

# P R O L O G U E

MANAMA , BAHRAIN

**JJ'S HAD COLD CARLSBERG ON TAP AND A DOZEN FLAT-SCREEN** televisions on its dark wooden walls. It was an above-average bar, generic Irish, and it would have fit in fine in London or Chicago. Instead it occupied the ground floor of a low-rise building in downtown Manama, the capital of Bahrain, a small island in the Persian Gulf.

By eleven p.m., JJ's would be packed with men and women pressing their bodies together in search of pleasures great and small. Now, at nine, the bar was crowded enough to have a vibe, not too crowded to move. A skinny kid with bleached-blond hair spun Lady Gaga and Jay-Z from his iPod as a dozen women danced badly but enthusiastically. The crowd was mostly European expatriate workers, along with American sailors from the Fifth Fleet, which was headquartered in Bahrain.

Robby Duke had gotten to JJ's early. The best girls were taken by midnight. Robby was twenty-eight, built like a rugby player, squat and wide, with long blond hair and an easy smile. Plenty of girls liked

him, and he liked plenty of girls. Expat birds were all more or less the same. British, European, whatever, they came to the Gulf for adventure, and adventure usually meant a few easy nights.

Dwight Gasser was Robby's wingman. He was soft-spoken, almost shy. He wasn't much use as a wingman, but some women liked his curly hair and sleepy eyes. "Them two," he said, nudging Robby toward the corner. A blonde with a round face and nice thick lips. The other skinnier and darker. Spanish maybe. They sat side by side, facing a table with two empty seats.

"Yes, Your Highness." Robby squared up and headed for them. Once he'd decided to go for it, he didn't see the sense in mucking about.

"Room for two more?"

The blonde sipped her drink and looked at him like a copper who'd caught him pissing in an alley and wasn't sure whether to give him a ticket or wave him on.

"All yours," she finally said.

Robby extended a hand. "I'm Robby Duke."

"Josephine."

They shook. Robby sat. Robby looked around for Dwight, but he'd disappeared, as he sometimes did when an introduction didn't seem to be going well. Annoying bastard. Though he'd be back soon enough, might even have a beer for Robby by way of apology.

"Josephine. A fellow commoner. Where you from? If you don't mind my asking."

"London."

"The center of the universe." He'd bet his right leg that she didn't live in London.

"Slough, really."

Slough was a suburb west of London, just past Heathrow Airport. Slough was more like it, Robby thought. He could line Slough up and

send it into the right corner and the keeper wouldn't do anything but wave.

"Slough sounds like London to a Manchester boy like me." He turned to the dark-haired girl. "You from London, too?"

"Rome."

"Rome. The city of—" Robby couldn't remember what Rome was the city of. "Anyhow, the plot thickens. What brings you ladies to JJ's?"

"We're cabin crew," the Italian girl said. "For Emirates"—the biggest airline in the Middle East, known for its shiny new planes and equally shiny flight attendants.

"Emirates. Have you flown the A-three-eighty, then?"

"It's a beast," Josephine said. "Who thought a plane with eight hundred seats was a good idea?"

"Not glamorous, then?"

"About as glamorous as the Tube."

"I like it," the Italian said. "I know it's stupid, but still, there's something amazing about it. How something so big can fly."

Robby turned to face the Italian. She had a big nose, but she wasn't bad. Those dark eyes and that long black hair. And the accent. Most important, she looked happy to talk to him, unlike Josephine. "What's your name, Italiano?"

"Cinzia." Beside her, Josephine sighed. Have fun with Dwight, Robby almost said. You two will get along great. Instead, he raised his glass. "Here's to Italy."

"To Italy."

"And to Bahrain on a Thursday night." He took a long swallow of his beer. *And we're off.*

**THE BLACK MERCEDES E190** rolled down the King Fahad Causeway, the ten-mile bridge between Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. Below

the asphalt was the water of the Persian Gulf, warm as a bathtub and nearly as flat.

Omar al-Rashid sat behind the wheel. His younger brother, Fakir, slept beside him in the passenger seat. A line of drool curled into Fakir's pure white *thobe*, the long gown that Saudi men wore. Fakir had the soft bulk of a high school nose tackle. His *thobe* draped his round stomach like a pillowcase. He was eighteen, two years younger than Omar.

"Fakir."

Fakir grunted irritably. "Let me sleep."

"You've been asleep since the Eastern Province. And you're drooling."

"I'm relaxed."

"You're as stupid as a donkey."

"Better to be stupid than scared."

"I'm not scared." Omar punched Fakir, his fist thumping against Fakir's biceps. And then wished he hadn't, for Fakir didn't complain, didn't even rub his arm.

"It's all right, brother. If you want to back out. We can do it without you."

"I'm not scared." For the first time in his life, Omar hated his brother. He was scared. Anyone would be scared. Anyone but a donkey like Fakir. But now he'd gone too far. The humiliation of quitting outweighed the fear of death. And maybe the imams were right. Maybe virgins and endless treasures awaited them on the other end.

Though he didn't see the imams lining up to find out.

Three minutes later they reached the tiny barrier island that marked the border of Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. A bored guard checked the Mercedes's registration. A hundred meters on, an immigration agent swiped their passports and waved them through without asking their

plans. Everyone knew why Saudis went to Bahrain. They went for a drink, or two, or ten. They went to hang out with their girlfriends without being hassled by the *muttawa*, the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice. The Saudi religious police. They went to watch movies in public, movie theaters being another pleasure forbidden in the Kingdom.

After Bahraini immigration, they were waved into a shed for a customs inspection. An officer nodded toward the blue travel bag in the backseat. "Open it, please." Omar unzipped the bag, revealing jeans, sneakers, and black T-shirts. The clothes were hardly suspicious. Saudi men often changed into Western-style clothes in Bahrain. "Enjoy your visit," the officer said, and waved them on.

"We will," Fakir said.

**AT JJ'S, ROBBY WAS** off his game. Dwight had won Cinzia's attention, leaving Robby with Josephine. He decided to go the tried-and-true route of getting her drunk.

"Time for another round. What's your pleasure?"

Josephine raised her glass, still half full. "No thanks, Frodo."

"Frodo!" Robby said, in what he hoped sounded like mock horror. In reality the joke cut a bit close. "Hope I'm bigger than he is."

"I hope so, too. For your sake." She glanced at Cinzia.

"Figuring the odds you'll be stuck with me?"

"Exactly." She swallowed the rest of her drink. "All right, then. Vodka and tonic. Grey Goose."

*Of course, Grey Goose, Robbie thought. Top-shelf all the way, this one. And thin odds I'll get more than a peck on the cheek.* "One Grey Goose and tonic coming up."

Five minutes later, he was back with fresh glasses. "Thanks."

"My pleasure."

“What about you? Live here?”

“Indeed.” Even this one would melt a bit when she heard his next line. “I teach.” Robby grinned. “I know what you’re thinking. How could I teach? You probably think I barely made my O-levels”—the basic British high school graduation exams. “But these kids are special.”

“Special how?”

“Autistic. Developmentally disabled, we call it.”

“That must be hard.”

“I feel lucky every day.” Robby wasn’t lying. He did feel lucky. Lucky he wasn’t one of the monsters. Half of them spent their days spinning and screaming *whop-whop-whop* every ten seconds like they were getting paid to imitate helicopters. The other half punched you when you asked them to look you in the eyes like they were actual human beings. Once in a while, Robby felt he was getting through. Mostly he could have been playing video games in the corner for the good he did. Lucky, indeed.

“My cousin’s son, he’s autistic.” Josephine’s mouth curled into a smile Robby couldn’t read.

“Are you close with him?”

“Hah. Real little bugger, inn’t he? Talk to him, he runs off and bangs his head against the wall. Pick him up, he claws at you like you’re about to toss him out the window. Six months of his mum telling him, ‘Pick up the spoon, Jimmy, pick up the spoon.’ And he picks up a bloody spoon. And we’re supposed to pretend he’s solved cancer or some such. But come on, the kid’s basically a vegetable with arms and legs and a mouth for screaming. Pick up the spoon already and be done with it.”

Robby was speechless. Of course, what she’d said wasn’t that different from what he’d been thinking, but *you weren’t supposed to say it*. It wasn’t civilized.

“I wish you could see the look on your face. Like I’d suggested putting the darlings in the incinerator.”

“Is that what you think we should do?”

“Only if they misbehave.” She smiled. “My. I’ve shocked you again. I’m pulling your leg, Robby. Honest to God, I don’t have any idea what to do with them. Do you?”

“They’re people. Could have been any of us.”

Josephine took another sip of her Grey Goose. “Could have been, but it warn’t. Why should we all run around and pretend that the facts of life aren’t so?”

“Maybe sometimes pretending is the only way to get by.”

**OMAR AND FAKIR HAD** grown up in Majmaah, a desert town in north-central Saudi Arabia. Omar’s father, Faisal, was a big man who wore a red-and-white head scarf and kept his *thobe* short around his thick calves, the practice followed by conservative Muslims. He saw Omar and Fakir—the youngest sons of his third wife—only rarely.

By the time Omar reached puberty he understood that he was a spare, to be watered and fed in case his older brothers died. The knowledge hollowed his insides, but he never complained. His brother was simpler and happier than he. They were best friends, their strengths complementary. Omar helped Fakir with his lessons, and Fakir pulled Omar out of his doldrums. They spent their teens in a *madrassa*, a religious school, where they learned to recite the Quran by heart.

When Omar was seventeen and Fakir was fifteen, the *madrassa*’s imam brought the boys into his office to watch *mujahid* videos. Helicopters crashed into mountains, and Humvees exploded on desert roads. “One day you’ll have the chance to fight,” the imam said. “And

you may give your life. But you needn't fear. You will be remembered forever. In this world and the next."

The imam couldn't have chosen a better pitch for a boy who hardly believed he existed. Omar offered himself to the cause, and Fakir followed. A few months later, they were blindfolded and taken to a date farm tucked in a *wadi*—a desert valley whose low hills offered faint protection from the sun. A man who called himself Nawif trained them and two other teenagers for months, teaching them how to shoot and take cover. How to clean and strip assault rifles, to wire the fuses on a suicide vest.

One day Nawif said, "Each of you must tell me you're ready." And one by one they pledged themselves to die for the cause. Then Nawif outlined their mission. Allah had smiled on them, he said. Their targets were Christians. American sailors. Drinkers and drug-takers. Any Muslims in the place were even worse, guilty of apostasy, forsaking the faith, the deadliest of sins.

They spent the next week walking through the attack. Just before they left the farm, Nawif announced that Omar would be the group's leader. Omar wasn't surprised. He was the oldest of the four, the best shooter. Despite his vague doubts about the mission, he was proud to be chosen.

On the night they left, the stars were as bright as they would ever be, the desert air cool and silent. A van waited, its exhaust burbling. Nawif held a blindfold. Omar submitted without complaint. He felt like a passenger in his own body.

Ten hours later, they stepped onto a Riyadh street filed with two-story concrete buildings. Nawif led them past a butcher store, flies swirling over the meat, to a dirty two-room apartment with a rattling air conditioner. Nawif handed them passports with their real names and photos.

"How—"



“Don’t worry about it. You’ll need this, too.” Nawif tossed Omar a car key. “There’s a Mercedes outside. You’ll take a practice run this afternoon.”

The highway to Bahrain was flat and fast. They reached the border post in five hours, just after sunset. A Saudi immigration officer flipped through their passports.

“Just got them last week, and already you’re on the road.”

“We didn’t want to wait.”

“Enjoy yourself.” The agent handed back the passports, and they rolled ahead.

In Manama, they found the apartment easily. Curtains covered the living-room windows. When Omar peeped out, he saw only an air shaft. Beside the couch was the locked chest Nawif had told them to expect. It held two Beretta pistols. Four short-stock AK-47 assault rifles, wrapped in chamois and smelling of oil. Extra magazines. Twelve Russian RGD-5 grenades, rounded green cylinders with metal handles molded to their bodies. They were the simplest of weapons, metal shells wrapped around a few ounces of explosive, triggered by a four-second fuse. Omar picked one up, fought the urge to juggle it.

“Let me see,” Fakir said. Omar ignored him. Fakir grabbed a Beretta, pointed it at Omar. “Let me see.”

“Put it down. You know what Nawif said. Treat them with respect. Next week you can have all the fun you want.”

Now next week had come. Omar steered the Mercedes down the eight-lane avenue that led into downtown Manama. Skyscrapers loomed ahead, glowing in the dark. In the cars around them, women sat uncovered. Across the road was a building hundreds of meters long, with a giant LCD screen displaying brand names in Arabic. A mall. Omar wondered what the inside looked like. A traffic light turned yellow in front of them, and he stopped for it, ignoring the honking behind them.

“You shouldn’t have stopped,” Fakir said.

“No need to rush.”

“You know, you hide it well. How scared you are. If I weren’t your brother, I wouldn’t see it.”

“What is it you want? Tell me. Or I won’t go any further.”

“I want you to *believe*. Otherwise, you shouldn’t be here. Because you’ll chicken out at the last minute.”

“Don’t worry about me, brother. I’m ready.”

Fakir squeezed Omar’s shoulder. “Good.”

“Good.”

The light dropped to green, and Omar steered them toward the apartment. Fifteen minutes later, they parked outside. Omar grabbed the blue bag and climbed the building’s narrow stairs as Fakir huffed behind. Omar didn’t know who had rented the place, just as he didn’t know who had bought the Mercedes or arranged his passport. Nawif had said they would be kept in the dark for their own protection. Omar didn’t even know why Nawif had told them to attack this particular bar. He saw now that he had been treated all along like a disposable part. But Fakir was right. The time for questions had passed.

At the apartment, the other two jihadis, Amir and Hamoud, waited. Omar unlocked the chest, splayed the weapons on the floor. He stripped off his *thobe*, put on his Levi’s and T-shirt and hiking boots. In the bathroom, he shaved and gelled up his thick black hair and sprayed on his cologne. He brushed his teeth, too, though he wasn’t sure why. A knock startled him, and he dropped the brush.

“Come on, brother. It’s almost midnight. It’s time.”

Omar looked himself over in the mirror. He wondered whether he could back out. But the other three would go ahead regardless. He would be proving only his own cowardice. “All right. Let’s pray, then.” They faced west, to Mecca. Together they recited the

*Fatiha*, “The Foundation,” the first seven lines of the Quran’s first verse. “*Bismillahi-rahmani-rahim . . .*”

*In the name of Allah, most gracious, most merciful  
 Praise to Allah, Lord of the Universe  
 Most gracious and merciful  
 Master of the day of judgment  
 You alone we serve and ask for help  
 Guide us on the straight path  
 The path of those you have favored, not of those deserving anger,  
 those who have lost their way*

“We have nothing to fear tonight,” Omar said. “When we wake, we’ll be in paradise.” The justification was predictable, ordinary. Yet its very familiarity comforted Omar. He wasn’t alone. So many others had taken the same journey.

Fakir tucked a pistol in the back of his jeans and stuffed the grenades and AKs and spare magazines into a black nylon bag. Amir and Hamoud took the other weapons. They slung loose-fitting nylon jackets over the rifles. Anyone looking closely would see the telltale curve of the magazines, but no one would have the chance to look closely.

On his disposable phone, Omar called Nawif. “We’re ready.”

“Go, then. And remember that Allah is protecting you.”

Omar wanted to keep talking, to invent a conversation that would end with him telling the other three that the mission had been called off. Instead he hung up. “It’s time,” he said.

They didn’t bother to wipe down the apartment. Nawif had told Omar that it couldn’t be traced to them. Further proof of their essential disposability.

JJ’s was barely five hundred meters away. They trotted through the

narrow streets, following the path they had traced the week before. They didn't speak. No one stopped them, or even noticed them. At this hour the neighborhood was largely deserted, the guest workers who largely populated it home for the night.

They turned a corner, and Fakir saw the bar's sign shining green and white just a block away. JJ's Expat. Music filtered through the windows. Fakir took his brother's hand. "I'm sorry I said you were scared."

"It doesn't matter. I'm not anymore, though." A lie.

"That's good, brother."

A few meters from the bar, Omar slowed his pace. "Remember, don't start until you hear us open up," he said over his shoulder to Amir and Hamoud. He wanted to add something else, but he had nothing left to say.

Covering the last few meters took no time at all. The noise rose. He heard people talking in English, a woman singing. He was dreaming and couldn't wake. He had two grenades in the front pocket of his windbreaker. He had a sudden urge to blow one now. Only he and his brother would die.

He didn't.

JJ's main entrance was inside the building that housed the bar. A corridor connected it to the street. Fakir stepped into the hallway, Omar a step behind. Two bouncers, big men in red T-shirts, stood just outside the entrance. Fakir walked confidently toward them, his chubby body jiggling under his T-shirt. When he was three steps away, he reached behind his waist and pulled the black 9-millimeter pistol.

"Hey—"

"*Allahu akbar*," Fakir said. He pulled the trigger, and the pistol sang its one true note. The shot echoed in the corridor, and the bouncer touched his chest and looked down at his hand. Fakir shot him again, and he screamed and fell. The other bouncer tried to turn,

but Fakir pulled the trigger again. The bullet caught him under his arm, and he grunted softly and collapsed all at once.

**ROBBY DUKE WAS ON** his sixth Carlsberg and feeling no pain. After his last trip to the bar, he'd scooted next to Josephine. She'd made way without protest. A soft glaze had slipped over her eyes and she'd squeezed his arm a couple times, always a good sign.

Her eyes drooped. He leaned in for a kiss, but she raised a finger and pushed him off. "Not a chance, Frodo." The fact that she was still calling him Frodo was definitely *not* a good sign. He didn't argue, though. She had the kind of knockers he loved, big and full, a real handful.

"Hey. Quit staring at my breasties. They're available to first-class passengers only." She smirked. "Notice anything about this place, Frodo?"

Robby turned his head. He felt like he was looking through a snorkel mask. Six pints would do that. JJ's was hopping. Three tall black blokes—American sailors, no doubt—towered above the crowd. On the screens overhead a new soccer match had begun, Manchester City and Tottenham. He couldn't tell what she wanted him to say. "You mean that girl in the corner? The one with the lip ring."

"Not her. She is cute, though. I mean the whole place. Notice anything?"

"It's pretty chill. Wouldn't expect it in Bahrain."

"But you would, see. You know, Emirates, we fly to New York. Tokyo. Buenos Aires. Sydney."

"You've been all those places."

"Not yet. But a bunch."

"I've been to New York," Robby said proudly. "It was awesome. Times Square and all that."

“Shush. And everywhere we go there are these Irish bars with DJs and tellies playing live football. I swear, even in Dublin it’s just like this. Even in Ireland the bars have lost whatever made them authentic and turned into replicas of themselves.”

“Dublin. Fantastic, innit?”

“I give up. You’re missing the point.”

“I *get* your *point*. People like the same stuff everywhere. So what? We’re all the same in the end. A few drinks, have a good time, a few shags. More if we’re lucky. Settle down with the missus, get old, piss off. Remember that song, got to be twenty years old. ‘Birth! School! Work! Death!’”

“The Godfathers. But that’s what you don’t get. We’re not all the same. Not everybody wants this stuff. We think they do because it’s what *we* want—”

Robby was sick of hearing deep thoughts from this flight attendant who was nowhere near putting out for him. He stood on the bench, threw his fists in the air: “Birth! School! Work! Death!” Around him, Beyoncé sang: ‘All the single ladies . . .’ The girls danced and raised their arms, and the bar descended into the beautiful drunken majesty of Thursday night.

And then—weirdly—Robby was sure he heard the quick *snap* of a pistol shot. A branch breaking cleanly. Over the music pumping, over his own voice yelling. He looked around, sure he was wrong.

Then he heard two more.

**FAKIR REACHED INTO THE** nylon bag, came up with an AK. Omar grabbed the second rifle. Amir and Hamoud opened up outside, firing long bursts. Omar couldn’t see them, but he knew they were standing on the street, firing through the windows at the bar.

The bar’s front door popped open and four women in T-shirts and

jeans ran toward them. Fakir unloaded a burst on full automatic. Two of the women flopped down in the corridor a couple steps from the door. The third tripped over a bouncer and started to scream in English before Fakir blew her head off.

The fourth kept coming, screaming. Omar raised his rifle. His first shot spun her, and his second and third went through her back. She reared like a frightened horse and fell.

*It's happening, Omar thought. It really is.*

**INSIDE JJ'S, PANDEMONIUM. ROBBY** Duke felt himself falling before he even knew he was hit. The round caught him in the left shoulder and spun him off the table. He sprawled on the ground and grabbed his shoulder, feeling the blood trickle under his fingers in steady pulses, not enough to be life-threatening right away.

Bizarrely, the speakers were still pumping Beyoncé: “. . . shoulda put a ring on it—”

The music broke off. Screams and shouts tumbled through the room.

“I can’t—” “My leg—” “Call 119—” The Bahraini equivalent of 911.

Above Robby, Josephine was screaming. He knocked the table aside, spilled his Carlsberg. Even in this madness, a tiny part of his mind regretted the loss of a good cold beer. He reached up, pulled Josephine down, covered her mouth with his hand.

“Are you hit?”

She shook her head.

“Shut it, then. There’s enough shouting already. Right?”

She nodded. He lifted his hand.

“The police—”

“These bloody camel jockeys aren’t going to wait for the police.”

The lights were still on. Robby rolled to his knees and looked left. He didn't see Dwight, but Cinzia was lying face-first on the table. Her brains were all caught in her pretty brown hair. A round had peeled off the top of her head. Lucky shot. Not for her. Robby wondered if he could get to the entrance. He peeked up as the doors opened and a group ran out—

And a burst, full auto, echoed outside, and a woman screamed, “No, don't—”

Another burst ended her plea.

“Jesus God,” Josephine shouted.

He squeezed her lips shut. “We have to move—”

“I can't.”

“Then you'll die here.”

He'd been to JJ's enough times to know that the place had only two exits on the first floor. These twats were obviously covering both of them. But the balcony that overlooked the dance floor had some narrow windows that Robby was guessing opened onto an interior airshaft. If he and Josephine got up there, he could try to break them. Then they could shimmy to the roof and wait for the cops.

It wasn't much of a plan, but they didn't have time for a better one. Robby had been in the British army for four years after he turned eighteen. He'd served in Basra. Not too far from here. He knew the men outside. He'd seen what they did to their own, much less to foreigners. They wouldn't stop shooting until everyone was dead.

The firing started again. Bottles smashed open, and the pungent smell of whiskey filled the room. Most people had gotten under tables now or hidden in corners. Robby heard a dozen panicked calls to the police. He grabbed Josephine's arm and tugged her, but she wouldn't move.

He couldn't wait longer, not for this woman he'd just met. He let her go, crab-walked toward the stairs. And then he heard it. The hiss



of a burning fuse. “*Grenade!*” he yelled. He dove forward, flattening himself on the floor. The training for grenades and mortars was simple. Get low and hope the shrapnel goes high. He heard it land, its metal shell bounce along the floor. It didn’t blow straightaway. It was an old one, then, with a time fuse—

“Christ, throw it back—” he yelled.

And then it went. The bar shook with the impact. His ears turned inside out. For a couple seconds, he couldn’t hear anything at all. The grenade was maybe fifteen feet from him, too close. The shrapnel shredded his jeans, cut his thighs into ribbons, hundreds of needles stabbing him at once. He couldn’t bear to look back. He had tried, he’d tried to get her to move, and she wouldn’t—

He looked back. He shouldn’t have. It must have landed practically on top of her. She was even worse than he expected, her breasts and belly pulped open, half her jaw gone—

Another grenade exploded, on the other side of the bar. Robby could barely hear this one. His eardrums must be blown. The room shook. Part of an arm slung across the room. *Jesus. A hand. A woman’s hand, red nail polish and rings.* It hit the bar and knocked over a glass of beer. *Guess we won’t be needing that one,* Robby thought wildly. *The beer or the hand, either.*

The game was obvious now. Pin them with rifle fire and then lob in grenades. With proper gear and a few mates from the 7th Armoured, he would have torn these bastards to shreds. But he didn’t even carry a knife anymore. He couldn’t do anything about it. Nothing at all.

Still. He had to try. Plenty of people were still alive. In another three minutes they’d all be dead, these idiots singing to Allah all the way. He pushed himself to his knees and crawled for the stairs as another grenade, this one behind him, shook the room. Fortunately, he was wearing his favorite moto boots, thick leather and heavy rubber soles. They had a couple inches of lift, which in another life five

minutes ago had come in handy picking up girls. His calves and feet weren't too badly cut. But his thighs felt like they were on fire and he didn't know if he could stand.

The room around Robby was smoke and blood and bodies. He couldn't put together a coherent picture of what was happening, only snatches, as though he were watching through a strobe light. One of the American sailors stood and threw a bottle at the main doors. He ran along the bar, crouching low, grabbing bottles and whipping them blindly as he went. "Go on," Robby yelled. "Get there." But the guy didn't. Four steps away from the door, he went down, grabbing his chest, his legs still pumping.

The stairs to the balcony rose behind a filigreed wall that divided the dance floor from the rest of the bar. Robby reached them, pulled himself up. He saw he'd gotten lucky. The guys at the main entrance couldn't come in while their buddies outside were lobbing grenades. They waited by the door, shooting at anyone who moved and tossing in their own grenades.

Robby guessed that when the police showed, the bastards on the street would turn to hold them off. Then the ones at the door would come in, mop up everyone in the room who was still alive. Maybe set the place on fire to boot. For now he had a few seconds to move. Move or die. Like Josephine, like Cinzia, like Dwight Gasser, the worst wingman ever. Dwight had never liked JJ's. Robby couldn't blame him anymore. Maybe God was punishing him for what he had said about his students. He was truly sorry. He closed his eyes. He wanted to rest. He was going into shock. He had to pull himself out. He grabbed his wounded shoulder and squeezed, jolting himself awake. Before the pain faded, he grabbed the banister and pulled himself up the stairs, ignoring the agony in his legs.

Step, step, step. Rounds dug into the wood around him, but he kept moving. He reached the top step and saw, too late, the table laid

sideways as a barricade. He lowered his head and drove his strong, stubby legs forward and smashed his undamaged shoulder into it. The table gave a foot. He reached an arm forward and yelled, "I'm English!"

The table slid aside. Two men grabbed his arms, pulled him onto the balcony. He felt his wounded shoulder tear as they dragged him. It should have hurt, but it didn't. He looked around. About ten people. No one seemed injured. These were the lucky ones. He was safe. For now.





**PART ONE**



# CHAPTER 1

## MONTEGO BAY, JAMAICA

“**O**NE-FORTY-NINE . . .”

John Wells felt his biceps burn as he reached full extension. He held, held, lowered himself again. Beneath him, the world narrowed to a few square feet. The cigarette burns speckling the dirty green carpet were as large as canyons.

“One-fifty.”

Up Wells went, slow and sure. Outside, a spring breeze rolled off the Caribbean. In here, the air was humid, almost murky. Sweat puddled at the base of his neck, dripped off his bare chest.

The room’s door swung open. Afternoon sunlight flooded in. Wells raised his left hand to shield his eyes and decided to see if he could get away with a one-armed push-up. Down he went, balanced on his right arm. He hadn’t tried one in years. Harder than he remembered. Or he was getting old. He tensed his chest, felt his triceps and biceps quiver, held himself steady.

Brett Gaffan stepped into the room, flipped on the light. “Trying to impress me, John?”

Wells ignored Gaffan, pushed, rose. Stopped. Found himself stuck. Sweat stung his eyes. He slipped sideways—

And with a final convulsive effort forced himself up. Once he passed halfway, he felt the power coming from his biceps rather than his triceps and knew he'd be all right. He stood as soon as he finished, before his arm could give out.

"You look like you're gonna have a stroke."

"I could do those all day." Wells tried to stop panting.

"Uh-huh." Gaffan tossed Wells a paper bag. Inside, a liter of cold water.

"Thankee." Wells sucked down half the bottle. As part of his cover, he had to drink. And though he was careful to nurse his Red Stripes, he couldn't be too careful. He'd gone through five or six last night. He wasn't used to drinking so much. Or drinking at all. Every morning he woke to a cotton-filled mouth and a shrunken skull.

Until a few months before, Wells had been a CIA operative. He'd had a long and successful career at the agency. A few years before, he'd played a highly public role in stopping a terrorist attack on Times Square. But his missions since then had been kept quiet, and the public's attention was fickle. He was still a legend among cops and soldiers, but civilians rarely recognized him.

Wells would admit that part of him had loved working for the agency. The CIA and its cousins in the intelligence community could arrange a new identity in a matter of hours, get him anywhere in the world in a day, hear any call, open any e-mail, track any vehicle. But the power came with a price, one Wells could no longer pay. He had always been allergic to the Langley bureaucracy, the way the CIA's executives put frontline operatives at risk for their own gain. After his last mission, the tension had grown unbearable. Vinny Duto, the agency's director, had used Wells to win an intra-agency power struggle. Wells felt what was left of his honor boiling away in the cauldron of Duto's contempt.

He saw no choice but to quit, make a life for himself in New



Hampshire, a land whose silent woods mocked Washington's empty talk. The granite mountains would outlast empires and the men who built them. He rented a cabin in a little town called Berlin. But he and his dog, Tonka, spent a lot of time fifty miles south, in North Conway, with Anne Marshall. Wells had met Anne a few months before, before his last mission. She knew who he was and some of what he'd done, though he kept some details from her. He wasn't sure yet what their future would be.

**NOW WELLS WAS BACK** in the field. He had decided to run down a fugitive CIA double agent. Without official approval. Not for the first time on this trip, Wells wondered what he was trying to prove. And to whom.

He dropped the empty water bottle on the floor, where it joined crushed Bud Light cans and the remains of a joint that had rolled under the dresser between the two queen beds. All left here on the unlikely chance that a Jamaican drug dealer decided he needed to check their cover. Gaffan and Wells were sharing the room, which had acquired a funky odor after four days.

"Yo. You have to play that way?"

"Did you really just say 'yo'?"

"I did." Gaffan had grown up in northern New Jersey, a rowhouse town called Bergenfield, near New York City. His years in North Carolina and Georgia had coated his Jersey accent with a strange sugar. He seemed to speak fast and slow at the same time. Wells couldn't explain how.

"Please don't ever again."

Wells pulled a dirty T-shirt on with his cargo shorts, slipped black work boots on his sockless feet. He'd owned the boots barely two weeks, but they were as ripe as the room. He tugged a New York Mets

cap low on his head and stuffed twenty twenty-dollar bills in his pocket. Wells was a Red Sox fan, but he couldn't wear the cursive *B* under these circumstances.

"How do I look?"

"The question is not how you look, it's how you smell."

"How do I smell?"

"Like a skeezy pothead dumb enough to think you can buy a few ounces of good shit without getting rolled, mon."

"Exactly right. Let's go."

Gaffan was a former Special Ops soldier who had crossed paths with Wells twice before. They'd stayed in loose touch after the second mission. When Wells realized he would need backup for this trip, he'd called Gaffan, who had quit the army to join a private security firm in North Carolina. Gaffan had happily taken a week of vacation to join him.

At the door, Gaffan stopped. "Peashooters tonight?" Wells's old Makarov and Gaffan's new Glock were stowed in plastic bags in the air-conditioning vent in the bathroom—along with two suits, one for Wells and one for Gaffan. For the moment, Wells had insisted they leave the weapons. They were supposed to be small-time dope dealers. Guns would raise questions, and being unarmed didn't bother him. He'd gone naked on lots of missions. Gaffan obviously didn't enjoy the feeling. He'd asked Wells to reconsider a couple of times.

"Son. Don't take your guns to town."

Gaffan tapped his temple. "Johnny Cash. Like it, yo."

"Keep this up and there's trouble ahead."

"The Dead. Showing your age."

**WELLS AND GAFFAN WERE** chasing Keith Robinson, a former CIA officer who had sold secrets to China. After his cover was blown, Robinson fled the United States on a fake passport. For three years, he

turned to smoke. Agents never found a credit card or phone connected to him. His name didn't pop at border crossings. The best guess was that Robinson had altered his appearance and was living in a country that had a mostly cash economy—and enough Americans that he wouldn't stand out. Selling trinkets in Guatemala. Teaching English in Vietnam. Studying at an ashram in India.

The CIA had promised a five-hundred-thousand-dollar reward for information leading to Robinson's arrest. The FBI and CIA websites and U.S. embassies displayed his photo and the reward offer. The agency's best hope was that a tourist would recognize Robinson or that someone who knew him would betray him for the money. Indeed, tipsters had reported spotting Robinson everywhere from Paris to Beijing to Wrigley Field. But none of the sightings panned out.

The investigation had not been closed. It never would be. Robinson's crimes were too serious for the agency and the FBI to give up on him. Officially, anyway. But after three years without a lead, only four agents were assigned to the case full-time. They spent most days asking local police forces to chase tips. They no longer monitored the phone calls or mail sent to his ex-wife, Janice.

**SO THEY NEVER SAW** the postcard that dropped through the slot of Janice's front door in Vienna, Virginia, a few miles from the agency's headquarters. On the front, a photo of a six-foot-long marijuana cigarette on a beach towel. And four words: "Getting baked in Jamaica." On the back, a phone number. No signature, no explanation.

Janice hoped the card wasn't what she thought it was. Suddenly she was thirsty, an itch in her brain as real as a spider bite. She could almost feel the welt. She didn't have any booze in the house, of course. But she knew every liquor store in Fairfax County. Didn't have to be hard alcohol. She could have a glass or two of wine. To relax. A bottle. One bottle wouldn't kill her.

She raised her shirt, looked down at the scar where the George Washington University surgeons had given her a new liver. She'd lost the old one to cirrhosis before she turned forty. *Wouldn't kill her?* She might as well put a gun in her mouth. Be quicker and hurt less. She tore the postcard into pieces so small it looked like she'd run it through a shredder. Her hands ached when she was finished. She threw the pieces into the garbage disposal and went to the first Alcoholics Anonymous meeting she could find.

**THE SECOND CARD CAME** three months later. This one had a photo of Bob Marley above the words "Don't worry, be happy." A phone number. Janice couldn't remember if it was the same one that was on the first card.

This time she didn't panic. She made herself a pot of coffee and sat on her couch and stared at Bob Marley. She couldn't pretend now. It was Eddie. At the agency he'd gone by Keith, but his middle name was Edward. She'd called him Eddie, and she'd always think of him as Eddie. Anyway, it was him. Had to be.

She'd hoped he was dead. A couple of the FBI guys had told her, he's dead. You can't run like the old days. We post his picture on the Web, everybody in the world sees it. If he were still alive, someone would have told us. She never believed them. Eddie was too much of a snake to die. A cockroach. Didn't the scientists say that cockroaches would outlast everybody? He'd dragged her down inch by inch, drop by drop, and she'd let him.

No. She wouldn't blame him. After their son Mark died, she'd stopped caring about anything but her own misery. Every day dawned grayer than the one before until the sun stopped rising and the night was eternal. Eddie seeped away in the darkness like smoke. So she wouldn't blame him for what she'd done to herself. But she wouldn't

forgive him, either. He was a whoremonger and a spy. He'd betrayed his country. Four men, at least, had died for his sins.

She'd felt so stupid the night she found out. How could she not have known? The early-morning walks. The piles of cash. Poor Eddie. Always frustrated with the agency. Stuck in a dead-end job working counterintelligence when he wanted so much to be in a foreign post. Always so sure that his talents were wasted.

She had to admit it seemed obvious in retrospect.

After Eddie left, the FBI moved her to a hotel, a Marriott in Alexandria. And they made sure that she had plenty of wine in the room. They weren't even subtle about it. They brought in Costco bags filled with bottles. For a couple days she was grateful. Then, finally, she realized just how far she'd fallen. The FBI was afraid if she stopped drinking she'd go into withdrawal.

A week later, she quit. She woke up and reached for the bottle on the bedside table and thought, *I can't do this anymore*. She wasn't sure at first whether *this* meant drinking or living, but then some part of her decided she wasn't ready to give up yet. In a day, she had the shakes so bad that the agents called 911. She wound up in thirty-day rehab, and to everyone's surprise, including hers, it took.

A month after it ended, she got another surprise. She woke up vomiting, her eyes a pale yellow. A blood test showed she had hepatitis C, a final going-away present from Eddie. The combination of booze and virus had ruined her liver. The doctors told her that if she didn't get a transplant in a year, she'd be dead. Not that she needed the warning. Her skin was yellow, curdled like milk left out too long.

She didn't expect a transplant. She didn't deserve one. She had done this to herself. But the transplant networks had their own rules, and after eight months her name came up. She never asked about the donor. She couldn't face another ounce of grief.

The transplant took. The immunosuppressant drugs worked. She

went to her AA meetings and stayed sober. The months turned into a year, and another. She divorced Eddie in absentia. She started teaching kindergarten again, something she hadn't done since her son died. She knew her life would never be smooth. Her ex-husband was a traitor. She was no one's idea of a catch, a forty-year-old woman on her second liver. But she imagined she might make a life for herself. It would be simple and lonely, but it would be hers.

Then the postcards came.

**ALMOST FROM THE BEGINNING**, the FBI agents had told her that she wasn't a suspect. For that, she was grateful. As the investigation wound down, they asked only that she inform them if Eddie ever reached out. A call, a letter, an e-mail. *Even if you're not sure it's him. You start getting hang-ups late at night, let us know.*

Now she needed to tell them. But she couldn't face having Eddie back in her life. She couldn't face a trial, replaying the humiliations of the last decade. The newspapers would portray her as the pitiful ex-wife of a traitor. And they'd be right.

She needed Eddie gone. Forever.

*John Wells.*

It wasn't so much that she remembered Wells. She'd never forgotten him. He and another CIA agent, Jennifer Exley, had discovered what Eddie had done. They'd come to the house the night after Eddie disappeared. She hadn't seen Wells since then. But he'd taken charge, and part of her, despite her despair, because of her despair, had hoped that he would sweep her up and rock her to sleep. Her knight in bulletproof armor. Maybe he could solve this for her.

Ridiculous. God. Ridiculous didn't even begin to describe her. But Wells had given her his phone number. And she'd never thrown it away. She'd kept it in her wallet all along. Now she reached for it.



**WELLS CAME TO SEE** her two days later. He was older than she remembered, flecks of gray in his hair, narrow creases around his eyes like a child's drawing of rays coming off the sun. But he still had his hair. His chin was still square, and his shoulders, too. She'd bet he could still pick her up with one hand. Anyway, this wasn't a *date*. She hadn't told him about the postcard, but he must have known that her call had to do with Eddie.

He stepped inside, looked around as if he were trying to match the furniture in his head with what he saw in the living room. Most everything was new. She'd thrown out the heavy, smoke-sodden couches and replaced them with bright futons from Ikea.

"I redecorated. It's probably meant for some college student half my age, but I don't care. I needed the old stuff gone." She realized she was chattering and made herself stop. She couldn't remember the last time a man had visited the house.

"It's nice."

"I'd offer you a drink, but there's nothing in the house—"

"I understand—"

She felt herself redden. Of course he understood. "If you'd like some coffee."

"Coffee's fine, sure."

She came back with two cups of coffee. "Milk? Sugar?"

He shook his head, leaned back, waited. She'd hoped for small talk. She wondered if Wells was still with Exley. She'd been certain back then that they were together. And even as she watched her life collapse, she'd found the energy to be jealous.

But she was afraid to ask Wells about his life. She could see he wasn't much for casual conversation. So she told him about the postcards, how she'd destroyed one and kept the other. She showed the

card to Wells. It was creased at the corners. He looked it over carefully, though there wasn't much to see, just the phone number and the stamp, canceled with a postmark from Kingston.

"You think it's Eddie?" she said.

"Any idea why he'd do this now? He knows the risk."

"I think maybe he's lonely. And bored. And thinks I won't tell."

"Why would he think that?"

"Because he believes I'm weak. And that he can manipulate me. And he's right."

"You're not weak. You're—" Wells broke off. She could see he couldn't bring himself to say "strong," the lie was too obvious. "You're human. But what I don't understand is why you came to me on this. The FBI—"

"I don't want them. I want you."

"I'm retired."

"Even better. Because there's something I can't ask the FBI."

Wells shook his head, like he already knew what she was going to say.

"When you catch him. I want you to kill him."

**AGAIN, WELLS THOUGHT. VINNY** Duto last year and now Janice Robinson. The director of the CIA and the ex-wife of a double agent. They had nothing in common aside from their shared belief that Wells would kill on command. That he would turn another human being into dust, not in battle but methodically and without remorse. Wells had killed before, more times than he wanted to count, but he wasn't an assassin.

"Not yet," he said aloud.

"Not yet what?"

"I'd love to be the one to bring him in. But it's not my place."



“You don’t understand.” She told him of the humiliations she feared, the loss of privacy. “Anyway, what he did. Not to me. To the country. He doesn’t deserve a trial. He deserves to disappear. Feed him to the sharks.”

An idea flickered in Wells. “Look. If we’re lucky, and Keith”—Wells couldn’t make himself say “Eddie”—“is in a place where I have leverage, what if I get him to come back to the United States on his own? And plead guilty. No trial.”

“I know what you’re saying. If he plea-bargains, he won’t get the death penalty. But I promise he doesn’t care. Knowing Eddie, he thinks that life in prison, no parole, is just as bad. If you catch him, he’ll want a trial. His moment in the limelight, to tell the world what he thinks. He’ll love it. He’ll drag it out as long as he can.”

“There’s things worse than the death penalty.”

“I don’t get it.”

“I guess you’ll have to trust me.”

**FROM HIS SUBARU, WELLS** called Ellis Shafer, his old boss at the agency. Shafer was an odd little man, jumpy and brilliant. Sometimes Wells thought that he and Shafer were both too independent to fit inside the CIA’s bureaucracy. Yet the evidence proved him wrong. Shafer had survived almost forty years at Langley. And Shafer had stayed on when Wells had quit, even though Vinny Duto had used Shafer as badly as Wells on their last assignment. Wells supposed he understood. Shafer was more cynical, more used to these games. Still, he hadn’t entirely forgiven Shafer.

“Hello, John.”

“You’ll never guess who I just saw.”

“Bill Gates.”

“What? No—”

“Tiger Woods.”

“Stop naming random celebrities.”

“You asked me to guess.”

“No, I didn’t.”

“Well, you said I’d never guess, which is the same thing—”

“Ellis. Please stop. You win.”

“Who was it, then?”

“I’ll tell you when I see you. Which will be in about five minutes.”

“Don’t hurt me. I promise I’ll confess to whatever you like.” Shafer hung up before Wells could reply.

**THE FRONT DOOR WAS** unlocked. “In the kitchen,” Shafer yelled.

The kitchen smelled of burnt coffee. Coffee grounds blotched Shafer’s jeans, and he was wearing a T-shirt that said “World’s Best Grandpa.” He raised his arms to hug Wells.

“No hug. Please. And congratulations, Ellis. Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Tell you what?”

Wells nodded at the T-shirt.

“Oh. No. There’s no grandchildren. Lisa, you know, she’s at UVA, and she’s got a boyfriend now. It’s kind of reverse psychology. I figure the shirt is so lame, she’ll be sure to take care when she—”

“You found the shirt for ninety-nine cents, didn’t you? At Sam’s Club or something.”

“Maybe.”

“Ellis, you’re getting weird in your old age.”

“You sound like my wife. But it’s good to see you. What’s going on?”

“Sit.” Shafer sat. Wells recounted Janice Robinson’s story, and what she’d asked. By the time he finished, Shafer was leaning forward

across the table, his eyes boring into Wells, all the slack gone out of him.

“You know, I hear this, my first thought is you quit,” Shafer said. “You live up in the sticks with your dog and your new girlfriend.”

“She’s not my new girlfriend—”

“Oh, no, no, no. You are some genius at ops, but you couldn’t be more emotionally stunted. Especially about women. And please don’t tell me we’re the same. I’ve been married thirty years. Thirty years, one woman.”

“I didn’t come here to talk about this.”

“How about this, then? Call the FBI and be done with it.”

“Janice Robinson wants me to handle it.”

“I’m sorry. I missed the section of the criminal code that says the traitor’s ex-wife decides who brings him in. Anyway, she doesn’t want you to handle it. She wants you, period. I remember Jenny telling me, back in the day.”

“I have a plan.” Wells explained.

“You understand that’s not a plan. That’s five long-shot bets. Even if you’re right about where he is, what he’s doing, you have to find him. Then you have to get to him. Then you have to hope he doesn’t want to go out in a blaze of glory.”

“He’s a runner. Not a fighter.”

“Runners fight when they’re cornered. I understand why you’re doing this. But nothing’s going to make up for what happened last time. Let the Feebs”—Shafer’s unfriendly term for the FBI—“do their job.”

“Thanks for the advice.” Wells stood to leave.

“You’re going to be as pigheaded as always, do this on your own.”

Wells nodded.

“Then you want some help?”

Another nod.

“All right. But let me make one thing clear. I’m not doing this because I think I owe you, I should have quit with you, whatever. I’m doing it so you don’t blow it.”

**THE NEXT AFTERNOON, JANICE** led Wells to her kitchen. The counter was strewn with red horses, purple cows, yellow sheep, a menagerie of construction paper.

“Decorating?”

She laughed, the sound sweeter than Wells expected. “For my kindergarteners.”

“You like teaching?”

“You probably know this, it must be in a file. But Eddie wanted another baby. After our son died. I couldn’t do it. Wouldn’t. Maybe things would have been different if I . . .” She trailed off.

“Guys like your husband, they find excuses to do what they want. And if they can’t find one, they just make it up.”

Janice shrugged: *I don’t believe you, but I won’t argue.* “Anyway, the teaching, it’s D.C., Northeast, a charter school. These kids, they don’t have two nickels to rub together. You see it in the winter, their shoes, these cheap sneakers that soak through if there’s any rain. Much less snow. So I’m trying to show them the world cares about them, even a little bit. Maybe it means something to them. Probably not, but maybe. That’s a long way of saying yes, I like it, John. You don’t mind if I call you John?”

“Of course not.” Wells touched Janice’s arm and then realized he shouldn’t have. Her face lit like a winning slot machine. “You understand what I want you to do?”

“I don’t know if I can.”

“It’s the only way. Otherwise, I have to tell the FBI.”

“All right.”

“Good. So tomorrow, somebody’s gonna put a tap and trace on your phone. Keith won’t know it’s there.” Shafer had called in a favor he was owed from an engineer who used to work at NSA. “Tomorrow night, you call him. Sooner or later, he’ll call you back. Don’t ask him where he is. Unless he brings up a visit, don’t mention it.”

“Don’t push.”

“Right. You’ll make him nervous. Don’t be too friendly. Don’t forgive him. Don’t let him think you’re giving in too easily. Deep down he knows this call is a bad idea. You’ve got to make him focus on you instead of that.”

Janice turned away from Wells and opened the kitchen faucet all the way but held her glass a foot above the spout, as if somehow the water could defy gravity.

“He loved me,” she whispered to the window, her voice barely audible above the water sloshing down the drain. “It sounds stupid, but it’s true.”

“I believe you.”

“God. I hope you catch him.”

**THE NEXT NIGHT, WITH** Wells sitting beside her on her couch, Janice made the call, straight to voicemail. “Eddie. Is that you? I got your cards. Call me.”

Wells figured Robinson would wait weeks to call back. If he ever did. But a few minutes later, with Wells still in the house, the phone rang. Janice grabbed it. “Hello.”

Through the receiver, slow, steady breaths.

“Eddie. Is that you?” She waited. “Why did you send the cards, Eddie?”

“Are you okay, Jan?” His voice was raspy and deep.

“I had a liver transplant.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Go to hell, Eddie.” She slammed down the phone before Wells could stop her and slumped into Wells’s chest. They sat silently for a few minutes as Wells wondered why he’d ever trusted Janice.

“He’s never calling back, is he?” Janice finally said.

“I don’t know.” The phone rang again. Janice reached for the phone, but Wells put a hand on the receiver before she could answer.

“Like I said, he’s definitely calling back. Keep cool. Promise?”

She nodded. He let go of the receiver, and she picked up.

“I deserved that.”

“Why are you calling me?” Her southern twang thickened when she talked to Robinson.

“I wanted to talk.”

“That simple. Like you’ve been away on business instead of—I don’t even know how to describe it—”

“I miss you, Jan. It’s hard out here.” He sounded close to tears. Wells hadn’t understood until now that in addition to everything else, Robinson was simply a spoiled brat.

“Are you sick?”

“Been better. But I have a fine doctor taking care of me. Cuban. Viva Fidel. I’m gonna live forever. I’m gonna learn how to fly.”

“You need to turn yourself in.”

A hollow laugh from the other end. “Not a good idea.”

“What do you want?”

“To talk. To somebody who knows me.”

“I don’t know you. The day they came to the house, I realized that.”

Beside Janice, Wells twisted his hands: *Steer the conversation if you can*. “I hope you’re doing something good now, Eddie. Making up for what you did.”

Another laugh. “Could say I’m doing a little community service. Helping youngsters in need. I’ve got to go, okay?”

“Tell me how to get hold of you.”

“I’ll get hold of you.”

“Eddie. Are you still in Jamaica? Kingston?” Wells shook his head no, but he was too late.

“Are they there? On the call?”

“No, it’s just me. I swear.”

“Swear on Mark’s grave.”

She looked at Wells. He nodded.

“Don’t make me do that.” She squeezed her eyes shut. Wells wasn’t sure whether she was talking to him or to Robinson.

“Do it.”

“God, Eddie. I swear. It’s just me.” Tears peeped from under her eyelids.

“Yes. I’m in Jamaica. Montego Bay. I’ll call you again.” *Click.*

Janice swung at Wells, her fist glancing off his chest.

“You shouldn’t have made me say that.”

Wells was all out of compassion. Her husband was about the most miserable human being alive. She’d just had to lie on her dead son’s grave. He was sorry for her. But that didn’t mean he was responsible for her.

“You wanted him? We’ll catch him now. Between the trace and what he told you, we’ll have enough. If he reaches out again, let me know.”

She shrank against the couch. “I’m sorry,” she said. “Please don’t go.”

Wells walked out. He wanted to find a fight, make someone bleed. Instead he got into his Subaru and peeled away, promising himself that Keith Edward Robinson would regret sending those postcards.

**SEVEN HOURS AND FIVE** hundred thirty miles later, Wells turned off I-91 at Boltonville, Vermont. He had sped through the night *Can-*

*nonball Run*—style. Normally, driving soothed his anger, but tonight he gained no relief from the empty asphalt.

Long ago, in Afghanistan, Wells had converted to Islam. But his faith came and went, pulling away just when he thought he'd mastered it. Of course, no one could master faith. God always hovered around the next curve, the next, the next. The quest to find Him had to be its own reward. Wells understood that much, if nothing more. But tonight the search felt lonelier than ever. He hadn't seen another vehicle for more than half an hour. As though he were the last man alive.

He swung right onto Route 302, drove through a little town called Wells River—no relation. Past a shuttered gas station and an empty general store and over a low bridge into New Hampshire. Then Woodsville, a metropolis by the standards of the North Country, with a hospital and a bank and a thousand people clustered in steep-sided wooden houses against the winters. Wells gunned the engine to leave the town behind.

A few miles on, he swung right, southeast on Route 112, the Kancamagus Highway, impassible in the winter. He was exhausted and driving too fast now, through old forests of fir and pine, the Subaru a blur in the night, sticking low to the road. The next curve, and the next. Wells felt his eyelids slipping. In the dark now, in the night, he began to murmur through pursed lips the *shahada*, the essential Muslim creed: *There is no God but God, and Muhammad is his messenger*. Finally he emerged into the open plain of Conway, a town too quaint for its own good, and turned left toward North Conway.

Anne lived in a farmhouse at the edge of town, run-down and sweet, with maple plank floors and an iron stove in the kitchen. Wells was helping her restore it, painting, sanding the floors, even putting in new sinks—a job that had almost gone disastrously wrong. The place needed new wiring and a new roof, and she couldn't afford the fixes on a cop's pay. Wells's salary had piled up during his years



undercover. He wasn't sure whether he should offer to pay, if he'd be presuming too much.

He slipped the Subaru into the garage beside the house and padded into the kitchen through the unlocked back door. Tonka, his dog, a German shepherd mutt, trotted up to greet him, her big tail wagging wildly. She put her paws on him, buried her head in his chest. He'd bought jerky at the gas station, and he fed it to her strip by strip.

"John?"

Anne's bedroom was upstairs. She slept sideways across the bed, stretched like a cat under a down comforter. He slipped under the blankets and hugged her warm, sleepy body and kissed her slowly.

"Flannel pajamas. Sexy." He tried to reach under them, but she twisted away. "You stink of the road. Brush your teeth and come back. I'm not going anywhere."

And she wasn't.

An hour later, she lay beside him, touching the scar on his upper arm, a knuckle-sized knot from a bullet he'd taken long before. She rolled the dead flesh between her fingers like a marble. "Does it ache?"

"No."

She pinched it. "Does it now?"

"I thought we were supposed to be relaxing."

"You never struck me as the cuddling type."

He closed his eyes, and she rubbed his face, tracing slow circles over his cheeks. In seconds he fell into a doze, imagining an endless narrow highway. But he woke to find her hand sliding down his stomach.

"Really? Again?"

"If you can handle it."

"Easy for you to say. I do all the work and you get all the credit."

"Is that so?" She lifted her hand, tweaked the tip of his nose.

Wells turned sideways so they were face-to-face. "Maybe not always."

Again she dropped her arm. He was eight inches taller than she was, and she had to scoot halfway under the blanket to follow her hand. "I'm looking for something." Her hand was on his stomach now.

"You found it."

"That's your belly button."

He leaned down, and their mouths met.

"There it is." She paused. "You're worn out. But I can fix that."

"We'll see. Maybe . . . Yes. Yes, you can."

**LATER SHE NESTLED AGAINST** him, her breathing soft and steady.

"You've got a mission coming. An operation. Whatever you call it."

"Why do you say that?"

"I saw it when you came in. In your shoulders. Want to tell me?"

"It's old business." He waited. "Are you mad I can't tell you?"

"John. Please. Do you want me to say I am, so you have an excuse to leave? You don't need an excuse."

He was silent. Then, finally: "I'm sorry."

"It's like you want to reinvent yourself but you know there's no point in trying, because you know that you can only be who you already are."

"Isn't that the same for everyone?"

"Most of us have some give. You're cut from rock."

"Let's go to sleep."

"You want to spend your life with me here, you will. If not, you won't. Just don't ask me to fall in love with you while you're deciding. I have to protect myself, too."

He closed his eyes. He felt that somehow she was accusing him, though he wasn't sure of what. Anyway, everything she said was true.

He slept heavily and without dreams. When he woke, she was

gone. She worked the afternoon shift. He padded downstairs to find that she'd left coffee and a tray of freshly baked biscuits. He always wound up with women kinder than he deserved.

Wells drank the coffee as he considered his next move. He was guessing that Robinson dealt drugs small-time. He'd be handy to the local dealers. As a white face, he'd be less likely to frighten tourists who wanted to score.

Wells wondered how long Robinson had been playing this game, and why. Maybe he'd drunk or smoked though his cash and was supporting his habits by dealing. Maybe he had the insane idea that if he put together a big enough nut, he could get back to the United States. Maybe he was hoping to relive the thrills he'd had as a mole. Even he might not know the answer. Guys who listed pros and cons on a yellow pad didn't wind up as double agents.

Now that Robinson had given up his best defense, his invisibility, Wells figured that finding him shouldn't be too difficult. Montego Bay was only so large. Still, Wells wanted backup for the mission, a face that Robinson wouldn't recognize. He thumbed through his phone, found Gaffan's number.

**MONTEGO BAY WAS JAMAICA'S** second-largest city, the hub of the tourist trade. From November to April, cruise ships disgorged clumps of sunburned Americans to buy T-shirts and rum at a heavily policed mall near the port. They were back on board by nightfall to head to the Bahamas or Puerto Rico.

Montego also had a busy international airport. Many wealthier visitors saw the city only on their way to the fancy all-inclusive resorts outside of town. But younger tourists on tighter budgets often stayed in Montego itself, in an area south of the airport called the Hip Strip, a name that immediately proclaimed a trying-too-hard uncoolness. Centered around Gloucester Avenue, the Hip Strip mixed

hotels and clubs with shops selling overpriced bongos and bead necklaces. The hotel rooms facing Gloucester were useful for heavy partiers or heavy sleepers only. Until early morning, reggae and rap boomed from beat-up Chevy Caprices, the old square ones, and Toyota RAV4s with tinted windows. Outside the clubs, barkers promised drink specials and Bob Marley cover bands. Wells and Gaffan had rented a room just off Gloucester. Wells figured they would cruise the clubs until they ran across Robinson.

But catching Robinson had proven more difficult than Wells had hoped. Until he arrived, he hadn't understood the scope of the drug trade in Jamaica. Pot and other drugs were technically illegal on the island, but at every corner on Gloucester, dreadlocked men cooed, "Smoke. Spliff. Ganja, man. Purple Haze." After a while, the words blended into background noise. "Spliffsmokeganjaman." The Jamaican national anthem.

The Montego Bay cops were around, too, walking the avenue. As far as Wells could tell, they weren't trying to stop the trade. Their presence was intentionally obvious, giving the dealers plenty of warning. The only people they caught were tourists too stupid or high to hide their smoking. Wells had seen an arrest, a barely disguised shakedown. A young woman—mid-twenties, maybe—passed a tiny joint to her husband when the cops approached. "Come here," one of the cops said. The couple wore narrow wedding rings of bright, cheap gold. "I'm sorry," the woman said. "We're sorry. We didn't mean to disrespect your country."

The lead cop pulled the man into an alley. The other cops stood in the street around the woman. "You know, it's the first time I ever smoked pot," she mumbled. "I don't even feel anything. Just thirsty."

Wells watched from a shop across the street, riffling through T-shirts that read "Life's a Beach in Jamaica" and "No Shirt. No

Shoes. No Problem.” A couple minutes later, the guy emerged from the alley, an unhappy smile plastered on his face.

The cop in charge seemed satisfied. He patted the husband. “Enjoy your trip, mon. And be careful.”

“Yes, sir. We’ll do that.” The cops disappeared. The husband pulled out his wallet, cheap black Velcro, and opened it wide. Empty. “Two hundred dollars. Assholes,” he said.

“You said it would be okay,” his wife said.

“It could have been worse.”

A philosophy of sorts, Wells figured. Then the couple disappeared, poorer and wiser. The shakedown had happened the second day, when Wells still hoped to find Robinson on the street. But Robinson was no doubt working carefully, popping up for a few days and then retreating. And the sheer volume of the drug trade meant that Wells and Gaffan couldn’t simply hope to bump into him. They would have to search him out, a more dangerous proposition.

**NOW WELLS TUCKED HIS** wallet, thick with twenties, into his shorts and followed Gaffan out of their hotel room. “Where do we start tonight?”

“Margaritaville.” Part of Jimmy Buffett’s empire, which stretched over Florida and the Caribbean like an oversized beach umbrella. The Montego Bay outpost featured water trampolines and a one-hundred-twenty-foot waterslide that dropped riders into the Caribbean. Each night it filled with tourists who would prefer to visit another country without seeing anything outside their comfort zone, exactly the type of unimaginative dopers who wanted to score from white dealers.

The night before at Margaritaville, Wells had watched a guy in a tropical shirt work the room. He sat with a table of frat boys for ten minutes before he and one of the guys got up. They came back five

minutes later, the frat boy rubbing his nose, his face flushed. The coke must have been pretty good. An hour or so later, the dealer pulled the same trick with another table. But the dealer couldn't have been Robinson. He had blond hair and was a decade too young.

Margaritaville was on the southern end of Gloucester Avenue, separated from the street by high walls. Wells and Gaffan paid their cover and walked past three bouncers, each bigger than the next. They gave Wells a not-very-friendly look, letting him know that his shorts and especially his boots barely passed muster.

"Welcome to the islands," Gaffan said. "Nicest people on earth. Want a beer?"

"Red Stripe."

The inside of the bar was empty. The drinkers had migrated to the decks over the bay, getting ready for another subtropical sunset. The sun had turned the sky a perfect Crayola red, and a satisfied hum ran through the crowd, as though the world had been created solely for its amusement. The dealer stood in the corner, in a different tropical shirt today, his hair pulled into a neat ponytail. Wells edged next to him.

"Nice day," Wells said.

"They all are this time of year."

"Peak season. Business must be good."

The dealer shook his head.

"I saw you last night."

"Looking for something?"

"I might be."

"I'm not a mind reader. Ask away."

"It's more a someone than a something."

"That's gonna be impossible. Something, difficult. Someone, impossible."

"You don't even know who."

The dealer pulled away from the rail, turned to face Wells. He looked like a surfer, tall and lanky, with a craggy, suntanned face. He lifted his sunglasses to reveal striking blue eyes.

“What I know is that you and your bud, you couldn’t look more like cops if you tried. Him especially.”

Gaffan walked toward them, holding two Red Stripes. Wells raised a hand to stop him. “We’re not cops.”

“You don’t fit, see. There’s several kinds of dooper tourists. The frat boys, bachelor-party types, they just wanna buy some weed, coke, not get ripped off too badly. You’re too old to be frat boys. The old heads, retired hippie dippers, they were in Jamaica back in the day, man, back in the day. Probably once for about a week, but they still talk about it. Now they have kids and they came on a cruise, but they want to get high for old times’ sake. That *definitely* is not you.”

“True.”

“Then you have the true potheads, the guys who subscribe to *High Times* and argue on message boards about Purple Skunk versus Northern Lights. Amateur scientists. At least they would be if they weren’t so damned high all the time. They come down here two or three at a time. Mostly they don’t look like you, they’re fatter and their eyes are half closed. But let’s say you two have kept yourself up better than most. Except they don’t hang out here. They go straight to Orange Hill, like wine connoisseurs in Napa doing taste tests. And believe me, they’re equally annoying. So what are you, then? You look like cops. Or DEA, but why the hell would the DEA be buying ounces on the Hip Strip?”

“We’re not DEA. We’re not cops. We’re looking for someone. Nobody fancy. Nobody like Dudus”—Christopher Coke, a dealer who had run an infamous gang with the unlikely name of the Shower Posse.

“That’s good. Seeing as he’s in Kingston”—the Jamaican capital.

“And seeing as you wouldn’t get within a mile of him. Let me tell you about Jamaica. Seventeen hundred murders reported last year, not counting a couple hundred bodies that never turn up. Dumped in *de sea* to feed *de fishees*, mon. Four times as many murders as New York City, and New York has three times as many people as Jamaica.”

The dealer stopped talking as a woman splashed down the water-slide and into the bay with a pleased scream. “Watch this. Her top’s going to come off. Yep.”

Shouts of “Tits!” erupted from the deck. “Tits! Tits! Tits!” The woman happily raised her polka-dotted bikini in the air as the crowd cheered.

“The whole country is a warehouse for coke and pot. From here you go west to New Orleans, east to the Bahamas and Florida. The politicians are owned by the gangs lock, stock, and barrel. They don’t even try to hide it. The cops just play along. Don’t let the dreads and the Marley songs fool you. This place is Haiti with better beaches.”

“So how do you get by?” Wells found himself intrigued.

“These frat boys? They’d pay by credit card if they could. They like a friendly face. And by friendly I mean white.”

“And you keep the locals happy.”

“I take care of the people who take care of me. In and out of this bar. I understand my place in the ecosystem. I don’t have aspirations. And understand, please, that whether it’s white or green, it’s so pure that I can step on it two, three times and still make my customers happy. In fact, I have to, or they’d wind up OD’ing. And trust me, you don’t want to see the inside of a Jamaican hospital, any more than a Jamaican jail.”

Around them the deck was filling up.

“It’s getting busy,” the dealer said. “I appreciate the chance to chat, but I gotta go.”

“How do we prove we’re not cops? Get high with you?”



“I believe you. You’re not cops. But you’re trouble. Whatever you want, it’s trouble.”

The sun touched the edge of the horizon. A long collective sigh went up from the crowd beside them.

“Gonna be a beautiful night,” the dealer said. “Do me a favor. Get lost. I see you and your boy hanging around, I’m gonna talk to my friends. You don’t want that. These dudes, they won’t care even if you do have a badge. They do sick stuff when they’re stoned. Most people get relaxed when they smoke, but these guys, they just dissociate. They won’t even hear you screaming.”

“We’ll be going, then.”

The dealer nodded. Two minutes later, Wells and Gaffan were on the street.

“So? He know where Robinson is?”

“He didn’t say, but I have a feeling he might.”

“And he’ll help us?”

“He doesn’t think so. But we’re gonna change his mind.”