

PROLOGUE

WASHINGTON, D.C.

The President wanted to see John Wells.
The feeling wasn't mutual.

Wells sat in the emergency room at the Virginia Hospital Center in Arlington, waiting for a doctor to set the foot he'd broken a day before on another continent, when his phone buzzed. A blocked number.

"Mr. Wells?"

"If you say so."

"Steve Lipsher at the White House. The President would like to invite you to a meeting in the Oval Office. Four p.m."

"Shafer gonna be there?" Ellis Shafer, a CIA lifer and Wells's closest friend. Currently stuck inside a federal jail not five miles from this hospital, his reward for helping stop a war.

"Just you, the President, and Ms. Green." Donna Green, the National Security Advisor.

"Then no. I can't."

The silence that followed suggested that no one had ever turned Lipsher down before.

"Someone will call you," Lipsher finally said, and hung up.

Wells was tempted to turn off the phone. Five minutes later, it buzzed again. “John. It’s Donna Green. Justice is drafting the release order, but we have to find a judge, and it’s Sunday, remember?”

“You locked him up easy enough.”

“We’ll get it done. Promise.”

“What about the senator? He coming, too?” Wells meant Vinny Duto, the former CIA director, now senator from Pennsylvania. For the last month, Wells, Shafer, and Duto had secretly worked together against a billionaire casino mogul named Aaron Duberman who’d tried to trick the United States into invading Iran. Duberman’s plan had nearly succeeded. Shown false evidence that Iran wanted to smuggle a nuclear weapon into the United States, the President had set a deadline for Iran to open its borders or face invasion.

But barely twelve hours before, Wells and Duto had delivered proof of Duberman’s plot to Green, forcing the President to back down. In a midnight speech from the Oval Office, he called off the attack.

Wells had expected that the President’s next move would be to punish Duberman for what he’d done. Expected and hoped. Green’s tone, simultaneously wary and pleading, suggested otherwise.

“No Duto,” Green said now. “And that’s not negotiable.”

Wells wasn’t surprised. Green and the President had forced Duto out of the CIA two years before. Now Duto had the upper hand. He could destroy the President simply by revealing the truth about the way Duberman had suckered the United States. Though Duto had already hinted to Wells that he had another agenda. As a price for his silence, he would make the White House help him in the next presidential election. A straight power play, standard operating procedure for Duto, whom Wells imagined kept a shrine to Nixon in the basement of his mansion.

“Fine,” Wells said. If Green didn’t know that Wells disliked Duto

almost as much as she did, Wells saw no reason to enlighten her. “I’ll see you at six. Give you time to get Ellis out, me to get my foot set.”

“You’re picking the time for a meeting with the President?”

“Come to an emergency room without hundred-dollar bills taped to your forehead, see how long it takes them to fix you.”

AT 5:45 P.M., Wells offered his driver’s license to the White House gate guards and limped toward the West Wing entrance. The worst of the winter was over. Wells wore only jeans and a bright red T-shirt that read *Chicago Homicide: Our Day Starts When Your Day Ends*. Hardly appropriate for meeting the President. But he couldn’t make himself care.

As Wells passed through the metal detectors, he knew he should feel good. He and Duto and Shafer had kept the United States out of war. Yet Duberman was still in his fortified mansion in Tel Aviv. Meanwhile, the President’s back-and-forth had damaged the United States already. An hour after the President’s announcement, Iran’s Ayatollah Khamenei made his own speech. He thanked Allah for “defeating the Zionist-American crusaders” and promised that “American lies will not stop our mighty Islamic Republic from using its nuclear facilities *as it sees fit*.” The last four words were new. In the past, Iran had insisted it would develop its nuclear program only for peaceful purposes.

Then Russia and China said they would immediately lift all economic sanctions against Iran. “The United States must learn not to meddle with other nations,” Russia’s Foreign Minister said, in a finger-wagging lecture that was more than slightly ironic, given his own country’s recent adventures in the Ukraine.

The White House confined itself to repeating the points the President had made the night before. *We will fully review the evidence that Iran was trying to smuggle weapons-grade uranium into the United States.*

The ultimatum for an invasion no longer serves either side. The Pentagon had already leaked plans to bring home the troops it had just flown to Turkey and Afghanistan. A *New York Post* headline summed up the popular view: “THANKS, MR. PRESIDENT. WE JUST LOST A WAR WE DIDN’T EVEN FIGHT!”

So Wells wasn’t surprised that the mood inside the White House was grim. Though it was Sunday, the West Wing was crowded. Presidential aides trudged along the narrow hallways, staring at their phones for bad news. In the Oval Office anteroom, Wells found Shafer. He was freshly scrubbed and in his best suit, but the bags under his eyes suggested he hadn’t enjoyed his time in jail. Or maybe Wells had just forgotten how old Shafer was. They had first met when Shafer was in his late forties. Wells supposed part of him still saw Shafer that way, thick curly hair and a cynic’s smile. Now Shafer’s hair had become a white horseshoe at the fringes of his skull. His shoulders were bent and narrow from too many years in front of a computer.

He still had the smile, though, the one that warped the edges of his lips. He gave it to Wells. “Seriously? Chicago Homicide? I’m the one who goes for pointless acts of rebellion.”

“Learned it from you, Dad. So don’t I get a hug? Or you got enough man-to-man contact the last few days?” Wells couldn’t talk to anyone else on earth this way.

“I was in there, no way of knowing what was happening, this siren came on like they were evacuating the place, then the intercom, a voice I’d never heard, *We have decided to broadcast the President’s speech tonight because of its importance.* Five words in, I knew you won.”

“We won, Ellis.”

“Lucky us. Now we’re here for our prize.”

The door to the Oval Office opened. “Gentlemen,” Donna Green said.

THE PRESIDENT WAS in his mid-fifties, nearly as tall as Wells was, though not nearly as muscled. He wore a tailored blue suit and white shirt. No tie. He extended his hand and looked Wells over. His eyes were resigned, like Wells was an unwanted suitor marrying his daughter. *No idea what she sees in you, but I guess we're stuck with you.* Still, he radiated command and power, the arrogance of the man who always had the last word. Beside him, Green was small and frumpy, in a wrinkled blue sweater and a shapeless gray skirt. Like Shafer, she seemed almost aggressively unfashionable.

"Please." The President indicated the twin yellow couches in the center of the room. "Anyone need a drink?" *Nothing formal, just a friendly chat.*

Wells and Shafer shook their heads.

"I could ask about your foot," the President said to Wells. "Offer to sign that cast. But I have a feeling you're not in the mood."

"Let's just stipulate that we've had the small talk," Shafer said. "You were charming."

"As always. I want to apologize to you, Mr. Shafer. It goes without saying that we should never have detained you—"

"But I'm guilty. I leaked that information, sir."

The President's smile didn't waver. "You've both done a great service."

"You're taking this well. Considering Ladbrokes is making book on when you'll resign."

"Good for them. I can't say I was happy when Donna came to me last night. But I'm not angry at *you*. The CIA failed. I failed. We shouldn't have needed you. But we did. And for that, I thank you. At some point, I'd love to hear the story, how you did it, start to finish."

Wells found himself impressed with the man's apparent sincerity. Then he heard Shafer. "Very good, sir." A parody of an English servant's accent. "Very, very good." *Veddy veddy guhd*. He golf-clapped. Twice.

Until now, Wells hadn't realized the depth of Shafer's anger. He wondered how far Shafer would push. How much the President would take.

"You're so happy, how come you didn't tell the country the truth? You lied your ass off last night. Now you're about to ask us to keep our mouths shut like good little soldiers. After we tell you the story, of course. Guys like you *always* want to hear what happened. From your bulletproof offices. Why don't you ask my man here"—Shafer nodded at Wells—"about the nightmares he gets. You think you want the truth, but you don't even want the truth's second cousin, what it's like out there."

"Ellis—" Wells said.

"You think because we gave you an enema with the facts last night and you had no choice but to back off your war, everything's cool, we'll keep our mouths shut. And in return we get a secret medal we look at for five minutes before you lock it in a safe and promise that our grandchildren get it fifty years after we're dead? Shiny and gold? Heroic Workers of the Revolution? Tractor on it?"

"Mr. Shafer—"

"I'm not finished. *Sir*. What about Duto? All he wants is your job and you can't give it to him right now, not unless you've secretly rewritten the Constitution. But I bet you promised him you'll make it happen as best you can. Which would be a disaster, in case you don't know. But you don't care. All you want is to stay in here."

Shafer wiped his forehead. "Now I'm finished."

A flush climbed the President's neck like an infection. He reached for the pitcher of water on the table between the couches, poured a

glass, drank it down. Wells figured he was buying time to cool off. Yet when he spoke, his voice was even.

“I had that coming. I lied like a rug to the whole country. About Duberman, all of it. Didn’t see a choice.”

“The truth is always a choice—”

“My turn. I let you talk. Should I have told the world that one man, a civilian, hired a couple of dozen operatives, almost faked us into starting a war? Would that have made us look better? Everyone’s blaming me. Let ’em. Let them say I was bluffing, the Iranians beat me. I know this stains my record forever. I’ll take that. Better than the alternative.”

The President rattled off the sentences quickly and with an almost unnatural precision. Wells wondered if he’d slept at all the night before, if he’d taken a little helper this morning to stay awake.

“You want to know what I want,” the President said. “I am not telling you to keep your mouths shut. Not threatening you. Not implicitly, explicitly, in any way. You want to call *The New York Times*, go ahead. Tell ’em everything. We won’t deny it. We won’t split hairs about what you told us and when. You want the truth out, it’ll come. My only request. Please tell me in advance, so I can be ready.”

“To resign?”

The President poured himself a fresh glass of water, looked into it as if it might hold the answer. For a man with no leverage, he was making a decent case, Wells thought. Neither threatening nor begging. Treating them as equals, telling them the choice was theirs.

“Probably how it shakes out.”

The bald, liver-spotted truth. They could make him quit, if they chose. Wells wondered if he could substitute his judgment for that of 320 million Americans. Though if the voters knew the truth, would they keep this man in power?

“But you’d rather we didn’t.” Shafer spoke quietly now.

The President didn’t bother to answer.

Shafer looked at Wells. “I said my piece. You?”

The question meant Shafer hadn’t decided. Otherwise, he would have forced the issue, dragged Wells along. Wells looked at Green. “You’ve been quiet.”

“I’ve been listening. Like I should have last week.”

“Can he survive? Or is he ruined?”

Green’s eyebrows rose. “You’re asking me to tell you if I think he should quit? In front of him? And you expect an honest answer.”

“I do, too,” the President said.

“And if I say it’s time?”

“Donna, if I’ve lost you, then I’ve lost everyone.”

“All right, then,” Green said to Wells. “The truth? We’re better off with him. As badly as we screwed the pooch, you want to air all this?”

“Suppose we don’t air it. He quits in a couple weeks, gives whatever reason he likes.” Talking about the man like he wasn’t in the room with them.

“That’s worse. And either way, the Veep is not the guy for this job. He wants to be liked too much. Talks too much.” Green leaned toward Wells. “I know we made a huge mistake. But in the end, you showed us the proof, we listened. No war. Now give us the chance to fix the damage we’ve done. If we can’t, you can go public anytime.”

Wells had spent the last dozen years making life-and-death decisions, but he felt unequipped for this one. He looked at the President. “If I agree—and I’m not saying I am—you flush the CIA. Hebley, all his guys. And Ellis gets to stay at Langley as long as he likes. He’s ninety and drooling, doesn’t matter.”

“Ninety and drooling?” Shafer said.

“Protection for my son, my ex-wife. I ask, the Secret Service watches them. Forever.”

“Not a problem,” the President said.

Wells had the uncomfortable feeling that the President had expected his demands exactly. He decided to shake the tree. “And I’ll need ten million dollars.”

The others, even Shafer, sat up straighter.

“Excuse me?” The President’s voice was tight. Offended. The reaction Wells had hoped to provoke. “I didn’t think you were in this for the money.”

“I’m not.”

“So this is, what, a tip?”

“Not that you need to know. But half to an animal shelter in New Hampshire. Long winter up there for strays.” Wells thought of Tonka, the mutt he’d found years before, in his ex-girlfriend Anne’s keeping now.

“The other five, yours to keep.”

“Now that I’m freelance, I don’t have someone to call at Langley if I need a plane or a dozen guys with guns. My winning smile only goes so far. I usually find I need to offer cash, too. I had a couple of million from the Saudis, but I spent it. So, a refill.”

The President nodded. Wells sensed he was looking for a reason to say no but couldn’t find one. “Fine. Tell Donna where to send the money and we’ll get to you Monday. Anything else? Your own aircraft carrier?”

“Stay out of the way while I take care of Duberman.”

The President shook his head.

“Then forget it.” Wells stood.

“John—”

“Please don’t call me John. We don’t know each other that well.”

What he needed to say came to him all at once, a speech brewing for years. “You know what’s always the same? The top guys always skate. We never touch them. American, Saudi, Russian, whatever, they make their messes and everybody else cleans up. I don’t mean to sound naïve, but I’ve had enough compromises for the greater good. Duberman, we can take him. Nobody’s protecting him.”

The President nodded. “Somebody spends two hundred million dollars to get you reelected”—as Duberman had done for this President—“he’s not just a donor. He’s a friend. He’s been in this room. Then he tries to fake the United States into a war? Fake *me*? You think I don’t want him to pay?”

“Then let me do something about it.”

“Not you. We’re going to do this the right way, even if it takes time. We have to take him out in a way that doesn’t blow back on us—”

“On you—”

“Me and the country, yes. You can have everything else. But not Duberman. You don’t like it, call the papers.” The President reached into his inside suit pocket, came out with an iPhone. “Secret Service lets me keep it as long as I’m in here and can’t lose it.”

He pressed his thumb to the home button to unlock it, tossed it to Wells. Then sat back on the sofa, as studiously casual as a poker player who had shoved all his chips into the middle of the table. *Over to you. Call or fold.*

This guy. He’d humiliated himself and the country. Yet he still acted like he was in charge. Like sheer force of personality would see him through. The world’s best bluffer.

Wells saw the irony. He complained no one ever held the men in charge accountable. Now he had the chance to make the most powerful man in the world pay. Only he couldn’t do it. He handed the phone back. “You promise me, I stay out of it, you’ll get him.”

“I will do everything possible. Understand, that doesn’t mean blowing up his mansion or his plane with his family on it. No collective punishment. No civilians and especially not his wife and kids. Him only, and maybe that one bodyguard, the one who’s always with him—”

“Gideon.” Wells wouldn’t forget Gideon Etra’s name soon. Or ever.

“Yes. Gideon’s a legitimate target. So? Will you give me a chance?”

“One condition. Get him out of Israel. Within a week.”

The President shook his head in confusion.

“Tel Aviv’s the hardest place to kill him. The Mossad and Shin Bet will know the second you bring in a team. He can hole up in his mansion. And he probably figures you won’t come after him if he has his family around. Flush him, make him move, maybe he makes a mistake. Goes to that island he owns, nice fat target.”

“They won’t kick him out without a good reason,” Green said. “We’ll have to tell Shalom”—Yitzhak Shalom, the Israeli Prime Minister—“the whole story.”

Exactly what Wells wanted.

The President and Green whispered briefly.

“Okay,” the President said. “But he winds up in some underground compound in Moscow where we can’t touch him, don’t blame me.”

Wells looked at Shafer. “What do you think, Ellis?”

“I’d like to know what Duto wants.”

“Nothing you wouldn’t expect,” the President said. “Carte blanche in naming the new DCI. Also all my donor files, plus all the oppo research we have on every potential candidate, both parties.”

“You told him no to that?”

“I told him yes to everything.”

“You gave him your dirt.”

“It isn’t that juicy. Politicians are boring these days.”

“What are you going to do when he tells you he wants you to endorse him?”

“Truth is, that would barely move the needle. Even in the primary. Nobody cares what I think. I’m the past. The past can’t sign bills. The only way I can guarantee he gets the job would be to make the Veep resign, name Duto Veep, then resign myself. That would be a constitutional crisis in a can. I’d rather have it all come out.”

“Plus you’d be out, anyway,” Shafer said.

“Correct. So that’s not happening.”

“Just don’t underestimate him.”

“Lesson learned. So? You on board?”

Shafer tapped Wells on the leg. “Good enough for him, good enough for me.”

“And vice versa,” Wells said. “For a while.”

“How long?” Green said.

“Time limits only cause trouble.” An unsubtle reference to the President’s failed deadline. “Last thing. I don’t want anyone on me. I find out you’re watching, it’s off.”

“Fine.”

Then they had nothing else to say. Green gave Wells and Shafer cards without names, just numbers on the front and back. “Cell and home. Call anytime.”

“Let’s go to Shirley’s,” Shafer said, when they were finally off the White House grounds. A run-down bar in northeast D.C., left over from the District’s bad old days as the Murder Capital. It sold two-dollar shots of no-name booze, and its bathroom sent customers to the back alley. The perfect place for a defeat celebration.

“Your wife won’t mind.”

“My wife is just happy I’m out of jail.”

“Drinkers wanted—inquire inside” read the sign taped to Shirley’s

front door. Inside it was dirtier than ever. Like going downmarket was a strategy. Wells wanted to summon some nostalgia for the place, irritation for the eight-dollar-a-beer gastropub that would replace it as Washington's gentrification spread ever farther east. He couldn't. It could have been cheap and local and still have had pride.

Wells ordered a Budweiser and didn't drink it. Shafer ordered whiskey and did. One shot, a second, a third. Shafer wasn't a big drinker, and the shots added up. A rheumy film blanked his eyes. After his fourth shot, he poked Wells in the side, his finger hardly denting the muscle over Wells's ribs. "I ever tell you about Orson Nye? My first COS?" Chief of station. "In Congo? That first posting in Africa, back in the day, I had the worst case of Nile fever."

"West Nile?"

Shafer smirked. "No, like Potomac fever." Washington residents used the term to describe the naïve excitement that young arrivals to the city displayed over their proximity to power. *That intern's got Potomac fever so bad, we could have him research the weather service budget for a month and he'd love it.*

"Hard to imagine." Wells peeled the label from his Budweiser and sloshed the liquid inside back and forth. Muslims didn't drink. He was Muslim. Thus, he didn't drink. The rules were the rules.

He missed beer, though.

"Oh, but I did. Loved it, all of it. The embassy parties. Chartering a plane so some twenty-year-old could fly me into the jungle for a meeting with the Angolan rebels. The weekly briefings in the secure room. The safe with the gas masks and the nines and the grenades. All the coms protocols we had to use, back then it wasn't just some encrypted phone. Our secretaries practically needed Ph.D.s. Checking out the surveillance photos we had of the KGB residents, knowing that they had the same photos of us. Spy versus spy. So glamorous."

“I’m waiting for the *but*.”

“But. Took me maybe a year to figure out that everything we did was for show. Mobutu was all that mattered in Congo.” Mobutu Sese Seko, the country’s president for thirty-two years, until just before his death in 1997. “And all he cared about was money. Carter talked a good game about human rights, but he kept the man’s palms greased. Reagan didn’t even pretend to care.”

Shafer raised his glass and the bartender shuffled over.

“One more?” The guy looked like he belonged in a nursing home, not a bar.

“At least. Your name’s Ed, right?”

“Depends who’s asking.”

“You’ll never guess where we were today, Ed.”

“Got that right.” The bartender filled Shafer’s glass, swiped a pair of dollar bills from the counter, walked away.

“Gonna miss this place,” Shafer said.

“Makes one of us. Mobutu?”

“Back then, nobody worried about terrorism; the COS and the ambassador threw parties all the time. Open bar, wide open. One night, I’m drunk, I start spouting to Orson, the people of Congo are starving, Mobutu’s stealing with both hands. We’re standing by, letting him; why don’t we do something about it? He’s drunk, too, big guy, old-school agency, country-club type. Pretty wife. He puts his hands on my shoulders, leans in—he smelled great, by the way—”

“I’m not sure what to make of the fact you remember that.”

“I can’t say a man smells good? And he said, ‘Look, you want me to send a cable, *time to get rid of MSS*? We’ll go to the secure room, do it right now. Just promise me one thing.’ And I said, ‘What?’ And he said, ‘Whoever comes next him will be better. At least Mobutu’s greedy first

and a sadist second. At least I can go over to the palace, ask him to lay off the fingernail pulling and leg breaking when it gets too bad.”

Shafer had delivered this monologue in a Jimmy Cagney–esque voice that apparently was meant to be Nye’s. He raised his glass. “Here’s to you, Orson. You shut me up good. You know what I said back to him? *Zip-ede-doo-dah, zip-ede-yay, my oh my—*”

Wells didn’t like seeing Shafer drunk. “Had to have been guys who were better.”

“And worse. We couldn’t tell ’em apart. Whoever we picked would say the right things until he took over. Then maybe we’d find out the truth. And plenty of broken glass along the way. Plenty plenty. Even after only a year over there, I was sure of that.”

“So Mobutu stayed in power for another twenty years, almost, and destroyed Congo.”

“Sure did. Hasn’t improved since he died, though.”

“How come you never quit, Ellis?”

“I have a good marriage, right?”

“I don’t know much about marriage, but it looks that way.”

“Great family. All the drama I didn’t have in my personal life, it went to the agency. I always thought of the CIA as a woman. A beautiful woman. She cheats, she fights, she lies, but you get addicted to the drama. Of course I only went out with three women in my life, so what do I know?” Shafer downed what was left of shot number five and reached for the bottle in front of Wells. “May I?”

“Please don’t.”

Shafer took a pull, belched. “Nectar of the gods. Though not Allah.”

“You think we did the right thing by letting him skate? The President, I mean.”

“Heck if I know, John. I know you weren’t ready to do it, and I

wasn't, either. Let's see what happens. Donna Green was right about one thing. We can always change our minds."

Wells was done with this crusty bar. And with Shafer. "Let's get a cab."

"One more."

"No more." Wells lifted Shafer off the stool. He was light as an empty sack and Wells wondered if he might be sick.

Not that. Not Shafer, too.

"You want to stay over?"

"So you can watch me sleep, report my nightmares to the President?"

"It happened."

"*Once*. You poured it on thick enough."

Outside, Wells led Shafer south and west until they found a taxi.

"Get out of this town," Shafer said, as he slid inside. "It doesn't agree with you. Sort out your love life. If you can't do that, at least go see your kid. Give our fearless leader a chance to keep his word."

"He can't get away with this." Wells wasn't sure whether he was talking about Duberman or the President.

"You'll know when it's time. We all will." Shafer hauled the door shut. He didn't look back as the cab rolled away.

PART ONE

HONG KONG

Aron Duberman owned estates all over the world. But since marrying Orli Akilov, an Israeli supermodel, he had spent more and more time in Israel. After the President's speech, he was glad he had. Since its very beginnings, Israel had been a haven for Jews who faced persecution. A "law of return" gave all Jews the right to gain Israeli citizenship. Duberman wondered if he should take advantage.

At the least, he planned to stay inside Israel indefinitely. The United States would hesitate to kill him here without telling the Israeli government of its plans. And Duberman doubted the government would let another country kill a Jew inside Israel. Especially him, especially under these circumstances. The Prime Minister would surely see that Duberman had done what he'd done to protect Israel from Iran.

Five days after the President's speech, Duberman learned how wrong he was. He was eating dinner with Orli and their twin sons at the mansion when his gate guard called.

"Yaakov Ayalon is here." The guard's voice carried unmistakable respect. Ayalon headed the Israeli Security Agency, the famous Shin Bet, Israel's FBI. "He asks you meet him at the gate."

“Tell him I’ll be glad to see him inside.”

The response came back seconds later. “He asks you meet him at the gate.”

“I have to go,” Duberman said to Orli.

“At dinner?” She treated dinners with the twins as close to sacred. Even on nights when they ate out, they often had a first meal at home. Duberman had joked she wanted him to become bulimic.

He kissed her and the boys, wondering if he’d ever see them again, stepped through his cavernous mansion, past the Jeff Koons balloon-animal sculptures and the Keith Haring paintings. Fifty million dollars’ worth of modern art in the front gallery alone. Barely a rounding error in his thirty-billion-dollar fortune.

What good was any of it now?

Outside, the night was calm, the air fresh and clean. Three Ford Mondeos sat nose to tail, two men in each. Ayalon waited by the gate. He was a bantam of a man, with black nerd-chic glasses, a neatly tailored suit, close-cropped gray hair. He looked like a psychiatrist with a rich clientele.

“Your phone, please.”

Duberman handed it over. Ayalon turned it off, tucked it in his pocket.

“You can come with me.”

Surely the Israelis wouldn’t pluck him from dinner to put a bullet in his head. But then what exactly was the protocol for an assassination?

Ayalon led him to the middle Ford. “I know it’s less fancy than what you’re used to.” Within minutes, they were on Highway 1, headed southeast, toward Jerusalem. Whenever Duberman made this drive, he was struck by how small Israel was. Jerusalem and Tel Aviv were barely forty miles apart. The whole country was about the same size as New

Jersey, though longer and narrower, less strategically defensible. When the Muslims threatened to push the Jews into the sea, they weren't speaking rhetorically.

Yet the hills outside Jerusalem were beautiful, even in the dark. For one short stretch, the highway coursed through a canyon that offered the illusion of being wild country. Then it turned and rose toward the glowing lights that marked the newest western tendrils of the ancient city.

Minutes later, they turned onto the road that led up the hill that was home to Israel's central government complex. "Knesset?" Duberman said, the name of the Israeli parliament. Ayalon didn't answer.

Instead, they turned into the parking lot of the Israel Museum, a low cluster of modern buildings that occupied prime real estate near the parliament. A loading bay big enough for a tractor-trailer was open. The lead and chase cars waited outside as the Ford carrying Duberman drove to the back of the bay. Duberman reached for the door.

"We wait inside," Ayalon said. Fifteen minutes later, a five-car convoy sped into the bay, an armored Cadillac limousine in the center.

"Out."

Duberman stepped out as the Caddy stopped beside the Ford. A burly bodyguard emerged from the right back door. "Fine," he said, and a tall man unfolded himself from the back seat. Yitzhak Shalom. Ayalon and the guards walked away, leaving Shalom with Duberman. The two men were about the same height, but Shalom was painfully thin. His breath carried the oily smell of grape leaves. They'd met dozens of times. Duberman had donated millions of dollars to Shalom's political party. But Shalom's face suggested that neither the money nor their friendship nor Duberman's marriage to Orli would help him.

"Mr. Prime Minister—"

“I’ve spoken to your President.” A slight emphasis on *your*, a reminder that Duberman was American, not Israeli. “You need to leave.”

“But Tel Aviv is just getting nice.”

“You *joke?*”

“The right of return.”

“Doesn’t apply to murderers.”

“If you’ve spoken to the President, you know I only aimed at Israel’s enemies.”

“What about the Americans your people killed?”

Duberman couldn’t deny the accusation. As part of the plot, his operatives had killed a CIA station chief and his bodyguards, hoping Iran would be blamed.

“When he told me what you’d done, I nearly offered to solve the problem myself.” Shalom lifted his head and huffed, a single short exhale, like a witch casting a spell. This close, Duberman smelled his stomach bile. “Please don’t think about begging your right-wing friends for help. Yaakov and I are only ones who know the truth. If that changes, you won’t benefit.”

“Don’t you see that what I did, I did for Israel?”

“If you think that, you’re an even greater fool than I thought. You have forty-eight hours. Of course you can keep your properties here, but you can never come back.”

Me and Moses. Banished from the Promised Land. Duberman feared the Prime Minister wouldn’t appreciate the comparison. “What about Orli?”

“Did she know?”

“Of course not.”

“Then she can stay. The children, too.” Shalom turned away. Just before he stepped into his limousine, he looked back. “Two days, Aaron. Don’t make the Shin Bet come again. They won’t be so polite.”

AYALON DIDN'T RIDE with him back to Tel Aviv. Duberman had the Ford to himself. The highway rolled by as he considered his next move. If Israel was closed to him, Europe was out, too, and of course the United States. Isolating himself on his island would make him an easier target. *A mysterious early-morning explosion has destroyed the mansion belonging to casino billionaire Aaron Duberman on his private island of Gamma Key. Duberman is missing and presumed dead in the explosion . . .*

Presumed dead. What about faking his death, taking off with a few million dollars? Duberman doubted he could stay hidden for long, even with plastic surgery to disguise his features. He was too well known, and facial reconstruction wasn't effective for people in their sixties. Like the people inside them, faces turned grooved and worn, their features difficult to change. Even if the surgery succeeded, where could he go? Besides English and Hebrew, he spoke a little Spanish, nothing else. Would he move to a village in the Peruvian jungle and act the part of an overaged hippie interested in the local shamans?

No matter where he went, he'd have no contact with Orli or his children. The CIA and NSA would watch them forever. He'd have no friends, no possibility of making any. He'd have no way of spending his millions without attracting attention that he couldn't survive. He'd be in an open-air prison of his own design, waiting for the day when a hit team knocked on his door.

He had to have a better choice.

China. The country that had saved his parents from certain death. They had escaped the Holocaust by fleeing from Austria to Shanghai after Hitler's troops arrived in Vienna in 1938. Almost eighty years later, maybe China could do the same for him. He had a mansion on Hong Kong Island, near the top of Victoria Peak. The President had

told Israel the truth, but he wouldn't want to show the same weakness to the Chinese. If the United States decided to come after him in Hong Kong, it would do so on its own, without Chinese help. Of course, the President still might try, but the risks were even bigger than they'd be in Tel Aviv. Hong Kong was as densely populated as any city in the world, and the Chinese wouldn't look kindly on an attack that killed their citizens.

Plus Duberman had a good excuse to live in Hong Kong for a while. His casinos in Macao, forty miles west of Hong Kong across the Pearl River Delta, were the heart of his company. He would add even more security guards to convince the President that killing him wouldn't be worth the trouble. Maybe in a few months, tempers would cool. Maybe he could secretly offer to donate his fortune to the President's favorite charity, buy himself penance.

Maybe, maybe, maybe. Duberman knew the odds were long. But he knew, too, that he had no choice. For the first time, he understood in his bones why gamblers stayed at his tables long after they should have left. Why they reached for the last credit card in their wallets, the one they had promised themselves never to touch, the one for the groceries. Whatever the odds, they were in too deep to leave. Once you'd lost everything, why not hope for a miracle?

AS HE WALKED through the mansion toward his bedroom, he found himself hoping Orli would be asleep. Or even out. Anything to avoid having to explain what had happened tonight.

Duberman had been a legendary playboy. He'd long since lost track of how many women he'd bedded. A thousand, at least. As he'd neared sixty, he realized he wanted to leave something besides casinos and stained sheets behind. He wanted children, and to him children

meant a wife. Orli wanted kids, too, and she'd figured out rock stars might not be her best bet. She was cynical enough to understand the deal they were making, smart enough to stick to it, to know that he wouldn't tolerate her stepping out.

Despite the age difference, they got along. Like him, she was fundamentally unpretentious, street-smart rather than bookish, and a hard worker, even if her work consisted of two-hour Pilates regimens. They even had a solid sex life. Duberman couldn't perform like a twenty-something anymore, but he was still in shape, and what he lacked in vigor he made up in experience. With the help of a drug called Clomid—beloved of steroid cheats and fertility doctors—Orli was soon pregnant with twins.

The pride Duberman felt surprised him slightly. Orli's offer to take a DNA test didn't. He'd made her sign a prenuptial agreement. If they divorced, she would receive tens of millions of dollars. But they both knew that money was a fraction of his wealth. She wanted him to have no question about his paternity, so that he would leave everything to her and their children without hesitation. He agreed to the test. Why not? He didn't think she was bluffing, but he saw no reason to take the chance. Sure enough, the children were his.

Orli was a better mother than Duberman had expected. She threw herself into the dirty details of being a parent, changing diapers and mashing food. He was embarrassed he'd ever questioned her motives for having them. In a way, he envied her. He loved the twins, but on a minute-by-minute basis he wasn't much interested in their pooping or their squirming or the mushy noises that they made.

He stepped into their bedroom and found her awake and in bed, typing on her laptop. She flipped it shut, stared at him. Even furious, she was distractingly beautiful. Every part of her fit together perfectly, and she had the natural grace of an Olympic gymnast.

“The head of Shin Bet?”

“It’s complicated.”

“Tell me the truth.”

“The truth is, better if I don’t.”

“Then I leave. The boys with me.” She slid from the bed, picked black yoga pants up off the floor. “You think I need your protection, Aaron? I’m beautiful, I must be stupid. Did I ever tell you how I lost my virginity?”

He knew her secrets. Even some she thought belonged only to her. Not this one. “I assumed it was to me.”

No one was smiling at his jokes tonight.

“I was fifteen, I went to Paris, my first big round of shows, Dior picked me to walk. A big deal, Dior. My agent, Nicholas was his name, he said he needed to stop at his office before he dropped me at my hotel. We get there at six-thirty, you know, France, nobody works past five, the place is empty. He takes me into his office, says, ‘Let’s have glass of wine to celebrate. Your first big score.’ I said, ‘No’; he said, ‘One glass’; I said, ‘Sure, why not?’”

“Wasn’t Natalia with you?” Her mother.

“At the hotel. Anyway, he gives me the wine, and it tastes a little funny, but I don’t know anything about wine. I drink it. Five minutes later, I don’t feel so well. Five minutes after that, the room is spinning, I pass out. When I wake up, I’m on the floor of his office, and he’s inside me. Blood all over the floor, and it *hurts*. No one tells you that, how much it hurts. I screamed and kicked, begged him to stop. He told me I’d get used to it, next time I’d like it better—”

She rubbed her hand across her mouth, closed her eyes, fifteen again and back in Paris.

“Finally, he’s done. A virgin, he says. Didn’t think those existed anymore. I tell him he’d better kill me, I’m telling my mother when I

get back to the hotel, I'm calling the police. He says go ahead. He holds up my wineglass, says I was drinking, no one will believe me, everyone knows models are little whores. Anyway, if I do, I'll never get another job, not in Paris or anywhere."

"So you didn't tell your mother?"

Orli laughed, small and bitter. "I did. The very minute I came to our room."

Duberman sat beside her. She edged away.

"She told me I'd get over it. You know, the money was good, and there was something else, too. Mothers and daughters, I don't think men can understand, my mother was pretty enough, but forty-seven, her looks were fading, and I was—"

"This."

"She told me I would remember for the rest of my life, the way men really are. That being beautiful makes you a target. She told I shouldn't think anyone would believe me. Understand, I was still bleeding, bruises on my legs."

"I'm sorry, Orli." The only words he had, however inadequate.

"She asked me, was I *sure* I hadn't invited him. We were in a little hotel on the Left Bank, the sixth floor. Our room had a balcony, and I walked outside and looked down and the pavement called to me. But then I decided, no, I won't give them the pleasure, not my mother, none of them. You think I don't know the world?" She reached over, took his hand, squeezed once. "You'd better tell me."

He didn't answer. She let go of him, pulled on her shoes, went to the bedroom door, long, sure strides. "I'll take the boys to Sam's." Her younger sister, whose given name was Shasa, but whom Orli always called Sam. "Don't fight me for custody. I'll take the prenup."

"Orli—"

"Then *let me judge*."

He should have stayed silent and let her go. Kept her away, kept her safe. But he couldn't face losing her, much less the boys. So he told her. Not everything, but enough.

"You tried to fool the United States into invading Iran," she said, when he was done. She sat beside him on the bed, touched his neck gently, a nurse calming a feverish patient.

"It must seem—" Another sentence he couldn't finish. "I promise it's true."

"But the CIA found out the truth."

"Not exactly." He understood her confusion. "This man Wells who used to work for them, and two others. One a senator named Duto."

"They came to the mansion?"

"Right." In the desperate days before the President's deadline, Wells and Duto had come directly to Tel Aviv to confront Duberman. "The third one still inside the agency—Ellis Shafer is his name. They figured it out together and went to the President."

"Here I thought I had the best story of the night. And the President doesn't tell the truth because he thinks it'll make him look guilty, too. Because of all the money you gave to his reelection."

"Exactly. People will believe he knew what I was doing. Even though he didn't."

"So why did Mr. Shin Bet come?"

"The President won't say anything in public, but he told the Prime Minister the truth, what really happened. He asked the Israelis to make me leave—"

"Why?"

"Probably because they think I'll be an easier target outside Israel. And Shalom agreed. You and the boys can stay. I have forty-eight hours to get out."

“You can’t change his mind?”

“He practically threatened to pull the trigger himself.”

“Where will you go? Somewhere in Africa they don’t have electricity, they don’t know you. Tibet, a monk. After all your women.” She laughed, with a mocking edge.

“Hong Kong.”

“You think the Chinese love your casinos so much they’ll protect you?”

“The President will be too embarrassed to tell them. Maybe I can wait it out. Best case, he doesn’t do anything for the rest of his term, he’s too busy hoping not to be impeached. When he’s done, the next guy doesn’t know anything about it.”

“What about this man Wells?”

A good question. “I don’t know. He might come after me, too, or he might decide it’s enough, he stopped the invasion, let the President deal with me.”

She tilted his face toward hers. He didn’t think she’d ever looked at him so carefully before.

“One last look before you leave?”

“You know why I chose you, Aaron?” She smiled. Her teeth were not quite perfect, with a tiny space between the top two in front. Somehow models were allowed to have gapped teeth, the only imperfection the arbiters of beauty permitted.

His face must have betrayed his surprise.

“Don’t tell me you thought *you* chose *me*?”

But, yes, he had. Even with the age difference. “I thought my offer was compelling.” He raised his hands to the mansion around them.

“You weren’t my first billionaire.”

Something else he hadn’t known.

"I looked at you, how hard you worked, the engine never stopped—"

"You knew I would be too busy to bother you much."

"I thought, this guy's the same now as he was when he was twenty, didn't have a penny. He just wants to win."

"And that was appealing?"

"You can't imagine how *lazy* rock stars are. Half the reason they wind up as junkies is that heroin is the world's best excuse to do nothing. So you went after me, you swept me up, maybe it was a little bit cheesy, over-the-top, the million-dollar ring—"

"Four—"

"Like you couldn't even imagine I'd say no. How you've lived your whole life. And so I didn't. Now, finally, you went too far." She cocked her head, looked at him critically. "Tell me again why you did this? Aside from proving that you could?"

He pointed to the Tel Aviv skyline through their window, the apartment buildings glowing along the beach. "It all looks solid. But a nuclear bomb—" He snapped his fingers. "It's gone. And the problem is no one believes it can happen until it does. It seems like madness. But mad things happen."

She twined her fingers in his. "You really think you can get out of this?"

"It's possible."

"Then I'm coming with you."

"Orli—"

"No one thinks I had anything to do with it, right? If everyone knows I'm innocent, who's going to touch me?"

"The longer you stay, the more my guilt becomes yours."

"But not right away."

"No. The Americans will assume you don't know. And even if they start to suspect you, they would probably warn you first."

“Then I’m not going to worry about that. Promise me, from now on we’re partners.”

“Yes. Partners.”

FORTY-SIX HOURS LATER, they were on Duberman’s personal Boeing 787 Dreamliner, bound for Hong Kong. The mansion on Victoria Peak was fully furnished. Even so, they were carrying dozens of trunks of clothes and jewelry, along with their personal chef and Orli’s trainer. The travails of the super-rich.

As they flew, Duberman wondered whether the United States would pluck them out of the sky, force them to land in an American ally like Tajikistan, and from there bring him back to American soil for trial. But the hours and the countries passed and then they were in Chinese airspace and he knew they were safe. Their arrival at the VIP terminal in Hong Kong was a strange anticlimax. They cleared immigration without a hitch, convoyed up to the mansion on the Peak, and unpacked. In other words, told the people who worked for them to unpack.

The days turned into weeks. They settled into a routine of sorts. Orli worked. She even left Hong Kong sometimes for photo shoots. Duberman encouraged her. He didn’t want her to feel she was stuck. And his absence from the public eye would be less notable if she went out.

Meanwhile, Duberman spent most of his time in the mansion. He left only to visit his casinos in Macao, a fifteen-minute helicopter ride away. He always flew at night and made sure he was never the only passenger by asking big Hong Kong gamblers to ride with him. They viewed the chance to ride with him as an honor. No doubt they would have felt differently if they’d known he was using them as human

shields, insurance against the risk that the United States would blow his helicopter out of the sky above the South China Sea.

He watched CNN International and the BBC religiously, wondering when his role in the plot would leak. But the White House seemed concerned mostly with damage control. In interviews, the President and his advisors blamed the CIA, saying it had misinterpreted Iran's intentions. A month after his failed deadline, the President fired Scott Hebley, the DCI that he himself had put in place. On the cable news shows, talking heads joked that the President might not have pulled off an invasion of Iran, but he had sure ravaged Langley.

Congressional leaders demanded the President and his aides fully explain what had happened. The White House refused, on the grounds of national security and executive privilege. Some members of Congress threatened to impeach him, but the idea didn't gain traction. After all, the United States *hadn't* gone to war. Polls showed most Americans believed the President had been bluffing all along, hoping an invasion threat would force Iran to end its nuclear program. They were upset the move had failed. But a majority of them also thought that second-guessing it would weaken the United States. As far as Duberman could tell, the political stalemate worked to his advantage.

Duberman received more good news with the return of his top bodyguard, Gideon Etra. During his confrontation with Duberman in Tel Aviv, Wells had cut Gideon's left Achilles tendon, literally hobbling him. Surgeons in Israel had stitched the fibers in the heel back together, and Gideon had spent months in rehabilitation. He was almost healed, though he still couldn't run. Duberman trusted Gideon more than anyone else in the world, even more than Orli. A decade before, Duberman had spent millions of dollars on an experimental bone-marrow treatment that saved the life of Gideon's son Tal. *Kill for you*, Gideon

had told him, when the oncologists pronounced Tal free of leukemia.
Or die for you.

DUBERMAN STARTED TO let himself believe the President might leave him alone. He asked Geoffrey Crandall, his local lawyer, to look into whether he and his family could become permanent residents of Hong Kong. A *yes* came back quickly. The territory had strict immigration laws, but it was as eager for billionaires as everywhere else. Once again, Duberman had cheated the odds. Yet along with Duberman's elation came fresh anger.

At John Wells.

Wells had ruined his plans. If Wells hadn't gotten involved, the United States would already have attacked Iran. Instead, the country was a bigger threat than ever. Tehran knew the United States would never invade. It could build a bomb at its leisure. Sooner or later, the world would have to let it join the nuclear club.

Wells was to blame.

Plus Duberman would never be safe while Wells was alive. Wells had killed a dozen of Duberman's operatives. He was surely furious that Duberman had escaped what he would call justice. Duberman guessed the President had promised Wells he would act and asked Wells to stay away. But with each passing week, Wells would trust that promise less, move closer to coming after Duberman on his own.

On a humid Wednesday, thunderclouds swirling over Hong Kong's magnificent harbor, Duberman brought Gideon into his office. "How's your ankle?"

"Better every day."

"As long as you don't tear it again."

“I didn’t tear it the first time.”

The perfect segue.

“Nothing new from him?”

“I have an idea.”

“You want to stir this up. Now? Whatever calculation the President’s making, if you kill Wells, the truce will be off. He’ll have to hit you back.”

“What if Wells comes after *me*? Here, to Hong Kong, tries to attack me, kill me, in the house where I live with my family—”

“Self-defense.”

“Wells is a problem for him, too.” Him, in this case, meaning the President. “Maybe he thanks me for taking care of this.”

Gideon sat on the couch across from Duberman’s desk, rubbed his wounded ankle. He was a trim man in his mid-fifties who still carried himself like the soldier he had once been. Not just a soldier, a sniper, with thirty-six confirmed kills during Israel’s 1982 invasion of Lebanon. His nickname was Chai-chai—*chai* being a Hebrew word that meant “life” and also “eighteen.” Duberman sometimes wondered what Gideon felt about all those kills. Were the details still sharp, or had time blurred the edges of his memories? Could you forget killing a man?

“So, what, you invite Wells over?”

“The expansion opens in two months.” Duberman was adding a hundred-and-ten-story tower to 88 Gamma Macao. Its two top levels, almost eighteen hundred feet above the South China Sea, would be open only to the highest rollers. The Sky Casino, atop the Sky Tower. The tables would take minimum bets of one hundred thousand Hong Kong dollars, the equivalent of \$14,000 U.S. *The world’s highest casino*, 88 Gamma promised in press releases. *For the world’s greatest gamblers. The Sky has no limits!* “I’ll give interviews. Talk about how I’ll be there.

How much I love living in Hong Kong, how I might spend the rest of my life here.”

“You think he’ll be watching.”

“He put a gun to my head and I *laughed* at him. He’s watching.”

“He’ll figure a trap.”

“Doesn’t matter. He can’t stop himself. It’ll make him crazy.”

“That’s what you want? Maybe keep your head down, count your blessings.”

The pushback surprised Duberman. He’d figured Gideon would want a chance for revenge. “I thought he cut your ankle, *Chai*. Not your balls.”

Gideon cursed under his breath.

“It’s like this. If I’m going to live, I want him dead. And if I’m going to die, I want him dead, too.”

“So he comes. Then what? Not like we can ask the police for help.”

“We put men down in the city, watch the main MTR stations. He can’t hide here.”

“Seven million people in Hong Kong.”

“How many look like him? The city’s too small and there aren’t enough ways up here. Sooner or later, we’ll see him. Then he’s ours.”