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Opening Extract from...

The Secret Soldier

Written by Alex Berenson

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The Secret Soldier

ALEX BERENSON

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PROLOGUE

Manama, Bahrain

JJ's had cold Carlsberg on tap and a dozen flat-screen televisions on its dark wooden walls. It was an above-average bar, generic Irish, and it would have fit in fine in London or Chicago. Instead it occupied the ground floor of a low-rise building in downtown Manama, the capital of Bahrain, a small island in the Persian Gulf.

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

Robby Duke had gotten to JJ's early. The best girls were taken by midnight. Robby was twenty-eight, built like a

rugby player, squat and wide, with long blond hair and an easy smile. Plenty of girls liked him, and he liked plenty of girls. Expat birds were all more or less the same. British, European, whatever, they came to the Gulf for adventure, and adventure usually meant a few easy nights.

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

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

'Room for two more?'

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

'All yours,' she finally said.

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

'Josephine.'

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

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

'London.'

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

‘Slough, really.’

Slough was a suburb west of London, just past Heathrow Airport. Slough was more like it, Robby thought. He could line Slough up and send it into the right corner and the keeper wouldn’t do anything but wave.

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

‘Rome.’

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

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

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

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

‘Not glamorous, then?’

‘About as glamorous as the Tube.’

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

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

‘Cinzia.’ Beside her, Josephine sighed. Have fun with

Dwight, Robby almost said. You two will get along great. Instead, he raised his glass. 'Here's to Italy.'

'To Italy.'

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

The black Mercedes E190 rolled down the King Fahad Causeway, the ten-mile bridge between Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. Below the asphalt was the water of the Persian Gulf, warm as a bathtub and nearly as flat.

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

'Fakir.'

Fakir grunted irritably. 'Let me sleep.'

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

'I'm relaxed.'

'You're as stupid as a donkey.'

'Better to be stupid than scared.'

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

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

'I'm not scared.' For the first time in his life, Omar

hated his brother. He was scared. Anyone would be scared. Anyone but a donkey like Fakir. But now he'd gone too far. The humiliation of quitting outweighed the fear of death. And maybe the imams were right. Maybe virgins and endless treasures awaited them on the other end.

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

Three minutes later they reached the tiny barrier island that marked the border of Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. A bored guard checked the Mercedes's registration. A hundred meters on, an immigration agent swiped their passports and waved them through without asking their plans. Everyone knew why Saudis went to Bahrain. They went for a drink, or two, or ten. They went to hang out with their girlfriends without being hassled by the *muttawa*, the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice. The Saudi religious police. They went to watch movies in public, movie theaters being another pleasure forbidden in the Kingdom.

After Bahraini immigration, they were waved into a shed for a customs inspection. An officer nodded toward the blue travel bag in the backseat. 'Open it, please.' Omar unzipped the bag, revealing jeans, sneakers, and black T-shirts. The clothes were hardly suspicious. Saudi men often changed into Western-style clothes in Bahrain. 'Enjoy your visit,' the officer said, and waved them on.

'We will,' Fakir said.

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

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

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

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

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

‘Figuring the odds you’ll be stuck with me?’

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

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

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

‘My pleasure.’

‘What about you? Live here?’

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

‘Special how?’

‘Autistic. Developmentally disabled, we call it.’

‘That must be hard.’

‘I feel lucky every day.’ Robby wasn’t lying. He did feel lucky. Lucky he wasn’t one of the monsters. Half of them spent their days spinning and screaming *whop-whop-whop* every ten seconds like they were getting paid to imitate helicopters. The other half punched you when you asked them to look you in the eyes like they were actual human

beings. Once in a while, Robby felt he was getting through. Mostly he could have been playing video games in the corner for the good he did. Lucky, indeed.

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

'Are you close with him?'

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

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

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

'Is that what you think we should do?'

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

'They're people. Could have been any of us.'

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

'Maybe sometimes pretending is the only way to get by.'

*

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

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

When Omar was seventeen and Fakir was fifteen, the *madrassa*'s imam brought the boys into his office to watch *mujahid* videos. Helicopters crashed into mountains, and Humvees exploded on desert roads. 'One day you'll have the chance to fight,' the imam said. 'And you may give your life. But you needn't fear. You will be remembered forever. In this world and the next.'

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

assault rifles, to wire the fuses on a suicide vest.

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

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

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

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

'How—'

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

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

'Just got them last week, and already you're on the road.'

'We didn't want to wait.'

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

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

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

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

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

'You shouldn't have stopped,' Fakir said.

'No need to rush.'

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

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

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

'Don't worry about me, brother. I'm ready.'

Fakir squeezed Omar's shoulder. 'Good.'

'Good.'

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

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

'Come on, brother. It's almost midnight. It's time.'

Omar looked himself over in the mirror. He wondered whether he could back out. But the other three would go ahead regardless. He would be proving only his own

cowardice. ‘All right. Let’s pray, then.’ They faced west, to Mecca. Together they recited the *Fatiha*, ‘The Foundation’, the first seven lines of the Quran’s first verse. ‘*Bismillahi-rahmani-rahim . . .*’

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

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

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

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

‘Go, then. And remember that Allah is protecting you.’

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

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

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

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

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

'That's good, brother.'

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

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

He didn't.

JJ's main entrance was inside the building that housed the bar. A corridor connected it to the street. Fakir stepped into the hallway, Omar a step behind. Two bouncers, big men in red T-shirts, stood just outside the entrance. Fakir

walked confidently toward them, his chubby body jiggling under his T-shirt. When he was three steps away, he reached behind his waist and pulled the black 9-millimeter pistol.

'Hey—'

'*Allahu akbar*,' Fakir said. He pulled the trigger, and the pistol sang its one true note. The shot echoed in the corridor, and the bouncer touched his chest and looked down at his hand. Fakir shot him again, and he screamed and fell. The other bouncer tried to turn, but Fakir pulled the trigger again. The bullet caught him under his arm, and he grunted softly and collapsed all at once.

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

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

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

Robby turned his head. He felt like he was looking through a snorkel mask. Six pints would do that. JJ's was hopping. Three tall black blokes – American sailors, no doubt – towered above the crowd. On the screens overhead a new soccer match had begun, Manchester City and Tottenham.

He couldn't tell what she wanted him to say. 'You mean that girl in the corner? The one with the lip ring.'

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

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

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

'You've been all those places.'

'Not yet. But a bunch.'

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

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

'Dublin. Fantastic, innit?'

'I give up. You're missing the point.'

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

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

Robby was sick of hearing deep thoughts from this flight attendant who was nowhere near putting out for him. He stood on the bench, threw his fists in the air: 'Birth! School! Work! Death!' Around him, Beyoncé sang: 'All the single

ladies . . .' The girls danced and raised their arms, and the bar descended into the beautiful drunken majesty of Thursday night.

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

Then he heard two more.

Fakir reached into the nylon bag, came up with an AK. Omar grabbed the second rifle. Amir and Hamoud opened up outside, firing long bursts. Omar couldn't see them, but he knew they were standing on the street, firing through the windows at the bar.

The bar's front door popped open and four women in T-shirts and jeans ran toward them. Fakir unloaded a burst on full automatic. Two of the women flopped down in the corridor a couple steps from the door. The third tripped over a bouncer and started to scream in English before Fakir blew her head off.

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

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

Inside JJ's, pandemonium. Robby Duke felt himself falling before he even knew he was hit. The round caught him in the left shoulder and spun him off the table. He sprawled on the ground and grabbed his shoulder, feeling the blood

trickle under his fingers in steady pulses, not enough to be life threatening right away.

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

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

'I can't—' 'My leg—' 'Call 119—' The Bahraini equivalent of 911.

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

'Are you hit?'

She shook her head.

'Shut it, then. There's enough shouting already. Right?'

She nodded. He lifted his hand.

'The police—'

'These bloody camel jockeys aren't going to wait for the police.'

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

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

Another burst ended her plea.

'Jesus God,' Josephine shouted.

He squeezed her lips shut. 'We have to move—'

'I can't.'

'Then you'll die here.'

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

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

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

He couldn't wait longer, not for this woman he'd just met. He let her go, crab-walked toward the stairs. And then he heard it. The hiss of a burning fuse. '*Grenade!*' he yelled. He dived forward, flattening himself on the floor. The training for grenades and mortars was simple. Get low and hope the shrapnel goes high. He heard it land, its metal shell bounce along the floor. It didn't blow straightaway. It was an old one, then, with a time fuse—

'Christ, throw it back—' he yelled.

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

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

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

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

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

They had a couple inches of lift, which in another life five minutes ago had come in handy picking up girls. His calves and feet weren't too badly cut. But his thighs felt like they were on fire and he didn't know if he could stand.

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

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

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

pull himself out. He grabbed his wounded shoulder and squeezed, jolting himself awake. Before the pain faded, he grabbed the banister and pulled himself up the stairs, ignoring the agony in his legs.

Step, step, step. Rounds dug into the wood around him, but he kept moving. He reached the top step and saw, too late, the table laid sideways as a barricade. He lowered his head and drove his strong, stubby legs forward and smashed his undamaged shoulder into it. The table gave a foot. He reached an arm forward and yelled, 'I'm English!'

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