

INSIDE OUT

Barry Eisler

(epigraph)

By definition, establishments believe in propping up the existing order. Members of the ruling class have a vested interest in keeping things pretty much the way they are. Safeguarding the status quo, protecting traditional institutions, can be healthy and useful, stabilizing and reassuring.

— Evan Thomas, *Newsweek*

Of course, the United States is unique. And just as we have the world's most advanced economy, military, and technology, we also have its most advanced oligarchy.

— Simon Johnson, *The Atlantic*

L'état, c'est moi.

— Louis XIV

PROLOGUE

December, 2007

Ulrich stared at Clements, wanting to believe he'd misheard. Even in the grand panoply of CIA incompetence, this one would be a standout.

"Let me get this straight," he said, deliberately speaking slowly and clearly so Clements and the rest of the Langley contingent assembled before him would understand exactly what Ulrich made of their collective mental acuity. "Ninety-two interrogation videotapes, and you're telling me they're just... missing?"

Clements shifted his weight from one foot to the other, the frozen grass crunching under his wingtips. "We think there were ninety-two. We're still trying to get an accurate inventory."

Ulrich looked past Clements at the precise rows of thousands of white markers, their expanse dazzling in the brilliant morning sun. Well, at least now he understood why Clements had wanted to meet here. No one was going to notice, much less overhear, a small group of men paying their respects to the honored dead of Arlington National Cemetery. No records, no witnesses, no proof this conversation had ever happened.

"All right," Ulrich said, running the fingers of a gloved hand along his thick gray beard. "First thing I need to know. What's on these tapes?"

Clements glanced at the man to his left and then at the one to his right. Stephen Clements, Michael Killman, John Alkire. The deputy director of the CIA, the director of the National Clandestine Service, and the director of the Counterterrorism Center. Half

the bureaucratic firepower of the entire Agency, huddling in their dark overcoats like an incipient union of funeral directors.

“Are you going to tell me? Or are we all just going to stand out here and freeze?”

Clements said nothing, and Ulrich was suddenly concerned at how meekly the man was taking his licks. Ulrich was used to being deferred to—after all, in this administration, chief of staff to the vice president was an exceptionally powerful position. On top of which, Ulrich was a big, imposing man, accustomed to intimidating bureaucratic rivals with his loud voice and blunt manner. But Clements looked beyond intimidated. He looked... scared. Which was itself unnerving.

Ulrich sighed. He took off his wire-framed spectacles, closed his eyes, and massaged the bridge of his nose. When he felt calmer, he slipped the glasses back on.

“Just tell me,” he said, his voice a notch softer.

Clements blew out a long, frozen breath. “Waterboarding, for one thing.”

Ulrich closed his eyes again. “Crap.”

Waterboarding was a problem. In the public mind, it was the one enhanced interrogation technique that was most arguably torture. But even for waterboarding, the mainstream media had done a nice job of sanitizing the public’s imagination of what the practice entailed, carefully describing it as “torture” only with scare quotes, or as “a practice some describe as torture.” Actual footage of helpless, shackled men sobbing and begging and pissing themselves while American guards repeatedly drowned and revived them could cause a change in sentiment.

“What else?” Ulrich said.

“Walling. Stress positions. A lot of the stuff we had to stop using after Abu Ghraib.”

Well, they’d survived photos of this kind of stuff coming out of AG. The public wanted to believe it had been just a few bad apples, and anytime the public wanted to believe something, the job was already ninety percent done. It could be done again here.

“What’s the worst of it? The parts that’ll be on the blogs.”

“I don’t know, we’re talking about hundreds of hours of footage. It’s—”

“The worst, goddamn it.”

The three Langley men exchanged glances. Alkire said, “The dog stuff is pretty bad. The waterboarding is worse. There are people at Langley who couldn’t even watch it on video. And the beatings—some of these guys, they had edema from being manacled to

the ceiling for a week straight. You ever see someone with edema, hanging by his wrists, getting the shit beaten out of him? Half the time, their skin splits open.”

Ulrich considered. He knew these three had every reason to make it sound as bad as possible. They wanted him to know that if any of this got out, the fire would be so big they'd all burn together. But even if they were exaggerating, it wouldn't be by much. He knew what was being done at the black sites. He'd long ago made his peace with it, of course, as the price that had to be paid in the shadows so the rest of America could go on enjoying the light. But asking the secret guardians of American liberty to live with the truth was one thing. Force-feeding it to the entire public was different. It wasn't the public's burden to bear.

“When did you learn the tapes were missing?” Ulrich asked.

“Just this morning,” Killman said. “Another FOIA request in federal court. You're following these cases?”

Ulrich nodded. Of course he was following the cases. The ACLU had filed multiple Freedom of Information Act requests for information on treatment of terrorist detainees and then sued when the Agency refused to turn anything over. God, he hated the ACLU. If they had even half the concern for the safety of Americans they did for the rights of terrorists...

“Well, recently our people monitoring the FOIA cases have been getting alarmed. We've got a detainee in court claiming his interrogations were videotaped. Now it looks like we're going to receive a court order specifically for video—and not just for Guantanamo, but covering the black sites, too. If that happens, we won't be able to dodge the order the way we have before. So we decided to do a complete inventory, assess our exposure, get ahead of the order. That's when we discovered the problem.”

The problem. If nothing else, the CIA always had a flair for understatement.

Ulrich stroked his beard. He supposed it was possible one of these jokers was less stupid than he seemed, that he'd destroyed the tapes himself and was going along with this meeting just to obscure his own actions. Or that someone else, some patriot, or even just someone wise enough to have a modicum of self-preservation instinct, had done what needed to be done. After all, it wasn't as though anyone was going to take the credit for it. All that would earn him would be a silent prayer of thanks from the people whose asses he'd saved, a prayer that would last only as far as the first congressional investigation into the latest CIA cover-up, at which point his circle of silent fans would immediately point their fingers inward, ensuring their benefactor would be crucified for their collective sins.

So yeah, it was possible there was someone inside the CIA smart enough to have demonstrated the proper initiative. That was his immediate working theory. But he had no way to prove it. And even if he did, it wouldn't solve the immediate crisis.

“There’s something else,” Clements said, glancing at the other Langley men.

“Is that even possible?” Ulrich asked, unable to resist.

There was a long pause. Clements said, “Some of the tapes are of the Caspers.”

Ulrich could actually feel the blood drain from his face. “You...”. But he couldn’t finish the sentence. He’d only just gotten his mind around what that very morning he would have believed was impossible. Now he was dealing with the unthinkable.

We’re done, he thought. We’re really done. I can’t spin this one. Nobody could.

Yes, you can. You just have to focus. The Caspers don’t matter. They don’t change the dynamic. They just raise the stakes. You handle it the same way regardless.

But handle it how?

They all stood silently. Ulrich’s mind raced furiously, examining options, gaming out plans from multiple angles, pressure-checking vulnerabilities. He felt both terrified and weirdly exhilarated. If he could put a lid on something this big, they’d have to invent a new name for it. Damage control? Hell, he was trying to control a cataclysm.

He kept going—*yes, no, too dangerous, if, then*—conducting an orchestra of alternatives just behind his eyes. A minute went by and a narrow possibility began to emerge, a little sliver of hope. It was crazy, it was audacious, it would require luck. But it could be done. It had to be done. Because there was simply no other way.

“Here’s what you’re going to do,” he said, looking at Clements. “You call one of your contacts in the media—”

“Ignatius?”

“No, definitely not Ignatius. At this point he might as well be an official CIA spokesperson, and everyone knows it. And not Broder or Klein, either—they’re known to be too sympathetic, too. Too eager to please.”

Clements frowned, obviously not getting it. “We don’t want someone pliable?”

“Just listen, okay? For this, we need a news article, not an op-ed. At least to start with. From a paper that’s considered liberal. So... make it the *New York Times*. Yeah, the *Times* is perfect, they won’t even use the word ‘torture’ in their coverage but they’re still thought of as an enemy. Call them. You’re a whistle blower. The CIA made some interrogation tapes, tapes that include footage of detainees being abused.”

Clements’s mouth dropped open. “What?”

“I’m not finished. You say the CIA destroyed the tapes. Clear case of obstruction of justice. You’re calling because you’re a patriot, this won’t stand, something needs to be done.”

They were all looking at him as though he’d lost his mind. Christ, they were slow. They didn’t deserve to have him save their asses. Unfortunately, his ass was next in line. These morons happened to be his primary defensive wall.

“You’re crazy,” Clements said. “There’s no way—”

“Shut up and listen if you want to survive this. The liberal media will jump all over the story. Obstruction of justice, cover-up, rogue CIA, the whole thing. There’s going to be pressure. And under pressure, the CIA admits, no, no, you *confess*—yes, we destroyed the tapes. But no more than two of them for now. Two, you understand?”

Clements shook his head as though he was trying to clear it. “What... why two?”

“Because it’s too soon to go public with ninety-two. Two is a nice, finite number, it makes it sound like you’ve been exceptionally careful and selective regarding who gets subjected to enhanced interrogation techniques. You can tie the number to just a couple of high-profile detainees, right? Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, Abu Zubaydah, Abd al-Rahim al-Nashiri, just the worst of the worst. Listen to those names. You think anyone outside the ACLU will complain if you’ve maybe been a little rough with a couple terrorists named Mohammed al-this and Khalid al-that?”

“But... what are we going to do later on, if the real number comes out?”

“Later on won’t matter, don’t you see? You’ll already have established the principle that the destruction wasn’t a big deal by attaching a low number to it. You can always increase the number afterward, at which point you’ll just be applying the established principle to a new number. You say something like, ‘oh, did you think I said two videotapes? I meant two terrorists on one of the tapes. Sorry for the confusion.’ You get it? For Christ’s sake, you don’t have to sign a fucking affidavit that there were only two tapes, this is just to ease the idea into the public mind. Are you telling me you don’t know how to put a number in play in a way that gives you room to walk away from it later?”

No one said anything. Ulrich couldn’t tell if they were getting it or if they were drifting into shock. Well, nothing to do but keep going.

“Understand? Two interrogation videos, you think. Keep it a little vague, and you can get them to report two while giving you wiggle room for later.”

“Okay, fine,” Killman said. “But what do we do when they start asking about waterboarding? You know they will.”

“Of course they will. And when they do, you reluctantly admit it. It’s already out there anyway, the vice president himself acknowledged it. This is your chance to tie the waterboarding to just a small number of detainees, your chance to minimize it. That’s actually a win.”

“Doesn’t sound like a win,” Alkire said.

Idiots. “You can’t cover this up, don’t you understand that? If you try, the whole thing comes out. What you can do is channel the information, shape the narrative. You need to manage this story or it’ll manage you. Do it right, keep it simple, and you’ll be fine.”

“But it’s not simple,” Clements said. “It’s not just videos. There are also records of what’s on the videos, who had access to them—”

“Good, now you’re thinking. You need to destroy all contemporaneous records describing what’s on the tapes because that’s the next thing the court will ask for if the tapes are unavailable. You destroy all records of who had access to the tapes, of who might have knowledge of what was on them. And you create a paper trail of the proper authorizations that predates the court order. You claim the tapes had no further intelligence value, and... yes, yes, you say you had to destroy them because if they ever leaked, they could compromise the identities of field agents, patriotic men and women who are risking their lives every day on the front lines of the war on terror to keep America safe. Fox, and Broder and Klein and Krauthammer and Hiatt and Ignatius and the rest, they’ll pick up that angle and run interference for us, attack the patriotism of anyone who questions the decision to destroy the tapes. They’ll make it a political issue, it won’t be a legal one. ‘Only the angry left would want to put our soldiers and spies in danger,’ that kind of thing.”

None of them spoke.

Come on, Ulrich thought. Man up. We can do this.

“Look,” he said, “you’re not going to be alone, okay? We’ll get someone highly placed in the administration to leak the same talking points.”

Clements looked doubtful. “The vice president?”

“Definitely possible. But if not him, me or someone else who can speak for him. We’ll give the background not for attribution, the papers will publish it, and then the DCI, the vice president, whoever, they’ll go on all the Sunday morning talk shows and cite as evidence for our positions the articles the newspapers wrote based on what we fed them.”

Clements nodded, a glimmer of understanding in his eyes. “Information laundering.”

“Exactly,” Ulrich said, rather liking the phrase. “Just the way drug traffickers pass their money through corrupt banks to make the money usable in society, we need to pass our talking points through the mainstream media to make the talking points seem objective. You see? The mainstream media turns our talking points into news stories. They love the access we give them, it makes them feel savvy. And we love the coverage they give us in return. It’s a good system and it always works. It’ll work here, too.”

“It’s still going to be a scandal,” Clements said, apparently determined not to keep up.

“Of course it’s going to be a scandal,” Ulrich said, disgusted that his *hey, we’re all in this together* pep talk apparently had accomplished nothing. “And you might even have to resign for it. Would you rather own up to not even knowing where the tapes are or how many there actually were or what the hell happened to them? How do you think the 4th Circuit would respond if you said, ‘Sorry, we don’t know where the tapes are, we can’t find them’? You think they’d actually believe you could be that inept? You and I know better, but the court? They’d think it was a cover-up because no one could be so stupid as to misplace ninety-two tapes that if they ever see the light of day would be the most damaging national security leak in the history of the nation. You’d have so many outside investigations up your ass you’d spend the rest of your life trying to shit them out.”

Clements glared, but took the rebuke. “I still don’t see what this gets us.”

“Number one, it gets us time—time to conduct our own investigation, from the inside. If we do that, with a little luck we recover the tapes ourselves, do what should have been done in the first place, and the truth never gets out. The only way you’re going to cover this up is by ‘confessing’ to a lesser crime. How can you not see that? The media will jump all over the confession because for Christ’s sake, no one would confess to destroying those tapes if he hadn’t actually done it. No one will suspect the confession is actually concealing something worse, and for now the revelation of a few destroyed tapes will obscure the existence of just how many tapes there really were and what actually happened to them. Think the Forest Service, starting small, controlled fires to prevent the big ones, all right? How much more do I need to spell this out for you?”

“It’ll never work,” Clements said. “Someone will smell political opportunity. We’ll never avoid an investigation.”

“No? Haven’t you been briefing Congress on the program?”

“Just the gang of eight,” Clements said, using shorthand for the Democratic and Republican heads of the House and Senate, and the chair and ranking minority member of the House and Senate intelligence committees. “But we’ve been deliberately fuzzy on the details.”

“The details don’t matter,” Ulrich said. “What matters is that the briefings took place. You think the speaker of the House wants to get into a public fight over what she was told and when she was told it? She loses that battle just by having to fight it.”

Were they getting it? He still wasn't sure.

"Plus, I know how you guys work. What did Goss testify to Congress that time? 'It may be only a matter of time before al Qaeda attacks the United States,' wasn't that it? May be, but maybe it won't be? My God, how many positions can you take in the same sentence? Go back to your records, I'll bet you can find something in a briefing about videotapes and whether they should be preserved. I guarantee someone dropped some casual mention just in case there was ever a problem later. Work this right and you can use the media to implicate anyone. And the gang of eight will know it."

There was a pause while they absorbed the diagnosis. Dire, with a brutal treatment regimen, but not without hope.

"I'm not taking all the heat for this," Clements said. "I'm not going down alone."

Ulrich could almost have smiled. Clements was in. Now they were just negotiating price.

"Then find someone at CIA who will. Who's in a position to have authorized the destruction of those tapes? Get to that person. Use whatever leverage you need to. And make sure he's on board."

"There's no one else. That would be a decision for the director of the National Clandestine Service. Anything else will look like bullshit."

"Then pin it on Killman's predecessor. He's got a nice cushy job in the private sector now, right? Intelligence contractor, making four times his government salary? You can't provide him with the right incentives to play ball? You don't have any dirt on him?"

Clements smiled, the smile of someone who's been smelling blood in the water and only just realized it was coming from someone else. "I'll see what can be done."

"But remember," Ulrich said, "all this is doing is buying us time. The most important thing is that we find those tapes, or verify their destruction."

"How are we going to do that?"

Ulrich closed his eyes and suppressed the urge to shout. If he could work with just one competent organization. Just one.

"You need to put together a team," he said. "Comprised of people with the right talents and the right incentives."

"Meaning?"

“Meaning, how many field interrogators are featured in those videos?”

Clements shrugged. “Maybe a half dozen.”

“Military experience?”

“Of course. They’re all Spec Ops veterans, now with Ground Branch.”

“Good, then they have the talent. And they’ll understand that if those videos ever get out, the least they can expect will be public ostracism. More likely, prison. That means we can trust them.”

The three Agency men were nodding now. They were getting it. Slow as ever, but educable if you took the time and trouble to spell things out, if you showed them the one narrow route that offered a chance of saving them.

“Recall those men from the field. I don’t care what they’re working on, I don’t care what their priorities are, as of this moment they have a new assignment. You run the investigation, reporting directly to me. You manage the field, I manage the political cover. There are a lot of people, people from both parties, who have a reason to want those tapes secured. If we need their cooperation, I’ll make sure we have it.”

Clements nodded. “How much are you going to tell the vice president?”

“Let me worry about that. For now, everything is need-to-know. And speaking of which, communication on this is face-to-face or by secure phone only. No writing, no paper trails.”

Ulrich glanced down at a small sign in the pathway next to him. Through the frost obscuring the face of it he read *Silence and Respect*.

He took off a glove, reached into his coat pocket, and clicked off the Dictaphone he’d been running since this otherwise off-the-record meeting began. Then he came out with a tube of ChapStick to conceal what he’d really been up to. He rubbed the ChapStick across his lips, dropped it back into his pocket, and pulled the glove back on. It wasn’t the first time he’d taped these sorts of conversations and he doubted it would be the last. He knew he would never need the recordings, but it would still feel good to have them. If his enemies ever breached all his other defenses and threatened to close in on him, he could brandish his recordings like a suicide bomb. A last-ditch threat in case the worst should ever happen. And the worst had never looked more likely than it did right now.

Still, on balance he was starting to feel a little better. He’d been rattled there for a moment, true, especially when they’d mentioned the Caspers, but that was before he’d had a chance to consider the options. Now, the more he thought about it, the more he realized he had assets he could deploy. Everybody was exposed on this, if not legally,

then at least politically. The main thing was, he had a plan. And no one could work a plan the way he could.

“Remember,” he said. “*The New York Times*. Two interrogation tapes, as far as you know, destroyed years ago. Now go. Get it done.”

New York Times, December 6, 2007

CIA DESTROYED TAPES OF INTERROGATIONS

WASHINGTON— The Central Intelligence Agency in 2005 destroyed at least two videotapes documenting the interrogation of two al Qaeda operatives in the agency’s custody, a step it took in the midst of congressional and legal scrutiny about the CIA’s secret detention program...

The videotapes showed agency operatives in 2002 subjecting terror suspects—including Abu Zubaydah, the first detainee in CIA custody—to severe interrogation techniques. They were destroyed in part because officers were concerned that tapes documenting controversial interrogation methods could expose agency officials to greater risk of legal jeopardy...

The CIA said today that the decision to destroy the tapes had been made “within the CIA itself,” and they were destroyed to protect the safety of undercover officers and because they no longer had intelligence value.

PART 1

All told, more than three thousand suspected terrorists have been arrested in many countries. And many others have met a different fate. Let's put it this way: they are no longer a problem to the United States and our friends and allies.
— George W. Bush

They literally were chaining people up for days... If they ever had videos of this, it's something out of the thirteenth Century.
— Bob Woodward

So it appears we now have evidence Ghul was in a CIA prison. Where he is today is still a mystery...
—Justice Department Office of Legal Counsel memo

New York Times, March 2, 2009

U.S. SAYS CIA DESTROYED 92 TAPES OF INTERROGATIONS

The government on Monday revealed for the first time the extent of the destruction of videotapes in 2005 by the Central Intelligence Agency, saying that agency officers destroyed 92 videotapes documenting the harsh interrogations of two Qaeda suspects in CIA detention... including the simulated drowning technique called waterboarding.

CHAPTER 1: ABOUT A HUNDRED PERCENT

Ben Treven could feel the Australians looking at him again, sizing him up for whether he'd make a good victim tonight. He brushed his blond hair out of his face and kept his gaze on nothing in particular, nodding his head slightly as though he was enjoying the pulsing house music. He knew the smart thing was to ignore them, but part of him couldn't help hoping they'd take their wordless interview just a little further. It had been a hell of a day and he could feel that old, crazy urge to unload on someone. If these guys wanted to give him a reason, it was up to them.

The three of them were in civilian clothes, but he'd heard the accents and seen the swagger and took them for sailors on shore leave. Manila's P. Burgos Street, an eternally crumbling matrix of neon and girly bars and massage parlors, had ingested them as it had ingested generations of sailors and marines and sex tourists before them. It would appropriate their money, alleviate their lust, and expel them after like pale effluent into the dank Manila night.

The burliest of the three missed his shot at the spotlit pool table, and as he stepped away to make room for his buddy, he squinted and waved a hand up and down in Ben's line of sight, palm forward, as though wiping a window: The gesture read, *Hello? Anybody there?*

Ben kept his expression blank. *Oh yeah, pal, somebody's here. And believe me, you don't want to meet him.*

A petite Filipina waitress in heels and a microscopic skirt sauntered over to the pool table, balancing a tray of San Miguels one-handed. Ben hadn't seen her earlier—she must have just started her shift. She took the Australians' pesos, distributed their beers, and studiously failed to respond to their leering smiles. Then she turned and headed in Ben's direction, the Australians' eyes following her ass.

"You need another drink, sweetie?" she asked Ben, smiling, her eyes dark, her teeth white against the smooth brown skin of her face.

He was standing with his back to the bar and she would know he could have just ordered from the bartender. He didn't know whether her interest was personal or professional. He wondered whether it would irritate the Australians.

He shook his head and offered only a polite smile. "Thanks, I'm good."

She leaned a little closer. "Are your eyes... green?"

"That's what people tell me."

She smiled again. "It's my favorite color. If you need anything, just tell me, okay?"

“I will. Thanks.”

She walked away. The Australians didn't track her ass this time. They were looking at Ben.

He told himself that as long as he didn't do anything to provoke them, it wasn't his fault. But he also recognized that he was ignoring them almost ostentatiously now, that a more effective way to avoid a problem would have been to raise his Bombay Sapphire and give them a cold smile: *I'm aware of you, I'm not afraid of you, I'm being friendly so you can now look for trouble elsewhere without having to acknowledge you've backed down to the guy you were initially assessing.*

He took a swallow of the gin and set the glass down on the bar. Yeah, that would have been the better way. But that afternoon his ex-wife had told him she never wanted to see him again, that their daughter, Ami, believed the man now raising her was her real father, that he shouldn't have tracked them down in the first place, and what could he have been thinking after they hadn't heard from him in nearly three years? She hadn't even seemed angry when he'd approached her in the rain in front of Ami's suburban Manila school, just uncomfortable, as though he was no more than an old acquaintance she would have preferred not to run into. She'd countered his protests, ignored his entreaties, and dismissed him with obvious relief. And instead of doing the minimally dignified thing and just leaving, he had lurked around the corner, getting wetter and angrier, until he heard the school bell, and then he had watched pathetically from behind a tree as his ex-wife collected their small daughter, kissing her and taking her by the hand and leading her away before Ben even had time to get a good look at her face. And now he was on his third double Bombay Sapphire, and these chumps were giving him the stinkeye, and the bar was too noisy and the spotlights too glaring and Manila was too fucking polluted and humid and he was sick of it, he was sick of all of it, and someone was going to pay.

The burly Australian waved again. Ben maintained his thousand-yard stare. The Australian cocked his head and said something to his buddies; over the music and the noise of conversation at the bar, Ben couldn't hear what. The three of them started walking over. Ben noted they hadn't put down their pool cues. His heart kicked a little harder and he felt his mouth wanting to twist into a smile.

The Australians took their time, watching him, continuing to gauge him as they approached. None of the bar's patrons, generally young, mostly western, universally stupid, seemed to notice. Ben remained motionless. The Australians weren't sure what he was, and Ben knew they would bark before they got up the courage to bite. Amateurs.

They stopped an arm's distance in front of him, three abreast, the burly one in the middle, the pool cue in his left hand, his right arm draped across his buddy's shoulder. He said, “Looking out of it there, mate. Too much to drink, eh?”

Ben kept his gaze unfocused, noting the placement of their hips and hands, smiling now as though at some private joke. The burly one was clearly the leader. Drop him suddenly

and violently and the other two would be useless for anything other than hauling his carcass home. There were so many ways to do it, too, it was almost sad to have to choose. The guy's weight was on his right foot, exposing the instep to a stomp. His knees were open, too, and so were his balls. Or start with the throat, move to the head, then work your way down in whatever time you had before the guy collapsed.

The guy leaned in, his eyes trained on Ben's face. "You hear me, mate? I'm talking to you."

Still Ben didn't look at them. "I know. It's making it harder for me to ignore you."

The guy furrowed his brow. "You're trying to ignore us, is that it?"

In a different mood, Ben might have felt sorry for the guy. He might have just met the guy's eyes and let him know with a look what was a second away from happening. Then maybe give them a face-saving way out, maybe tell them he was just here to chill, sorry if he'd done anything to offend them, fair enough?

Yeah, in a different mood.

The guy glanced left and right at his buddies as though sharing his amusement, but in fact seeking reassurance. "You believe this guy?" he said. Then he turned back to Ben. "Hey. Look at me when I talk to you."

Ben felt it coming. He wasn't even trying to stop it anymore.

The guy raised his right hand and went to jab his outstretched finger into Ben's chest. "I said—"

Ben shot his left hand out and wrapped the guy's finger in his fist. He stepped in and bent the finger savagely back. There was a sound like snapping tinder. The guy shrieked and plummeted to his knees. The sounds of conversation and laughter ceased and Ben could sense people reorienting, trying to figure out what had caused that bloodcurdling sound. Ben bent what was left of the finger farther back and twisted it. The guy shrieked again, his face contorted in pain.

The guy to the left choked up on his pool cue and started to bring it around and Ben instantly realized he'd been wrong about them turning tail. A klaxon went off in his mind and some deep-seated setting instantly ratcheted from *bar fight* to *combat*. He snatched his glass off the bar and flung gin into the guy's face. The guy recoiled and started to turn away. Ben grabbed a bar stool and swung it in a tight arc, going for center mass, getting his hips and full hundred and ninety behind it. The guy made the mistake of trying to duck, and the stool caught him in the head instead of the shoulder and blasted him sideways.

Somebody shouted. People started scrambling away. The third guy was backpedaling, his left arm out, his right hand reaching for the back of his belt, obviously going for a weapon, trying to gain an additional half second to deploy it. Ben bellowed a war cry and lunged forward, swatting away the guy's outstretched arm, grabbing and securing his right wrist, attacking his eyes with his free hand. The guy screamed and tried to shake free and something clattered to the floor. Ben shot a knee into his balls. The guy doubled over and Ben let him go. He saw the first guy coming to his feet.

He stepped in, wrapped his fingers in the first guy's hair, yanked him forward, and clubbed him in the back of the neck. The guy's arms spasmed and Ben felt something crack under his fist.

He spun to face the other two. They were twisting and groaning. The first guy was splayed on the floor, motionless.

A thought flashed through his mind, sobering in its clarity: *Did I kill him?*

He looked toward the exit. The patrons had scattered to the periphery and the center of the bar was clear, but ten feet away, between Ben and the door, four wiry Filipinos were pointing pistols at him. Off-duty cops? Another thought flashed through his mind:

Shit, what are the chances?

Two of them were starting to fan out to his flanks now, the two in the center moving forward, pistols still forward, one guy producing a pair of handcuffs from the back of his belt.

Right now? Chances look about a hundred percent.

Even if he'd been armed, and he wasn't, dropping all four without getting shot in return would have required a hell of a lot of luck. He briefly considered raising his arms to show he was no threat and just walking past them to the exit. But their quick reaction to the disturbance, and the tactical way they were approaching him now, told Ben these guys were experienced, that they'd be happy to shoot him before suffering the humiliation of letting him just walk on by.

Ben looked around and saw people holding up cell phones. They were taking his picture. Or video.

He glanced at the Australians again. Two were still twisting. The other was still inert. The red haze was suddenly gone and a chill rippled through him. He raised his hands, palms forward, and thought, *Oh, shit.*