

1

DADAAB

James Thompson's voice rose. Again. "There are people who say we can't do anything about this. Americans who say that. That we should let these Africans fend for themselves, starve for themselves. That they did it to themselves by having so many kids. That we can't afford to help them. You know what I say to that?"

"Tell me," Paula Hutchens said. They were in Thompson's office at WorldCares headquarters at Dadaab. Like the rest of the compound, the room was unadorned, the furniture simple and thrifty. A poster behind Thompson showed a black girl running hand-in-hand with a white boy.

"I say letting kids starve is not in keeping with our principles. And I'm not afraid to tell you it's racist. If these little children had white skin and not black, you think anyone would be saying, let them die? Let me tell you, we've forgotten how lucky we are. Even worse, we've forgotten the duties, the obligations, that come with that luck."

Thompson stopped speaking. He leaned forward in his chair, stared at Hutchens like he could see through her. Hutchens had only met Thompson a few hours before, but already she was getting used to that look. The man had presence.

Thompson was in his late forties, with broad shoulders and thick lips and meaty hands. He wasn't tall, but his bulk made him formidable. He looked like a bailiff. Or a pit boss. When he got excited, he spread his hands and raised his voice. He sounded like an old-time preacher. In reality, as he'd told Hutchens, he came from a family of railroad workers. He ran WorldCares/ChildrenFirst as a secular organization, no proselytizing allowed. "We're here to feed the hungry and help the sick. We look after their bodies. Their souls are their own business, as far as I'm concerned."

Hutchens could already see that James Thompson would star in her feature on the aid groups at Dadaab. Fine by her. She was a reporter for the *Houston Chronicle*. Normally she covered the mayor, but the paper had reached into its not-so-deep pockets to send her on a ten-day reporting

trip to Kenya. Roy Hunter, the *Chronicle's* publisher, had taken an interest in Dadaab after his daughter read a book about Somali refugees. Every few months, Hunter called the paper's editor and demanded a series on something that had caught his attention. Deep-sea fishing in the Gulf. The potential for supersonic jets. HOUSTON TO HONG KONG IN TWO HOURS? IT'S POSSIBLE!

The editor knew better than to argue with the man whose name graced his paycheck. He looked for a plausible excuse to send a reporter to Kenya, and found it in WorldCares and other Texas-based aid organizations working in Dadaab. Now Hutchens was working on a series tentatively called *Texans With Heart*. It had been *Texans Who Love The World* until Hutchens pointed out that the title sounded like a bad porn movie.

She couldn't claim to know much about the issues over here, but she'd done some research on WorldCares before she'd come over. The group had grown a lot in the last few years. After meeting Thompson, she saw why.

He leaned forward now, lasered in on her with those blue eyes. "What do you think, Ms. Hutchens?" He had a slight Southern accent that took the edge off his ferocity.

She hated when sources tried this tactic. Reporters didn't have much going for them anymore. Her job security and prestige had evaporated years before. But she still had the privilege of asking the questions, not answering them. "About what?"

"About this. All of it."

"I'm a reporter. My job is to tell your story. In any case, I just got here."

"With all due respect, ma'am, that's a bunch of junk. People look to you for advice. They want the newspaper to tell them what to think."

"I've never noticed that, Mr. Thompson. Though the idea does have a certain appeal."

"I'm not joking. I'm serious as a heart attack. I'm publishing a book next spring. Called 'The Children Will Lead.' I want the world to know. It's a crime to let these people suffer. And I'm not saying do everything for them, I'm not saying that at all. I'm saying work with them, build something together."

"I get it." Her digital tape recorder beeped. She decided to bring the interview to a close. For now, anyway. She had a feeling that Thompson wasn't done talking, and might never be. "I'd like to see a little bit of the camp itself today, if that's possible. You know, since I got here this morning, I've hardly seen a refugee."

"Today may not work. We don't like to send people out late in the afternoon for security reasons. But tomorrow morning, sure." Thompson settled back in his chair. "And you'll still be here when my nephew and our other interns get back, right?"

"When will that be?"

"Two days, three at most."

"I should be here, yes."

"I think they'd give you a really good perspective. The four of them just graduated college

and they've been here three months working seven days a week. Finally I told Scott, that's my nephew, take a couple days off before you burn out. They went to Lamu."

"What's Lamu?"

"Island just off the coast. Amazing place. So I hear. Never been there myself."

"I look forward to talking to them." She slipped her recorder into her computer case.

"Feel free to talk to anyone you might like on our staff. I've told everybody to do their best to answer your questions. Open-door policy."

"I appreciate that."

A heavy knock on Thompson's door, which was in fact closed. Hutchens turned around to see it swing open. The guy who ran security—she couldn't remember his name, something weird—strode in. "I'm sorry to interrupt, but something important's come up." He looked at Hutchens.

"I was just leaving."

"No, please. Whatever he has to say, I don't mind you hearing."

"It's the interns. Your nephew and the others. No one's heard from them."

"What about Suggs?"

"Not him either."

"That can't be. They were going to call when they got to Mokowe."

Open-door policy or no, Thompson realized she'd just heard something she shouldn't have. "Ms. Hutchens, can you go back to your trailer for a few minutes, let us sort this out?"

Hutchens sat forgotten for the two hours, as the sun set and the compound's lights kicked on. Through her screened window, she heard hushed, urgent voices. Finally, just as she was about to head back to Thompson's office and demand to know what was happening, a heavy knock rattled her door. Thompson stepped in.

"There's really no way to keep this from you. My nephew and the others, plus the Kenyan driving them, they've disappeared. Their phones are off, they didn't check into the hotel in Lamu, their Land Cruiser didn't reach Mokowe."

"An accident?"

"Unlikely. Someone would have called us. It's possible—" he hesitated—"it's possible they've been kidnapped."

"I'm so sorry." She was, too. But the reporter in her had one thought: *Great story. And all mine.*

"I have to ask you not to write about this. Or tell your editors."

"I can't do that, sir."

"Their safety—"

"If they've been kidnapped, then every aid worker in Dadaab is at risk, every tourist in Kenya. They have a right to know." The right to know. Every reporter's most sacred cow.

“At least give us time to make sure. Try to get them back quickly and quietly.”

Hutchens considered. “Look, Houston’s nine hours behind, it’s morning there. Tell you what, I won’t do anything today. But tomorrow morning there, afternoon here, I have to call my editors and tell them.” What she didn’t tell him was that she planned to spend the night and morning putting together a biography of the four volunteers and Suggs. This story would be big.

“That’s the best you can do.”

“It’s more than I should do.”

“I’ve never understood until now why people don’t like reporters.”

“Sorry you feel that way.” Over the years she’d had a lot of practice saying those words. They never worked, and they didn’t this time. Thompson pursed his lips in disgust and turned away, slamming the door to her trailer as he went.

2

NORTH CONWAY, NEW HAMPSHIRE

John Wells ran. Over the river and through the woods. Wearing only a T-shirt and shorts despite the cold. His legs burning but his breath level and easy. His heart pumping twice a second and more. Tonka, his boon companion, a stride behind, matching him on four legs.

The trail curved through grizzled trees in the low mountains outside North Conway. Gray wallpaper covered the late-afternoon sky. Wells kept his head down to watch the roots and dips in the trail. He hurdled a puddle left from rain two nights before, landed clean, ignored the twinge in his left leg.

For Wells the woods offered a special sorcery, the magic of leaving himself behind. The missions, the kills, the towns and villages with names he could barely pronounce. He had lived in a world that few Americans outside the military ever saw, the North-West Frontier and the Bekaa Valley and the other red zones. Running here he worked up an honest sweat, not the stink of tension and sleepless hours. These runs set him free from the question that had plagued him since the Arghandab: Had he acted justly? Francesca didn't bother him. Alders did.

Though in some ways the question didn't matter. The word once writ couldn't be undone, et cetera. No one else could help him answer, not Shafer, not even Anne. So Wells ran.

Back at the farmhouse he found Anne in the kitchen, squatting beside the open cabinet under the sink, which was full of dirty dishwater. Two wrenches and a penlight were laid on a rag on the floor. Wells squatted behind her, smoothed her hair away, kissed her neck.

"What seems to be the problem, Officer?"

She was a cop in the North Conway Police Department, though she was thinking about joining the New Hampshire state police, which investigated many murders and major crimes in New Hampshire. She and Wells had been together almost three years. In the last few months, she'd stopped asking if he thought they should marry. Maybe she thought he risked his life too casually to commit to a marriage, much less a family. Maybe she had her own reasons for taking marriage off the table. He couldn't bring himself to ask. He was happy to be with her this way for as long as she would let him.

She was past thirty now, and the New Hampshire winters had given her hints of crow's-feet and wrinkles that city girls didn't get until their forties. But her jeans and sweaters hid a supple

body and strong legs. Wells loved watching her walk. At the moment, though, she wasn't happy to see him.

"Why don't you go take a shower and let me fix this."

"I can help."

"Like you know anything about plumbing. If I weren't here, you'd have done what you always do. Tossed in a bottle of Drano, and if that didn't work, bought the really strong stuff, and if that didn't work, called the plumber. It's bad for the pipes."

"I'm feeling very emasculated." Though Wells had to admit that aside from chopping wood, he wasn't particularly handy around the house. His survival skills were more primal.

"Where'd you and Tonka go?"

"The usual."

She turned around, nuzzled against his neck. "You smell good. Like the woods. Tell you what. If I can fix this quick enough, maybe I'll join you in the shower."

"Give me a chance to regain my manhood."

"Something like that."

She didn't join him. While he was soaping up, he heard the phone. He showered quickly and then brought up logs for a fire in their bedroom. She found him just as he kindled it. "Trying to prove you're not completely useless around the house?"

"That obvious?"

"Yes. As a matter of fact. Evan called."

"Evan my son?"

"Is there another Evan? Said it was important."

That's impossible, Wells almost said. Just before his last mission, he had visited Evan in Montana. He hadn't seen his son in more than a decade and wanted to reconnect, explain his absence. Evan had smashed that hope in the time they needed to finish a cup of coffee. He'd made clear that he hated the CIA and viewed Wells as a professional vigilante at best, a war criminal at worst. Wells had left Montana figuring that they wouldn't talk again for many years. If ever.

Wells couldn't imagine Evan had woken up today and had a change of heart. He had no idea what his son might want. Not money. His stepfather was a doctor and they lived well.

"Maybe somebody's pregnant and he doesn't want to tell his parents," Anne said.

"I don't see him coming to me for that. I don't see him coming to me for anything."

She handed him her phone.

Despite everything, he knew Evan's number by heart.

“Hello?”

“It’s John.” “John” seemed safer than “your dad.”

“Thanks for calling me back so fast.”

“Everything okay?”

“How are you, Dad?”

The falsity of the last word churned Wells’s stomach.

“Let’s talk about why you called first.”

But Evan didn’t seem to know what to say next.

“Something wrong with Heather?” Wells finally said. Wells’s ex-wife, Evan’s mom.

“No, it’s not that—you know on the news, those aid workers, the ones kidnapped in Kenya?”

“Sure.” The story had taken over the media in the last seventy-two hours. Four American volunteers taken hostage. Dragged into the heart of darkness, most likely by Somali bandits. The cable networks couldn’t get enough of it. The fact that the two women were so photogenic didn’t hurt. If you were going to get kidnapped, being pretty was the way to go. Plus they were all friends, recent graduates of the University of Montana—

Wells realized why Evan had called. “You knew them?”

“One of them, mainly. Gwen Murphy. I’m friends with her sister. Catelyn.”

“Friends.”

“Good friends.”

Words that could mean anything. Wells didn’t push.

“Catelyn’s freaking out,” Evan said.

“I can call some people down at Langley, ask them to watch it. They probably already are.”

Wells had resigned from the CIA years before, but he’d stayed entangled with the agency. As a rule, the CIA avoided involvement in overseas kidnappings unless the victims were government employees or the crime had clear political or terrorist overtones. But given the media attention that this case had received, Wells imagined the agency was watching closely and working its contacts inside the Kenyan security services.

“Dad—John—it’s been five days and Gwen’s family is going crazy. Nobody has a clue. . . Nobody’s seen them, nobody’s sent any pictures. Brendan, that’s her dad, he’s talking about getting on a plane, going over there. Even though everybody says that wouldn’t help.”

“It wouldn’t.” It would add to the circus. The grieving father, wandering through the camps, passing out pictures as camera crews tagged along. Have you seen this woman? The irony that many people at Dadaab had lost their own children would be lost to the viewers, though not the refugees themselves.

“I told Catelyn about you and she got really excited. She thought— she thought maybe you could look into it yourself.”

You happen to mention that you accused me of being an assassin? You work that into the conversation? In a way neither of them could have anticipated, Evan had suddenly seen the value

in his father's skill set. Wells found himself both flattered and angry. "Kidnappings are tricky, Evan. I'm not an expert in them. Or Africa. I'm sure the Murphys are talking to people who are."

"They can pay. They have money."

"It's not about that."

"Please, Dad. Please."

With those three words, Wells had no choice. Evan was using him. So? Parents existed to be used by their children. "Look. I'll talk to the family, the Murphys, and if they want me involved and I think I can help, I'll do what I can."

"I promise, they want you. They know who you are. I reminded them about the Times Square thing."

Several years before, Wells had stopped a terrorist attack on Times Square and briefly become a national hero. But his recent missions had stayed secret, and memories were short. "They remembered that?"

"Wikipedia. Anyway. I'll tell Mr. Murphy to call you. Thanks, Dad."

"Glad to be of service." Wells wasn't sure whether he was being sarcastic.

"So?" Anne said. Wells explained. She took his right hand between hers, squeezed his palm and traced its lines, half masseuse and half fortune teller. "Had to have been a hard call for him."

"It didn't sound hard."

"He's a smart kid. He knows what he did. You're in his life again, whether he likes it or not."

"Maybe. Or maybe he's hoping to get laid. Not that I blame him. If his friend Catelyn looks anything like her sister."

"Please don't tell me you're going to turn into a dirty old man."

The ringing phone saved him from answering.

"Mr. Wells? This is Brandon Murphy. Thank you, thank you, for agreeing to do this." Murphy sounded fevered. Wells wondered if he'd slept since he'd found out his daughter had been taken.

"Tell me what you know."

Murphy explained that James Thompson, the head of WorldCares, had called four days before—late evening in Montana, morning in Kenya. Thompson said the four volunteers, along with a Kenyan employee named Suggs, had gone missing the previous day.

"From what I've read, they were headed for Lamu Island, is that right?"

"It was a few days off." Murphy sounded defensive. The sleazier cable hosts liked mentioning that the volunteers had been on their way to a vacation. An ultra-luxury resort island off the Kenyan coast, Nancy Grace said. Just the four of them, *relaxing*. She made *relaxing* sound like code for *having an orgy*.

"And Gwen told you in advance about the trip."

"She was nervous because of those kidnappings a while back, but Hailey—"

“Hailey Barnes—”

“Yes. Hailey thought it would be fine. And that’s her best friend. Gwen, she’s a beautiful girl and she’s not dumb, but she’s not a leader, you understand. Basically she operates on instinct, listens to the people around her.”

“I understand.”

“Scott, that’s James Thompson’s nephew, he pushed, too. The trip was his idea.”

“And were Scott and Gwen boyfriend and girlfriend?” Nancy Grace had hinted as much.

“You know, kids that age, they don’t necessarily use those words.”

“But they had a relationship.”

“Yes. So back to your initial question, we knew she was going. She checked in on the morning they were leaving. She did that most days to let us know she was okay. Morning for her, the night before for us.”

“Her message that morning was routine.”

“Yes. And we asked her to email us when she got to Lamu, which would have been overnight for us. But when I woke up the next morning and checked my Gmail I didn’t see anything. I figured, okay, she’ll send something soon. Or maybe Lamu doesn’t have good Internet. I checked during the day and I didn’t hear anything. I was getting nervous.” Murphy paused, breathed deep. “Then, late afternoon in Missoula, very early in the morning over there, Thompson called. He said he didn’t want to worry me but no one at WorldCares had heard from any of them since the previous morning. Including the driver, this man Suggs. He asked if Gwen had checked in with us.”

“Did he say he thought they’d been kidnapped?”

“Not at first. He said his security officer had checked with the hospitals and the police and the Interior Ministry and hadn’t heard anything, but they’d check again in the morning when the offices opened. That maybe the police detained them for some reason. I brought up kidnapping. Me. Not him. Like he didn’t want to mention the word. He said, yes, that’s also possible. I got angry, told him he was supposed to be keeping my daughter safe. He said he understood how I felt, that his nephew was with her and that he hoped they’d all be back safely very soon.”

“Then what happened?”

“We couldn’t sleep, of course. I emailed all her friends here, asked anyone if maybe she’d emailed them, but she hadn’t. And we called Hailey, Owen, their parents, and they hadn’t heard anything either. Then, a couple hours later, James Thompson called back, said that they’d double-checked with the police and that we had to assume the worst. His exact words. We must assume the worst, he said. I’ll never forget that. Because the most irrelevant thing went through my mind. Assuming makes an ass out of you and me. That’s what I thought at that moment. I’m a fool.” Brandon Murphy fell silent. Wells waited. There was nothing to say. Finally, Murphy spoke again. “The next news we got was maybe twelve hours later.”

“So this is close two days after she left the camp for Lamu —”

“Yes. So much time wasted, and I don’t understand. Anyway Thompson called back, said the Kenyan police found their SUV on a dirt road about a hundred miles south of Dadaab. That they were gone and that the police assumed they’d been taken over the border. To Somalia.”

“Did he say anything about damage to it, the SUV?” Damage, as in bullet holes or bloodstains.

“No, and I didn’t ask. I guess I should have. I did ask whether the police had found evidence that anyone had been hurt. He said no.”

“That’s good.”

“And then the media got wind and since then, the last three days have been crazy. The police are helping us, they moved the TV trucks off our block, but if we leave, it’s like sharks.”

“My son said you haven’t received a ransom demand.”

“No.” A single word that carried a world of despair.

“And you’ve been in touch with Thompson since he told you about the SUV.”

“At least twice a day. But he says it might be weeks before anybody makes a demand. Even months. He says that doesn’t mean anything except that they may be moving the hostages to somewhere they consider more secure.”

More secure no doubt translated into deeper in Somalia, but Wells saw no reason to say so. “You spoken to anyone besides Thompson? Either in the U.S. government or the Kenyan?”

“A woman at the embassy named Kathy Balfour. Not sure of her title, but I could find it for you. She said they’d reached out to the Kenyan police. She put me in touch with an officer in Nairobi, a colonel. Russell Mesuru’s his name. He told me the case is their highest priority.”

“What about the FBI or the agency?”

“This morning I talked to an FBI agent, Martina Forbes—she’s in Washington. She said they work with the CIA and their first step is they try to trace cell phones and computers, that kind of thing. She said they’re already working that angle but they’ve gotten nothing so far. The next step is probably a ransom demand, she said. But she said they prefer to let the host country take the lead unless they have no choice.”

An answer more forthcoming than Wells expected. And the FBI had been surprisingly aggressive considering that the aid workers had disappeared only five days before. The publicity was having an effect.

“But I have a strong impression that the Kenyan police don’t have much chance of finding her even if she’s still in Kenya. And no chance if she’s in Somalia. Do you think I should go over there?”

Murphy was probably right about the skills of the Kenyan police, though Wells didn’t want to upset him further. “Not right now. It might attract even more attention, make matters worse. Have you talked to anybody who specializes in these situations?”

“A place called Kroll. In New York. They told us they manage negotiations and payments, not rescues, that until we received a ransom demand it didn’t make sense to involve them. I’ll spend

everything we have to get Gwen back, but since they said they cost like ten thousand dollars a day, I figured I'd hold off for now. More money for ransom, if it comes to that."

"But WorldCares must have kidnapping insurance."

"The way Thompson explained it to me, it covers volunteers as long as they're in the camps or working on assignments. Like an aid convoy. Not on vacation. And since everyone in the world knows they were headed to Lamu—"

Murphy broke off. Someone must have told him that Somali kidnappers often asked for ransom payments of millions of dollars. Without insurance, the family might lose everything.

"So you think I can be helpful," Wells said.

"Your son says you're the best at this."

"East Africa is not my area of expertise."

"Mr. Wells, this is killing us. My wife hasn't slept in four days. She blames herself, she blames me, she blames everybody. All night last night she paced around the bedroom counting her steps, telling me she wanted to jump out the window. I would have called an ambulance but I know it just would have made the reporters even crazier. You want me to beg you to help, I will. You want me to pay, name your price."

"You don't have to beg me. Or pay. Just email me a note saying that I'm your representative over there and you authorize me to find your daughter."

"Of course. And I'll tell Jim Thompson you're coming."

"No." Wells wanted to meet the head of WorldCares on his own terms.

"All right." Though Murphy sounded uncertain. "When do you think you might go?"

"Tonight, if I can find the flights."

"Mr. Wells. Thank you, thank you."

"I'll do my best. I can't promise a miracle." She might be dead already, you understand?

Murphy wasn't listening. "God bless you."

As if Wells had already saved his daughter.

Wells hung up, called Ellis Shafer, his old boss at CIA.

"John. Word travels fast."

"What?"

"That's not why you're calling?"

Wells waited. He knew from experience that silence was the only way out of these conversational cul-de-sacs with Shafer.

"The big man is out. At the end of the year. I speak of the capo di tutti capi. The one we call Vincenzo."

Shafer was being cute because this was an open line and because he liked being cute. Vincenzo was Vinny Duto, the CIA's director. Wells didn't like Duto, but part of him would be sorry to see the man go. The informal arrangement between Wells and the agency might not survive a new regime.

“What’s he doing?”

“Eight ball says running for Senate. You were right, John. He’s looking at the big one and he needs some real-life political experience.”

“Does he even have a party? Or a state?”

“Democrat of Pennsylvania. I know he appears to have arrived on this planet a full-grown sociopath, but he was in fact born in Philly.”

“Democrats aren’t going to vote for him. He was neck-deep in rendition and all the rest.” As Wells and Shafer knew personally.

“He can’t run as a Republican. Too liberal on the social stuff. Guess he figures aside from the ACLU types Democrats don’t care about rendition any more than Republicans. He’s right, too. He’s got a shot.”

“Let’s see how he does first time somebody asks him a question he doesn’t like.” Duto was not exactly warm and fuzzy. Over the years, he had learned to check his temper. Still, he was a man used to giving orders and having them obeyed, and that attitude was hard to hide.

“Don’t be surprised if he calls to say bye. I think he’s getting sentimental. He’s got me on the calendar for a valedictory lunch. I’m not sure if I’m the main course or just an appetizer. So what’s up?”

Wells explained, not mentioning Evan.

“I’ve only been following it on TV, but I’ll see what we have and call back.”

Wells spent the next half hour arranging travel. Nairobi was more than seven thousand miles away, and no nonstops ran between the United States and Kenya, not even from New York. It was already past six p.m. Wells would have to catch an overnight from Logan to Heath-row. Then he’d be stuck several hours until he connected on a night flight to Nairobi. With the time difference, he’d arrive the morning after next. A lot of lost time, but he couldn’t do better without a private jet, and even that would save only a few hours.

Wells booked the tickets under his own name. No reason to be tricky. His diplomatic passport would let him carry a pistol and ammunition and, maybe most important of all, a wad of cash big enough to get him out of trouble. Or into it, if necessary.

With the flights arranged, Wells grabbed his backpack, sending Tonka into hiding. The dog knew what the pack meant. Wells kept his pistol and cash and other unmentionables in a locked trunk in the bedroom closet. He took fifty thousand dollars, the Makarov, two passports, and a satellite phone. He hesitated for a moment and then grabbed a handful of other goodies that might be tough to come by in Kenya. Finally, the vintage Ray-Bans that Anne had given him before his last mission. He kept them locked up so he wouldn’t lose them. They were lucky.

Anne had disappeared into the spare bedroom while he packed. She came back with copies of the email from Brandon Murphy designating Wells as his representative, plus a pile of stories and blog posts about the kidnapping and the world of the camps at Dadaab. “Back

ground.”

Wells kissed her.

His cell trilled. “Ellis?”

“None other. So I have to tell you this one is tough. On a bunch of levels. As far as we can tell, no single group over there runs these kidnappings. The goal is to grab people, get them onto Somali soil, so the Kenyans can’t get them very easily. After that, as long as you can keep paying your guards, you can hold them basically forever. Somalia has no central government, no police, no legal authority to step in. Sometimes, these boats that get taken in the Gulf of Aden, the shipowners pay to get their vessels back but not the sailors themselves. So the sailors are held for years, until either the kidnappers take pity on them and let them go, or else they cut their throats.”

“We don’t interfere.”

“You know that since 1993, Black Hawk Down, we prefer to pretend Somalia doesn’t exist. Al Shabaab, that’s the al Qaeda affiliate over there, we’ll hit their guys with drones when we get a chance, and we know some groups involved in piracy. We have a matrix on those guys because we can identify vessels and the ports they operate from. But the west side of the country, the Kenyan side, it’s just gangs and Shabaab. We don’t have much. The Kenyan police have given us a few names, but no photos or locations or anything real. Frankly, we don’t pay much attention, because mainly it’s Somali-on-Somali violence. No ships, so no shipping companies complaining.”

“No white people.”

“You said it, not me.”

“You have any good news, Ellis?”

“I have one piece of advice. Think about playing up the Arab thing. Kenya and Somalia are close to Arabian peninsula. There are businessmen there from Dubai and Lebanon. Stick to Arabic when you can, wear the right clothes, you’ll stand out less.”

“That is something.”

“And I’ll put in a word for you with the COS”—chief of station— “in Nairobi. Name’s Tania Roddrick. For all the good it’ll do.”

“Know much about her?”

“She’s young, only been there three years. Speaks Swahili. Ambitious. African-American. On the surface she has a good relationship with the Kenyan government, but I don’t know how deep it goes.” What Shafer really meant was be careful of her, but neither man needed the words spoken out loud.

“Anything else?”

“Just my gut, but don’t count on the Kenyan police. I’m not sure they’re that interested in solving this. Kenya’s thoroughly sick of those camps. A few dead volunteers might be what they need to close them.”

“Wonderful world.”

“Indeed. John. Mind if I ask why you’re sticking your nose in this? Besides boredom and a vague desire to do good.”

“Evan.” Wells explained the call. Shafer already knew the backstory.

“Good enough, then.”

“For once nothing sarcastic.”

“He’s your son. I get it. Anything I can do, call me.”

“Thanks, Ellis.”

“I’ll drive you to Logan,” Anne said.

“You don’t need to do that.”

“I’ll drive you.”

At the front door, Tonka blocked him. “I’ll be back soon. I promise.” But the dog wouldn’t move, and after a minute of negotiating and scratching behind the ears Wells had to drag him aside. Wells tossed his pack into the back of his Subaru WRX and settled into the passenger seat, letting Anne drive. The flight was leaving in four hours, and even with his fancy passport and first-class seat he didn’t have much time. The shortest route was nearly straight south on 16, but both he and Anne preferred to dogleg southwest to 93 and make up the extra miles with speed. Like him, she had a heavy right foot.

She drove expertly, singing the WRX along the tight curves of the White Mountain Highway. They kept a companionable silence until the interstate. Then she reached over, squeezed his arm. “What are you thinking about?”

“The hostages. How terrifying this has to be. I’ll take a fight any day. This, you try to negotiate, to explain yourself, establish a rapport. None of it matters. Sooner or later they’ll punish you just to prove they can.”

“Kurland.”

The name carried Wells to an underground cell in Saudi Arabia. He hated thinking about Ambassador Kurland. Sometimes he wondered if life was anything more than the accumulation of regrets. “Kurland, yes. But I think it must be even worse for women. The fear of rape.”

“Any man tries that with me, I’m gonna make him pay. Even if it gets me killed.”

Anne still didn’t see what this kind of captivity meant. What ten men and not one are holding you? What if they tie your legs apart, make sure everybody gets a turn? “That’s a happy thought,” Wells said.

They were coming up fast on an SUV, a big Ford that didn’t belong in the passing lane. Anne didn’t bother to slow down or hit it with her brights, just slid by at ninety.

“You wish you were coming?” Wells said.

“Yes and no. Mainly I keep thinking about that Makarov of yours. How it’s a lousy pistol and

the magazine is too small and it almost got you killed last year. You need to lose it, get something better. But you have this idiotic attachment to it. This sentimental streak I see in you sometimes. I saw you stuff your Ray-Bans in the pack.”

“*You* gave those to me.”

“I’m glad you like them. But they’re just glasses. And the Makarov’s just a pistol and you need a better one.”

“You get in these spots, it’s not a video game. You’re in close, and whoever shoots first wins. As long as your gun doesn’t jam, and believe me, that thing never jams. Muzzle velocity, caliber, that stuff doesn’t matter. It’s for basement soldiers. Guys playing Battlefield 3.”

“You’re telling me extra rounds wouldn’t have come in handy last year. Or more stopping power. I don’t mean an assault rifle. I’m talking about a better pistol.”

She was right, he knew. “I’ll think about it.”

“When you get back, that might be your Christmas present. If I’m allowed to call it that.”

Wells, who was one-quarter Muslim by birth, had taken Islam as his faith on his first mission for the agency, when he’d gone undercover in Afghanistan to infiltrate al-Qaeda. Over the years, his attachment to the religion had waxed and waned. His relationship with Anne fell outside its bounds, since she wasn’t Muslim and they weren’t married. But his faith had returned in other ways in the last few months. He was praying every day, avoiding pork and alcohol. He’d even signed up to audit a class on Islam at Dartmouth, his alma mater, a way to learn more about the religion’s cultural and theological foundations.

“My stocking will be heavy with a Glock.”

“If you’re lucky.”

“You’re my Christmas present. Every day of the year.”

“Listen to you. Getting sappy.”

“The way to a man’s heart is through his trigger finger.” He rested a hand on her thigh.

The evening rush was done when they hit Boston, and Anne pulled up to the curb at Logan two hours before his flight. “Be careful over there. And come home quick.”

“I will. I love you.”

She pointed at her eyes, touched her heart, pointed at him. “Now go.”

He went.