

# PROLOGUE

**“LET THE TIDE AND SAND TAKE CARE OF THE BLOOD.** How many more vintage Turkish rugs can we afford?” The higher ups liked the idea. The weather in the Caribbean this time of year was ideal. There was an island’s worth of secluded beach on which to ask questions about ones’ education and work history. Then, if the candidate was a go, take the necessary action and welcome him to the club. Otherwise, hey, free meal with a view.

Tad Wingo was told he’d be meeting with the head of marketing on the beach. A nice stroll, maybe something to drink as they walked with pant legs rolled up, their bare feet sinking into the wet sand, the sun making its way toward setting. Tad was psyched. That showed class. Not some faceless conference room with bad art and someone’s coffee cup from the last meeting sitting on a faux woodgrain table. A walk on the beach to talk about his future with an exciting new resort opening in the West Indies. Things were about to get good, bub. Bring the “A” game and show these laid back island-types how shit gets done LA style.

Tad took care to put together an outfit that was relaxed, because he got the island vibe of things, but still business enough to be ready when the brainstorming came and maybe he’d need to slap together

a PowerPoint deck. Tan Abercrombie khakis, a light blue Banana Republic oxford. No t-shirt. Nobody layered up in the tropics. He'd break out the Cole Haan loafers that set him back three hundred, but fuck it, if they get wet he was pretty sure the resort was gonna offer him a number that bought a lot of loafers. Bag the socks.

He was meeting with Kent Rossiter, head of marketing for Manje, LLC. Tad conducted due diligence, but came up with very little except that the resort, as yet to be named, would be a five star luxury hotel with all the shiny things that came with catering to the seldomly-impressed rich. Things had moved quickly. He learned about the gig from a co-worker who had a cousin who'd landed a beverage service job with the resort and heard they were staffing up majorly. Tad had climbed his last rung with The Marriott corporation, a company he'd always considered faceless and bland, yet it was a namebrand that had some cache. Better than The Red Roof Inn. Just as well. His superiors thought the same of Tad in regards to blandness.

Four-thirty came and Tad took one last look in the lavishly appointed hotel suite bathroom mirror. "That's very kind of you. No, really. Well, I make a habit of staying near smart people and hope some of it rubs off." He adjusted his collar. "I'll tell you how I see things, Kent. I've been in this biz a long time now (5 years) and I can tell you that I've learned two things. One: Never interrupt your enemy when he's making a mistake (Napolean Bonaparte) and two: you miss one hundred percent of the shots you don't take (Wayne Gretzky). That's how I live my life. It's how I work. It's how I play." Tad fussed with a sleeve button. "You got this, bro" he said to his reflection.

Kent was waiting for Tad in the lobby, which immediately set Tad on edge. Wasn't he ten minutes early? Shit. Kent was dress in a suit, sans a tie. Fuck. Was Tad too informal? You got this, bro.

"Tad Wingo," Kent said. He extended his hand and smiled.

Two things struck Tad immediately. Kent's hand was ice cold and the teeth he was showing with that million dollar grin could be seen from space.

"Mr. Rossiter. It's a pleasure."

"Call me Kent."

"Will do, Kent."

"Ready to see the kind of beach oil magnates relax on?"

"Lead on, sir."

Tad clenched his teeth. "Lead on, sir?" What the fuck? Not like this was meeting your girlfriend's dad for the first time. A woman dressed in some kind of ceremonial garb that Tad guessed incorrectly was Jamaican (he kept the guess to himself, thank you, Jesus) held a silver serving tray on which rested two flutes of champagne. The light that filled the lobby of the hotel made the glasses sparkle. The woman smiled and for the second time in less than two minutes, Tad had bore witness to some amazing orthodonture.

"Thanks Carmella," Kent said, taking both glasses and handing one to Tad. "Let's take a stroll."

It was as Tad imagined.

Pant legs rolled up, shirts one button lower than respectable, the loafers were ditched as soon as they hit the sand, Kent having made a crack about being a SoCal kid so the feel of sand on bare feet was always a welcome sensation. The two men strolled and gazed out at the ocean while they chatted. Kent was very personable and had a modest quality that gave Tad a boost of ego, thinking already that he'd have Kent's job in eighteen months tops.

School. Work. Family. The hospitality biz. Music. Movies.

Kent stopped and faced the ocean, Tad taking up the space beside Kent. "I love it here," Kent said. "I've always preferred this climate to the others I've been in and that's saying something for a guy who's been in this business for nearly one hundred and eighty years.

How was that? Tad obviously misheard, but chose to ignore it. Kent nodded to the sunset. "Yep. Over sixty-five thousand sunsets. Tell me, Tad. How do I look?"

Tad smiled, his eyes darting. Okay. He'd go along with it.

"You look great," he blurted out. "I mean, your skin is flawless. Talk about a perfect tan. And I'm sure you've heard this before, but you have the most amazingly white teeth I have ever seen."

"They are white, aren't they," Kent said. "We have the best people on staff. Can't take credit for the tan. It's a combination of fake bake, creams and powders. There's also puttys, gels, foams, urethanes, composites—a mortician's wet dream, really. What they can do to preserve skin, tendons and muscle—let's go ahead and call it an art form."

Probably the champagne. Tad felt confused. He'd nailed this interview. Keep it together. You got this, bro.

"So whaddya think, Tad? Two-fifty to start. Your own office with an ocean view. Immortality?"

"Ho-kay," Tad said. "I'm not usually a lightweight, but I'm having a little trouble tracking you."

"I'm offering you the job, Tad," Kent said. "And I only offer it once."

Whatever Tad thought he heard, the one thing that stuck with him was, "Two-fifty to start." "I'm all in," Tad said.

"Then a toast," Kent said raising his glass. Tad followed suit. "To a seriously long relationship."

"Here here."

They clicked glasses and drank. Then Kent tossed his glass into the surf. Tad laughed, shrugged and did the same. "Did you like the champagne, Tad?"

"I did. Dom?"

"Ha. No. It's Krug Clos d'Ambonnay 1998. Two grand a bottle. We mix it with formaldehyde before the kill. Slows down the blood flow."

"The blo—"

Before Tad could finish saying "blood flow," Kent had grabbed Tad by the shoulders and sank his teeth deeply into Tad's neck, shook his head like a shark biting a seal, and ripped a chunk of flesh from Tad's neck. Going into shock immediately, Tad fell to his knees, his hands fumbling for a way to stop the flow of blood that ran down his shoulder and chest. His fingers got tangled in the arteries and tendons. Bubbles of blood managed to rise and fall out of Tad's mouth. Kent stood, looking down at Tad, chewing slowly, savoring the chunk of humanity that never ceased to be an explosion of flavor in his mouth. Tad fell sideways, landing face up on the sand, hands still trying to stench the blood flow, but doing so with much less gusto. His larynx had been severed so there was no way to scream, let alone say something like, 'OH MY GOD!'

"Ish won't be long, now," Kent said. He was still working away at the chunk of meat with his alloy fused porcelain teeth. Tad's hands slid away from the gaping bite, bits of flesh flickering in the breeze. His lids slowly closed. Kent swallowed the last of his meat and with hands in his pockets, looked out at sun that was just about to touch

the horizon line. It really was the best of climes. A slight moan. Kent sniffed, his tongue licked a corner of his blood-smearred mouth for one last speck of flavor. Another moan, this time louder. Kent looked down at Tad, whose eyes were wide open.

“Kind of a kick to the nuts, I know. I remember.”

Moan.

“It’s gonna take a few days to clean you up and do some repair work to your neck. And then you’re in for the shock of your life when you meet Sadie from HR. She’s gonna hit you with a stack of forms to fill out that would make you wish I’d finished the job.”

Kent leaned down towards Tad, hands still in pockets.

“Welcome aboard, Tad. Life’s better in the Caribbean.”