

Prologue

There are things I'm going to say here that people will tell you, He can't know that. But that's just because they're ignorant of how I did it. Sometimes, all you have to do is just keep your mouth shut and listen. You'd be surprised what people will tell you when you let them, but the folks I worked for had other ways of knowing things, too. Ways I can't talk about, especially not with that treason business waiting to crawl out from the rug it was swept under. That's one can of worms I'm not going to kick over no matter how hard you ask, so you might as well not try.

And there are people, and plenty of them, who accuse me of spackling over the empty spaces when I don't know every little detail about what I'm talking about. There may be something to that, but most of what I'm going to tell you is truer than you'd guess. You just have to realize that knowing things was my job and I was very good at it.

What I can tell you is that all I wanted out of my final assignment was to be shuffled off to some quiet place where I could finish out my career in peace. Rachelle and I pulled some strings and got posted to Morocco where she could keep doing what she was doing, and I could slide halfway into retirement

without having to do much of anything. Looking back, we would have been better off if we'd picked some less exciting locale to serve out our remaining months, like Pakistan or Afghanistan.

1

What Happened to Amelia

My new job, if anybody had cared enough to ask, was to report to Washington on how women in Morocco were treated. That was back when Hillary Clinton was secretary of state and women's issues had become the crusade du jour of American foreign policy. On paper, it was the just kind of backburner assignment I'd been hoping for.

I don't want to go casting slanders on America's ever-evolving ideals for how other people should live their lives, but keeping spreadsheets on distressed damsels isn't exactly the main career path to becoming ambassador. Our country has bigger irons in Morocco's fire than that, like keeping the king happy. Mohammed VI is one of the few friends we have left in Muslim parts of the world, and we most emphatically do not need to go muddying up that relationship.

My job was to send enough reports back to DC enumerating the ways the embassy was pursuing Mrs Clinton's pet project to keep the State

Department happy, which wasn't much. Then go home at night and plan for retirement.

My new boss and I had met before and she couldn't have been happier with that arrangement. She hadn't thought much of my work the last time, she didn't expect much out of me this time, and the less involved I got in any real work, the happier she was going to be. It was a win win all around and would have been the ideal situation if god hadn't taken the opportunity to play one of his everlasting pranks on me. Because it wasn't just women I was supposed to report on, but kids as well.

About three days into the job I read through the files and discovered what everybody else already knew: that there was a wrong-way Underground Railroad stealing underage girls from down south in the mountains and carrying them up through Tangier to sell in Europe, my opinion about how I wanted to spend my time changed. I didn't agree with Mrs Clinton on a lot of matters, but I was with her on that one. The whole business about children turned my stomach. Worse, it made me think about what happened to Amelia. That was more decades ago than I want to admit, but it still makes me feel bad about myself every time remember it.

I was nine at the time. Amelia was the big sister I never had, and I'd had a crush on her as long as I could remember. I'd show up at her apartment after school, or on Saturdays, and she would be practicing the bugle, at least

until the neighbors called the police and put a stop to it. Or, sometimes, she'd be tinkering with one of her airplane motors, making the propeller buzz louder. One time she built an entire German Stuka dive bomber from a kit, with flaps on the wings and tail flaps and a remote controller, and we flew it around the playground until I crashed it into a basketball hoop. She was eleven.

People talk a lot about black kids growing up without fathers, but there are different ways to do that. My situation wasn't anything I could complain about, at least not to Amelia. Her daddy had been a drug addict who disappeared before she was born. Mine was a preacher, which is why I didn't spend Sundays with her.

There was no better time to be a preacher than 1964 when the Civil Rights Act was working its way through Congress. Momma had gone down to DC to help with that and Daddy did his lobbying from that fancy, carved desk he kept in the apartment. Usually, you wouldn't expect folks like my parents to pick a place like Roosevelt Homes to raise their son. But being one with the people was one of their causes. The fact that I didn't have any brothers or sisters, that was another one of their causes. They'd figured out there were too many people in the world. Or the world was so bad they couldn't in good conscience bring any more children into it. Or, most likely, that one kid was bother enough with all the important, socially-conscious things they had to worry about. Whatever, I got most of my mothering from Amelia. And, then one

day after school when nobody else was around, she told me about her mother's boyfriend slipping into her bed at night.

That was the reverend Washington and he was big in the Civil Rights movement and somebody my daddy admired for all he did for our people. When I tried to tell him about Amelia he told me, "People have been telling slanders on the Reverend Washington for years just so they can undermine all the good he's doing, and don't let me ever see you repeating them, you hear me, Boy?"

There wasn't any way I didn't hear him, and I nodded, but that wasn't good enough. He made me say it out loud, that I didn't know what I knew.

Then I asked him if Amelia could come stay with us, just until Momma got back. "You don't sleep in the same bed, so there's a place for her and everything." Daddy didn't usually show much emotion but the way he shoved back from his desk and came around to my side, I thought he was going to hit me. But he just grabbed me by the shoulders and shook me and told me, "I know what you're up to with that question and don't ever try to con me with nonsense like that again. You hear me, Boy?" He made me say that out loud, too.

The thing about people like the Reverend Washington is, it's not just the people they hurt who come away hurt. They make everybody who knows what's going on and don't do anything about it feel like less of a person, too. What he was doing to Amelia made me ashamed and I started avoiding her.

Sometimes when I walked by her apartment in the afternoon I could hear her crying. A couple of times she caught me in the hall and begged me to help her figure some way to escape, but I didn't have any better ideas than she did. In the end the only way she could get out was to go to work as one of LeMond's girls. She did that on her thirteenth birthday. "At least I'll have somebody to protect me," she said, and I never saw her again, except years later on the street when she came on to me and offered me a freebie, "for old time's sake." And for the drugs she knew I was carrying.

2

Murder at the Club Oblivion

Some of those children who got kidnapped and sold into brothels didn't wind up in Europe, they got skimmed off to a place called the Club Oblivion right there in Rabat where Rachelle and I lived. I broke my own rule about easing my way into retirement and took to working nights and weekends to see what I could do about it. Nobody was going to let me go to Europe to find out where the girls went, and I didn't have any contacts down in the mountains to work with. Which left the Club Oblivion was the obvious place to start.

The thing is, those doors just wouldn't open. I needed to be hooked up with the Palace, or be a drug kingpin or some other high-roller to get inside and, try as I might, I never could talk my way past the bouncers. Except that one time after there'd been a murder.

A prince from over at the Palace showed up in one of the private suites with a dagger in his gut, which was fine by me and should have been an occasion to party for every decent body in Morocco. Not that he was an important prince, just some kind of distant relation the king would have had to

be introduced to if he showed up at a family gathering. But that was Royal Blood was seeping into the carpet which automatically made it a big deal. I would have liked to have seen the body but it wasn't there when anymore. People from a private ambulance company had hauled him away as soon as the Palace Police had taken a few photographs. The fact that Palace Police were involved instead of ordinary cops told you a lot about how privately this matter was handled.

One of the girls had put the knife in him. They had her in custody and there wasn't any question she did it. Nobody else had even been in the suite with Mr Dead Prince, the security cameras showed that. Camerawise, the Club Oblivion was more secure than those clean rooms NASA uses where you can't be so much as a mote of dust without having your portrait taken from three different directions. They had cameras at both ends of every corridor and two at the entrance, and at every other outside door. They even had cameras watching the cameras in case somebody wanted to mess with a camera, and none of them showed anybody going into the rooms the prince used that night or back out again, except that girl.

Usually Uncle doesn't get mixed up in local crimes, but the graceful way to say this is that we have . . . resources . . . that aren't available to law-enforcement otherwise. I'm not going to go too deeply into what those resources are only to say what everybody already knows, that there isn't an

American embassy or consulate anywhere in the world that doesn't record every electronic communication within a hundred miles around. And that in Morocco we have an embassy in Rabat *and* a consulate in Casablanca, which covers a lot of landscape. And that a murder that comes even close to somebody at the Palace is a very high-profile murder. And, like I said, staying friends with the people who live in that palace is Number One on our list of to-do's.

Okay, so I didn't exactly get *sent* over to the Club Oblivion, but in the words of one George Washington Plunkitt, I seen my opportunities and I took em, and flashed a Treasury Department badge and walked in like I belonged there and nobody said boo. Treasury Department was a good badge to use. Even in America, most people don't actually read a badge and, when they do, they don't know what the job description of a Treasury Agent is supposed to be, and waive you on through. You'd be surprised the places you can get into with a badge like that.

The club looked pretty much the way upper-crust nightclubs look. There was a long, shiny bar, a platform for the band and racks of strobe lights which were turned off. This being Friday, the customers were down at the mosque purifying themselves from what they'd done the night before, but were really holed up in private suits sleeping it off. Which is the kind of thing people do everywhere but, in the Lands of the Faithful, no good Muslim wants to talk about. Especially around foreigners.

Not that anybody from my department cared about the drugs or the liquor that moved through the Club Oblivion, that was Morocco's problem. Hell, they could have been bootlegging pork out the back door and it wouldn't have made any difference to us. What I wanted was to look around inside the Club, only I didn't get as much of a look as I was hoping for. The Palace Police didn't want outsiders looking around, and rushed me down a darkened corridor to where the girls were being questioned. There were a couple of dozen of them in little groups waiting to testify and they were scared out of their minds.

People who work in places like the Club Oblivion are never comfortable around cops but these girls were scared worse than usual because the cops could do pretty much anything they wanted to them. In the first place, these weren't ordinary cops, they were Palace Police and Palace Police aren't beholden to anybody but the king. And the king isn't beholden to anybody at all.

In the second place, the girls didn't have anywhere else to go, and the cops knew it. They all owed some kind of trumped-up debt to the Club and were indentured there until they worked it off, which was never. Or, at least, never until they were too old to be worth the food they ate, or came down pregnant, or one of the customers cut them up in an effusion of passion and, then, it was out on the street to earn their keep as best they could.

The cops had the girl who did it in a room not much bigger than a broom closet. Half of the girls were underage, but this one was under that.

They claimed she was fourteen, but you couldn't prove it by me. She had narrow hips and narrow shoulders and, except for the breasts shifting around under the see-through robe, she could have passed for a precocious fourth-grader. The prince had been in his fifties but he could have passed for a fourth-grader himself, given his taste in companions. He liked them young and he liked them buxom.

Even all streaked and crying with her hair messed up and blood splattered on her robes, it wasn't hard to see that she was turning into a real beauty. Beautiful the way girls from the High Atlas Mountains are beautiful. It was no wonder the prince wanted her. She was slender and had enormous eyes and gorgeous long hair, at least it was going to be gorgeous once she ran a comb through it.

That girl could have been a case study in a master's seminar in economics, the tragedy of the commons: too many people jumping her bones before she was ready. In America she'd have been whisked off by the Department of Children and Family Services before the police had even cordoned off Mr Dead Prince. Here, she was huddled on a chair and out of her head from crying and babbling and hugging herself. She'd been in love with Mr Dead Prince. He was going to rescue her from the Club Oblivion, and take her with him, and make her into a princess, and what was she going to do now?

Well, maybe, but the cop doing the questioning was no fool. Princes don't run off with whores, no matter what the movies try to tell you, or how good looking Julia Roberts is, although that's just the kind of fantasy a ten-year-old girl might latch onto. I'd seen too much of that wishful thinking back in grade school, myself.

It wasn't just the blood on her robes that told the police she was the one. She had bruises on her throat and her wrists, and scratches on her arm, and marks on her face. It didn't take CSI Las Vegas to know she'd been in a fight. There's a saying in my line of work, "when you hear laughing on the other side of the wall, don't think hyenas. Think there's a party you didn't get invited to." She and Mr Dead Prince had gotten in a fight, he'd slapped her around, she'd grabbed one of the daggers decorating the walls and let him have it in the belly and up into the chest cavity. It was one of those straight-bladed daggers like the Tuareg use down south, not the sickle-shaped kind Arabs flash around, and it was the right choice to sink into the diaphragm of a child rapist. Mr Dead Prince hadn't even been able to yell. He just fought for a while then collapsed on the fancy rug and died while she headed back to her own room and pretended nothing happened.

It was a pity about the carpet, though. If he'd had the courtesy to land a few feet to the side, he'd have bled on the floor tiles and somebody could have mopped it up. That man had wasted a lot of things in his life and, at the

end, added to the list a beautiful piece of work some lady in the High Atlas Mountains had spent months laboring over just to have a low-rent child rapist bleed to death on it. I know, I know, this is the way they do things in the Muslim world and I should be more culturally sensitive, but it's hard to get all multicultural where children are concerned.

The suite was done up in whorehouse Arab, which explains the weapons decorating the walls and the panels inscribed with verses from the Qur'an tacked up in between. The room was fitted out with carpets and silks and a brass brazier that, on account of modern heating, didn't do any brazieing. Besides the daggers there were crossed scimitars and mirrors and plates of fruit. I don't think it ever occurred to that dead son of a bitch that keeping weapons handy might not be such a hot idea. Not that I ever met the son of a bitch in question, but I've got my opinions. Little Miss Jailbait had watched enough Egyptian soap operas to know to wipe her prints off the dagger, but she hadn't been able to do anything about the Prince-blood on her robes. Or the bits of skin under his fingernails that matched the claw marks on her arm. That's as far as I got because the major domo, or whatever that muckety-muck called himself, figured out I wasn't on the guest list and invited me back onto the street and, next Monday I was on my way to Marrakech.

If this was a spy-thriller instead of me just telling you what happened, here's the place I'd march myself into the station chief's office and have a face-

to-face with the old fool and tell him my spider sense was tingling, and that there was more to what happened to the dead prince than meets the eye. And he'd tell me it wasn't my problem and keep my nose out of it. Then we'd get in a big fight and I'd stomp out and start hanging around the Club Oblivion and risk my career on what looked like a fool's errand until I saved the world.

It's not that my boss wasn't an old fool, I'm not going to take a position on what kind of fool my boss was. Not in public, anyway. But the truth is she didn't have any more choice in the matter than I did. It didn't take more than one phone call from DC before she discovered that Marrakech was the place I needed to focus my investigative abilities on until the folks at the Palace forgot about my busting in on their private crime scene. Which wasn't going to happen anytime during the remaining lifetime of the Milky Way Galaxy.

3

Jemaa el F'naa

The fact that I'd been exiled to Marrakech because I wasn't supposed to be doing any real work, that was on Uncle. And the fact I was there on TDY and drew a per diem, that was on Uncle, too. So I dressed up like a tourist and went down to the Jemaa el F'naa, which is what they call the main plaza, and found myself a nice table on the third-floor balcony of a café where I could sit back and watch the show going on below.

I'd tell you what Jemaa el F'na means, only nobody knows anymore. Some say it's the Assembly of the Dead. Others will tell you it's the Mosque of Nothingness, or the Place of Execution, but none of that makes sense when you actually go there, the place is so full of life.

They had fortunetellers down there and men blowing flames out of their mouths. They had scribes with ancient, upright typewriters waiting to take a letter if you couldn't write one for yourself, which most people couldn't. There were acrobats tumbling around and, when you were down there with them, you had to watch your back or you'd get tumbled on. There were carts selling

pastries, or oranges they'd make into juice for you. Tables were piled with teeth to show off the talents of whichever dentist was lounging nearby with pliers. All the while, boom-boxes were blasting out bad children's songs about Allah that got stuck in your brain like toothpaste commercials.

There were monkeys wearing diapers for tourists who wanted to have their picture taken with a diaper-wearing monkey on their head. Chickens clucked underneath baskets in case you wanted to buy a chicken out from under a basket. Other baskets held Egyptian cobras that would rise up and look around when the man who owned the basket tooted on a tin horn, so you had to be careful about your baskets. There were a lot of smaller snakes I didn't even want to think about, except to know where they were so I wouldn't walk on them. And there were cats.

These were the kind of cats you don't mess with. They were rangy and on edge and led lives that were hard in every way a cat's life can be hard, except for dogs. Dogs are unclean and, if you associate with a dog, you have to go through an extra layer of ablutions five times a day at the mosque, and who needs that? So you don't see many dogs in Marrakech.

One thing I could do right at my table was chat up the waiters. Nobody gets to listen in on more people who don't think they're being listened in on, than waiters. Which made a waiter who needed money a prime target to get on Uncle's payroll.

Making a new friend for America or, as the Moroccan government would put it, suborning one of their citizens, is not the kind of thing you want to rush, but I had my eye on a kid named Tariq. I liked that boy. He was hardworking and earnest and had a mother and four sisters to take care of, and the whole thing made me feel fatherly. Which is a feeling I never got from that fool nephew of mine back in East St Louis, who just made me feel homicidal.

Somebody else I had my eye on was the old man who came out in the evening and told stories at the far end of the Jemaa el F'naa. The book on him was that he'd been doing that for fifty years, and his grandfather before him. If there was any one somebody in a position to know what was going on in Marrakech, he was the one and I took to hanging around the back of the crowd to get a feeling about whether he might be the kind of old man who'd like to go to work for our side. That involved some blending-in if I didn't want to call attention to myself as an American who spoke more of the local lingo than he was supposed to, so I dressed myself up like a Hararee Man.

Black skin isn't all that common in Morocco, no matter what they try to tell you about Blackamoors in Shakespeare class, but it's not completely unknown, either. Back in slave days, bits of inventory got misplaced from time to time and a few of the Brothers settled down and became citizens. Which meant all I had to do was outfit myself with one of those long, woolen djellabas with the tan stripes that men wear and, presto-digito, I'm in with the in-crowd.

Come evening, I pulled the hood over my head and walked over to listen to the storyteller just like my ancestors would have been doing for generations, if generations of my ancestors had ever done anything like it.

One thing you have to say about that old storyteller, he could tell a story. A hundred-and-fifty, two-hundred people, maybe, were in a circle half-a-dozen deep watching him wave a stick with a knob on the end while he spun out the Tale of Abdelilah and the Flying Horse. Abdelilah needed the stick to fight off a tribe of hill demons who lived on the far side of the Crystal Mountains. Most of the old man's stories took place on the far side of the Crystal Mountains.

He had a brass bowl at his feet and a horse egg in his other hand. The bowl was to catch coins listeners might want to drop in, and the horse egg was not just any horse egg. It was an egg stolen from the nest of al-Buraq, the horse that flew Mohammad up to the Seventh Heaven to check out Paradise. And a good thing he did, too, because while he was there he had a sit-down with god and arranged for the prayer thing to be commuted to five times a day. The original sentence was fifty, so if you wonder why the Prophet is held in such high esteem, that's Reason Number One on the list.

In the world on the far side of the Crystal Mountains, flying horses hatch from eggs. In the world where we live, the egg came from an ostrich. It was a great story and had been chipped into shape and polished and smoothed

by a thousand years of being told on that exact spot, and made me regret not knowing it back when my boys were younger.

I got wrapped up in listening just as tight as everybody else, and it seemed like no time before the song of a muezzin rang out. The first star was about to appear and the hour had come for all good men to head over to the mosque and make a public display of their righteousness. Ladies weren't invited. Men are weak, and women, even the ones dressed up in the bags they were supposed to wear, are too distracting. Where the ladies are concerned, god has to make house-calls.

Before the first muezzin was done, a second cut loose and, then, another until a whole cascade of muezzins had picked up the chorus. Now I don't want to sound like I'm trying to be counted among the Faithful because god would see right through something like that, but, sometimes when those calls got to going even us infidels would catch our breaths and listen for a while.

After a bit the old man picked up the brass bowl and the horse egg and tucked the stick under his arm and headed down an alley into the souk and disappeared into the shop where he lived with his wife and son.

4

Baghurr the Fox

A week later I was drinking coffee at the café, and relaxing and feeling good about myself. It was a pretty day in April, Uncle was paying me to act like a tourist, the dossier on the old storyteller had arrived from the Sûreté Nationale, and I'd guessed right. If there was any one somebody in all of Marrakech who might be willing to sell a little piece of his country to America, he was the one. Add to that the fact I'd just signed up Tariq, and it was a good day all around.

Odd thing about that boy, he always came to work in a pair of black tuxedo pants with a stripe down the side. They'd been donated by a charity in New Jersey, but he'd had to pay full price anyway. That's pretty standard for poor people in a lot of places. Still, he was the most grateful of boys. He was thankful for the pants, he was thankful for his sisters, and he was so thankful for the money I'd be giving him he took me outside to meet his mom.

She sold pastries off one of the carts parked in front of the café and almost wept when she grasped my hands and thanked me for what I was doing for her family and invited me to dinner. Then she sent me back inside with a

pink paper bag full of lemon tarts to munch on while I read through the dossier on the old storyteller, not that she knew about the dossier.

His official name was Isma'il, but that was just to sign him up as a citizen. The government refused to acknowledge anybody who didn't have an Islamic name. In real life he was Baghurr, which means fox in the local language, because of the red hair he was born with. And because foxes are smart, and that's something his mother wanted for him. Lots of folks look down on the Berber tongues, but his mother called the Middle-Atlas Tamazight they speak in Marrakech the Language of the Free People, which is what Berbers call themselves.

Besides the Middle-Atlas Tamazight Baghurr told his stories in, he spoke Darija, which is the version of Arabic they speak in Morocco, and nobody outside the country can make sense of. He spoke Modern Standard Arabic as well as any Arab, Standard, or Modern or otherwise, could speak it. He could get by in French and Spanish and Italian and German and English from spending so much time around tourists. And he was fluent in the speech of the Free People in the Rif Mountains. Good as I am with languages, I couldn't hold a candle to that old man.

As spectacular as all that would have been in an American, it was pretty standard stuff for somebody who earned his living at the Jemaa el F'naa. But there were other things in the dossier, things that made the Sûreté

Nationale question his loyalty to king and country. And made me think I might be able to talk him into coming to work for us.

One of the reasons they didn't trust him was because his wife grew up in the desert. There was nothing personal in that. Governments all over the Muslim world look askance at Bedouins because Bedouins don't pay enough attention governments. A Bedouin will trample across whatever border the mood suits him, which doesn't exactly shout Blind Loyalty to the country he finds himself in right now. The fact that the Sûreté may have had reasons for being suspicious of Bedouins is something I should have given more thought to, only it didn't trigger anything at the time.

Another thing that made them suspicious, in a general kind of way, was that Baghurr was a storyteller. Storytellers are automatically suspect because stories involve metaphors, and metaphors can involve religion. Or the king, and you never can tell what something like that might lead to. But in Baghurr's case there were more specific things the Sûreté worried could have affected his loyalty. Namely, that his eldest son had disappeared into police custody. Some of what happened was in the dossier, but most I didn't find out about until later.

The boy's name had been Khalil and it all started when he married Habebe. Habebe means Sweetheart and she'd been named right. Everybody said she'd been the most devoted of brides when he brought her home, and

the most modest. Also, one of the most beautiful, everybody said that, too. They still did, for that matter, and Baghurr and his wife had fallen in love with her the moment they met her. Then, one morning, Habebe left to carry dough to the communal oven and never came back. The loaves were still waiting when Khalil showed up looking for her.

A gang of boys saw what happened. A BMW was cruising the streets and Habebe had been dragged inside. The boys didn't think anything about that, women got dragged into cars all the time by brothers and uncles who had nothing but their best interests in mind, but there's nothing like a fancy car to attract attention. One of the boys even remembered the license number. It belonged to Maurice the Honeybeak.

People called him that because he had a pointed nose, and because of the money he made off his connections at the Palace. Alcohol. Drugs. Little boys. Girls, you name it and Maurice supplied it. He was always careful to kick some of the profits upstairs to people with even better connections than he had, which made justice very expensive when Maurice the Honeybeak was involved.

Khalil tried anyway, the whole family did. They paid every dirham Baghurr's father bequeathed him from the slave-trading business. Then they sold their house and borrowed more money and raised such a stink that a women's-rights outfit from Switzerland got involved. Not that any of it made

any difference. Maurice the Honeybeak just smirked when the detectives asked what he'd done with Habebe.

Months after she disappeared, she showed up at the Club Oblivion. When the police interviewed her, it turned out Maurice's beak wasn't the only thing he'd been dipping. He'd raped her for weeks, then forced her to work as a dancer when he got tired of her. The police believed her story, they just didn't take it seriously. Everybody knows what dancers really do, and how could you rape a whore? The fact that she hadn't been a whore, or a dancer, before Maurice dragged her into his BMW didn't cut any ice, and they gave her back to him. The man had a business to run, after all. Then they issued a formal apology for the trouble they'd caused.

When Khalil found out where she was he headed up to Rabat to get her back. But he wasn't Maurice the Honeybeak and he didn't have friends at the Palace, and nobody was about to let a piece of street trash into the Club Oblivion. He caught a glimpse of her from the door, and that's the last he ever saw of her. She had her back to him and was drinking champagne with an oily-looking man. Her hair was cut short like a boy's, she had bruises on her slender neck and on her arms, her dress was scooped so far down the back she was naked almost to the waist and it was clear she wasn't wearing anything underneath. The man had his hand on the skin of the small of her back and, when her husband yelled to her, the bouncers kicked him off the steps.

When he refused to leave the street, they called the cops. A two-hundred-and-thirty-pound sergeant hit him in the side of the head with a nightstick, tossed him in back of a police van, and nobody ever saw him again. Not long after that, somebody from the Palace accused the women's-rights organization of proselytizing for Jesus, and they were thrown out of the country. A year later, Baghurr discovered Habebe scrubbing floors in a hotel down on the edge of the desert. Now that she had the baby, Habebe wasn't fit to work at the club and had to make do as a chambermaid.

"My daughter," Baghurr said when he saw her, "you are welcome in our home. But she'd been too ashamed of what had been done to her to ever return to Marrakech. Or to her parents in the mountains, for that matter.

I agreed with the Sûreté on that one. Any man who'd been so thoroughly betrayed by his own government would be ripe to cut a deal with foreigners. Add to it a lifetime in the Jemaa el F'naa keeping tabs on what was going on in every language under the sun, and that man was right out of central casting.

The only hold-up was that Yours Truly wasn't exactly in a position to conjure up the money to pay him. The people who could get him and Tariq on the payroll were the same people who'd sent me down to Marrakech to get rid of me. Which meant that whatever applications I made were going to take more

time processing their way up through channels than I had left before heading back to St Louis, no matter how long I took to retire.

I'm not known for corporal works of charity, but I thought about paying Tariq out of my own pocket. Well, not exactly out of my own pocket, but close. I had a small entertainment budget I could dip into. I wasn't really designed to hand out money to waiters, but close enough. The people checking the paperwork were up in Rabat, I was in Marrakech. Besides, I liked the kid. I had enough boys of my own to know what he was going through. Besides, his mother gave me a bag of lemon tarts, and who can overlook something like that?

Then I thought about the way a foreigner had taken me under his wing when I needed a daddy, and what that led to. And I knew I wouldn't be doing the boy any favors, no matter how much he looked up to me, or how much his family need the money, or how many lemons tarts his mother gave me. I didn't follow up the contact and became one more unfulfilled promise in a lifetime of unfulfilled promises Tariq already had.

5

Wu

The foreigner's name was Wu and he is, maybe, the smartest person I ever met. Smarter than any of you. Smarter even than that champion card player from North Korea who disappeared out of a high-stakes canasta tournament in Hong Kong, which is another thing I'm not going to tell you about.

Smart enough to keep our people off his back for years with the hints he kept dropping about switching sides and coming to work for us, which would have been a very big deal, indeed. Only thing was, it seemed like everybody who tried to finalize the arrangements wound up getting recruited in the other direction. And the ones who didn't, he ruined them, too, because who really knows after somebody's spent time with Wu?

There was a third kind of person, the ones we never found out about because they were already working for him when they came to work for us. Like happened to me. The thing was, working for Wu was overstating it, at least in my case. That was in my days as an Israeli Jew and once he had me signed up, he sent me back to America and applauded while I got my job, and

got promoted, and became more and more trusted at what I do. I kept worrying about the day he'd say the secret word and turn me into a Chinese super weapon. Only he never said it.

The secret word was three words: "Malcolm is dead." Don't get me wrong, this wasn't a Manchurian Candidate sort of thing where I'd climb up in the rafters and shoot my own momma. It's just that Wu needed some way of letting me know when my services would be required. I was heavy into Black Power and raised fists just then, Malcolm X was a hero of mine, and telling me Malcolm is dead was a surefire way to get my attention.

Wu hardly even had to recruit me. In the first place he was Chinese, which in my book put him halfway to being a Brother. And he was old and wise and seemed like a daddy, and that was something I'd missed out on. Maybe he felt like one, too, I don't know. His wife had smacked up against the one-child rule they had in China. Boys are what most people hold out for because they'll take care of you in your old age. But when Bao-Yu got pregnant there was no way she was going to abort her little boy, even when he turned out to be a girl. So that could be part of it, the fact that I reminded Wu of the son he never had.

We spent a lot of time in restaurants. He'd buy the meals, which made him seem more like a daddy, I suppose, and made me feel taken-care of. Besides, I always liked good food, and he had an expense account that the

people back in the Peoples' Republic took care of. With Wu, it never was just one reason. You were lucky when you could figure out half of them.

Restaurants were good places to meet. There are other tables in restaurants, which meant somebody could keep an eye on him and make sure I wasn't the one doing the recruiting. At least, that's what I thought the other somebodies were doing. No matter how important a Chinaman gets, he never gets important enough to be left alone with a foreigner. So I didn't give much thought to the guys at the other tables until years later when it occurred to me they'd have pictures. And tape recordings, too, and none of it would leave any doubt I'd be jumping up and saluting the moment Wu said the secret words, regardless of what my current opinions on the matter were.

Wu was smart enough to know I'd figure out about those things on my own, and too good a psychologist to rub them in my face. What he wanted from me was genuine loyalty, and he knew he had it after I shot up a beach in Haifa.

I'd been at a café eating falafel and waiting for him to show up when a girl got attacked no more than fifty feet away. I remember that part, the falafel and the humus. It was an outdoor café looking out across the Mediterranean with a big, crescent moon halfway up the sky. She was a Palestinian girl in a Western bathing suit, a modest one-piece with a skirt around the hips. There were six of them and attacked was the only word for it. They had her backed

up against a bath house. They were pulling down her suit and had their hands all over her. She was struggling and trying to cry out, but one of them had his mouth on hers so no noise was coming out. She couldn't have been more than twelve and reminded me of Amelia, although she didn't look much like her.

But it was enough to get me on my feet and reaching for my pistol the way I'd been fantasizing about doing years ago. I wasn't required to be armed, but the IDF highly "encouraged" us to carry weapons when we went out in public, even when we were out of uniform, and I fired a couple of shots into the air.

The boys let go of the girl and looked around, trying to see where the shooting was coming from. One of them looked straight at me and reached into his pocket.

I didn't shoot into the air that time.

I fired into the sand next to his feet, which wasn't what I had in mind but turned out to be a good thing. What I'd meant to shoot his balls off but I pulled the trigger too quick. All my training was not to aim high, so I shot too low and hit sand, instead, and he threw his hands over his head and fell to his knees.

The other punks ran off and I went down and grabbed that jackass by the collar and pulled his jacket off and gave it to the girl to cover herself.

That jacket would have been evidence that could have landed at least one of those bastards in jail, but I never said anything to the police about it. I'd

been young and stupid once, too. Fact was, I was still being stupid, but that night when I saw what I'd almost done I started growing out of it.

I brought the girl over to our table and waited with her until her parents arrived. They were in traditional clothes and just the kind of people who were likely to take it out on their little girl for causing what happened. By then, Wu had showed up and spent half an hour explaining to them and the police how he'd seen everything and it wasn't my fault, or the girl's fault either. Whether that worked long term with her parents, I don't know, but it hit me at an empty place I'd been carrying around since the Reverend Washington started in on Amelia.

Good as I felt about all that, it wasn't where it ended. Things never end with the part where you feel good about them, they just keep going. In this case there'd been a shooting and, even though nobody got shot, the IDF didn't have any choice but to launch a court of inquiry. There was an election coming up and the whole thing wound up in the papers. Palestinians started throwing rocks. A couple of international civil rights organizations got involved and the IDF figured that the easiest way to put the matter behind it was to come down hard on me. Which meant calling in witnesses to tell what I did.

There hadn't been many people at the café, and those who'd been there hadn't seen what happened, at least not all of it. Some of them had noticed what the boys were doing but nobody paid any attention to me until they heard

shooting. Then they looked up and saw me pointing a gun at Palestinian kid down on the beach.

Wu was the only one who'd seen the whole thing. He testified for four hours explaining how the punks had been in the process of raping the girl, how I'd shot twice into the air to stop them, how one had reached for a weapon and I fired a warning shot into the sand next to his feet and, how when I'd gone down to help the girl and he'd turned tail and run off. Exactly the way it happened, only none of it was true.

The facts were true. He told them just the way they happened only he hadn't been there to see any of it. He hadn't shown up until a good twenty minutes later. But what he said, the way he took up for me, the way he told the court how I'd shown good sense, that almost anybody else would have shot that punk, those were words I'd waiting fifteen years to hear. When he testified that I'd risked my own life to help a girl I'd never met, he may have been thinking about his own little girl but he was talking to me. Somewhere deep, deep within me. From then on, it wasn't just that Wu was like my daddy, he'd turned into the daddy I'd always wanted.

When the court found in my favor, he announced it was time for me to head back to America and wait for Malcolm to be dead. To tell the truth, I was fed up with Israel by then, and the racists they have over there, and I was ready to go. All I needed was somebody to give me permission. Wu was good that

way, maybe the best psychologist I ever met. He went on to a fine career with secret medals and rice-wine toasts and everything that goes along with them if what Rachelle says is true, except none of it's the kind of thing he could publish on his resume.

When I got home, he worked a scholarship for me at Perdue, which is more than Uncle ever did. He might have even had some behind-the-scenes thing going that got me my present employment, I don't really know except a person with my history wasn't exactly prime meat to go into the work I do. If you catch my drift.

The flaw in the ointment was that Wu was playing a very long game, and it was too long for me. I graduated from college and started making money. The Israel days got smaller and smaller in my rearview mirror and I kept waiting for the other shoe to drop. But Wu never said anything about Malcolm being dead.

Rachelle popped out the first of our boys and, then, another. Life turned better than I ever thought it could get, and I stopped having to pretend so hard to be a good American. I was just naturally changing into one. The morning came when I woke up with her snuggling next to me, and more kids than I could keep track of jouncing on the bed, and birds outside the window, and I realized I didn't have to pretend anymore.

On paper, that would have been a very good time to come clean about Wu and the whole Chinese connection, but nothing will put you in jail quicker than relying on things on paper. The moment I mentioned anything about that, I'd find myself in a private room having to answer follow-up questions along the lines of, Howcome you didn't say something about this ten years ago? No matter what I said, our guys would put two and two together and come up with something a lot bigger than four. Like fifty-five-to-life, unless there was a firing-squad in it first.

And, now, here I was in the same position Wu had been in when he signed me up, thinking about walking over to the shop where the old storyteller lived and signing him up to report to me. Except Baghurr wasn't me. He wasn't young and he wasn't stupid and I wasn't going to tell him some secret word that was going to make him turn traitor at a moment's notice. All I was going to ask him to do was help me do what he wanted to do anyway, put a stop to those people who prey on the Amelias and Habebes and all the other girls who can't protect themselves. How could that lead to anything but good?

6

Signs Baghurr Up

“I know you from the Jemaa el F’naa,” Baghurr said when I walked into the shop. He was sitting on a carpet next to a table stacked with inlaid wooden boxes. “You dress like a Hararee man, but I do not think you are.” Propped against the wall was a sink carved out of fossil-bearing marble from the High Atlas Mountains. It’s a weakness of mine, I know it, but I’ve always been fascinated by fossils, and I liked the looks of that sink. I could imagine washing my face in fossils every morning when I shaved.

“I’m American,” I told him. It’s always good to start off with the truth. It builds confidence.

“And yet you speak the Language of the Free People.”

“Americans speak many languages,” I said.

“Indeed,” the old man shrugged and leaned back against the wall and didn’t say anything.

Dead air makes most people nervous, but not that old fellow and the silence dragged on.

After a while he gestured at a leather purse hanging from the ceiling. "That handbag is Tuareg." It's surprising how many things turn out to be Tuareg when a foreigner walks into a shop. Foreigners will pay almost anything for something Tuareg.

"Yet it was manufactured in Fes." I'd spent enough time at the tanneries to know what purses from Fes looked like.

"It was . . ." Baghurr seemed as if he wasn't sure how far to stretch the truth with somebody who spoke the Language of the Free People. ". . . It belonged to a Tuareg woman." An American dressed like a Hararee Man and speaking Middle-Atlas Tamazight hadn't come into the shop to buy a cheap purse for his girlfriend. He knew that. The banter was his way of checking me out.

"You found it in the trash?"

"It's true the lady no longer wanted it."

"She was a woman of discretion."

"Her husband had taken a second wife and he needed to console her, so he let her pick out a new purse. She chose one made of snake leather." He pointed at a python-skin purse with a garish chrome G for a clasp. "Like all ladies, she wanted to be unique."

"It's cheaper to be unique when the snake is a factory in Shanghai," I said.

“God alone knows the ways of a woman.”

“Sometimes even god does not know the ways of a shopkeeper,” I said.
“I can buy this sort of Gucci on the street in East St Louis.”

“This is genuine Tuareg,” a Canadian whispered to his son as they pushed through the beaded curtain at the back of the shop. “You don’t see much of this anymore.”

A young man rolled his wheelchair through the curtain and followed the Canadians to the front of the shop and took their money. His name was Omar and he was Baghurr’s second son, the one who hadn’t been clubbed to death by the cops. Omar didn’t see any reason to point that out that the dagger the man was so excited about had been stamped out of sheet metal by a small-business coop organized by the Peace Corp.

“St Louis?” he wheeled his way over to us. “I have a cousin in Chicago.” Omar had cousins in Italy, and France, and San Francisco and every other place a customer came from. If the customer hailed from outer space, Omar would discover a whole line of cousins on Mars. “Where are you staying?” he asked.

“I’ve got a place in a riad,” I told him. “It’s just temporary until I return to Rabat.”

That wasn’t the answer he was looking for. He wanted me to tell him I stayed in a fancy hotel. The fancier the hotel, the more I’d spend in his shop, was the way he figured it. “A riad,” he grinned. “Then you’re one of us.”

With any luck I'd turn out to be a businessman or some kind of international lawyer who didn't get out much. Those people don't have a clue what things cost. "You grew up in St Louis?" Omar said.

"East St Louis. In Roosevelt Homes. We called it the Projects."

"Your Franklin Roosevelt was in Casablanca once," Baghurr said. "He was a very great man. These Roosevelt Homes must be fine, indeed."

"Not so much," I said. "I was able to get out but my nephew wasn't so lucky."

"Your nephew?" Omar asked.

"J'amaal."

"He's one of the Faithful?"

"He's an American like me."

"But a Muslim. I've heard there are many to be counted among the Faithful in your country. Praise be to god."

"There're some in America," I said, "but my nephew isn't one."

"J'amaal is a Muslim name."

"In the Projects, many boys are named J'amaal. There were seven in the building where I grew up."

"So many?"

"It's a very big building. The government uses it to store people it doesn't have any use for."

“Still, all those J’amaals. How does one tell them apart?”

“People call my nephew Triple-A because he spells his name with three a’s. A couple of the Jemaals have two a’s, so people call them Joliette Two-A and Greenville Two-A for the places they did time. I forget where the One A’s went.

“Who’s Joliette?”

“Joliette Correctional Center. The slams. Jail. Lots of boys from Roosevelt Homes wind up there.”

“And you? You were in jail, too?”

“For throwing tear gas back at the pigs.”

“Pigs are unclean. I don’t think you should have been sent to prison for throwing things at pigs.”

“These were a different kind of pig, but I hear what you’re saying.”

“Your nephew . . . did he throw things at pigs?”

“He sells drugs.” That’s not the kind of thing I usually talk about with somebody who wasn’t family, but it was the only way I could see to get Baghurr to trust me. “He’s back on the street, now.”

“The street isn’t such a bad place.” Baghurr said. “I’ve made my living on the street since the French were here.” He poured each of us a cup of very sweet tea.

“In America, the street isn’t a good place to earn a living. These are . . .” I ran my hand over the marble sink “. . . fossils?” The time had come to change the subject.

“Orthoceras. There are many seashells in the mountains.” Omar knew more about fossils than I did.

“How much do you want for the sink?”

“Another American was here today . . .” Omar took a sip of tea “. . . who wants to buy this sink.” The man knew his business, negotiation-wise. Another-buyer-was-here-today is a classic opening gambit.

“Yes,” I nodded. “But how much do you want?” Omar was good, but he wouldn’t stand a chance in East St Louis.

“These other Americans are very devout,” he said, putting off saying how much. “They’re from Oklahoma and think seashells in the mountains prove the truth of Nuh’s Flood.”

“And all the fountains of the great deep were broken up, and the windows of heaven were opened and the rain was upon the earth for forty days and forty nights,” I said.

“You attended Madrassa that you may quote scripture?” Baghurr asked.

“Momma was very religious.” I ran my fingers over the sink again. “You haven’t told me what you want for this.” Always make the other side go first.

“And she taught you how to pray?” Omar was still hadn’t given me a price.

“Watching her pray taught me that prayer has nothing to do with getting what you want out of life.”

Omar nodded, as if he suspected the same thing. “Five-thousand dirhams.” Another classic gambit. The way he figured it, I’d counter with half of whatever he opened with. We’d meet in the middle and I’d go home and brag how I’d talked him down twenty-five percent. “Five-thousand dirhams is a very good price.”

“Excuse me,” I clutched my stomach. “I must have”

“Is it the tea?” Omar said. “Perhaps it’s the sugar. My cousin in Chicago tells me that Americans are not accustomed to so much sweetness.”

“No,” I said. “It’s not the sugar. It’s just that . . . for a moment there . . . I’m sorry, I thought you said five-thousand dirhams.”

“It’s a very good price.”

“It’s a very good price for a car. But I’m looking to buy a sink. I’ll give you two.”

“Your nephew sells drugs,” Baghurr said, changing the subject back, “but he isn’t rich?”

“Marijuana. He earns a dollar and twenty-nine cents an hour standing on a street corner trying not to be gunned down by some other guy selling

drugs. We figured it out, one time. He's almost thirty and when he's not in jail he still lives with my sister because he can't afford to get a place of his own. Like I said, I'll give you two for the sink."

"Your nephew earns twelve dirham an hour to let people shoot at him?" Baghurr said. "Truly, this is not a good way to earn money."

"Two?" Omar said. "Two-thousand dirhams? This is a joke."

"Not Two thousand," I said. "*Two*. I will give you *two* dirham for the sink. It's a very good amount." People who don't know better will tell you it's an insult to offer too low a price, but I never met a shopkeeper who seemed offended. They start high. I start low, and we both have fun.

"We need," Omar looked like he was recalibrating what he could get out of me, "to find a price that is good for both of us. Give me two-thousand five-hundred. That's my best price."

"Five," I said.

"Five-hundred dirham isn't enough," he said.

"Not five hundred. *Five*. I'll give you five dirham."

"Five dirham? I asked for your best price."

"My friend, I came up from two. You came down from five-thousand. I have more than doubled my offer and you've only cut yours in half." Even I didn't think that made sense, but it was a kick to say.

"Two thousand. That's my best offer."

“I’ll give you ten.”

“Your government lets you cheat poor shopkeepers but jailed your nephew for selling marijuana? One-thousand five-hundred. That’s my very best price.”

“No. Our government forbids us to sell marijuana. It merely warns us about shopkeepers. Fifty dirham.” I grabbed my stomach again.

“You hold your belly,” Baghurr laughed. “Yet my son has not said a price.”

“I thought I heard myself say fifty dirham. Maybe something’s wrong with the tea after all.”

“Berber whiskey,” Omar grinned. “It loosens the tongue.”

“I should leave this shop before my tongue falls out of my mouth.”

“Your nephew,” Baghurr said. “Why doesn’t he leave this evil business?”

“He can’t. He owes money to a man.”

“And this man forces him to risk his life selling marijuana for \$1.29 an hour. How did such a thing happen?”

“When J’amaal was a boy he went to work for a man who uses children to sell marijuana because children don’t go to jail when they’re caught. Once, when my nephew was twelve, thirteen years old, he got arrested along with a couple kilograms of marijuana. When he came home, Lemond told him he owed him for the marijuana.”

“Your nephew needs to sell a great deal of marijuana so he can stop selling marijuana?” Baghurr nodded, and I knew I had him. J’amaal was in the same boat Habebe had been in at the Club Oblivion, only it wasn’t marijuana she’d been forced to sell.

“You’re his uncle and you are rich. Can’t you lend him the money?”

“He asked once but I”

“You refused your nephew? He is your blood and you refused him?”

“I’m also an agent of the United States Department of the Treasury. There’s no way I can be mixed up in something like that.”

“There is no way you were willing to risk being caught,” Omar said in a quiet voice.

“There’s no shame in honoring the oath I took to my government.” That’s what I said, but it embarrassed me how easily Omar cut through to the truth. Then I turned to Baghurr, “you’ve been telling stories in the Jemaa el F’naa for many years?” Time had come to get down to business.

“What I have been doing depends upon who you are.” He hadn’t liked the sound of the United States Department of the Treasury, but I needed him to know I worked for our government. “You have something you want to discuss with us?”

“I do.”

Neither one said anything for a long time.

“We should to work together.” I hated to be the one to break the silence, but I was the one who wanted something. “My people and yours have many interests in common.”

“True enough,” Baghurr said. “But the interests you have in mind are more . . . specific?”

“There are men who wish both of our countries harm,” I gestured in the direction of the door. “To see that they’re stopped my government wishes to make the acquaintance of people in a position to hear things that, perhaps, your own government won’t learn about until it’s too late.”

“A shopkeeper and a storyteller?” Omar said.

“Who better?”