

PROLOGUE

TWELVE DAYS . . .

MUMBAI, INDIA

For as long as he could remember, Vikosh Jain had wanted to see India. His family's homeland for a hundred generations. The world's largest democracy. The birthplace of his religion.

While his friends moved out after college, he lived at home, paying off his loans and saving money for what he knew would be an epic adventure. The trip became an obsession. He mapped every train ride across the subcontinent, Mumbai to Delhi, Kashmir to Madras. Finally, when he'd saved the twelve thousand dollars he'd budgeted for a ten-week trip, he bought his ticket.

What a fool he'd been.

After a month, he couldn't wait to get home. He was sick of India. Sick *with* India, too. He'd stayed away from street food and drank only bottled water. Even so, he found himself glued to a toilet a week after he arrived. The cheekier travel websites called what had happened to him "the Delhi diet." It sounded like a joke, but by the time the doxycycline kicked in, he'd lost ten pounds. He could hardly walk a flight of stairs. His skin let him pass for local, but his gut was suburban New Jersey through and through.

Not just his gut. Coming here had taught him how American he really was. Every time he stepped into the streets, he was overwhelmed. By the dust coating his mouth. The shouting, honking, hawking crowds. The pushing and shoving and relentless begging. The way the men pawed women on buses and streetcars. He felt disconnected from all of them, even the ones who had money. Especially the ones who had money. He'd planned to spend a week with his father's family in Delhi, but he left after two days. He couldn't stand the way his aunt screeched at her maids and gardeners, like they weren't people at all.

Before the trip, his parents had warned him his expectations were unrealistic. When he emailed home to complain, long paragraphs of frustration, his father had answered in one sentence: *You need to accept it for what it is.* And after another long screed: *Don't you see? This is why we left.*

Even as Vik read those words, his stomach pulled a 720-degree spin, like a reckless snowboarder had taken up residence in his gut. He wondered what he'd eaten this time. He wasn't scheduled to fly home for another six weeks. But enough. Enough was enough. He clicked over to united.com and found that for only two hundred dollars he could change his flight. He could leave this very night. He tried to convince himself to stay, that he would be quitting, betraying his heritage. But India wasn't his country. Never had been. Never would be.

He reached for his credit card.

Now, after an endless taxi ride to Chhatrapati Shivaji International Airport, an hour-long wait to enter the terminal, three bag searches, two X-rays, and a barking immigration officer, Vik was almost free. He had maybe the worst seat on the plane, 45A, a window in the cabin's last row. So be it. He'd be close to the toilets.

Nick Cuse had captained nonstops to Mumbai and Delhi for two years. After twenty-eight years at Continental—and he would always think of CAL as his employer, never mind the merger or the name on the side

of the jet—he could choose his runs. Most captains with his seniority preferred Hong Kong or Tokyo, well-run airports that weren't surrounded by slums like the one in Mumbai. But Cuse had started as a Navy pilot, landing F-14s on carrier decks. He was keenly aware that every year commercial aircraft became more automated. Every year, pilots had less to do. He wanted to end his career as something other than a glorified bus driver. Mumbai was a lot of things, but it was rarely boring. Twice he'd had to abort landings for slum kids running across the runway, airport cops chasing them like a scene from a bad movie.

His co-pilot, Henry Franklin, was also ex-Navy, just young enough to have flown sorties in the first Gulf War. They'd shared the cockpit three days earlier, and Cuse was happy to have Franklin with him for the ride back. Ninety-nine times out of a hundred, a civilian with a week of training could have done what they were about to do. But the hundredth time defined the job. A good pilot felt a crisis coming before his instruments did, and defused it before it became serious enough to be a threat. Cuse had that sixth sense, and he saw it in Franklin. Though the guy was a bit sharp to the crew.

Now they sat side by side in the cockpit making final preflight checks, their relief crew sitting at the back of the cockpit. A flight this long required another captain and first officer. Their Boeing 777 was just about full, making weight and balance calculations easy. Two hundred sixty-one passengers, seventeen crew members. Two-seven-eight human souls traveling eight thousand miles, over the Hindu Kush, the Alps, the Atlantic. They would fly in darkness from takeoff to landing, the sun chasing them west, never catching them.

Every time you leave the earth, it's a miracle, Cuse's first instructor at Pensacola had told him. You come back down, that's another. A miracle of human invention, human ingenuity, human cunning. Never forget that, no matter how routine it may seem. Always respect it.

"Captain," Franklin said. "We're topped up." An eight-thousand-mile flight into the jet stream required the 777 to leave Mumbai with full tanks,

forty-five thousand gallons of aviation-grade kerosene. The fuel itself weighed three hundred thousand pounds, accounting for almost half the jet's takeoff weight. They were carrying fuel to carry fuel, an inherent problem with long-range flights.

Cuse glanced at his watch, a platinum Rolex, his wife's present to him on the day they signed their divorce papers. Nine years later, he still didn't know why she'd given it to him. Or why he'd kept it. 11:36 p.m. Four minutes before scheduled departure. They'd leave on time. By Mumbai standards they had a good night to fly, seventy degrees, a breeze coming off the Indian Ocean to push away smog from trash fires and diesel-spewing minibuses. He looked over his displays one more time. Perfect.

Cuse liked to keep the cockpit door open as long as possible, a throw-back to the days when pilots didn't regard every passenger as a potential terrorist. Now the purser poked his head inside. "Cabin ready for push-back, sir."

"Thank you, Carl. You can close the door."

"Yes, sir." The purser switched on the cockpit lock and pulled shut the door.

"Cockpit locked, Captain," Franklin said. In aviation lingo, he was the "pilot monitoring," with the job of talking to the tower and watching the instruments. Cuse was the "pilot flying," responsible for handling the plane.

"Thank you, Henry."

"Greetings, United Flight 49. I'm Carl Fisher, your purser. We've closed the cabin door and are making final preparations for our flight to Newark. At this point, United requires you to put your cell phone on airplane mode. To make the flight more relaxing for you and everyone around you, we don't allow in-flight calls. But you are free to use approved electronic devices once we've taken off. The captain has informed me that

he's expecting our flight time to be sixteen hours. We do recommend that you keep your seat belt fastened for the duration of the flight in case we run into any rough air, as is common over the Himalayas . . ."

Vik thumbed in one last text to his mother—*On the plane, see you tomorrow*—and then turned off his phone. Even if his stomach settled down, he doubted he'd sleep. He was caught between the cabin wall and a chubby twenty-something woman wearing a Smith College sweatshirt and hemp pants. She smelled of onion chutney and positive thinking.

She caught him looking at her and extended a hand, exposing a dirty Livestrong bracelet. "We're going to be neighbors for sixteen hours, we should know each other's names. Jessica."

Vik awkwardly twisted his arm across the seat to shake. "Vik. Let me guess. Yoga retreat?"

"That obvious? How about you?"

"I came to visit family."

"That's so wonderful. Getting to see the place where you're from."

"Sure is." Despite himself, Vik liked this woman. He wished he could have seen the country through her eyes instead of his own.

It was 11:50 p.m. by Cuse's Rolex when he swung the jet onto 09/27. For years, the airport here had tried to operate a second, intersecting runway, a prescription for disaster. Complaints from pilots and its own controllers finally forced it to stop. Now 09/27 was the airport's sole runway. At this moment, it was empty, two miles of concrete that ran west toward the Indian Ocean.

"United Airlines four-nine heavy, you are cleared for takeoff on runway nine. Wind one-two-zero, ten knots." The air-traffic controllers here had call-center English, clear and precise.

"United forty-nine heavy, cleared for takeoff on nine." Franklin clicked off.

Like all new-generation jets, the 777-200 was fly-by-wire. Computers

controlled its engines, wings, and flaps. But Boeing had designed the cockpit to preserve the comforting illusion that pilots physically handled the plane. Instead of dialing a knob or pushing a joystick, Cuse pushed the twin white throttle handles about halfway forward. The response was immediate. The General Electric engines on the wings spooled up, sending a shiver through the airframe.

Cuse lifted his hand. “N1.” For routine takeoffs, the 777 had an auto-throttle system for routine takeoffs, though he could override it at any time.

“N1.” Franklin tapped instructions into a touch screen beside the throttle handles. “Done.”

Cuse dropped the brakes and the three-hundred-fifty-ton jet rolled forward, at first slowly, then with an accelerating surge. They reached eighty knots and Franklin made the usual announcement: “Eighty knots. Throttle hold. Thrust normal. V1 is one-five-five.”

At one hundred fifty-five knots, the 777 would reach what pilots called V1, the point at which safety rules dictated going ahead with take-off even with a blown engine. Franklin spoke the figure as a formality. Both men knew it as well as their names.

“One-five-five,” Cuse repeated, a secular *Amen*.

Cuse’s gut and the instruments agreed: V1 would be no problem. The engines were running perfectly. Cuse felt as though he were wearing blinkers. The city, the terminal, even the traffic-control tower no longer existed. Only the runway before him and the metal skin that surrounded him.

The markers clipped by. They passed one hundred thirty knots, one forty, one fifty, nearly race-car speed, though the jet was so big and stable that Cuse wouldn’t have known without the gauges to tell him—

“V1,” Franklin said. And only a second later: “Rotate.” Now the Triple-7 had reached one hundred sixty-five knots, about one hundred ninety miles an hour. As soon as Cuse pulled up its nose, the lift under its wings would send it soaring. Cuse felt himself tense and relax simulta-

neously, as he always did at this moment. Boeing's engineers and United's mechanics and everyone else had done all they could. The responsibility was his. He pulled back the yoke. The jet's nose rose and it leapt into the sky. *A miracle of human invention.*

"Positive rate," Franklin said.

"Gear up." Cuse pushed a button to retract the landing gear. They were gaining altitude smartly now, almost forty feet a second. In less than a minute, they would be higher than the world's tallest building. In five, they would be able to clear a good-size mountain range.

"United four-nine heavy, you are clear. Continue heading two-seven-zero—"

"Continue two-seven-zero," Franklin said.

"Good-bye," Cuse said. That last word was not strictly necessary, but he liked to include it as long as takeoff was copasetic, a single touch of humanity in the middle of the engineering, *good-bye, au revoir, adios amigos, but no worries, I'll be back.*

They topped four hundred feet and the city bloomed around them.

"Flaps," Franklin said.

"Flaps up. Climb power."

Vik pressed his nose against the window, looking down at the terminal's bright lights. He felt an unexpected regret. Maybe he should have stayed longer, given the place another chance. He might see it again. Once he married, had children, a trip like this one would be impossible. Unless he married a wannabe yogi like Jessica and got stuck taking trips to India for all eternity.

"I miss it already," she said, as if reading his mind.

"What's not to love?" He wondered if she knew he was being sarcastic.

Second by second, the jumbled neighborhoods around the airport came into view. At ground level, Mumbai hid its massive slums behind

concrete walls and elevated highways. But from above, they were obvious, dark blotches in the electrical grid, the city's missing teeth. Some of the largest surrounded the airport. Vik had read a book about them. He imagined rows of rat-infested mud-brick huts, children and adults jumbled together on straw mattresses, trying to sleep, plotting their next dollar, their next meal. So much desperation, so much bad luck and trouble. They pushed on. But then, what else could they do?

Then, from the edge of the slum nearest the airport, Vik saw something he didn't expect.

Twin red streaks cutting through the night. Fireworks. Maybe someone down there had something to celebrate, for a change. But they didn't peter out like normal fireworks. They kept coming, arcing upward—

Not fireworks. *Missiles.*

Following a failed al-Qaeda effort to shoot down an Israeli passenger jet in Kenya in 2002, the Federal Aviation Administration had considered making American airlines retrofit their fleets with antimissile equipment. But installing thousands of jets with chaff and flare dispensers, along with radar systems to warn pilots of incoming missiles, would have been hugely expensive. Estimates ranged from five to fifty billion dollars. Worse, the engineers who designed the countermeasures couldn't say if they would allow a passenger jet to escape. Passenger planes were far less maneuverable than fighter jets. Their engines gave off big, obvious heat signatures. And major airports were so congested that the systems might have caused jets to fire flares in each other's paths.

The seriousness of the threat was also unclear. Despite their reputation for being easy to use, surface-to-air missiles required substantial training. After a few months of memos, the FAA shelved the idea of a retrofit. And so American jets remained unprotected from surface-to-air attack.

From the cockpit, Cuse felt the missiles before he saw them. Something far below that didn't belong. He looked down, saw the streaks. They had just cleared the airport's western boundary. Unlike Vik Jain, he knew immediately what they were.

"Max power." He shoved the throttle forward and the turbines whined in response. "Nose down—" He dropped the yoke.

"Captain—"

Cuse ignored him, toggled Mumbai air-traffic control. "Mumbai tower, United four-nine heavy emergency. Two missiles—"

"Repeat, United—"

"SAMs." The tower couldn't help him now. He flicked off, snuck another look out the window. In the five seconds since he'd first spotted them, the missiles had closed half the gap with the jet. They had to be deep in the supersonic range, twelve hundred miles an hour or more. A mile every three seconds. Of course, the Boeing was moving, too, at three hundred miles an hour and accelerating. With a two-mile horizontal lead and a thousand feet of vertical. If the SAMs were Russian, they had a range of three to four miles. At three miles, the jet would probably escape.

At four, it wouldn't.

The world's deadliest math problem. Those beautiful deadly streaks would either reach him or not, and the worst part was he'd already played his only card. He couldn't outmaneuver the missiles, or hide from them. He could only try to outrun them.

In 45A, Vik had felt the surge of the engines. Then the plane leveled off, more than leveled off, started to drop. *They know. They'll do whatever they do to beat these things and we'll be fine.* But the missiles kept coming,

closing the gap shockingly fast, homing in on the jet, arrows from the bow of the devil himself.

He grabbed Jessica's hand.

"Whoever you pray to, pray. *Pray.*"

"Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee—" The words tumbled out of her. Vik just had time to be surprised. He'd expected a yogic chant. One of the streaks flared out, fell away.

But the other didn't.

The Russians referred to the missile as the Igla-S—*igla* being the Russian word for "needle." NATO called it the SA-24 Grinch. The Russian military had put it into service in 2004, updating the original Igla. They'd invested heavily in the redesign, knowing that man-portable surface-to-air missiles had a wide export market. Armies all over the world depended on them to neutralize close air support. A single SAM could take out a twenty-million-dollar fighter. The Russians more than doubled the size of the Igla's warhead. They improved its propellant to allow it to catch even the fastest supersonic fighter. They added a secondary guidance system.

And they lengthened its range. To six kilometers.

Twelve seconds after its launch, the Igla crashed into the Boeing's left engine. The warhead didn't explode right away. Its delayed fuse gave it time to burrow inside the casing of the turbine. A tenth of a second later, five and a half pounds of high explosive detonated.

In movies, missile strikes inevitably produced giant midair fireballs. But military jets had Kevlar-lined fuel tanks. In the real world, missiles destroyed fighters by shearing off their engines and wings, sending them crashing to earth.

This time, though, the Hollywood myth was accurate. The 777's fuel

tanks weren't designed to survive a missile strike, and the plane carried far more fuel than a fighter jet. It was a flying bomb, fifty times as big as the one that had blown up the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City.

The explosion started in the fuel tanks under the left wing and created a superheated cloud of burning kerosene that tore apart the cabin less than two seconds later. From Nick Cuse, in the cockpit, to Vikosh Jain, in the last row, all two hundred seventy-eight people on board were incinerated. The ones nearest the fuel tanks in the wings didn't die as much as *evaporate*, their physical existence denied.

Despite his immediate action, Cuse couldn't save his jet. Even so, he was a hero. By getting the Boeing offshore—barely—before the missile struck, he saved the city from the worst of the fireball. If the explosion had happened over the slums, hundreds of people would have burned to death. Instead, Mumbai's residents lifted their heads and watched as night turned to day. The tallest buildings were the worst damaged, so for once the rich suffered more than the poor.

The fireball lasted a full thirty seconds before fading, replaced with an unnatural blackness, a cloud of smoke that didn't dissipate until the morning. By then, the toll of the attack would be clear. Besides the two hundred seventy-eight people on the plane, two people on the ground died. One hundred sixty-five more suffered severe burns. Planes all over the world were grounded.

And the United States and Iran were much closer to war.

WASHINGTON, D.C.

The images were horrific. A man's legs, brown skin sloughed off, exposing the yellow-red meat underneath. A layer of jet fuel burning on top of the ocean, charring a chunk of bone. Worst of all, bits of a stuffed toy, blood smearing its white fur.

The first reports of an explosion in Mumbai showed up on Twitter ninety seconds after the jet was hit. A half hour later, 12:30 a.m. in India, 2 p.m. in Washington, the Associated Press and Reuters confirmed a plane crash. The Indian navy had sent ships to search the waters west of the city, Reuters said. Two hours later, a bleary-eyed spokesman for the Indian Ministry of Civil Aviation identified the jet as a United Airlines flight bound for Newark. "The situation is difficult. At this point, we cannot expect survivors."

Almost immediately, Reuters broke the news that the jet's captain had reported missiles in the air seconds before the plane exploded. Then an Indian news agency reported that airport authorities had surveillance video that showed a missile striking the jet. By 8 p.m. Eastern, CNN and Fox and everyone else had the video. The anchors murmured somberly,

Disturbing, we want to warn you so you can have your children leave the room . . .

The video was silent, not even a minute long. The camera was fixed and faced west from the airport's control tower. It didn't capture the actual launch. The missiles were already airborne when they entered the frame. From left to right, twin red streaks rose toward an invisible target. After five or six seconds, they faded, too far away for the camera to catch. But they hadn't stopped their chase. The proof came with the explosion, a white flash tearing open the night, resolving into a mushroom cloud. The shock wave hit seconds later, rattling the camera as the cloud in the distance grew.

HORROR IN THE SKIES, the crawl under the video said, and this time CNN wasn't exaggerating. India's navy would call off its search by morning. No one could have survived.

The inevitable next act would be assigning blame.

The video ended. CNN cut to a serious-looking man in a gray suit with a white shirt. *Fred Yount, Terrorism Analyst at RAND Institute—*

John Wells flicked off the screen before he had to hear Yount. A man squeezed a trigger in the dark. A few seconds later, almost three hundred people were dead. Whatever Yount had to say wouldn't change those bare facts.

Wells had quit the Central Intelligence Agency years before. But he'd never escaped the secret world. He knew now he never would. He felt like a swimmer fighting a whirlpool. He was strong enough to avoid being sucked down, but not to reach land. He could only tread water, knowing that one day his body would fail.

He was in his early forties, but his chin was still sturdy, his shoulders thick with muscle. Only the patches of gray hair at his temples and the permanent wariness in his brown eyes betrayed his age and his too-close acquaintance with the world's sins.

Now he lay back on his bed, stared at the ceiling. He was in room 319 in the Courtyard by Marriott at the Washington Navy Yard, a hotel

favored by randy congressmen for its nearness to their offices. More than anything, Wells wanted to close his eyes. Sleep. But he had a plane to catch in less than four hours. He had arrived in the United States only the night before. Now he was going back the way he'd come, over the Atlantic, bound for London and Zurich. To meet with a man who didn't much want to see him. Then, maybe, to Mumbai.

Wells understood. He didn't want to see himself either. Not at the moment. He was carrying himself around like a rain-soaked cardboard box about to burst. Too many miles. And too much death. Wells blamed himself for the downing of the jet. A few days before, he'd discovered the truth about a plot to maneuver the United States into war with Iran. He'd nearly found a way to stop it. But his enemies had outplayed him.

He'd failed.

Wells turned out the bedside light. He closed his eyes, and for sixty seconds thought of the jet's passengers. Then he made himself forget them. Nothing else to do.

A light knock stirred him. The room door swung open. "Nice opsec." Ellis Shafer's gravelly, mumbly voice. The lights flicked on.

"If it came to that, I could kill you in my sleep, Ellis."

"Hitting you hard?"

"I'm all right." Wells pushed himself up.

"Of course you are." Shafer sat on the bed next to Wells. "They probably didn't even know what hit them. Except the captain. Obviously."

"You should be a grief counselor."

"Should I tell you they're in heaven with seventy-two million virgins each?"

"Ellis—"

"Too soon?"

Wells had been raised Christian but converted to Islam more than a decade before, in the mountains of Pakistan. Shafer was a Jew who had

declared his atheism at his bar mitzvah more than fifty years earlier. Unlike Wells, he still worked for the CIA. Barely. Until one of the new director's new men got around to dropping off a letter of resignation for him.

Over the years, Wells and Shafer had worked together on a half-dozen operations.

But they had never faced a mission as tricky as this one.

A few weeks before, Iran had begun a secret campaign against the United States. Assassins working for the Quds Force, the foreign intelligence unit of Iran's Revolutionary Guard, killed a CIA station chief. Then the Guard smuggled radioactive material onto a Pakistani ship bound for Charleston, South Carolina. Fortunately, a rogue Guard colonel tipped the CIA to Iran's efforts, enabling the Navy to intercept the ship in the Atlantic.

Then the colonel gave the agency an even more disturbing piece of intel. He said Iran had moved three pounds of weapons-grade uranium to Istanbul. The uranium was ultimately destined for the United States, according to the colonel, who called himself Reza.

Wells and Shafer knew that the truth was very different. Iran had nothing to do with the killing of the station chief, or the smuggling. Reza wasn't a Revolutionary Guard colonel at all. He worked for a private group trying to trick the United States into attacking Iran. A billionaire casino mogul named Aaron Duberman had paid for the operation. Duberman hoped to stop Iran from building a nuclear weapon that it might use against Israel. Iran regularly threatened to annihilate the Jewish state, and a nuclear weapon would make the threat real. Even if Iran never used the bomb, its mere existence would give the country new freedom to launch terrorist attacks against Israel.

Since the fall of the Shah in 1979, the United States had stood firmly with Israel against Iran. Now the relationship between Washington and

Tehran was warming. The White House had recently agreed to loosen economic sanctions against Iran. In turn, Tehran promised to stop work on its nuclear weapons program. But those promises in no way satisfied Duberman and the mysterious woman who was his chief lieutenant. They had decided to force the United States to act by fooling the White House into believing that Iran was trying to smuggle the pieces of a nuclear weapon onto American soil.

Wells and Shafer had unraveled the scheme in the last couple of weeks, after Wells tracked down Glenn Mason, an ex-CIA case officer who had betrayed the agency to work for Duberman. Senior CIA officials refused to consider that Mason might be involved, for a reason that at first seemed airtight. Mason had been reported dead in Thailand four years before, and the death report appeared genuine. Mason hadn't used his passport or bank accounts since. In reality, Wells discovered, Mason had undergone extensive plastic surgery, so he could travel without setting off facial-recognition software.

After chasing Mason across three continents, Wells finally found him in Istanbul. But Mason turned the tables, capturing Wells and imprisoning him in an abandoned factory. Wells spent a week in captivity before killing Mason and escaping. Wells assumed that the Turkish police would find Mason's body at the factory, setting off an investigation that would unravel the plot.

Instead, Duberman's mercenaries disposed of Mason's body and cleaned up the factory, leaving police with nothing to find. Wells and Shafer had no other evidence to prove that Duberman was involved.

Meanwhile, the plot was close to success.

Tests conducted by the Department of Energy had shown that the weapons-grade uranium the CIA found in Istanbul didn't come from any known stockpile. The DOE and CIA agreed that Iran was the only logi-

cal candidate to have produced it. Kilogram-size chunks of highly enriched uranium didn't exist in private hands. And Iran had worked on nuclear weapons for decades, doing everything possible to hide its efforts from international inspectors. The United States and Israel had repeatedly unearthed hidden enrichment plants over the years. But Iran was twice as big as Texas. No one could say for sure that every plant had been found. In fact, Iranian exiles had told the CIA of rumors that the government had opened a new plant deep under central Tehran.

Despite his fears of starting another war in the Middle East, the President decided he had to accept the reality of the Iranian threat. In an Oval Office speech, he gave Iran two weeks to end its nuclear program or face an invasion. To support his threat, he ordered drones and stealth fighters to bomb Tehran's airport. Congressional leaders in both parties backed the President. Ironically, the earlier deal with Iran increased his credibility. A man who wanted an excuse to invade Iran wouldn't have spent years trying to end sanctions.

China and Russia protested the American attack on Tehran, but neither country offered any military aid to Iran. Afghanistan and Turkey, which had long-standing rivalries with Iran, agreed to allow the United States to use their territories as bases for American forces who might eventually invade. The rest of the world stayed on the sidelines. Most countries seemed to think the United States and Iran deserved each other. One was a fading empire that used its military too often, the other a dangerous theocracy that couldn't be trusted with nuclear weapons.

Iran responded furiously to the American threat. Its supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, gave a two-hour speech accusing the United States of lying to justify an invasion: *"Iran shall never open its legs to the filthy Zionist-controlled inspectors. Our people will gladly accept martyrdom. The Crusaders and the Jews will suffer the fury that they have unleashed . . ."*

Now someone had shot down an American plane. Iran was the obvious suspect. And the Islamic Republic had a history of terrorism against the United States.

Shafer turned on the television. CNN was replaying the explosion yet again.

“Think it was Duberman?”

“A couple hundred civilians wouldn’t stop him, if he thought it would fuel the fire.”

“On the other hand . . .” Shafer didn’t have to finish the thought. The Iranian government might also have downed the jet. The fact that it was innocent of the nuclear plot made it *more* rather than less likely to lash out. From Iran’s point of view, the United States had created fake evidence as an excuse for an invasion. Iran was not likely to wait for American troops to cross its borders before it took revenge.

“We have any idea where Duberman is?” Wells said.

“Probably Hong Kong,” Shafer said. “When not starting a war, he’s got casinos to run. Those rich Chinese want to see the man who’s taking their money.”

Wells wondered if Duberman was cold-blooded enough to glad-hand wealthy gamblers while goading the United States into war. He’d never met the man. But the sheer boldness of Duberman’s scheme suggested that the answer was yes. And Duberman was not just an ordinary billionaire, if such a creature existed. He was one of the richest men in the world, with a fortune of almost thirty billion dollars. He had mansions all over the world, a small fleet of private jets, his own island. He had spent \$196 million on ads in the previous presidential election, making him the largest political donor ever. Some analysts believed that the President wouldn’t have won without his help.

“You talk to Evan and Heather?” Shafer said. Wells’s son and ex-wife.

“Yeah. They agreed to hang out a few more days. Though they aren’t happy about it.” “Hang out” translated into *stay in FBI protective custody*. Before Wells killed him, Mason had threatened Evan and Heather. Wells didn’t know if Mason had been serious, but he couldn’t take the risk.

“Where are they?”

“Provo. Heather told me the biggest risk was death by boredom. And Evan says I’m going to get him kicked off the team. He just cracked the rotation and now this.” Evan was a shooting guard on San Diego State’s nationally ranked basketball team.

“We all have problems. You mention you killed five guys three days ago?”

“We had a nice conversation about it.”

The room door banged open. Vinny Duto walked in. Strode in.

The former Director of Central Intelligence, Duto was now a Pennsylvania senator. He’d crash-landed in the Senate after the President pushed him out of the CIA. He was an old-school politician, unpolished and raw with power. No one would call him handsome. He had stubby fingers, a heavy Nixonian face. But his intensity had resonated with Pennsylvania’s flinty voters. He had dominated the debates.

As DCI, Duto had saved Wells’s life more than once. Now they were working together to stop Duberman. But Wells could barely stand Duto at the best of times. He saw Duto as the worst kind of Washington opportunist. And he knew that Duto pegged him as an adrenaline junkie who took unnecessary risks.

They were both right.

Duto offered Wells a thin-lipped smile. “Gentlemen. Hope I haven’t interrupted anything.” Duto liked to irritate Shafer by accusing him of having an old man’s crush on Wells.

Wells felt the itching in the tips of his fingers that meant he was ready to fight. Three hundred people dead and Duto was cracking jokes. Wells knew exactly what Duto thought of the downed plane. Not a tragedy. A *moment*. One that might help his career if he played it right.

“Imagine you lost a donor on that plane,” Wells said. “Then you could pretend to care.”

“Life lessons from you, Johnny? Definition of irony.”

“Boys. Already?” Shafer clapped his hands like a cheerleader trying to

distract a drunken crowd from a blowout. “Same team here. Same team. We have bigger fish to fry, *n’est-ce pas?*”

Shafer’s horrendous French broke the spell. “Did you just say *n’est-ce pas?*” Duto said.

“He did,” Wells said.

“You two ready to be grown-ups?”

They both nodded.

“Then let’s move on. Please tell us you have something CNN doesn’t, Vinny.”

The new CIA director, Scott Hebley, had tried to freeze Duto out. But Duto still had sources in the National Clandestine Service, the former Directorate of Operations.

“Video analysis says the missiles traveled at least five kilometers from launch, maybe six. Based on distance and speed, the betting is they’re late-model Russian SAMs. Possibly SA-24s. Which only came into service in 2004. Unfortunately, they’re pretty much untraceable. The Russians have sold them all over, including Libya. After Qaddafi went down in 2010, we had a report that both Iran and Hezbollah agents got their hands on a bunch.”

“And could easily have moved them to India,” Shafer said.

“The White House will see it that way for sure. At this point, I don’t think we have any way to know whether this is Duberman pushing buttons or the Iranians firing across the bow.”

“Anything on the ground?”

“The Indian security services have responded with their usual efficiency,” Duto said.

Meaning none. In 2008, terrorists had attacked hotels, a synagogue, and the central train station in Mumbai. The police didn’t respond in force for hours, allowing ten attackers to kill 166 people and wound hundreds more. “Good news is that the Bureau”—the FBI—“has a five-man forensic team permanently in Delhi. They’ve flown in, along with some of our guys. Bad news is that there are a bunch of slums around the air-

port. Very dark at that hour, no security cameras. It's just possible whoever did this was dumb enough to leave the firing tube on the ground. Otherwise." Duto raised a mock missile to his shoulder. "Drive in, pow-pow, drive out."

"Pow-pow," Wells said.

Shafer grunted at him: *You made your point, now lay off.*

"White House planning anything?"

"If they are, they're not telling me. But at the moment, I don't think so. They suspect Iran, but they've got no evidence. I think for us the best bet is to stay away from Mumbai, stick with the original plan."

That morning, before the attack, the men had met at Duto's office in Philadelphia and agreed that finding the real source of the Istanbul uranium was their only chance to stop the plot. They were caught in the world's worst game of chicken-and-egg. With the President already having launched a drone strike against Iran, the CIA wasn't about to chase new theories. Especially one that accused the President's largest campaign donor of treason.

Wells, Shafer, and Duto would have to find their own proof. But they were stuck on their own. They couldn't have NSA crack open the servers at Duberman's casino company. They couldn't go to the CIA for surveillance or Special Operations Group help.

But if they could prove that someone other than Iran had supplied the uranium, then the President and CIA would at least have to consider their theory about Duberman. And no matter how careful Duberman and his operatives had been, the agency and NSA could unravel what he'd done if they focused on him.

Unfortunately, at the moment they had no idea who might have supplied the uranium. They faced the same blank wall that had led the agency to conclude that Iran had been the source. And they were short on time to find out. The President had given his speech, with its two-

week deadline, almost three days earlier. They had less than twelve days left, if they were lucky.

Wells saw that Duto was right. Mumbai was a blind alley. Let the FBI and CIA work it. Their first plan was still their best option.

“Fine,” Wells said. “Zurich it is.” Zurich was home to Pierre Kowalski, an arms dealer, both friend and enemy to Wells over the years. Kowalski was dirty enough to know who might have been sitting on a stash of weapons-grade uranium. Wells could only hope he was clean enough to want to stop this war.

“You going tonight?”

“Through London.”

“He know you’re coming?”

“He knows.”

“He gonna help?”

“He said he’d see me. Not sure he knows anything.” *Must we do this?* Kowalski had asked when Wells called. To which Wells had said, *Yeah. We must.* And hung up before Kowalski could object.

“But he’ll see you? How sweet.”

Before Wells could swipe back, Shafer intervened. “You talk to Rudi, Vinny?” Ari Rudin, who had run the Mossad until two years before, when the Israeli Prime Minister forced him out.

“Yeah. He tried to tell me he was too sick to meet.”

“Sick?”

“He has lung cancer. Been keeping it quiet. Told him I’d come to Tel Aviv. I’m not expecting much. I fly out tonight. Twenty-two-hour round-trip for a ten-minute meeting.” Duberman’s wealth and his importance in Israel meant that the Mossad must have watched him over the years.

“Too bad you don’t have lung cancer, too,” Wells said. “You could make him meet you halfway.”

“What about you, Ellis?” Duto said. “You going to look for the leak?”

The final thread. Duberman’s team seemed to have a source inside Langley. Wells, Shafer, and Duto weren’t sure whether the leaker knew

the truth about the plot or had simply been fooled into giving up bits of information that Duberman could use. In any case, they saw the leaker as an opportunity as well as a threat. He was another potential avenue to Duberman. But they risked alerting Duberman to what they knew if they went after him.

“At this point, no. Ice is too thin. I’m just going to go into my office, keep my head down for a couple days. May try to talk to Ian Duffy. Mason’s station chief in Hong Kong. He’s back in D.C. now. Lobbying. Maybe he knows something about how Mason connected with Duberman.”

The move was a long shot at best, but all they had right now were long shots.

“So we go our separate ways,” Duto said. “John, in terms of”—Duto made a pistol with his thumb and forefinger—“I know you’ve had difficulties getting hooked up.” Without access to a diplomatic pouch, Wells had trouble getting weapons across borders. “Some places, I still have friends. Russia, for example.”

Wells wasn’t entirely sure why Duto was working so hard. Getting involved with this mess carried serious risk. Duto wouldn’t bother unless he smelled a bigger payoff.

Then Wells realized. “You think this is your ticket, don’t you?”

Duto must have expected the Senate seat would be his last stop. He had won his race as a conservative Democrat, a breed that rarely survived presidential primaries. But now he had a chance at the biggest prize of all. If he could prove that the President’s largest donor was trying to lure the United States into war, he could demand whatever he wanted from the White House. A promotion to Secretary of State or Defense. Done. The President’s endorsement in the next election? Absolutely.

Duto had used Wells and Shafer before. But never for stakes this high. And Wells had never seen the con so early in the game.

“*La, la, la,*” Wells said. Arabic. No, no, no.

Duto nodded. “*Nam.*” Yes. “Unless you prefer the alternative.”

He tapped his wrist. "Come on, you can ride with me to Dulles."

"I'll get there myself." Wells couldn't bear sharing a car with this man.

"As you wish." Duto walked out.

Wells and Shafer sat side by side on the edge of the bed.

"We can't," Wells said.

"Can't what?"

"He's not fit." Wells wasn't one hundred percent sure about much, but he was sure that Duto shouldn't be President. Part of him wanted to flip on the television and watch ESPN for the next eleven days. Let Duto solve this, if he could.

"You want another war, John? Me neither. Take a minute so you don't run into him in the elevator. Then go. You have a plane to catch."

Wells had nothing left to say. He went.