



ATLANTIC OCEAN, 100 MILES EAST OF MIAMI

The *Norwegian Epic* had everything.

Not just cruise-ship necessities like a casino, pools, and an all-you-can-eat buffet. Two bowling alleys. A seven-hundred-seat theater. A gym with rows of gleaming and rarely used treadmills.

After six days, John Wells couldn't wait to leave. On the cruise's final afternoon, he and Anne sat on their balcony as the *Epic* chased the sun toward Miami. The sky was a bright subtropical blue, marred only by the diesel exhaust unfurling from the *Epic's* smokestacks. Like the ship was giving the ocean an inky middle finger. The *Epic* was as big as a skyscraper, a thousand feet long, with four thousand passengers and two thousand crew. It was the third-largest cruise ship ever built. Wells couldn't imagine numbers one and two.

Anne, Wells's girlfriend, had proposed the trip weeks before. The New Hampshire winter had been crueler than usual. Snow poured down by the foot. Drifts piled above the windowsills of their farmhouse in North Conway. Even Wells's dog, Tonka, a shepherd mutt who usually liked cold weather, went outside only long enough to take care of necessities.

Wells spent hours every day tending the fireplaces. He carried

armfuls of wood from the garage, layered on logs until he'd built blue-flame blazes hot enough to warp steel screens. He watched as the hearths filled with glowing red coals that inevitably turned to gray-black soot. *Ashes to ashes and dust to dust* . . . the keeping of fires touched a chord in him primitive and true.

Anne spent her days on patrol in North Conway, waiting to join the New Hampshire state police. They'd offered her a job, but the state had a hiring freeze as deep as the winter. Wells found himself inward-turned, dreaming of the heat and dust of East Africa. One morning he woke to find Anne sitting beside him, her laptop open. "What we need."

"Summer."

"A cruise." She tilted the screen toward him. A gleaming white ship passed—barely—under a giant gray bridge.

"How does that thing even float?"

"There are last-minute sales."

"This is new."

"John, I know you think you don't belong on a cruise ship. Trained killer, savior of the unknowing masses, blah, blah, blah. It'll be fun."

She had him. If he complained, he'd sound self-satisfied and ridiculous.

"And I don't want to hear about carbon. You've put half the trees in this state up the chimney this month."

She had him there, too.

"Maybe terrorists will take it over. Like *Speed 2*."

"There was a *Speed 2*?"

"An excuse to relax. Besides, I'd like to have sex on a ship. Bet it's like a giant waterbed." She stroked his neck.

"That supposed to work? Throwing sex around as a treat so I'll do what you want?"

"Yeah."

He pushed the laptop aside and grabbed her. "It does."

So they went. Despite himself, Wells enjoyed the first couple days, if only for the sunshine. But as the cruise continued, he found its wastefulness gross. The way the crew scraped before passengers also bothered Wells. No doubt many sailors were desperately poor and glad to make five hundred dollars a month for twelve-hour days polishing and mopping. No doubt the cruise was a hard-earned luxury for many people on board, a vacation they had saved for years to enjoy. Still, Wells started to see the *Epic* as something like a floating plantation.

Anne wouldn't admit she felt the same, but she and Wells spent most of the cruise's last two days sunning on their balcony, avoiding the rest of the ship. Now, with Miami hours away, Wells had a decision to make. A big one. He wondered if he should take a walk on the decks. He had developed a hint of flab this winter. After a week of all-you-can-eat meals, the hint had become a suggestion. An insistent suggestion.

Anne leaned over. "You've had enough of this."

"David Foster Wallace was right." Before setting sail, they had both read Wallace's 1996 article about his miserable week aboard a cruise ship. Now Wells was rereading Wallace's book *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again*, which contained the piece.

"No more David Foster Wallace for you. He's a depressing depressive. Was."

Wells clutched the book to his chest, an exaggerated gesture.

"I agree it's all a little much," she said.

"Everest is a little hill." Wells raised his sunglasses, wraparound Oakleys that had replaced the vintage Ray-Bans she'd given him. He'd lost those in Somalia. He was still sorry to have given them up, though he'd had no choice.

"Don't pretend you haven't enjoyed parts of this. I saw you scarfing down ice cream at the buffet like a *Lifetime* special on bulimia."

In retrospect, Wells had gotten excited at the sundae bar. He poked at his stomach. "It's going to take about a million hours of running to lose this. Past forty, it doesn't come off so easy."

She cuffed his cheek, peaceably. "The world doesn't know it, Mr. Wells, but you're as vain as a supermodel."

"I have practical reasons. The life you save may be your own."

"If an inch around your waist is enough to get you killed, you've pushed your luck way too far."

"Look tough enough and maybe you won't have to fight at all."

"You boys check out each other's abs before you get to it?"

"On occasion." Wells knew that when he got home, he would lose the pounds he'd gained, no matter how many hours it took. But he was more aware than ever that time was the ultimate victor. He had once been gifted with the coordination and hand speed of a professional baseball player. Now his reflexes had slowed. He'd gone to a batting range a few weeks before for his usual once-a-year test, found himself swiping hopelessly at fastballs he'd once crushed. He was still strong, but close-quarters combat was more about quickness. To compensate, he worked his shooting, putting in an hour a day at the local range. More than a year had passed since East Africa. Too long. He needed to get back in the field.

"Have you thought any more about the training thing?" Anne had suggested he approach the agency about working at Camp Peary, known to the world as The Farm, where the agency taught new recruits.

Wells had no intention of begging the CIA for something to do. "They come to me, I'll think about it." He went back to the Wallace book. After a minute, she walked into their stateroom. Wells watched her go. She had a sturdy New England body, not fat but solid, with supple legs, muscled arms.

A few minutes later, she emerged wearing a solid black one-piece swimsuit that favored her and carrying a pitcher of iced tea. "Put on some trunks. One last trip to the pool."

He held up the book.

“You’ll regret it when we’re back at the North Pole.”

“I’ll find you there.”

“Want tea?”

“Sure.” She poured him a glass. He reached for it and she grabbed the book. She cocked her arm, tossed the book off the balcony. They watched in silence as it tumbled end over end into the water. It must have splashed, but from this height Wells couldn’t tell.

“Unnecessary.”

“I’m not looking to that guy to tell me how to live my life.”

“He was right. Cruises are the ultimate sign of late capitalism.”

“You want the ultimate sign of late capitalism? Deciding you’re too tortured to work. Too much of a genius. Then ditching your wife and everyone who loves you and hanging yourself.” As Wallace had done.

“He was depressed.”

She sat on the lounge chair beside him, rested a hand on his forearm. “People fight like hell to stay alive, John. No one knows that better than you.”

At that moment Wells knew he had been right to bring the ring. He pushed himself up.

“Are we going?”

“Don’t move.”

He found the box at the bottom of his suitcase. Inside, a simple white-gold ring set with a diamond, not huge, but flawless. Only a connoisseur would know how much it had cost. A foolish luxury, but Wells had little use for money. He’d seen what it could not buy. He’d ordered the ring months before, after realizing how happy he was every afternoon to see Anne. How his days didn’t begin until she walked into the kitchen and put her arms around him and mocked his half-assed cooking.

He pulled off his Oakleys, hid the box in his hand, walked back onto the deck.

“Take off your glasses.”

“I’ll go blind.”

She took them off. Wells dropped to one knee. He felt like he was going into combat, all his senses heightened. The sun scoured his skin. A warm breeze roughed his eyes. Before Wells could lose his nerve, he opened his hand and lifted the box toward her. “I know I should have done this years ago, but I wanted to be sure. About me, not you. I’ve always been sure about you. You’re smart and funny and gorgeous. I’m happy to fall asleep next to you and happier to wake up. You’re right about everything except this cruise, and I even forgive you for that. I love you and I want us to be together for the rest of our lives. Marry me, Anne.”

She was crying when he finished. He knew the tears weren’t joy even before she shook her head.

“John.” She took the box from him, opened it. “That is some diamond.” She flipped it shut. “Like staring into the sun.”

He couldn’t pretend this was the lowest moment of his life. Waiting in the hospital to learn if Exley would die had been worse. But he wasn’t sure he’d ever felt more shocked. He hadn’t imagined she would say no.

He’d underestimated her.

“Throw it over, I’m going to be pissed. It cost a few bucks more than the book.” He was croaking. His voice hardly worked, but he had to say something. She gave the box back to him.

“That’s no, then?”

“It’s not yes. I know you enjoy my company, John. I know you care about me. But I’m not sure you love me. I’m sure you want to love me, but I’m not sure you *can*. I’m not sure you don’t still love Jennifer—” This was Exley, his former fiancée, his former handler at the agency.

“I love you.”

"Let's say you do. I hope it's true. Because I *do* love you, and I want more than anything for it to be mutual. But you love your missions more. More than any of us. Even Exley. Wasn't that why she left?"

Wells didn't answer. To hear Anne dissecting him, so coolly, so accurately, made him wonder how long she'd waited to give this speech. How much hurt she'd swallowed on the way.

"So I would marry you, and I'd hope everything you say is true. Or might come true eventually. But I want kids, John. I'm closer to thirty-five than thirty now, and you may have noticed North Conway isn't long on marriageable prospects. I can't have kids with a man who's waiting for his next big chance to get killed."

"You want me to retire?"

"There are risks and *risks*, John. I'm not saying you want to die. But when you're on a mission, I'm not sure you care."

"I don't want to die."

"You know why I wanted us to take this cruise?"

She looked at him until he got it.

"You made me go on the *Norwegian Epic* planning to dump me when we got home?" Wells pulled himself up, turned away. He stared at the ocean, fighting the foolish urge to toss the ring. He wasn't sure if he was angry with her or himself. He'd never felt more foolish. Or less perceptive. He'd brought an engagement ring to a good-bye party.

"I wanted to remember you lying out in the sun, getting good and brown."

He turned toward her, flipped her the box. She caught it, pure reflex.

"I don't want to die," he said again.

"But do you want to be a father? A real father this time, present."

He didn't trust himself to speak. He nodded.

"Enough to walk away from an operation that's too dangerous."

He nodded again. Though he wasn't sure he knew what those words meant.

“I don’t believe you. But okay.” She set down the box. “I’ll give you thirty days. If you truly believe you’re ready to be a father, you come back to me with this.”

“You’ll say yes?”

“If I believe you.”

So he stowed the diamond in his suitcase and they went for a swim. Neither of them wanted to be in the suite anymore.

2

PHILADELPHIA

They'd warned him.

His friends. His advisors. Even the *Post* reporter who covered the CIA. Every last one told Vinny Duto that he held far more power as Director of Central Intelligence than he would as a new senator. That he'd be at the bottom of a deeply hierarchical institution. That his clout would vanish so quickly that he would wonder whether it had ever existed.

Still he'd left the seventh floor to run for the Senate. He knew something they didn't. The President was tired of him, the way he controlled Langley. The slights piled up slowly. His meetings with the big man started late, ended early. A budget request that should have been waved through instead took months of meetings. The National Security Advisor demanded preapproval for all drone strikes.

Duto decided to jump before the slow leaks started and he read about the agency's failures on the front page of the *Times*. He could have hung on for another year or two, but ultimately he would have lost. He might be the most successful DCI ever, but he was no match for the President.

He didn't discourage the inside-the-Beltway pundits, who said he was making a Senate run to position himself for his own grab at the

White House. If not in the next election, then the one after that. He'd still be young enough to be a credible candidate. Younger than Reagan. And in the back of his mind, Duto hoped the conventional wisdom was right. But he didn't delude himself about the odds. He wasn't a natural campaigner. In Pennsylvania, he could run as a relatively conservative Democrat, but he wouldn't have that option in a national primary. No matter. He had years to decide. Meantime, he was glad to leave on what seemed to be his own terms.

He'd won easily. But he hadn't realized that life as a senator would be so mind-numbingly boring. As DCI, he'd regularly faced life-or-death decisions. *Four senior AQAP operatives are meeting at a madrassa in Yemen. Can we waste them without blowing up a room full of kids?*

Now, instead of ordering drone strikes, he listened to lobbyists and his fellow lawmakers drone on. Worst of all were constituent meetings. The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania had thirteen million residents. Sometimes Duto thought every one of them was lined up in his office foyer, waiting for a handout. The Harrisburg mayor begged for \$27 million for a highway extension—and reminded Duto that Harrisburg had gone 70-30 for him. The president of Penn State hoped for an \$11 million earmark for a new dairy-science building, and wondered if Duto wanted tickets to his box at Beaver Stadium. A roomful of wig-wearing cancer patients from Philly asked for an increase in the National Institutes of Health budget. In that case, Duto sympathized.

His chief of staff, Roy Baumann, insisted that he press the flesh. Baumann was firmly in the all-politics-is-local camp: *People don't know how you voted on specific bills, much less care. They care whether the turnpike's safe and the economy's decent. They know you can't do much about any of it, but they want to think you're trying. And you're not like ninety percent of these gasbags. People want to meet you, hear your stories. Nothing important. Like, did Osama bin Laden really have porn in his safe house, or*

did we just put that out to discredit him? After a year or two you can disengage. I don't recommend it, but I can't stop you. But for now you say yes. Yes?

Thus Duto had said yes to lunch with the head of the Philadelphia hospital workers' union, Steve Little. Duto didn't like Little. Little had endorsed his opponent in the primary. *I'll remind him of that*, Baumann said. *This lunch is peaches and cream. Best friendsies.* Little was a trim black man with a perfectly tailored suit and shoes a Wall Street banker would have envied. Duto wondered if Little charged his clothes to the union. Probably—

"Senator."

"Yes?"

Little was shaking his head. "I lose you there? On the Medicare HMO issue? You looked glazed. I know it's esoteric, but these are huge numbers."

Duto's phone buzzed. A number he'd never seen before. A 502-2 prefix. Guatemala City. He sent it to voice mail. The phone buzzed again. Some instinct left from Langley told him to take it. "I'm sorry. Excuse me, Steve."

He walked outside. "Hello."

"Remember me, *comandante?*"

Only one man had called him that. "*Diecisiete?*" The man's name was Juan Pablo Montoya, but Duto would always think of him as Seventeen.

"None other. Did you miss me?"

"No."

"*Tenemos que hablar.*"

"Can we do it in English? It's been a while."

"If you must. I promise you'll want to hear this."

"One hour."

"*Una hora, comandante.*"

3

ISTANBUL

Brian Taylor stood by the window in room 1509 of the Inter-Continental Hotel in Istanbul, looking at the dark water of the Bosphorus down the hill to the east. In twelve years at the agency, he had never been so excited.

Taylor was the CIA's deputy chief of station for Istanbul. His dream job, his dream city. He'd fallen for it backpacking across Europe at the end of the nineties. The last flash of American innocence, when taking a summer to drink cheap wine and run with the bulls still seemed adventurous. Taylor followed the usual route. He saw the sun rise over Montmartre, jumped off the rocks in Cinque Terre. He met his share of women. Always Americans. He never cracked European girls. Maybe if he hadn't tried so hard . . . He had fun. Yet he felt he'd arrived a couple generations late. The cities were open-air museums. Even the beautiful couples walking along the Seine seemed to hold hands almost ironically. Like they were reenacting movies about Paris instead of living there.

Then he found Istanbul. Its history stretched millennia, and it was as picturesque as anyplace he'd ever seen. Its giant mosques loomed over the Bosphorus, the mile-wide waterway that separated Asia and Europe. Yet it wasn't a museum. It teemed with life. Shopkeepers

and students hustled along its hilly streets. Gleaming white yachts sped past packed ferries and rusted container ships. The Turks were hardworking and silver-tongued, loud and showy. Taylor had grown up in a stuffy town outside Boston. He liked them immediately. He even developed a soft spot for the devious shopkeepers in the Grand Bazaar. Those guys weren't exactly *trying* to take advantage, he decided. They wanted to deal. They wanted drama. Any tourist who didn't understand the game—which every guidebook explained in detail—deserved to be fleeced.

Taylor expected to be in the city three days. He stayed three weeks, flying home the afternoon before fall term started. He knew his sudden ardor was silly, but was falling for a city more absurd than falling for a woman? Both required a willingness to suspend disbelief. Anyway, now he had what every college student wanted. A goal, and a path to reach it. He would learn Turkish, move to Istanbul after graduation. Turkey had eighty million people and a fast-growing economy. Big companies needed Americans who spoke the language. And the University of Massachusetts shared an excellent Turkish program with other colleges around Amherst. He expected his parents to push back. They didn't. Dad: *It'll make you a lot more hireable than a history degree.* Mom: *I always wanted to live somewhere exotic.* Turkish was tough, but Taylor worked hard. By the start of senior year, he was nearly fluent.

Then al-Qaeda attacked the United States.

Like his friends, Taylor was terrified and enraged and wanted revenge. Unlike them, he could help. Turkey shared borders with Iraq and Iran. The FSB, Mossad, and Revolutionary Guard all ran major stations in Istanbul. The CIA was badly outgunned. Just four agency officers spoke Turkish. By November, the agency had contacted language programs all over the country in search of candidates. With his 3.8 GPA and spotless background, Taylor jumped out. A recruiter

invited him to Boston for a meet-and-greet. The remains of the World Trade Center were still smoldering. He never considered saying no.

And he had never regretted his decision—not even during his ten-month posting to Iraq, when he'd left the Green Zone only four times. He'd spent most of his career at CIA stations in Istanbul and Ankara, the Turkish capital. Taylor knew he wasn't a star case officer. The stars worked in Beijing or Kabul or Moscow. But he was reliable, dedicated, and a good fit for Turkey. Though he had joined after September 11, Taylor was something of a throwback. He disliked drones, preferred old-school spying, the careful recruitment of agents from government and business. Guys who lived in mansions, not mud huts. His best sources were mid-level officers in the Turkish army, bureaucrats in the Ministry of Finance.

So Taylor's career progressed, and his social life, too. He made a habit of American twenty-somethings who came to town on two-year stints for multinationals. He replaced them easily enough. His years with the agency had given him an appealing air of mystery. His apartment had a killer view of the Bosphorus. Plus he knew every restaurant in town, and he always picked up the check. Case officers had practically unlimited expense accounts. No accountant at Langley would question a two-hundred-dollar dinner for "recruiting."

The CIA promoted Taylor to deputy chief of station in Istanbul on the eleventh anniversary of his hiring. He planned to stay three years, then head back to the United States. He was ready to settle down, have a family. He didn't think he would ever be a chief. Taylor still believed in the mission, that in some small way he protected the United States. But he supposed that he'd become a careerist. September 11 had faded in his memory, along with everyone else's.

Then the letter arrived.

Almost half a year later, its details were etched in his mind. Noon on a Friday in early September. The consulate mostly empty as the

long Labor Day weekend approached. Istanbul stuck in a heat wave, smoking like a kebab on a spit. Taylor's office was air-conditioned, of course, but through its narrow bulletproof windows the men on the streets looked sullen and irritable.

A knock on his door. His secretary, Alison. She carried an envelope, holding it by her fingertips. Like it was contaminated. Though the consulate scanned local mail for anthrax and other nasties. She handed it to him without a word.

It was addressed to Nelson Drew, Associate Director for Citizen Services, United States Consulate, Istanbul. Taylor's cover name and job. Inside, a single page of staccato laser-printed sentences.

*"Nelson." You are spy. CIA. Real name Brian Taylor. Speak Turk/
Farsi. I am Rev. Guard Colonel. "Reza." I need to meet.*

Gran Bazaar 6 Sep 3 p.m. Ethcon Carpet.

Taylor felt like he'd gone to the doctor for a routine physical and been told he had an inoperable brain tumor. Impossible. The letter's plain white paper burned his fingers. *You are spy* . . . He couldn't be blown like this. But wishing wouldn't erase the words.

He handed the letter and envelope back to Alison. "Make a copy for me, one for Martha." Martha Hunt, the bureau chief. "Bag the original and the envelope. Try not to touch them, in case there're fingerprints."

Though he didn't expect forensic evidence. Whoever had sent this was smart. And knew much too much about him. That he worked for the agency. His real name. Even that he knew Farsi. He'd learned the language working with Iranian exile groups in Ankara. He hadn't liked the exiles. Most just wanted to hang out in Turkey on the CIA's dime. They found excuses whenever Taylor proposed operations that would send them back into Iran. Still, every so often one had decent intel, so the agency tolerated them.

Now that work had bitten him. As he'd assumed, some exiles were double agents spying for Iran. Still, he couldn't imagine how they'd found his real name. He'd been careful. But he'd been stationed in Turkey for a long time. Probably the Guard had put the pieces together bit by bit. Finding the answer would be impossible. He'd left Ankara four years before. The exiles had scattered. What mattered was that his cover was blown. What if the Guard knew where he lived? Part of him wanted to get on the first flight home.

But he knew he had to stay. The man who'd written this letter could be an enormously valuable source. The United States was desperate to stop Iran's nuclear program. Washington had imposed sanctions and attacked the program covertly. Still, the Iranians hadn't quit. Policymakers badly needed to know how close Iran was to a bomb. But the United States had few agents anywhere in the Iranian government, and none in the Revolutionary Guard. Instead, the CIA and National Security Agency relied on their usual technical wizardry. But Iran had buried its enrichment facilities to keep them from satellites, drones, and radiological sniffers. Following a joint American and Israeli attack on their computer systems in 2009, Iran's scientists had removed the computers from their labs. They solved equations with calculators now, used plaster to model bomb designs. Still, they were making progress. After all, the American scientists at Los Alamos had designed the first bomb in the 1940s with slide rules and hand-drawn blueprints.

Without hard evidence, the United States could only speculate at Iran's capabilities and intentions. Some analysts thought Iran would finish its first bomb in less than a year. Others said five years was more likely. This Revolutionary Guard colonel might have the answers.

If he was real. And not luring Taylor into a trap.

Martha Hunt was named Istanbul station chief four months after Taylor became deputy. She was two years younger than Taylor and

didn't speak Turkish. But he didn't begrudge her the job. She had served three years in Kabul, two in Islamabad. When they disagreed, she was usually right. The fact that she was shockingly good-looking, tall and slim, with killer blue eyes, didn't hurt. He'd never hit on her. He knew his league. She wasn't in it.

They met in the safe room beside her office. It had no windows and was swept weekly for bugs.

"I don't like it, either," she said, as soon as he closed the door.

"Hello, Martha."

"For all the obvious reasons. Who sets a meet in the Grand Bazaar? Must be five thousand security cams in there. But you've got to go." She didn't wait for him to agree. "We've got a week. Let's use it. Get a camera to put eyes on the door. He's dressed wrong, looks like he's hiding a vest, you abort. He wants to blow himself up, not your problem. Meanwhile, you want to stay in the safe house until this is done, I'm fine with that."

"I'll stay put. Can't give up that view." No way would he let Hunt think he was scared.

"You have a view? I hadn't heard." A joke. Taylor's apartment was a minor legend.

"Come on over sometime, see for yourself." He snorted, so she'd know he was kidding. Though he wasn't.

"Tell you what. Get us inside the Iranian nuclear program and I will." She smiled a smile he'd never seen before.

He spent twelve hours wondering if she was flirting. Until he realized what she'd done. She'd given him a tiny ambiguous signal to chew over. To take his mind off the letter. Taylor had heard some men weren't suckers for beautiful women. He'd never met one.

The week dragged. Taylor looked over his files from Ankara, but nobody jumped out as a possible double agent. The station's tech-support team—two chubby guys named Dominick and Ronaldo—

placed a thumbnail camera to watch the front door of the carpet store. The same night a cleaning crew threw it away. Hunt and Taylor decided not to risk placing another.

Two days before the meeting, Taylor checked out the shop himself. It occupied expensive space a few feet from the domed square where the bazaar had begun five centuries before. Rather than traditional patterned carpets, it specialized in modern, brightly colored rugs. Under other circumstances, Taylor might have bought one. Instead, he wandered into a pipe store and watched Ethcon's entrance as he pretended interest in an overpriced meerschaum.

He'd come early. The bazaar was almost empty. After a few minutes, the Ethcon clerk poked his head out to talk to his counterpart across the corridor. Taylor recognized his accent as from southeastern Turkey, near Iran. Probably a coincidence. Hundreds of thousands of the region's villagers had migrated to Istanbul. The letter writer had likely chosen Ethcon at random. The company didn't show up on agency databases, and when Taylor had checked its Turkish records he'd found nothing suspicious. Taylor eavesdropped as the clerk talked about very little. Finally, he handed back the meerschaum and left, ignoring the curses the pipe store owner tossed at his back.

He spent that night staring at the Bosphorus. He hated the way this meeting had come together. Simply by showing up, he was confirming his identity to whoever had sent the letter. Plenty of terrorists, from al-Qaeda to Greek anarchists, would gladly take a CIA scalp.

"Good night's sleep," Hunt said the next morning.

"We don't all have your cheekbones."

"Why don't you take the day off, practice your shooting."

The agency had a deal with the Turkish army to let officers use a range at a base near Istanbul. As usual, she was ahead of him. Taylor hadn't fired his pistol in a year. A day shooting would help him relax and might save his life. "I'll see you tomorrow."

The bazaar stretched across a dozen blocks in Sultanahmet, the heart of Istanbul's Old City. On Friday afternoon, Taylor sat at a nearby McDonald's, watching tourists and Turks slurp down Cokes against the late-summer heat. He wore a tiny receiver in his right ear for updates from the surveillance team, a baggy T-shirt to hide the pistol in his waistband. At 2:44, his receiver buzzed.

"Pico One. Possible Gamma sighting. In the forest now." Taylor could no longer bear the plastic friendliness of the McDonald's. He shouldered his way to the bazaar's southeast entrance. Two minutes later, his earpiece buzzed again. "Pico One. False alarm on that Gamma, unless he has three kids." Finally: "Pico Two. Empty forest. No Gamma, no X-rays." Picos One and Two were the CIA team around the store. Gamma was the letter writer, whoever he was. X-rays were a potential enemy team. X-rays almost certainly meant a trap. Reza would arrive alone if he was genuine.

At 2:55, Taylor entered the bazaar. Six minutes later, he reached the store. Pico One was gone, but Two stood down the corridor. He wore his Real Madrid cap backward, signaling to Taylor that the store was empty except for the clerk. Reza hadn't shown. Unless the clerk himself was Reza, a long shot.

Taylor walked inside. The Ethcon clerk was dark for a Turk, with oily black hair. He wore a T-shirt and jeans, both too tight to conceal a bomb. "You are Mr. Nelson?" Taylor controlled his surprise. The store was a single room, its only entrance the front door. Rugs were piled high along the walls. Nowhere for anyone to hide. Taylor took the bait. "Nelson Drew, yes."

The clerk picked an envelope off his desk. "Boy come yesterday, say you come to store today, I give you this. He say you want many rugs."

"How old?"

"Our rugs are new—"

"The *boy*. How old was the boy?"

“Ten years, maybe.”

“Iranian?”

“Turk.”

Reza had figured the agency would be watching the store. He had used a runner to get a letter into the store safely. Basic tradecraft. The clerk handed Taylor the envelope. *NELSON* was printed across the flap in black letters. Taylor tore it open, found a single sheet.

Tram to Cevizlibağ. Down stairs to gas station. Arrive by 3:30.

ALONE. Other Wise I will go and never contact you again. “Reza”

On his way out of the bazaar, he called Hunt, read her the note.

“As a meet, it makes sense,” she said.

“It’s no fun at all.”

“No cameras, we can’t box him. When he’s done, he gets back on the tram or finds a cab and disappears onto the highway. I think this increases the odds he’s real.”

“You’re not the one with no backup.”

“It’s nice and public. Nobody’s gonna touch you there. Just don’t go further. He tries to get you into a vehicle, tell him no.”

“What if he says I can have a puppy?”

He hung up, dodged through a busload of Chinese tourists blocking the bazaar’s main entrance.

The tram stop was close to the bazaar. Istanbul had lousy public transportation—the city had promised a subway line under the Bosphorus for decades. But the trams came often and were the fastest way around the Old City. Taylor waved his pass at the entrance gate’s scanner and joined the Turks crowding the platform. A tram was just arriving. He pushed his way on. The car was packed, and he wedged his hands against his sides. The butt of his Sig bulged under his T-shirt. A woman stared until Taylor shook the shirt loose to hide the pistol.

The stink of onion and garlic and summer sweat overwhelmed the

tram. Many older Turkish men still preferred traditional baths to everyday showering. Taylor fleetingly wondered if Hunt had given him this mission as a prank. Maybe she thought his life of expense-account dinners was too comfortable.

The tram chugged along, passing cars that were barely moving on either side. At 3:26, a cheery automated voice announced Cevizlibağ. Taylor shoved himself out. Sweat coursed down his chest. He unzipped his jacket, fought the urge to draw his Sig.

The gas station lay below the tram platform, beside the highway, an eight-lane monster that connected the airport with central Istanbul. Taylor joined a line of men walking down the spindly steel stairs and looked for his contact. *There.* A man leaned against the concrete retaining wall that supported the tram tracks. He had brown Persian skin. He wore wide mirrored sunglasses and jeans and dragged on a cigarette. His T-shirt and jeans were too tight to hide a bomb.

Taylor stopped halfway down, checked out the lot. Dozens of pumps and a busy minimarket. Lots of gas being sold, no sign of a kill or kidnap team. Men pushed past him, annoyed that he'd blocked their path. The guy in the sunglasses stepped toward the stairs. Taylor had reached the point of no return. Choose or lose.

He walked down.

Up close the man was older than Taylor expected, early forties, though Iranians could be tough to judge. He wore blue jeans and knockoff Doc Martens. He was tall and handsome, with salt-and-pepper hair. "I'm glad you came," he said. In Farsi. He sounded native, as best Taylor could judge.

"What about the store?"

"This is better." He led Taylor to the retaining wall, took a final drag on his smoke, and scuffed it under his shoes. His first mistake. Taylor would grab the butt after he left. The agency would test any fingerprints and DNA against its databases.

“What’s your real name, Reza?”

“Cigarette?” He offered Taylor the red pack of L&Ms.

Taylor shook his head. “You know my name, I don’t know yours.”

“You have a weapon, I do not.” He lifted his arms over his head, made a single slow twirl so Taylor could see the truth of his words. Like a middle-aged Iranian ballerina.

“Playing the fool, drawing attention to yourself.”

“If someone has followed me here, I’m dead already.”

“How does the Guard know my real name?”

“They don’t. Only me.”

“How’s that?” In Ankara, Taylor had used a different cover identity.

“We have a photo of you from Ankara in our files. Nobody ever bothered with it. I saw it a few months ago, I had an idea. Our man said you spoke excellent Turkish—”

“Who was the man?”

“He called himself Hussein al-Ghazi when he was in Ankara. A nobody. Back in Tehran.”

Taylor didn’t remember the guy. But the Ankara exile groups had hundreds of members. “And this man Ghazi gave me up?”

“All he said was that you spoke good Turkish—”

“Excellent.”

“Excellent, yes. Shall I explain, so we can put this behind us, I can tell you why I’m here? We don’t have long.”

Taylor nodded.

“I guessed your age and found all the Turkish-studies programs in America and looked up the graduates on the Internet. You don’t look Turkish, so I imagined you must learn at a university.”

“What if I knew the language because I had some family connection to Turkey instead?”

“Then I wouldn’t find you. A small risk. All I would lose is time.”

“Every program?”

“They’re not large, and most students are Turkish. All the way from 1995 until 2000 I saw only about three hundred Americans. I

checked yearbook photos until I found your real name. It took less than a month from beginning to end.”

Taylor was speechless. A monstrous security flaw, one he'd never considered before.

“Then I looked at our photos of American consular and embassy officers. We take those as a matter of course. I was fortunate you were still in Turkey, under official cover. And that you'd been here long enough for us to have your official name and title so I could know where to address the letter. I imagined if I'd guessed correctly, you would come. As you have.”

“But no one else in the Guard—”

“Correct. Only me. And I don't intend to tell anyone.”

The words Taylor had hoped to hear. If they were true. “You want to work for us, Reza? A man in your position must have valuable information.”

“I'm not here to sell out my country.”

If a decade as a case officer had taught Taylor anything, it was that agents always said that before they sold out their countries. The Iranian lit another cigarette, dragged deep.

“Our leaders, they've swallowed their own poison. They believe this bomb will make them safe. They hate you and the Jews for trying to stop them.”

“How close is it?”

“I don't know exactly. I have a friend in the program, he tells me very close. Though our engineers have been too optimistic before. But what your country needs to understand, it is already affecting our policies. Sometime next week, we will bomb two Israeli embassies.”

The surprises kept coming. “Where?”

“One Africa, one Asia. There was supposed to be a third, in Bulgaria, but it got pulled. Security was too tight. That's how I know.”

“This is Hezbollah or the Guard?” Iran used Hezbollah, a Lebanese militia, for most of its attacks on Israel.

“Hezbollah. But we're helping even more than usual. It's compli-

cated. Two simultaneous bombs, two continents. Also they're very focused on Syria right now."

"Why not delay, then?"

"If we had any choice, we would, but the orders come from the top. A message to the Israelis, stop shooting our scientists."

"Which embassies?"

"I don't know."

"Bombs? Does that mean truck bombs, suicide bombs?"

"Bulgarian was truck. I think the others, too."

"This is confirmed? Two embassies?"

Reza turned to Taylor, raised his sunglasses so they were eye-to-eye. "I don't have much respect for your agency. Technology, yes. Officers, no. You, you speak Turkish, your Farsi isn't bad, so I hope you're not stupid. Then you ask questions like this. Yes, it's confirmed." Reza took a last drag of the L&M, crunched it under his heel. "I must go."

"Reza, I need to know more about you. *We* need to know more. Why you're offering this information—"

"I'm sick of these fanatics who run my country. I don't like the idea of a nuclear war. You need more reasons?"

"If you have them."

"A friend of mine, the Basij-e beat his cousin to death during the Green protests." Following a disputed election in the summer of 2010, college students and other young Iranians filled Tehran with anti-government protests that became known as the Green Wave. The regime struck back with paramilitary gangs called the Basij-e Mostaz'afin—the name meant Mobilization of the Oppressed. The Basij-e were poor and devout and hated the protesters, who were wealthier and less religious. They attacked viciously, killing dozens and wounding hundreds more. The police didn't stop the violence. Sometimes they even worked with the Basij-e.

"At least tell me your name."

"I've told you the truth. You don't believe me, watch the news next

week. See that bag behind that piece of concrete.” Taylor followed Reza’s gaze to a brown paper bag. “A phone for you. I’ll call when I have something. It may be a while.”

“I can’t—”

“It’s not a bomb. Just a phone I bought today. Still in the package.”

“I need a way to reach you.”

“I don’t want you to reach me. Or pay me. Or take my photo. Or put my DNA in a file.” Reza picked up his crushed cigarette butts, tucked them in his pocket. “The Guard have a prison near Qom, underground. They keep rabid dogs. They take off your clothes, handcuff you to a post, open the cage. They tell about the rabies so you’ll know what happens after the bite.”

“We can’t protect you if we don’t know who you are.”

Reza pushed his sunglasses down. “Tell the Israelis. The end.”

Three pumps down, a taxi had just finished filling up. Reza strode to it, spoke to the cabbie. He slid inside and didn’t look back as the taxi rolled off.

Taylor squatted down beside the paper bag. He couldn’t see what was inside. Anyway, what was he expecting? That it would be ticking? He unrolled the top, nudged it over with his sneaker. A little mobile slid out in a clamshell case. Taylor decided to take a cab back to the consulate, just in case. If the phone blew up, there’d be less collateral damage.

When the Marines at the consulate’s front gate scanned the phone for explosives, it came back clean. Taylor left it with the station’s techs. “Make sure it’s not bugged.”

“Can I take it apart?” Ronaldo said.

“Do what you want, long as you don’t break it. You break it, I break you.”

Hunt waited in the conference room, two digital tape recorders on the table. “Tell me just as it happened. No opinions. Facts, as you recall them. I want every detail while it’s fresh.”

For a half hour, he recounted the meeting. “You did well,” she said when he finished.

“Thank you.”

“Did you get the cab’s plate?”

His elation vanished. “No, it was too far—”

“Forget it. I think you handled it about as well as anyone could have. But I have to know one thing. Don’t hesitate. Just yes or no, from the gut. Is he real?”

“Yes.”

“Because?”

“His anger at the regime felt real. His Farsi sounded native. Even the way he described the op, that it’s in trouble but the top guys are pushing. Whichever team you play for, we’ve all had that. And it doesn’t make sense otherwise. He gave us a very specific tip. We’ll know in a week if he’s lying. If the point was to set me up, why not shoot me today? We both know I couldn’t have done much.”

“Write up your report, I’ll cable the desk.”

“I wish I’d gotten a picture somehow.”

“Maybe we can convince the agency to put a sketch artist on a plane tonight before your memory fogs.”

“You think he’s real, Martha?”

“I trust you.”

An answer that wasn’t exactly yes. And, more important, left the judgment squarely on him. He was disappointed in her—and in himself for letting her beauty fool him. She was chief. He was deputy. Ever thus.

Taylor spent the next two days on conference calls with Langley, answering the same questions again and again. How the letter had come in. What had happened at the carpet store. Finally, he reached Bart Regina, an assistant deputy director. “You know no Rev Guard officer has ever defected? Not one. Ever.”

Taylor didn't bother to answer.

"If we pass this warning to the Mossad and we're wrong, we will look *muy* foolish. But you think we should go ahead."

Hunt scribbled on a piece of paper and flashed the words at Taylor. *Decision made, ass covering*. So this call was pro forma. Regina wanted to hear that Taylor believed. Then the backsplatter wouldn't touch Regina if the tip didn't pan out. If it did, no one would care that Regina had raised an alarm. The seventh floor would be too thrilled with its new source.

These internal games were the reason Taylor liked having a quiet career. Bigger stakes, bigger politics. Now he stretched out his neck, put it on the block. "Sir, if you're asking me whether Reza was genuine, I believe so. If for no other reason than he got my name from *somewhere*. The story he told makes sense. Believe me, I know we'd rather have his real name. But given the risks he faces, I'm not surprised he kept it to himself."

Despite the second-guessing—or maybe because of it—Taylor increasingly believed that Reza was who he claimed to be. Not just because being wrong would end his career. Taylor wanted everyone to have to admit he was right. *Everyone* included Martha Hunt.

"Good," Regina said. "We'll let the Israelis know. Classify it as single-source, probability four." The scale ran from one to ten, one completely reliable and ten wild rumor. Considering that the agency had only Taylor's gut as a data point, four was a vote of confidence. The line went dead.

"Nice guy," Hunt said.

"Just covering his ass. Like a certain station chief I know."

To his surprise, she smiled. "Guess I deserve that."

"Should have put your chips next to mine, Martha."

Four days later, in Luanda, Angola, a Nissan van accelerated down Rua Rainha Ginga and rammed through the outer gate of the Israeli

embassy, a small two-story building. As the Nissan approached the inner gate, its guards opened up with their AKs. The driver lost control. The van slammed into a concrete chicane that the Israelis had hastily put up after the American warning. The driver ran to a motorcycle and escaped.

Thirty seconds later, the van exploded. Two guards were killed, three others wounded. Six embassy employees were also hurt. An Israeli investigative team later found the van had held three hundred kilograms of fertilizer and fuel oil, enough to have taken down the embassy if it had reached the building.

Six thousand miles away, a taxi stopped at the rear entrance to the Israeli embassy in Bangkok. Neither driver nor passenger had an entry permit, so the local guards wouldn't raise the gate. After a fifteen-second standoff, the taxi's passenger shot the driver in the head and ran.

Forty-five seconds later, the taxi blew up. The driver and one guard were killed, two others badly injured. The passenger escaped. Thai police estimated that eighty pounds of a military-grade explosive called Semtex had been placed in the taxi's trunk.

The Israeli prime minister called the President to thank him for the warning. The President called his new DCI, Scott Hebley, a Marine four-star who had replaced Duto. Hebley called Taylor. Langley sent a surveillance team to Istanbul to help the station trace Reza. NSA cloned the phone that Reza had given Taylor so it would ring on a dedicated line in the Counterterrorism Center. Taylor kept the original. After all, Reza had chosen *him*. Despite the risk, he badly wanted Reza to call again. He expected to hear within a few days. Surely the Iranian would want credit for the tip, if nothing else.

Weeks passed. The agency checked its sketch of Reza against its databases, along with those from the FBI, Interpol, and the MIT, the Turk-

ish intelligence service. No matches. The surveillance team went home. In Angola and Thailand, the attack investigations stalled. The van had been stolen. The cabbie in Bangkok appeared unconnected to terrorism. He'd done nothing more than pick up the wrong fare. The Semtex was traced to a Czech factory that supplied half the world. Neither Hezbollah nor Iran took credit for the bombings, but their silence wasn't a surprise. They rarely broadcast their involvement.

September became October. Still Reza stayed away. Taylor found himself depressed, strangely jealous, a lover spurned after a one-night stand. *Why doesn't he call? What did I do?* He asked NSA to double-check that the phone was working. He changed ringtones, went back to the original. He put off his other agents, ignored calls, canceled appointments. For four straight Fridays in November, he reenacted every detail of the meeting. After the fourth, he found Hunt outside his office. "Have a drink with me," she said.

He knew he wouldn't like what she was going to tell him. He also knew he needed to hear it. In her office, she pulled a bottle of Laphroaig and two glasses from her bottom drawer and poured for them both.

"Most likely he's not in Istanbul anymore. They probably found him."

They both knew that if the Guard had discovered that Reza was a traitor, it would have arrested and tortured him. In that case, Taylor's cover was blown. He should transfer out of Istanbul. He wanted to stay. He wanted to be around when Reza called again.

"They're not on him. He's careful."

"Don't be irrational."

"That tip saved lives."

"Three months ago."

"You're jealous because you didn't buy in."

She sipped her scotch. "Plenty of glory to go round. Only one squandering it is you. You got PTSD from a single successful meet. First time in history."

He wanted to argue with her, but he knew she was right.

“That phone rings, we’ll be ready. Meantime, be a man. Get back to work. Let it go.”

“You be a man.” He wanted to be funny, but even to his ears the words sounded petulant.

“*Salud*, Brian.” She raised her glass and downed the whiskey in one gulp.

Fall ended. Christmas became New Year’s Eve and Taylor invited Hunt to his annual party. She didn’t come. Turkey entered its short, sharp winter, an unpleasant surprise for out-of-season tourists. Snow on the Bosphorus sounded picturesque, but Istanbul wasn’t built for cold. Winds whipped off the Sea of Marmara. Sleet frosted the sidewalks. The Turks hurried along in their too-thin coats, trying not to fall on patches of black ice.

Taylor felt almost relieved to be back to his everyday work. Still, he made sure the magic phone was always fully charged, always within arm’s reach. It rang at ten p.m. on a Friday night. For a few seconds, Taylor didn’t quite believe his ears. Then he grabbed for it. The screen reported the incoming number as the 123456 of a Skype call. He clicked on.

“Mr. Nelson.”

Taylor knew Reza’s voice instantly. “Yes.”

“InterContinental Hotel. Envelope at front desk. Pick it up, come to room 1509. Alone.” *Click*.

Taylor messaged Hunt: *R called. Activating team.* Each month, Hunt chose two officers to stand by in case Taylor needed backup. Basically the assignment meant, *Be ready to drop whatever you’re doing if Brian needs you. Make sure your phone is charged, and don’t get too drunk.* Dominick and Ronaldo were part of the team, too, though their job was only to get a picture. They weren’t trained in active surveillance.

They'd planned for a no-notice call like this. They wouldn't have time to set a trap. The tech guys would park near the hotel. One officer would wait in the lobby, the other outside. They'd all seen the sketch. They wouldn't follow Reza. Taylor and Hunt agreed a tail would be a mistake. Based on how cautious he'd been during the first meeting, Reza could probably make a two-man tail. If he did, he would be furious. He might break contact forever. So the station would settle for a photograph of him, and to see if anyone was with him or watching him at the hotel.

Taylor's apartment was a little more than a mile south of the InterContinental. He dressed, strapped on his holster, made his way into the misty Istanbul night. He walked northeast as texts lit up his phone, the team reporting in. Dominick and Ronaldo lived together a few miles north of downtown. Taylor had never understood whether they were roommates or lovers. Either way, they promised to reach the hotel in thirty minutes. One of the live surveillance officers said he could arrive in twenty. The second didn't respond. The guy was single. He could be in a loud bar and have missed the text. A bad break. But Taylor knew the truth. He would have gone in with no backup for the chance to meet Reza again.

The envelope the concierge passed him was nearly weightless. Taylor tore it open in the elevator, found only a hotel key card. He turned it in his hands and knew Reza wouldn't be waiting.

He stood outside the room and listened. Nothing. Knocked. No answer. He drew his Sig, held it at his side, pushed the key card into the slot. He shoved the door open as the lock beeped green. He hid at the edge of the door frame and waited. No footsteps scuffling inside, no whispered voices. He pushed inside, put the key into the slot by the door so the lights would pop on.

The room was empty, the bed unmussed. In the marble bathroom,

the soaps and shampoos and bottled water were untouched. Taylor had brought a radio-frequency sniffer that would find basic bugs. He scanned the room. Nothing. He didn't think Reza had been here. The agency would check the name on the reservation. But Reza had no doubt used a runner again, paid some lucky Turk a few hundred dollars to book the room. Taylor sat on the bed and scrolled through pay-per-view movies while he waited for the call.

Twenty minutes later, the phone rang.

"I said no surveillance. Did you think I wouldn't see those fat men in the van?"

Taylor knew why Reza wanted to keep his name secret. He understood why the Iranian had brought him here. Reza knew NSA had tapped the phone he gave Taylor. The room phone was clean. So Reza didn't have to worry about an immediate trace.

Still, the gamesmanship grated on Taylor. Agents and case officers had tricky relationships. To defuse their fears, some agents needed to prove they were smarter than their handlers. If Reza and Taylor were going to work together long-term, the Iranian's attitude needed to change. For the moment, Reza held the cards. Taylor couldn't risk driving him off.

"It's natural we're anxious to have a photo of you."

"I'm anxious that you don't."

"That's also natural."

"Will you give me your word that the next time we meet, there won't be surveillance?"

"I give you my word that next time you won't see it."

Reza laughed. *We are both men of the world*, the laugh said. *We understand each other. I don't hold the surveillance against you. You play your part as I play mine.* A knot in Taylor's stomach eased. Reza would cooperate today.

"Did you think I would call sooner?"

"I thought you would call when you had something to say."

"I told you, smarter than the average CIA. We are planning to assassinate a station chief."

Martha? Taylor almost said. He bit back her name in time. "Here?"

"Too close to home. Not Europe, either. The police, too good. I'm not involved directly, but I am told we're choosing from one in Asia, one in Africa."

"Hezbollah?"

"Too tricky for them. The Guard itself."

"That's like declaring war."

"No one asks my opinion. But we won't take responsibility, you can't prove it. Maybe we blame someone else. Al-Qaeda."

"When?"

"This one, it could still be called off. But I believe the approval's coming. Within the next ten days. The planning is done."

"A sniper, a bomb, poison?"

"I don't know."

"Give me *something*, Reza. We can't lock down the whole world."

"Of course, Brian. I will call General Moghrabi, demand he tell me. When he asks why, I'll say my friend at the CIA needs to know."

The phone went dead. Taylor listened to the dial tone until it turned into a fast, angry beep. The most important agent he'd ever had, and Taylor had treated him like a thousand-dollar-a-month file clerk. He stood by the window, looking at the Bosphorus. The windows were undoubtedly too thick to break. Lucky him.

The phone rang. Taylor dove for it. Actually dove across the room, grabbed the handset, sprawled on the bed. Not cool, but no one was watching.

"Next time I don't call back."

"I'm sorry."

"The risks."

"You could have had a team waiting to drop me, Reza. I came."

"You have men."

“Downstairs. What good are they when I open this door?” Taylor counted to five in his head. *Slow it down. Calm him down.* “We’re in this together.”

“Then let me do what I can. Don’t ask for information you know I don’t have. If I get what you need—”

Taylor suddenly knew what to do. “I’ll set an account for you. At UBS. Monday.”

“An excuse to get my name.”

“No safe-deposit box. No keys. No nonsense. It’ll be online, under the name Reza Istanbul. You’ll have the account number. Real money, not a promise. Take it out, transfer it, whatever.”

“It’s not necessary.”

“Two hundred thousand to start. If you defect—”

“I won’t.”

You might, Taylor thought. But even if he never touched the money, Reza would like having it. Two hundred thousand dollars was a small price to build loyalty from an agent like this.

“Next time we talk, will you tell me more about your biography? How old you are, where you grew up, when you entered the Guard, your life.”

“Why would I do that?”

“So we can understand each other better.”

“Good night, Brian.”

Taylor reached for a Heineken from the minifridge, then reconsidered and grabbed a Coke. He had a long night ahead. He would have to send a CRITIC-coded cable reporting the threat. Since Reza had been right about the embassies, the agency would put out an immediate worldwide alert, which would cause an immediate worldwide mess. The more cautious station chiefs would turtle up. The cowboys would figure this warning didn’t tell them anything they didn’t know, that they were always at risk, and without a specific threat the tip was

useless. They were right, and wrong. Reza might not know how the Guard intended to pull this off. But if he said the planning was done, Taylor believed him.

He popped open his Coke and stood by the window, looking out at the dark water of the Bosphorus, the shining city around it. Waiting for his stomach to settle.

It didn't.