bellie was hopeful that the renewed attention would stir something up. "It got international news, everyone found out about it, the whole world knew about it, and someone will get the fire under their tush, and we'll start really getting some answers," she remembers thinking.

A few days after the Watertown manhunt, Aria says, she spoke to Gagnon for the first time since 2011. He asked for her brother's cell-phone number and the name of the gym Brendan Mess went to. The Middlesex County DA's office had Boston cops send over the files from Erik Weissman's previous arrests. For the first time, Brendan Mess's younger brother Dylan and his friends were questioned about Tamerlan Tsarnaev. The FBI agents wanted to know if either Brendan or Tamerlan was involved in organized crime. If Tamerlan had guns. Who else he sparred with. If Tamerlan prayed, if he preached. The agents asked if the auto shops where Tamerlan and his father sometimes worked were part of an organized-crime ring.

A few weeks later, in mid-May, FBI agents called on Dylan again. He and a friend met them at Dwelltime, a café near Inman Square. The agents, who were in plainclothes, took them into the back of a van and showed them a series of photo lineups. Dylan and his friend looked at each other, and told the agents that the man in the last photo looked vaguely familiar.

The man in the photo, they would later learn, was Ibragim Todashev.

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No one who knew Ibragim Todashev seemed to have a complete picture of who he was. Even his own father, with whom he spoke regularly, did not know he had a wife in America, let alone a girlfriend. Ibragim was a womanizer. He was kind to children. He had a sweet tooth, and a temper. He was a trained MMA fighter who liked to hang out with a close-knit group of Chechnyan friends; he didn't socialize outside of that circle. He was an erratic driver—he'd been in several car accidents. He and his friends liked to drive luxury cars, but they'd buy old, broken-down ones and fix them up. He liked to listen to a Russian singer called Mr. Credo, who sings in a fake North Caucasus accent about buying drugs from the Taliban.

Ibragim was the eldest of 12 children—his father, Abdulkaki Todashev, had two wives. The family was on the move constantly in the chaos of war-torn Chechnya. After the wars, Ibragim attended college in Russia for three years before leaving in 2008. He arrived in Boston with a student visa (though he would never attend school here), and shortly thereafter received asylum.

Ibragim was welcomed into Boston's insular Chechnyan community. Tamerlan was one of his first friends. They worked out together, and went clubbing. But it seems he never socialized with Tamerlan's many American friends. He most likely knew Tamerlan's friend Brendan, though, because the three of them once lived within a few blocks of one another around Inman Square, and they all trained at the Wai Kru gym.

According to owner John Allan, Tamerlan introduced Ibragim to the gym shortly after Ibragim first arrived in Boston in 2008. Allan remembers them praying together before training. "[Ibragim's] English was horrific, and it was really hard to communicate with him," Allan recalled. "In the beginning I assumed the fights and problems were related to language. But later I learned he was just very hotheaded." For some reason, Allan said, the word "motherfucker" would incite in Ibragim an inconsolable rage. "He would lose it. He would just lose it. He would be ready to fight 17 people and not care if he would win or lose. Sometimes it wouldn't even be directed to him."

In 2010 Ibragim was working for a medical-transport company when he got into a verbal argument with another driver in traffic on Tremont Street. By the time police arrived, he was out of the car, being held back by several bystanders as he screamed, "You say something about my mother! I will kill you!"

Ibragim met his wife, Reni Manukyan, when she came to visit his roommate in May 2010. He was 24; she was 20. They exchanged phone numbers, and when she went home to suburban Atlanta, they began a courtship via text message. The relationship moved fast. By July, Reni, an Armenian Christian, had converted to Islam and married Ibragim; a few months later Ibragim moved in with her in Georgia. But he had trouble finding work, and came back to Boston in the summer of 2011 to work at another medical-transport company. Reni came to visit that July to watch him fight a match (he lost). She remembered that his friend Tamerlan called frequently during that visit. Reni told reporters that Ibragim left Boston in August; she told me she had a bank statement that proves he was in Atlanta the day after the murders, but she said her lawyers advised her not to show it to me.

By early 2012, Ibragim had moved to Orlando alone. A year later, when the bombs went off in Boston, he was living with a girlfriend in a condo complex located between Universal Studios and a swamp. A month later, the FBI shot him dead.

Anonymous FBI sources gave numerous accounts of Ibragim's death to the press, managing to be both vague and contradictory. The agency claimed that, just before being shot, Ibragim had been sitting at a table, about to write a statement that would implicate both himself and Tamerlan in the Waltham murders. In some reports, he lunged at an FBI agent with a knife, while others said he used a pole or a broomstick. It was an agonizing development: The FBI claimed he had been killed at precisely the moment he was about to give the answers so many of us had been waiting for.

Whatever occurred in Ibragim's apartment the night he was shot dead, his death put the FBI on the defensive. The agency quashed the coroner's report, leading media outlets and the American Civil Liberties Union to call for an independent investigation. On its editorial page, the *Globe* declared that "the agency's credibility is on the line" due to its lack of accountability in Ibragim's death. Ibragim's father accused the agency of "premeditated murder" and released photos of his son's bullet-ridden corpse, showing that he'd been shot in the top of the head—even though the FBI contended that one of its agents had fired in self-defense. Instead of providing answers, the FBI's investigation of Ibragim had turned into a sudden dead end.

Bellie was infuriated. "Oh, I was so angry," she said. "That was just horrible, because here we had an opportunity, they were starting to make connections and tie people and find out more information... and the man that could've given us answers is no longer available to us."

She added, "Where is there for us to go?"

But there was at least one person who might know more about Ibragim. At the time of his death, he had been living with a woman named Tatiana Gruzdeva. I found her on Facebook: a slight 19-year-old with bleached blond hair and huge green eyes. She posted a lot of selfies. I sent her a friend request. On the night of September 18, she accepted it.

We corresponded for a few minutes, and then she sent me her number. When I dialed, she picked up right away. Her voice sounded small, but she talked rapid-fire, her Russian accent thick but understandable. I told her I was a reporter, and that I wanted to hear her story.

Two days later, I flew to Orlando to meet her.

By the front door of 6022 Peregrine Avenue, a wire statue of a cow held a pink sign with the word “Welcome.” The apartment was all one room, with a lofted bed surrounded by a waist-high wall. Tatiana invited me in, and I looked around, taking in the sliver of a linoleum kitchen, distinguished from the carpeted living room by a small island. Tatiana slept in an upstairs loft, in a bed covered in stuffed animals, watched over by a poster of Muhammad Ali. The back wall was all windows, looking out on a black pond a few yards off, where a bale of turtles broke the surface to take in the evening air. Tatiana pointed out the place in the living room where the carpet had been cut out, because it had been stained with Ibragim’s blood.

She had met Ibragim through a mutual friend, Khusen Taramov. Then she moved in. “First it was just friends,” she said, “and after, we starting having relationship and we were sleeping together like boyfriend and girlfriend.” She cooked him meals. Together they adopted a cat, Masia. “It was like a small family, me and him and the cat, he was like a little baby for us.”

Tatiana knew that Ibragim had been married to Reni. She believed they were divorced.

After the Boston bombings, Tatiana recalled, Ibragim seemed upset. “He didn’t tell me it was his friend, he just was so sad. I said, ‘What happen with you?’ He said, ‘Nothing.’ Long time he don’t want to tell me. And after, he tell me, ‘My friend is dead.’”

The day after Tamerlan was identified as a marathon bombing suspect, Tatiana was washing the dishes when Ibragim stepped outside. Then she heard shouts outside the house: *Get down! Get down!* She saw Ibragim on the ground, surrounded by six or seven men. She didn’t know who they were, because they weren’t wearing uniforms. She says they told her they were FBI agents.

They handcuffed Ibragim and made him sit in the middle of the room, and began questioning him about the Boston bombings, asking him what he knew and where he was on the day of the attack. Tatiana spoke up: “He was with me, he was in the house, we didn’t do anything wrong,” she told the agents.

“They just kept asking again and again, the same questions,” she said. They asked if he knew Tamerlan Tsarnaev. He replied that the two of them had been friends. Tatiana said this was the first time she had heard the name.

Eventually the FBI left with Ibragim, confiscating his phones and computers. About six hours later, Tatiana said, Ibragim came home, reassuring her that everything was okay. The next day, she said, agents returned their electronics.

As best as I can tell, the FBI arrived on Ibragim’s doorstep looking for a terrorist. The marathon bombings had been the largest act of terrorism on American soil since 9/11, and if there were any chance that the Tsarnaevs had ties to a terrorist organization, federal agents had to find it. Wrapping up a drug murder was not their top priority.

For the next month, Ibragim and Tatiana were under intense surveillance. Agents intercepted Ibragim’s wife, Reni, in an airport and questioned her for five hours; she was later interviewed several more times. They even tracked down his old Boston roommate.

Meanwhile, Tatiana said, agents contacted the couple regularly on the phone, visited their home, and on several occasions called them into the local field office for more questioning. They asked Ibragim about a call from Tamerlan a month before the bombings, just after Ibragim had undergone knee surgery. “He asked how he feels after surgery and Ibragim tells him, ‘I’m better, what about you? How is your family?’ So they would talk just a little bit and that’s it,”

Tatiana said. At some point, Ibragim deleted the call from his phone's memory. "FBI asked him, 'Why did you delete this phone call?'" Tatiana said. "And he said, 'I was scared.'"

When Ibragim and Tatiana left the house, he would point out cars to her. "When we go to the workplace or we go hang out with him, he show me in the street, 'Look, look, they're following us,'" Tatiana recalled.

On May 4, according to an arrest report, Ibragim got into a fistfight over a parking space, beating a man unconscious. He fled the scene in his white Mercedes, pursued by Orange County Sheriff's deputies. When they caught him, Officer Anthony Riccaboni got out of the car and drew his gun. Ibragim put his hands up, and Riccaboni got a good look at him.

"I could see the features of the suspect's ears. I immediately recognized the marks on his ears as a cage fighter/jujitsu fighter," Riccaboni later wrote in his report. "I told this suspect if he tried to fight with us I would shoot him."

He made the suspect lie on the ground, but when he got up, he told Riccaboni something unexpected.

"Once on his feet, the suspect commented that the vehicles behind us are FBI agents that have been following him," Riccaboni wrote. "I noticed 3 (three) vehicles with dark tint. These vehicles began to leave the area. I noticed one vehicle was driven by a male, had a computer stand and appeared to be talking on a radio."

If Ibragim was right, FBI agents had just watched him beat a man bloody without intervening.

Then they turned the pressure up higher.

About two and a half weeks after Ibragim was first interrogated, the FBI called him back to their office yet again. While he was being interviewed, Tatiana said, two agents took her into an office, where they questioned her for three hours. At first they continued to ask her about the Boston bombings. The agents wanted to know if Ibragim was planning another attack.

"They asked me, 'Can you tell us when he will do something?'" Tatiana recalled. "I said, 'No! I can't!' Because he wasn't doing anything, and I didn't know anything."

Then they brought up a new topic: a triple murder.

"They said, 'We think he did something else, before.' They said he killed three people in Boston 2011 with a knife. I said, 'It's not true! I can't believe it.' You know, I was living with him seven months, and we have a cat."

Throughout the course of my reporting, Tatiana is the only one of Ibragim's associates who recalled being questioned about the Waltham murders before Ibragim's death.

When agents didn't get the answers they wanted, Tatiana said, they told her they would call immigration officials to detain her. Her visa had expired weeks before. "I said, 'Come on guys, you cannot do this! Because all this two and a half weeks, you know my visa was expired and you didn't do anything. And [now] because you need me and I say I don't want to help you, you just call to immigration?' And they said, 'Yeah, that's right.' And they called immigration and immigration came and they took me and they put me in the jail."

For a week, she said, she was kept in an immigration detention facility. She was allowed to talk to Ibragim every day on the phone. She said he told her that when he had come to find her in the lobby the day she was detained, FBI agents mocked him, saying, "Where's your girlfriend?"

He told her he was so angry, he felt like hitting them for lying to him and stealing her away.

Later that week, the facility had a visiting day, she said. Ibragim came to see her.

“He kissed me, he hugged me like never, it was so sweet, like always. And he tell me, ‘I will marry you when you get out of here, or in the jail, whatever. If we can marry in the jail, we will marry in the jail.’”

On May 21, the last night of his life, Ibragim was hanging out with friends when the FBI called him again. It was an agent Ibragim’s friends were by now familiar with, but knew only by his first name: Chris. The agent told Ibragim that men from Boston were here to ask him a few questions. Ibragim got nervous. He was afraid of a setup, he told his friend Khusen Taramov.

“And I said, ‘All right, if you don’t want to do it, don’t do it. But if you don’t do it, they’re not gonna leave you alone. They’re gonna get more suspicious.’ And so he decided to go, and he wanted me to go with him,” Khusen told reporters later. Despite his temper and proclivity toward violence, Ibragim had stayed relatively calm under weeks of questioning and scrutiny. But now, heading to meet the “men from Boston,” his demeanor changed. Ibragim gave Khusen his family’s phone number back in Chechnya, and told him about the \$4,000 he had in his apartment, inside his jacket pocket. In case he got locked up, Khusen thought. Then Ibragim said something strange: “Worst-case scenario,” he told Khusen cryptically, “forgive me.”

When Khusen and Ibragim got to the apartment, Chris was with three other officers—an FBI agent from Boston, and two Massachusetts state troopers. Orlando police were on the scene as well.

The officers took Ibragim into the apartment and Chris said he needed to interview Khusen outside.

It was 7:30 p.m. At the same time, at two different locations in Georgia, agents were interviewing Reni yet again, and questioning Reni’s mother, Elena Teyer, for the first time.

Agent Chris asked Khusen a few questions, “Like what do you think about bombings, or do you know these guys, blah blah blah, or what is my views on certain stuff. You know what I mean, lotta stuff, different questions,” Khusen said. Chris didn’t mention a triple murder.

Khusen waited outside the house for four hours. Then at 11:30 p.m., he was told to leave, and that the agents would drop off Ibragim back at the plaza where the friends often hung out.

What happened next inside the condo is known only to the officers who were there.

Pictures later released by Ibragim’s family, of his inert body, show that he was shot four times in the chest, twice in the arm, and once in the top of the head.

Neighbors remember hearing shots a little after midnight. One of them looked out the window to see the parking lot filled with police cruisers. Then he heard an ambulance coming.

At Glades County Detention Center, in Moore Haven, corrections officers were suddenly hustling Tatiana from an immigration jail to a cell in solitary confinement.

She didn’t know why they had moved her. When she asked, they said, “We’ll tell you tomorrow in the morning.”

The next morning immigration officers came to her cell. They told her Ibragim was dead.

“They said, ‘He’s gone.’

“I said, ‘Come on, what do you mean? That’s not true.’

“They said, ‘He died yesterday.’

“I said, ‘No! I just talked with him.’

“They said, ‘We have a paper, and it says that he’s dead, and you can make a phone call.’”

She called Khusen. He told her it was true: Ibragim was dead. “And I’m screaming. I have panic attack. I realize, I realize, he is really dead. And it’s true, you know, it’s true. And I will not see him anymore. It’s not like a movie, it’s not like we broke up or something, I will not see him anymore, for all my life. And everything is flush in my heart, my heart was broken, because me and Ibragim, we had a plan, we had a plan to be together, we had a plan to have a family.... And now he’s not here and we’re not going to be together anymore.”

She told me she was given a sedative, and was kept in solitary confinement for four more days before being returned to an immigration jail. Her detainment stretched for months longer. Finally, on August 9, she was released. Ibragim’s friend Ashurmamad Miraliev came to pick her up, along with Ibragim’s father, who had flown to Florida from Chechnya.

They drove her back to the apartment she had shared with Ibragim, where he had been killed. “They said, ‘Don’t worry, the house is clean, and we cleaned everything.’”

But the cat, Masia, was gone. With Ibragim dead, and Tatiana in jail, there was no one to feed it, and it had run away into the swamp.

When FBI agents came to tell Reni Manukyan that her husband was dead, they claimed they had hard evidence of his guilt in the Waltham murders. “We have DNA that proves he was involved in that triple murder,” she remembered them saying. “The only thing I was telling them is, ‘This is not true, this cannot be true.’”

With the exception of Ibragim’s alleged confession, no agency has ever offered an official explanation of how it connected either him or Tamerlan to the Waltham murders. Reni’s account is the only one that even suggests the FBI has physical evidence linking her husband to the crime. Last July, the *New York Times* quoted an anonymous official suggesting that DNA evidence may have linked Tamerlan to the crime scene. But as for Ibragim, the official said, they made their case based merely on “a lot of circumstantial pieces.”

If, in fact, the FBI had only circumstantial evidence against Ibragim at the time they shot him, it might explain what happened next. Investigators who had previously asked Ibragim’s friends only about the bombings suddenly returned to ask them about the murders. Even though their suspects were both dead, the case remained open. After Ibragim’s death, the FBI continued its take-no-prisoners approach: Several of Ibragim’s friends found themselves detained, interrogated, and ultimately deported.

The first to go was Tatiana. On October 1, after I’d published an account of my interview with her, she called me collect from Glades County Detention Center. She’d been arrested by Immigration and Customs Enforcement officers and placed back in solitary confinement—and, she says, immigration agents told her repeatedly that she was about to be deported for talking to *Boston* magazine. By October 11, she was on a plane back to Russia. An official from ICE confirmed that Tatiana had been in the country legally on what’s called a “deferred action” extension of her expired visa. The official could not tell me why she had been deported.

Others felt the scrutiny of the FBI as well. Several of Ibragim’s Orlando friends worked in a pizza shop; the owner told me that after the FBI came to question him, he fired them. Reni’s mother, Elena—a noncommissioned officer with the U.S. Army—says she was told that she would be flagged as a security risk, preventing a promotion. Khusen left the United States in mid-June, to attend Ibragim’s funeral in Chechnya, but when he attempted to return to the U.S. in December, according to several sources, he was blocked from boarding a plane, despite having a green card.

In one case, I was able to catch a glimpse of how the agency was maneuvering behind the scenes—and how, after Ibragim’s death, its focus seemed to shift from looking for a terror cell to investigating the Waltham murders. When it came to Ibragim’s friend Ashurmamad Miraliev, the agency worked clandestinely with local, state, and federal agencies to manufacture a charge against him, interrogate him without a lawyer present, and ultimately get him

out of the country.

After Ibragim's death, Ashurmamad had come to live with Tatiana, supporting them both with pizza-delivery work. On September 18, while Ashurmamad was driving Tatiana to an appointment with her immigration officer, he was pulled over on an expired driver's license. But this was no ordinary traffic stop. Between five and seven unmarked law-enforcement vehicles were present; Ashurmamad says FBI agents and local police took him out of his car and escorted him to the Orlando police headquarters. Tatiana never saw him again.

Contacted later, Orlando Police Sergeant Jim Young looked up the arrest record and said it looked like a routine traffic stop—with no mention of FBI involvement. But Ashurmamad says he was questioned by the FBI for hours—he's not sure exactly how long—and was denied requests to speak to his attorney. (The FBI has declined to comment on this case, but a Tampa Field Bureau public-affairs official told me it is their policy to question individuals "with their consent, or in the presence of their attorney.")

Agents had previously interviewed Ashurmamad and two of his roommates two days before Ibragim died. They questioned him about his own religious beliefs, the Boston Marathon bombings, and about Ibragim. Now, four months later, the interrogation was different. This time, agents were mostly interested in Ibragim and his involvement in the triple murder in Waltham. They wanted to know if there was someone else who might have been involved in the killings, and who else might have information.

But after hours of questioning, when Ashurmamad asked to leave, the agents told him he was going to jail—on a state charge they claimed to have nothing to do with. That turned out to be an outstanding warrant for a witness-tampering charge. It was the first Ashurmamad had heard of it—but the next thing he knew, he was behind bars.

The trumped-up charge stemmed from an incident the previous summer, when his friend Ibragim had gotten into a fight at a hookah bar with a manager named Youness Dammou. The next day, Youness walked into the pizza shop next door, where Ashurmamad worked. A screaming match ensued; Ashurmamad was angry that Youness had called police after the fight. At the time, police weren't able to identify Ibragim as the assailant, and Youness never mentioned his confrontation with Ashurmamad, so the case was closed. Then almost a year later, on May 17—five days before Ibragim was shot—the case was suddenly reopened. I wanted to know why.

I found Youness working in an Orlando strip mall. He told me it hadn't been his idea to reopen the case. Instead, he had been approached by an FBI agent in May, who took him to meet with an Osceola County Sheriff's Department detective in an unmarked cruiser in a Burger King parking lot. The agent sat in the front seat, Youness sat in the passenger seat, and the detective sat in the back. They showed him a picture of Ibragim. They told him about another fight Ibragim had been in recently—the incident in which agents apparently watched him beat up a man over a parking space without intervening. When he heard about the other assault, Youness was eager to press charges.

The law-enforcement officers did not mention that Ibragim was involved in a larger investigation. A few days later, however, Youness saw Ibragim's face on the news and learned his aggressor was a murder suspect—and dead.

That was the last he heard about it until the end of August, when the detective came back with another request: The last time they'd met, Youness had recounted the incident with the man who'd screamed at him in the pizza shop, Ashurmamad Miraliev. (Youness hadn't actually known the man's name; in the case file the detective wrote that an "Agent Sykes" provided the identification.) The detective said Ashurmamad could be charged with a crime. Would Youness like to pursue charges against him? At first Youness said he wasn't so sure, but then he agreed.

So the FBI had been matchmaking: They had helped the sheriff's department go fishing on a long-closed case to find a victim and a charge with which they could pressure or detain first Ibragim, and later Ashurmamad. The witness-tampering charge the FBI brought against Ashurmamad was so flimsy that it was dropped in just a month.

And yet it didn't matter. Although he had never been to Boston and never met the Tsarnaevs, Ashurmamad was nonetheless flagged—according to a note on the booking sheet—"ON TERRORIST WATCH LIST/PLACED PROTECTIVE CUSTODY AND HIGH RISK. HOUSE ALONE." Ashurmamad was taken from the Orlando Police Department to the Osceola County jail, where he was kept alone in an 8-by-10 room. To meet with his lawyers, he had to have his hands

and wrists shackled and be chained to the ground. Ashurmamad told me there were no windows, the light was always on, and he was always cold. He was there for a month until the tampering case was dropped. But he wasn't released. His student visa had expired, and he'd missed a court date while he was in jail. So he was moved directly to an immigration detention facility, and on November 4, he was ordered to be deported back to Tajikistan.

Nine months after Ibragim's death, the FBI still hasn't put the Waltham case to rest—or offered any further insight into the death of the man who might have closed it. Back in January, FBI director James Comey claimed the agency had completed its report on Ibragim's shooting and was "eager" to share it—but almost two months later, the report somehow still hadn't been released. The Florida prosecutor's office was also investigating the shooting—but at the end of 2013, shortly after speaking with the Department of Justice, it announced the report would be delayed.

When I spoke to Ibragim's father in February, he said he was waiting to hear the FBI's findings before deciding whether to file a wrongful-death lawsuit. But that account is unlikely to shed significant new light on Ibragim's death: The FBI has a long, unbroken history of clearing its agents of wrongdoing in shooting incidents, the *New York Times* found in a review of 150 such cases over the past two decades. And according to WBUR's David Boeri—quoting unnamed "law-enforcement sources familiar with accounts of what happened" that night—the FBI has little to add to the story it peddled to reporters on background shortly after the killing. Boeri's sources told him that during the interrogation, Ibragim admitted to being present at the crime scene but "blamed Tsarnaev for the murders." He also quoted law-enforcement sources saying that Ibragim had knocked over a table and come at the FBI agent with a pipe.

According to a statement by the Middlesex County DA's office, the triple-homicide case is "open and active" and state police, Waltham police, and the FBI are conducting a "thorough, far-reaching" investigation. "This investigation has not concluded and is by no means closed," it said.

They have not updated the statement in nine months.

In late September, Aria Weissman and Dylan Mess invited me to accompany them to the annual Garden of Peace ceremony, which is held beside a dry, stone-lined riverbed near the State House to honor Massachusetts homicide victims. As she does every year, Massachusetts Attorney General Martha Coakley presided over the event. "We have more people who are here to listen and to find some peace tonight," she said to the crowd that evening.

Afterward, Aria, Dylan, and I approached Coakley and asked her why there hadn't been any progress in the Waltham case. "We haven't been getting any answers," Aria told Coakley.

Coakley was calm and respectful. "I know how frustrating and how difficult it is for you," she told us. The triple murder, Coakley explained, was not her investigation—it was the Middlesex County DA's concern. She said that she could and would follow up to make sure state police were working with Waltham police on the murder case. "The Waltham PD and the state police should be working together," she told us.

But two weeks later, Detective Patrick Hart of the Waltham police, who has been investigating the murders since before the Boston Marathon bombings, told me his department had not been contacted by Coakley's office. "No one here knows," he said at the time. "I think I would have been told."

Two days after I reported on Coakley's exchange with Aria and Dylan, a victims' advocate from the Middlesex County DA's office reached out to Aria. The advocate said officials from the DA's office were looking to sit down with the victims' families and provide more information soon. But they never did.

After Ibragim was killed, Bellie Hacker's friends congratulated her. The case had been solved—she must be so relieved!

"I'd say, 'Don't pay any attention, nothing is solved,'" she said.

She's still waiting to be shown evidence—to know, finally, what truly happened to Erik. "I was told that once they knew something, someone would knock on my door in the middle of the night," she said. "I was told that I would be contacted even in the middle of the night."

State officials once told Bellie that they were waiting for a lead to shake loose, maybe from another case.

They were right. But by then it was too late.

Source URL: <http://www.bostonmagazine.com/news/article/2014/02/25/waltham-murders-boston-marathon/>

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