



THE

PERFECT ASSASSIN

WARD LARSEN



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A NOVEL

WARD LARSEN

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FIRST EDITION

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With apologies to LvB

Für Elise



Prologue

CAPE TOWN, SOUTH AFRICA

The longshoremen scrambled across the pier to finish their task. Lured to work by an offer of triple-time wages, the few who had shown up were getting anxious. The cargo had arrived late, and tonight everyone had more important things to do. Tall floodlights presided over the operation, their sulfuric glow staining the night sky an obscure yellowish hue, and calm winds were no help in flushing away the noxious haze that had settled over the city. Mostly it came from the fires outside town, but now mobs were adding to the conflagration, looting and burning in the city itself as the last viable corner of the Republic of South Africa slid to oblivion.

At 2,000 tons, and 150 feet along the waterline, *Polaris Venture* was not among the largest ships to have visited the Port of Cape Town in the last week. She was, however, the only vessel berthed there now, and that singular presence managed to enhance her stature. A converted trawler built by Sterkoder of Norway, her lines were decidedly square, as if to attest to the solid vessel she was. *Polaris Venture* had been in port for eight hours, which was about as long as anyone had stayed lately, but having taken on her cargo it was time to go. The loading crane and gangways backed away, and dockhands on the pier tossed heavy mooring lines into the water. *Polaris Venture's* crew scurried around deck to hoist up the lines, then her single screw was engaged and she began to crawl up the channel.

The ship moved slowly toward the jetties and open ocean. A leviathan in the narrow waterway, she'd soon become a speck on the vast ocean ahead. Sliding beyond the lights of the pier, *Polaris Venture's* profile fell to a vague silhouette. By the time she'd cleared the jetties and picked up speed, her running lights and a dim glow of white light from the bridge were all that punctuated an otherwise black ocean. Minutes later these extinguished, a nicely symbolic end to the entire affair, as the port would likely not see traffic again for a very long time.

The ugly noose of apartheid had been lifted over a decade ago, but those expecting quick rise of a new and just South Africa had been roundly disappointed. Like a failing dam, the cracks had started slowly. Festering land disputes and tribal arguments seeped out. Corrupt politics added pressure until, seemingly overnight, the madness burst through. The authorities were little help, they having already begun to split and polarize to the different camps. It was a textbook civil war left behind in *Polaris Venture's* wake, one whose course to an end would be anything but a predictable, straight line.

Back along an empty pier the dockhands dispersed, many silently wondering if they'd ever see work here again. A second group of men, those who had delivered *Polaris Venture's* cargo to the docks, gathered uncertainly around their leader. With the final seams of order shredding in a country that had been undone by racial bitterness, it

was an odd counterpoint that the two dozen soldiers were equally divided — twelve black and twelve white. Their uniforms were sanitized, displaying rank, but no regimental patches or other insignia. This much had been a firm directive, related to the night's work. But it was also an appropriate terminus for a unit whose sole mission had just departed on the high tide.

The detail's leader, a colonel, had little to offer. With a few words of congratulation on a job well done, he awkwardly dismissed his troops — to what or where nobody was sure. The men milled about for a few minutes to say their own good-byes, then disbanded in groups of two or three, knowing they would likely never see each other again.

The colonel was the last to leave. He paused on the pier, his thoughts still resting with his troops. He was an honorable sort who, while not particularly religious, did find comfort in the occasional divine request. The colonel stood at water's edge, closed his eyes, and offered a prayer for his men, a simple plea that their treason might be lost in the chaos.

Chapter One

Christine Palmer saw it right on schedule, a waxing three-quarters moon on the horizon. Bright and beautiful in its own right, the moon began lifting up toward the stars for what would certainly be another celestial masterpiece over the eastern Atlantic. She'd always been amazed by the number of stars you could see out here, away from the usual lights and pollution. Gentle swells made a rhythmic, hollow slapping noise against *Windsom's* fiberglass hull. The only other sounds were those of the boat's rigging, which creaked and groaned in proportion to the strength of the wind.

Christine raised her chin into a crisp southeasterly breeze, finding it remarkable that conditions on the open ocean could vary so greatly. The first night of her trip had been like this one, calm seas and a gentle breeze. The second night had been a singularly miserable experience. A strong weather system had rolled in, pounding *Windsom* with vicious winds and towering waves. Christine could do no more than keep the boat on course and the sails trimmed, all under a constant lashing of rain and frigid ocean spray. She'd spent most of that night on deck, wet and chilled to the bone. When the storm finally broke, late the next morning, she had collapsed onto her bunk, without even the energy to remove the foul weather gear that had done so little to keep her dry.

That had been four nights ago. Since then, the weather had largely cooperated and Christine convinced herself, perhaps with reaching optimism, that such trying times were necessary to find true appreciation of life's more placid moments. It was a satisfying concept, and one she suspected would be quickly discarded in the next squall.

Sitting at the helm, she twisted her shoulder-length hair into a ponytail and poked it through the back of her baseball cap. The luminescent hands on her watch told her it was five-thirty in the morning. The sun wouldn't be up for an hour. Christine tended to be an early riser, but sailing somehow magnified the trait. In the four days since the storm her routine had taken shape. She went to bed an hour or two after sunset, set the alarm to wake up once at midnight to check the sails, the autopilot, and the weather, then slept again until four or five. Aside from the one wake-up call, it was a natural fit for her body's circadian rhythm. And it allowed her to enjoy her favorite time of day.

Christine went below to the galley. When she crawled out of the bunk each morning, coffee was always the first order of business. It had to be brewing before she could go topside to face the day's other issues, such as whether or not *Windsom* was still pointed west. She poured her fix into a big ceramic mug, the one her father had given her last Christmas. It was an oddly shaped thing, similar to the Pyrex flasks she'd used so often in chemistry lab, wide at the bottom and tapering to a narrow, round opening at the top. The mug had drawings of famous schooners all around and a rubbery non-skid coating on the base. It was, in fact, the very same cup she had picked out for her father that Christmas. Mom had instantly seen the humor — the two sailors

thinking alike again, probably even ordering from the same catalogue.

The pain returned as Christine thought of her father. It had been three months since Dad had died, and the hurt still came, only not as often, and it dissipated more readily. Being on *Windsom* seemed the best tonic. It had been a place of great happiness for their entire family this last year. She and Dad had crossed east to Europe last summer. On arriving in England, Christine flew back to Maine to finish her third year of medical residency. Then Dad had somehow coaxed Mom to England to spend a month cruising Europe and the Mediterranean. This was a terrific coup, since Mom normally kept herself a great distance from all large bodies of water. Christine had no idea what persuasions her father might have used to get Mom aboard until the answer slowly presented itself — a constant stream of postcards from the ports of Europe. It was a second honeymoon, Christine thought, much deserved after having spent twenty-eight years raising a family.

Christine smiled as the pain subsided. Making this westbound return was a catharsis of sorts. It was the first time she'd ever tried the crossing alone, her two previous runs having been with him. She had been trying to talk Dad into it only weeks before the stroke — a solo retrieval of *Windsom* from France during her winter break. He hadn't gone for the idea, and initially Christine was angry, thinking his reservations had to do with her sailing ability. That didn't wash, though. Christine had been sailing since she was a kid, and they'd both spent countless hours on *Windsom*. She decided he was only disappointed that she hadn't invited him along. Or perhaps he saw it as a final sign that his fledglings were all truly gone from the nest. Christine was the oldest, but her two younger sisters had recently ventured off on their own, one to college and one to the altar. Yet even after they were gone, Ben Palmer continued to dote on his girls. The fact that "little Christi" had been out of the house for nine years, and was more often addressed as Dr. Palmer, didn't diminish that she was still his girl. And only now did Dr. Palmer realize how much she'd actually liked it.

Christine went back up top, making sure to reconnect the safety line to her harness. It was a fast rule to never be on deck without it. Even the most sure-footed sailors could be sent overboard by a snapped line or a freak wave, and it was a sealed fate for a solo driver to go over in the open ocean without being attached to the boat.

She estimated her speed at four knots, about right for the untended graveyard shift. Now that she could keep watch on things, though, Christine let out more sail and was soon making closer to six. She clambered around the perimeter of the boat, checking *Windsom's* rigging up close. A halyard needed adjusting on the mainsail. A tie-down was loose on the eight-foot fiberglass dinghy that lay overturned and lashed to the portside deck. Her only other discovery was a small flying fish that had come aboard — recently, judging by the fact that its gills were still laboring slowly. Christine gently picked up the fish and dropped him back into his element, trying to see if he swam off under his own power. She couldn't tell.

It took half an hour for Christine to finish her morning rounds. Afterwards, she settled into the cockpit with her second cup of coffee. She held it close with both hands, not wanting to let any of the heat escape. It would still be a couple of weeks before the latitude and trade winds took the chill from the air. She looked to the horizon astern, brushing away strands of hair the breeze had swept across her face.

Christine could just make out the subtle glow that announced the entrance of a new day. She watched, mesmerized, as the eastern sky slowly fell awash in rays of light. Then *Windsom* shuddered along its entire length.

Coffee went flying as Christine's hand shot instinctively to the tiller. "Christ!" she sputtered. The boat had hit something. Something big. Christine stood and looked ahead, but there was only ocean. A heavy scraping sound drew her attention to the port side, close in, where a huge timber slid by. It was half the length of her boat and as big around as a telephone pole. With another hollow clunk, it fell behind, rolling heavily in *Windsom's* wake.

Christine disengaged the autopilot and turned into the wind. The sails flapped loosely as she scanned all around. There was more flotsam. An empty gallon jug and some smaller bits of wood, but nothing like the first monster she'd hit. She eased the boat back on course and pulled in much of the sail to keep her speed down.

Reaching into the cabin, Christine found the binoculars. The sun broke the horizon to provide light as she scanned the surrounding seas, giving particular attention to what lay ahead. She spotted more debris, but nothing worrisome. It had probably come from one of the big ships, either thrown off as trash, or washed over in a storm. In any event, she'd keep her speed down for awhile until she was sure it was all behind.

Christine re-engaged the autopilot, figuring she'd better go up front to check for damage. She moved forward along the port rail, still scanning the waves ahead suspiciously. Nearing the bow she spotted something, bright red and squarish, bobbing in the distance to starboard. It looked like a big plastic cooler, and there was something lying over the top of it. She brought up the binoculars, focused, and was stunned by what she saw. It was an *arm* hooked over the cooler. There was actually someone out there!

Christine dropped the binoculars, but kept her eyes locked on the cooler as she backed toward the cockpit. She averted her gaze just long enough to open the hatch to the engine controls and start *Windsom's* small diesel. It sprang to life and Christine swung the boat straight at the bobbing red dot — she knew how hard it was to find something out here once you lost sight of it. Looking again with the binoculars, she could make out a head and shoulders above the water. Once she was closer, and certain she couldn't lose contact, Christine pulled in the sails to better maneuver.

As *Windsom* closed in she saw the person, a man, turn his head and wave weakly. Christine slowed the boat to a crawl, idling the engine ten yards away. She wouldn't venture any closer in the small but rolling seas.

"I'll throw a line and pull you in!" she shouted.

The man waved again.

Christine coiled a rope and heaved it across the divide, but the line fell away as he snatched at it. She gathered it in and tried again, this time laying the line right across his shoulder. He grabbed on and was barely able to wrap it once around his wrist. Christine pulled the man slowly toward *Windsom's* stern, but halfway there he lost his grip — first went the cooler, then the rope. He disappeared underwater, but came right back up. Without the cooler for support, the man seemed barely able to tread water. When he went under a second time, Christine had no choice. She checked that her

harness was secure and dove in.

The shock of the cold was piercing. The man resurfaced as she swam over, and Christine approached him from the rear. "I'm behind you!" she shouted. "Just relax and let me pull you in!"

He went limp so suddenly that Christine wondered if he was even still conscious. She threw an arm across his chest and started pulling herself back toward *Windsom* by the line, praying he was alert and strong enough to get up the boarding ladder. She approached it with care, as the stern rose and fell heavily on the waves. Christine grabbed the bottom rung and was relieved to see him do the same.

"Okay, you first. Try to get a foot on the bottom step," she said. It dawned on her that the man might not speak a word of English. He got a leg on and she tried to shove him upward, but then he lost his grip. The man tumbled back in a graceless flop and disappeared. Christine lunged out, snatching with her hand, and was rewarded with a fistful of shirt. Pulling with all her strength, she got him back up, coughing and spewing.

Christine had only been in the icy water for a few frantic minutes but she already felt her strength beginning to ebb. She wasn't strong enough to pull him up from above. *It was such a damned simple problem!*

They both latched onto the ladder again and she yelled, "This time when the boat falls with the swell, try to get both feet on the ladder and stand. Let it pull you out as it rises, okay?" She pointed to the bottom of the ladder and the man gave a nod as if he understood.

With all the leverage she could manage, Christine pushed him up as the stern fell. He stood on the ladder and rose with the next upward swing. The wave crested, and at the high-point he wobbled for a moment, like a child's top losing its spin, then tumbled forward into *Windsom's* cockpit. "Yes!" she shrieked, right before getting slapped in the face by a breaker.

Putting a leg on the ladder, she came out with the next swell and crumpled to the floor of the cockpit next to him, frozen and completely out of breath. She could only imagine how he must feel. The man lay still as Christine collected herself. She knelt next to him, checking his pulse. It was weak, too slow for all the exertion. His skin was deathly pale, almost white. Then she noticed the blood stain on his shirt. She unbuttoned it far enough to reveal a four-inch gash running between the bottom two left ribs. He'd obviously lost some blood. Christine wondered how long he'd been out here. With that kind of injury, and with the water so cold, it couldn't have been long.

The man stirred and looked around blankly, a dazed expression on his face. He tried to sit up, but *Windsom* took a wave broadside and the jolt sent him back down to the deck, grimacing. Adding insult, both were doused with a sheet of salty spray.

Christine looked across the water and wondered if there could be any others. If so, would he even know?

"Do you speak English?" she asked.

The man didn't respond. His eyes drifted shut, and Christine knew what had to be next. She pulled her best drill sergeant's tone — he might not understand the words but at least she'd get his attention. "We've got to get you down below, into a bunk!"

His eyes cracked open and she motioned to the cabin. He seemed to comprehend.

She helped him stand, and he leaned on her heavily, in obvious pain. They made their way to the steps, which he negotiated with the wobbling precision of a drunkard, Christine doing her best to stabilize his wandering inertia. Once in *Windsom's* main cabin, he collapsed onto the bunk. She propped his head on a pillow and figured the wet clothes were next. Gently, she pulled off the tattered shirt. His upper body was lean and muscular, and judging by the number of scars, Christine decided he must have found himself in the company of strange doctors on a regular basis. There was one particularly nasty-looking scar near the fresh wound on his ribcage. She took a good look at the new damage, hoping it was superficial.

“Any pain when you breathe?”

Again, no response. His eyes were closed and he was still pale, but at least the man's respiration had slowed now that he was lying down. To top it all off, he had what looked like a terrible sunburn, his face and arms blistered from exposure to the elements. She dug out her first-aid kit and dressed the wound, then checked for other injuries — any cuts, swelling or bruises. Christine gently palpated his rib cage and abdomen, finding no obvious complications. He wore no shoes, but she noticed when she took off his wet socks that the bottom cuffs of his pants were bound tightly around the ankles, tied with shoelaces. How strange, she thought. Christine untied them and removed his sodden trousers, leaving the man in his briefs. Next she got a towel, dried him off, and finally covered her patient with two heavy blankets. He stirred for a moment and his eyes opened, but they were void any semblance of coherence.

Christine went to the galley and poured a glass of water. She pressed it gently to his lips, “Try to drink. You must be dehydrated.”

He managed a few swallows, but then coughed roughly.

“Take your time.”

His eyes focused more clearly and he scanned the cabin, obviously trying to comprehend his surroundings. He finished the water, then drifted off again.

Christine was weighing what else she could do for the man when it dawned on her. *Damn!* She had never checked *Windsom* for damage. She wouldn't be much help to anyone if the boat was sinking.

Christine hurried up the stairs, refastened her harness, and went to the bow. There, she leaned over and saw where the big timber had first struck. The paint was gouged, and there was a noticeable scrape back along the port waterline. She looked closely, but didn't see any structural damage. Thank God for the resiliency of fiberglass, she thought. Just to be sure, Christine decided to check the hull from the inside. She looked over the railing and tried to gauge just how far down the damage was from deck level. That picture in mind, Christine headed back aft. She was approaching the companionway when she heard the crash from below.

She rushed down to find her stranger sprawled across the map table, an empty water glass in hand. Then she saw the smoke, billowing from a wet, buzzing rack of radios. Christine whipped around and opened up the fuse box on the bulkhead behind her. She tripped the breaker labeled nav/com and a couple of others for good measure. The equipment powered down, and seconds later the smoke began to taper off.

“That’s all I need!” she said with a scowl. “An electrical fire to top off my morning.” She picked the man up and guided him back to the bunk. He seemed weaker than ever.

“If you need more water, ask!” she chided. Her admonishing tone was sure to circumvent any language barrier. “You shouldn’t get up for anything!”

He raised the palm of one hand, an obvious apology.

Christine sighed. “All right, all right,” she softened, “just let me do the work.”

She refilled his glass and gave him another drink. This time he took half, then settled back and closed his eyes.

Turning to the radio rack, she eyed it dejectedly. Later she’d have to dismantle everything and dry off the components. Questions began to turn in her mind. Were any others still in the water? How could she summon help with all communications temporarily out? Christine wiped the table dry and spread out a map. They were at least two day’s sail from the Madeira Islands. Lisbon was slightly farther in the other direction. Even if she could reach someone by radio in the next few hours, Christine doubted a real search could be mounted before tomorrow morning. By then it would be pointless. Nobody could live for two days in water so cold. Within these constraints, Christine set her plan.

She would search all day for any other survivors. After dark, she’d set course for Lisbon and try to get the radios working. Lisbon was slightly farther, but the course would take her right across the shipping lanes that led to the Straits of Gibraltar — there was a chance she could flag down help along the way. She took a good look at her patient. He was resting quietly now and seemed stable, but very weak. She’d have to watch him closely. If there was any turn for the worse, she’d abandon her search and get him straight to a proper hospital.

Christine went forward in the cabin, finished her damage check, then moved up top and planned the search in her mind. Once established in a pattern, she picked up the binoculars again and began to scour an endless expanse of blue. Early this morning, the Atlantic had been her own private refuge. Now, she thought, it just seemed big.

Chapter Two

Benjamin Jacobs was nearing the end of his tether. He'd been elected Prime Minister of Israel nearly two years ago. His platform for regional peace was the bastion of a winning campaign, but forging promise into reality, as is so often the case in politics, was another matter altogether. It had taken twenty months — twenty months of painful, partisan negotiations — to be finally perched on this brink of success. Unfortunately, the accord he would sign in Greenwich, England, was still two weeks off, and in this part of the world two weeks could be an eternity. Jacobs' economic stimulus package had long ago been put on the back burner, hostage to the peace process. But that would be next in line. No peace would ever stand against fourteen percent unemployment, higher in the Palestinian areas. Too many idle hands and minds on both sides.

Then there was the American problem. Israel's staunchest ally, and her staunchest pain in the ass. They'd only sell more F-15Es if the West Bank settlements were halted. So much opportunity. So much important work to be done. And Benjamin Jacobs found himself mired in shit — ankle deep, in fact, or at least that had been the case an hour ago during his morning constitutional to the first-floor men's room.

Jacobs sat in a wide leather chair behind his weighty desk, listening with determined patience.

"Portable toilets, sir," Lowens said with stiff seriousness.

Jacobs was glad that Lowens was here. He doubted anyone else in his government could present the issue with such dignity, or for that matter, with a straight face. Lowens was the assistant deputy council of something-or-other, but after today, Jacobs mused, he would always associate the man with toilets. Special Assistant to the Prime Minister for Toilets — perhaps a new cabinet-level position.

"It's a temporary solution, sir, but our only option at present. Last night some men were working on a water main across the street and they tangled into a sewer pipe. There was backflow, which the older plumbing in this building didn't prevent as it should. We have cleaning crews working overtime, but it will take a couple of days to straighten out. Our only option for the time being is to bring in portable toilets. Unfortunately, setting up these facilities will be problematic. If we put them in back of the building there are security concerns, and that leaves only one other option."

"I can't imagine," Jacobs deadpanned.

"We can put them on the roof. Lift them up with a crane, or maybe a helicopter."

The Prime Minister's eyes closed, visualizing the spectacle, and a tortured look fell across his naturally photogenic, politician's face.

Lowens pressed on. "I realize it might look silly getting them up there, but if we do it at night ... well, once they're in place no one will be able to see them. We can hide them between the stairwell and the air conditioning equipment. That would be optimal. For appearances."

Jacobs remained silent at the pause.

“Ms. Weiss thought I should run it by you before we did anything,”

Lowens finally added, an obvious disclaimer from a career civil service man. Betty Weiss was Jacobs’ Chief of Staff.

“Put the toilets on the roof, Mr. Lowens,” Jacobs said, exasperated. “Anything else I should know about?”

“No, Mr. Prime Minister.” On that, Lowens, having spent twelve years serving politicians at various levels, clearly recognized the chance to retreat. “I’ll keep you informed,” he promised. The staffer got up and left the room with exemplary decorum, no doubt hoping he’d done nothing to endanger his prospects.

Jacobs mumbled to himself, “Keep me informed. Please.”

His secretary knocked once on the open door.

“Yes, Moira?”

“It’s Anton Bloch, sir. He says it’s quite important.”

Jacobs considered a quip about the importance of his last meeting, but held his tongue. “Send him in.”

Anton Bloch was Director of Mossad, Israel’s vaunted foreign intelligence arm. When he entered the room the look on his face was grim. But then it always was. He was a solid man whose large, square mug gave a decidedly blunt appearance. His hair was cut high and tight on the sides. On top it was gone.

Without waiting for an invitation, Bloch took the seat Lowens had just vacated.

“*Polaris Venture*,” he said.

The name got Jacobs’ attention, and the Prime Minister braced himself as Bloch shuffled through a stack of papers in his lap.

“We’ve lost her.”

Jacobs spoke slowly, wanting to be clear, “You mean you don’t know where she is? Or has she sunk?”

“Definitely the first, maybe both ... we think.”

Jacobs deflated in his chair as Bloch found the paper he wanted and began inflicting details.

“The ship had two satellite systems, a main and a backup. They were supposed to transmit encoded coordinates hourly. Late yesterday we stopped getting the signal. She was off the west coast of Africa the last time we heard from her.”

“And you don’t think it’s a technical problem?”

“That’s what we hoped, at first. We spent all last night trying to raise her, but no luck. The communications links are independent, with batteries to back up their power supplies. The odds of everything failing are slim, but if that’s what happened, our man on board had instructions to use the ship’s normal radio gear to send a message — in the clear if necessary.” Bloch descended into grim certainty, “No, I have a feeling there’s more to this than communications problems.”

The Prime Minister put his elbows on the desk and buried his face in his hands. He took a deep breath as he recalled the previous week’s meeting. “Anton, when we

debated this mission we came up with a worst case scenario. Is that where we are?”

“It’s going to take some time to find out, but yes, she may have sunk. Or been hijacked.”

The Prime Minister slouched lower. His political instincts had told him this was a risky venture. But Bloch and the rest had made it sound so easy. Of course, in the end, the decision had been his.

“How many of our people were on board?”

“Only one, from my section. And a crew of fifteen, all South African Navy.”

“What about a rescue? If she sank there would be survivors, right?”

“There’s a good chance. The British and French have aircraft, and of course they’d be willing to help. Morocco is closer, but I doubt it has much capability for search and rescue that far out. The problem is—”

Jacobs waved him off with both hands, “I know what the problem is. If we ask for help, a lot of questions will come up. What kind of ship? Where was it going? What was on board? Everything could come out.” The thought made Jacobs’ stomach lurch. “What would *our* capabilities be?”

“For a search? I’d have to ask Defense to be sure, but we’re awfully far away. It’s not the kind of thing our Navy and Air Force are built to do. We probably have a half-dozen airplanes that could get out that far. And our ships, the few real ocean-going ones we have, are all here. It would take days to get them to the Atlantic.”

“How do we find out what’s happened?”

Bloch was out ahead for once. “We have to send a reconnaissance aircraft, our EC-130. I’ll get right with Defense and have it sent to the area. My team arrived in South Africa the day before *Polaris Venture* sailed. They installed, among other things, two emergency beacons. If the beacons come into contact with salt water, or are turned on manually, they’ll emit a signal once every hour on a certain frequency. Our EC-130 is instrumented to pinpoint these kinds of beacons. It’ll take a day or so to get the airplane overhead, but if the ship is there we can get a good fix and find out exactly where she went down.”

“And if she’s not there?”

“Then she’s been taken. And we’ll find her.”

Bloch spoke with a certainty the Prime Minister knew was optimistic.

“All right, call Defense and have them send out everything they can for a search. I’ll convene the Cabinet in two hours,” Jacobs said with a look at his watch.

Bloch scribbled notes onto the mess of papers in his lap, then strode to the door, a locomotive gathering steam. Jacobs yelled for Moira and she appeared almost instantly.

“Cancel the rest of my day. The Cabinet will meet in two hours.”

“The French Foreign Minister just arrived downstairs,” she warned. “He’ll be here any minute.”

Jacobs sighed. He noticed that nasty smell again. One of his security detail had tried to clean Jacobs’ shoes after the sorry affair earlier in the men’s room, but the stench was hanging tight.

“All right. Stall him for a few minutes. And get Lowens back up here right away,” he added.

“Lowens, sir?”

“Yes, he’s about my size, and a sharp dresser. Tell him I want his shoes.”

A blue BMW. It had only taken a matter of minutes for Yosef Meier to distinguish the tail behind his taxi as they snaked their way through heavy traffic in London’s West End. Meier felt good about spotting it. He was no longer a field operative, having taken a headquarters job back in Tel Aviv, so that he might finally get to know his two young children. Evie was seven and Max eight. After missing the greater part of their first five years, he’d put in for the transfer. Now, in spite of two years on the sidelines, Meier was glad to see he hadn’t lost his touch.

The initial satisfaction of spotting his pursuer faded briskly as Meier considered why anyone would be following him to begin with. Try as he might, he always came back to the same, unsettling answer.

Meier saw the familiar facade of the Israeli Embassy just ahead. Behind, in the distance, he caught glimpses of the brooding structure that was Kensington Palace. He half-turned to see the BMW a few cars back, as it had been all the way from Heathrow. The cab stopped directly in front of the embassy and Meier gave the driver a healthy tip, asking him to wait. He avoided an urge to look again for his escort. It was around somewhere.

Meier approached the front gate, fishing for the expired embassy ID card in his pocket. It sported an uncomplimentary mug shot of Yassir Arafat, a gag he used to run with the old crew at security. Back then they all recognized him anyway, so nobody ever checked his ID. He’d brought it along on this trip intending to keep the ruse running, but one look at the unfamiliar, serious faces that were now standing at the embassy gate forced him to reconsider. Somehow the idea had lost its appeal. Meier presented his headquarters ID, took a hard stare from the sentries, and signed into the building. He just wanted to see David Slaton and get this over with.

Meier went to the receptionist’s table and finally found a familiar face.

“Hello, Emma.”

“Yosy!”

Emma Schroeder got up and moved around her table with arms spread wide. She was a heavy, bosomy woman whose penchant for large, shapeless dresses did nothing to minimize her presence. Yosy took a crushing hug, something Emma reserved for those few embassy staffers who were able to stay out of her personal debit column. Meier smiled through it all.

“Emma, you’re the one thing that will never change around here.”

She gave a throaty laugh. “Of course I change. I get bigger all the time. And smarter too,” she added in a devious whisper.

“Are you still going to write that book?”

She chortled again but didn’t answer, leaving the mischievous question open. Emma was a career civil servant and had been on the first floor desk in London longer

than anyone could remember. She had a mental library of facts, rumors, and gossip about the place that was unsurpassed, and for years she'd threatened to write a tell-all book and retire on the proceeds. Meier sometimes wondered whether she actually might do it.

"So what brings you here from headquarters? Nobody told me you were coming." She was obviously concerned that her networks might have failed.

"Don't worry Emma, nobody snuck anything by you. I'm on holiday. I came to see David Slaton. He and I were going to do some hunting out at the lodge."

She looked doubtful. "David's not here. He got slammed four days ago. *I* don't even know where he is."

Meier felt his stomach tighten. "Four days ago?" He did the math. He had talked to Slaton on Sunday, six days ago. It was a casual conversation, and he'd learned in a roundabout way that Slaton had no intention of leaving soon. Then, it had taken nearly a week for Meier to arrange his leave and get here without arousing suspicion. In that time, Slaton had been slammed, Mossad slang for an immediate assignment — don't pack, don't kiss the wife, just grab your passport and get to the airport.

"Have you heard from him since then?"

She shook her head. "No. And I don't know when he'll be back."

Meier's mind raced as he considered what to do.

His look of concentration wasn't lost on Emma Schroeder. "What was it you'd be hunting for?"

It was a loaded question that Meier ignored. He suddenly wished he'd called first. "All right Emma, thanks anyway. If you hear from David, tell him I've been looking for him."

"Where are you staying?"

"I'm not sure yet," he sidestepped, "but I'll let you know."

Meier left with Emma eyeing him suspiciously. He walked slowly to his cab, still lost in thought. When he got in, the driver asked, "Where to next, guv?"

"I'm going to rent a car. There's an Avis agency over in Whitechapel."

The driver tried to be helpful, no doubt in light of the generous tip Meier had already provided, "There's an Avis just up the road 'ere. Save you twenty pounds from goin' all across town."

"No," Meier lied, "I have a certain car reserved there, thanks."

"As you like," the driver said, pulling out into traffic.

It took half an hour to get there. The BMW was still in trail.

Meier was particular in renting a car, selecting a small red Fiat — slow and easy to see. He fell in with the heavy traffic and headed west, all the way back across town. His pursuers picked him up right away and they negotiated the traffic well, having no trouble keeping up in the powerful German sedan.

Twenty miles later, Meier was on the M3, leaving behind the western outskirts of London. The traffic thinned and he saw his trailer was still there, farther back now, a

dot in the rearview mirror. They were doing a respectable job of keeping back and masking behind other cars, but they never lost visual. This told him two things. First, there were no other vehicles involved. If that had been the case, the BMW would have backed out of sight occasionally for a tag team. Second, there were no other means of reconnaissance involved. No aircraft, satellites, or tracking devices. He was being followed the old-fashioned way, by a couple of guys who had to keep him in sight while trying not to be seen themselves. This made his tactical problem easier, but it also confirmed his fears about who might be in the car.

Meier sped up to seventy miles an hour. The little Fiat's engine whined at a high pitch. He took out the detailed map he'd purchased at the car hire agency and set it on the passenger seat. Yosy Meier looked at his watch.

It took another two and a half hours. Meier saw the BMW fall back and take an exit. He looked at his own gas gauge and saw slightly over a quarter tank. After all the stop and go city driving, followed by hours on the M3 and A303, the big car had to be on fumes. Meier had also seen the gas station just off the exit ramp, and he suspected it might be where they'd take their chance. He pushed the Fiat's accelerator to the floor. It hit eighty-eight miles an hour and stuck, the little engine revved to a screaming pace. He didn't bother to look at the map yet. Right now he needed one thing — to get out of sight. He reached the next exit in five minutes. Meier took it, then made a quick series of turns onto smaller roads. Finally satisfied, he eased off the accelerator and referenced the map. There was no one behind him now.

Christine was at the stove, tending to a pot of chicken soup, when she glanced over to find her patient awake.

"Well, hello," she said cheerily. "Glad you're back. I thought you might sleep all the way to Portugal."

The man seemed bewildered. Christine sat next to him on the bunk, showing both a smile and an interest that were completely genuine. "How are you feeling?" she asked.

He propped himself on his elbows, grimacing at the slow, tentative effort.

"Easy." She held out a hand and introduced herself, "Christine."

He took her hand and responded in a raspy voice, "Nils."

"Nils? Swedish?"

He nodded, "*Ja, Svensk.*"

Christine gestured toward herself and said, "American." Christine was surprised that he apparently spoke no English. The few Scandinavians she'd met before had all had a working grasp on her own language. As he eased himself into a sitting position on the bunk, she went to the galley and drew a glass of water.

"You'll need a lot of this," she said, holding it out.

He took it and emptied the glass in a matter of seconds. Christine quickly offered a refill as she studied her patient. There were a lot of questions to ask, but she had no idea how to go about it.

"I'm a doctor," she offered.

He showed no trace of understanding. She slowly pulled back the sheet that