PART ONE

'WHEN THE HEART IS SICK, THE BODY FOLLOWS'

2003, Tel Aviv

1

INFECTED MUSHROOMS

'No one knows and no one sees, and the cemeteries are full of innocent men' – Natasha

Avi was in bed with Natasha when the telephone rang.

His head still pounded with Infected Mushroom beats. The night before, at the Barbie. Strobe lights and a cloud of cigarette smoke. Ecstasy. He held a bottle of Goldstar instead of a gun. He was off duty and besides, the spare was tucked in his trousers in the back.

Figures moved through the haze, no faces. That's what made it safe for them to meet publicly like this. Not that Natasha didn't make an entrance. She always did. Came right up to him in her fur coat and gave him a kiss on the lips. She stuck her tongue in his mouth and slipped him a pill and laughed. He kissed her back, hungrily. He couldn't get enough of her.

The telephone kept ringing.

Avi fumbled for the receiver. Avi said, 'What?'

The room was in darkness but light broke in through the gaps in the Venetian blinds. He heard car horns outside, drills beating asphalt from where they were digging up the road. The voice on the other side was brief. Avi's mouth tasted like an ashtray. He kept grinding his teeth. He was bugging out.

'What is it?' Natasha said. She rolled over and pressed against him. Her skin burned hot. Avi said, 'Alright,' and replaced the receiver. He said, 'I have to go.'

Natasha pouted. She reached between his legs and smirked

when he hardened against her. She moved her hand, up and down. 'Are you sure?' she said.

Avi's teeth ground. Natasha kept stroking. Avi fumbled for the remote control. He turned on the TV.

Sirens, onlookers, a collapsed building, the metal skeleton of a burned-out car. Army and police sealing off the area. A news anchor with a microphone. Avi turned the volume up.

'Early this morning a car bomb exploded on Yehuda Halevy Street,' the news anchor said. 'As the adjacent skewer grill restaurant began to open, children walked blithely to school and tragedy struck.'

Avi's head pounded. Natasha said, 'What—?'

Her hand slackened on his prick.

'The car bomb, packed with explosives, blew up in a ball of flame,' the news anchor said. He spoke in that sort of monotonous voice with a sing-song rhythm, all the syllables spoken evenly until the last, where it rose suddenly for emphasis. *Tragedy str-uuck. Ball of fla-aame.* Avi's breath came ragged.

'Amidst the rubble were familiar scenes. The wounded. The dying. And the dead.' The news anchor paused.

And the deeee-aaad.

'Two children were among the casualties. Five people in total are dead, and many more were injured in the heinous attack.'

Natasha sat up, her hand covering her mouth.

'That's awful,' she said. She turned and looked at Avi. As though he could save them. He couldn't escape her eyes. They were bright and guileless. They reminded him of the Dead Sea at sunset.

He said, 'I'm mad about you, Tash.'

'Police and Red Magen David ambulances were on the spot in minutes. No terrorist organisation has yet claimed responsibility for the attack. The prime minister has spoken from Jerusalem to say no stone will be left unturned until—'

Avi pulled away with effort. He found the remote control and switched the television off. He said, 'I have to go.'

'It's not far from here,' Natasha said.

Avi grabbed his jeans off the floor. In the back pocket, inside a twist of paper. He palmed the pills and dry-swallowed. The

high-pitched whine in his head turned into a buzzing of bees. He pulled on a shirt. Got dressed. Put on his gun.

'What do they need you for?' Natasha said.

'I don't know.'

He knelt down to kiss her again. She wrapped her arms around him. 'Use the back exit,' she said. 'Make sure no one sees you.'

'No one knows about this place,' Avi said.

'No one knows and no one sees,' Natasha said, 'and the cemeteries are full of innocent men.'

It sounded like something one of her brothers would say; and thinking of her brothers made the buzzing noise in Avi's head worse.

'I'll be careful,' he said.

He left her there. Took the stairs down two at a time. Stopped by the fire door exit, pulled out the black plastic film canister from his pocket and popped the lid. Tapped a small heap of the powder onto his fist and snorted it straight.

Lights brighter, sounds louder. He pushed open the doors and the sun blinded him before he put sunglasses on. The drilling from up the road dug right through his brain. No one in the alleyway. He went onto the road and saw no suspicious parked cars and nobody watching. He walked two streets over to his parked car. Got in. Popped a tape into the player and turned the volume up high, a techno remix of Beethoven's 'Für Elise' pumping out. It was by some Turkish guy, or so the pirate tape seller at the Central Bus Station told him when he got it. Avi let the beats and the piano keys swallow the noise in his head and turn it to pure music. It took him back to being, how old was he, eleven or twelve, piano lessons every Tuesday afternoon with Mrs Idelovich, who still spoke Hebrew with a thick Hungarian accent and smoked thin menthol cigarettes. She kept at him, even as he longed to be outside. It was the summer his father had the stroke, the summer Avi first met the Goldins.

He hit the gas and sped up the road, past the construction crew, the sound of the drills mixing into the electronic beat on the tape. Busy traffic along Har Ziyon Avenue. Avi hit the brakes as a taxi and an intercity Egged bus narrowly missed each other in

front of him. The taxi driver leaned out of the car window, waving an angry cigarette at the bus driver.

'Watch where the fuck you're going!' he screamed.

'Who gave you a fucking license!' the bus driver shouted back furiously. 'Fucking taxis, you're like vermin in this town!'

He had the cadences of a former rabbinical student. Avi hit the horn. The two drivers glared back at him with shared hatred. Avi stuck out his badge.

'Police!' he shouted. He hit the horn again and as soon as the bus started moving Avi cut through, close enough to see the taxi driver's startled face on his right, then hit the gas again and didn't let get go until he was past Levinsky with the refugees on his right, took the corner hard and screeched onto Menachem Begin.

Trucks and taxis and courier bikes, the air hot and thick with fumes. Avi cut across traffic and took a right over a pedestrian crossing in a red light. He screamed laughter as pedestrians scattered. A right again and there was the inevitable police cordon. He screeched to a halt and staggered out of the car. The pills started to kick in.

'Yeah, yeah,' he said when a uniformed cop tried to stop him. He flashed his detective badge.

'What's going on?' Avi said.

'No idea,' the uniformed cop said. 'I'm just watching traffic.'

'Doing a good job,' Avi said. He gave him a pat on the shoulder and ambled past. He scanned the street. It was crawling with police and bomb squad and medics and journalists. Residents unhurt in the blast stuck their heads out of upper storey windows and watched the circus.

The exploded car sat on the curb. Its blackened chassis was all that was left. Glass on the floor from the exploded windows. Blood drying on asphalt. Witnesses stood talking to detectives. The car was parked in front of a money changer's. The shop's front door was blasted in and the wall collapsed but you could still make out the sign. On its left was a greengrocer and on its right a skewer restaurant, the sort of no-frills grill place that had paper napkin dispensers on the tables and you could go in and out and still get change from a fifty.

Something about this particular arrangement rang a bell in Avi's mind, and not in a good way. His head pounded and he gnashed his teeth. Ronen came over and shoved a plastic coffee cup in his hand and sniffed and said, 'You smell like a whore.'

Avi took a sip of coffee. It was hot and sweet and black. It burned on the way down. He said, 'What are we doing here, Ronen?'

'You tell me, Avi.'

'It's a car bomb,' Avi said. 'Terrorists?'

Ronen shrugged. 'Could be, could be,' he said.

'Well, what else would it be?' Something else occurred to him, something that bothered him. He said, 'How did you know where to find me?'

'I didn't,' Ronen said. 'Cohen gave me the number and said to call you in.'

'*Cohen*?' That bad feeling grew worse. And no one should have known where he was. And no one should have had that phone number. 'Shit.'

Ronen nodded to where camera crews gathered a respectful distance from the explosion, yet with the view firmly in their sight. 'He's giving a press conference any minute now.'

'What does he want with me?' Avi said. In all his time in the service he tried to stay away from Cohen.

'I'm not an oracle, Avi. Come on.' Ronen nodded to the waiting press. 'Maybe we'll both learn something.'

'Did you get me a sandwich?'

'No, I didn't get you a sandwich. Here.' He pulled out a crumpled green pack of Noblesse and tapped until a cigarette popped out. Avi took it and accepted a light. He drew smoke and sipped Turkish coffee.

'Thanks, Ronen.'

'Quiet. They're starting.'

Quiet was good. Quiet was what he needed. The pills *really* kicked in then. The electronic drum beat pounded in his head. The car still smouldering. Witnesses with bandages talking to police. Cameras flashed. He felt the journalists hush.

He followed their gaze. Saw *him*.

Tall, trim, in his late fifties maybe. Grey eyes, as cold as the sea

of some distant land. Nothing like the Mediterranean. They said his eyes were cold but his blood was hot. And he was smart. Too smart, anyway, to be a policeman.

The journalists quieted down. Everything slowed and stilled. Avi froze, only his heart kept beating in tune with the music. He shook himself from the spell, took another drag on the cigarette, coughed. His hands shook holding the coffee. Cohen turned, looked at him once. *Saw* him. He nodded, then went to the media.

'Chief Inspector Cohen,' he said. 'But you know me.'

He waited. The burned car was behind him.

'A bomb attack,' Cohen said. 'Five people dead, two of them children.' He glared at the cameras. 'Just another terrorist atrocity. Just another headline in the paper.'

He shook his head at them.

'No!' he said. His voice boomed. 'What happened here today is beyond the pale. *Criminal* terrorism has taken place.'

'What?' Avi said.

'What?' Ronen said.

'The car was loaded with explosives,' Cohen said. 'It was left parked, and seemingly abandoned, in the early hours of the morning, directly outside this money changer's shop. A shop that was visited, just before the bomb went off, by businessman Aryeh Rubenstein.'

Avi went cold. The beat *pounded*. The journalists shouted questions. Cohen stood tall.

'According to eyewitnesses Rubenstein came into the shop for a period of some fifteen minutes. The bomb went off when he stepped outside. In the short delay before it exploded Rubenstein made it safely back to his car, which was parked two spaces down. He was barely hurt, and is currently being treated in hospital for minor injuries to his arm.'

'Are you saying another crime family tried to kill him?' shouted one of the reporters from Channel 2 News.

'We cannot rule anything out at this point,' Cohen said. 'But in consultation with the army and border police we are focusing on this incident as a criminal enterprise. I believe this was an assassination attempt on Mr Rubenstein's life. He was lucky – the

employees of the change shop weren't. At the time the bomb went off a group of children happened to be walking to school. A boy and a girl died instantly. One more child is in hospital in a critical condition.'

Cohen's voice choked. 'Children, dead in our streets!' He waved his finger at the cameras. The reporters pulled back from his wrath. 'I assure you, the police will leave no stone unturned until the heinous assassins are brought to justice.' He paused, let his arm fall to rest, and said, 'I will now take questions.'

The reporters shouted questions. Avi turned away. He'd seen enough. He dropped the empty coffee cup on the ground and flicked away the cigarette.

'Rubenstein, eh?' Ronen said. 'That's crossing a line. A bomb in a public place like this? This is criminal terrorism.'

Avi didn't marvel how quickly Ronen picked up the new term. *Criminal terrorism*. Who came up with that one? he wondered. Probably Cohen himself.

What did Cohen want from him? What did Cohen *have* on him?

He thought of the black film canister in his pocket. He was dying for a line. Instead he followed Ronen to the witness from the grill place.

The man was an Arab, and nervous with it – as well he should be. It didn't do to be an Arab in these circumstances. Or any circumstances really.

'So?' Avi said. 'What did you see?'

'I already told this one,' the man said. He looked at Ronen pleadingly. 'What am I going to do now?' he said. 'They won't pay me if the restaurant's not open.'

'You're lucky you're not in a cell,' Ronen said.

'A cell? What do I need with a cell? I told you, I'm the dishwasher.'

Ronen sighed, pulled out the Noblesse, offered the witness one. The man took it gratefully and lit up. 'It was terrible is what it was,' he said. 'Those kids, they go past here every day that same time. Never could have imagined it. I saw the car but I just thought… Well, nothing. It was just a car.'

Avi hopped from foot to foot. Avi helped himself to Ronen's cigarettes. He said, 'Forget about the kids. Tell me about the man in the car.'

'Him?' The dishwasher looked even more nervous. 'Big guy, pot-belly, came in a black Mercedes. Came out the back seat, you know. Had a driver. The driver stayed in the car. He had another guy with him, stood outside the door the whole time he was inside.'

'How did you see all this?' Avi said.

'I was having a smoke. I get in a bit early, before the kitchen opens.'

'You recognise him?' Avi said.

'Who?'

'The man.'

'I don't know anything,' the dishwasher said.

'Yes or no?' Avi said, only a little threatening.

'Maybe, I don't know. He comes sometimes. Almost every week maybe. He goes in empty, he comes out with a bag.'

'What's in the bag?'

'How should I know?' the dishwasher said. He gestured at the ruined front. 'It's a change shop,' he said. 'What else they got in there but money?'

'What happened when the man came out?' Avi said.

'Nothing. He walked to his car and his bodyguard followed. The kids were just going past. I had my cigarette down to a stub, I was just about to go in to start cleaning. Then like two seconds later the bomb went off.' He looked at Avi with eyes like a wounded bird's. 'I'm lucky to be alive,' he said.

'Aren't we all.'

'Guess he got lucky too,' the dishwasher said.

'I guess he did,' Avi said. Someone called out his name and he turned.

Saw Cohen with a *come here* gesture.

'Thanks,' Avi said to the dishwasher.

'For what?' the man said. But Avi was no longer listening.

He went over to Cohen. Stood to attention and saluted.

'At ease,' Cohen said. 'What is this, a parade?' He extended his hand. 'Detective Avi Sagi? I'm Chief Inspector Cohen.'

'I know who you are.'

Cohen looked at him with some amusement. 'And I know who you are,' he said.

'Yes, sir.'

'I read your reports.'

Avi sweated.

'Yes, sir,' he said.

'Stop that. You can call me Cohen.'

Avi nodded.

'How come you never came to me?' Cohen said. Sounding almost wounded. 'I have a place for good people in my team. And I hear you're good people, Avi.'

Good people.

Avi ground teeth. Cohen nodded as though something had been decided.

'Come on,' he said.

'Where?' Avi said.

But he thought he already knew.

2

THORNS AND THISTLES

'If you wrong us, shall we not revenge?' – Shylock

The summer of his piano lessons with Mrs Idelovich, the summer he met the Goldin brothers for the first time, Avi's father had a stroke. He remembered the hospital from that time: the linoleum floors and that scratchy sound they made when you walked on them, an unexpected cry or a sob from a room down the corridor catching him unawares and making him jump, the light that was always too bright, men smoking in the corridors. Now the walls were the same off-white but there were new 'No Smoking' signs everywhere and outside the door to Aryeh Rubenstein's room stood two armed police officers.

Cohen met Avi at the hospital entrance. They'd driven over in separate cars, a small mercy for which Avi was grateful. He chewed on a mint on the way over and gripped the wheel hard.

'A heinous crime,' Cohen said. He looked at Avi dispassionately, like a biology teacher about to demonstrate surgery on a frog. 'It will not go unpunished. Retribution, Detective Sagi. "Vengeance is mine," said the lord. Deuteronomy 32:35. "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed." Genesis. Do you know, I have a granddaughter the same age as those children who died?' He gripped Avi by the shoulder. Avi winced.

'If you wrong us,' Cohen said softly, 'shall we not revenge?'

'Exodus?' Avi said.

'*The Merchant of Venice*,' Cohen said. 'Shakespeare.'

'Ah.'

'I want whoever did this, Detective Sagi.'

'I understand.'

'Do you?' Cohen said. 'Do you understand me?'

Avi stared into Cohen's eyes. Saw the cold absolute that was there.

He swallowed.

He said, 'Yes.'

'Then come.' Cohen let go of Avi's shoulder.

They walked up stairs and down corridors. A room with the door half open, and behind it Avi saw a small girl lying on a bed, bandaged and surrounded by monitors. He saw her heart beat, peaks and troughs on a monitor. A nurse inside glared at him and shut the door.

That summer his father sat slack in the living room, in the armchair where he used to read the newspaper. The house was so quiet that summer, and only the sound of the piano keys as Avi haltingly tried to play 'Clair de Lune' and 'Für Elise'. The sound of the damn keys. The house was so quiet and the blinds were drawn and only his mother came and went. He was desperate to escape that house. He wanted to break things.

'At ease, gentlemen,' Cohen said. The two policemen standing guard saw him and relaxed. Cohen slipped one of them a fresh packet of Marlboros.

'Take a smoke break,' he said.

'We're not supposed to—' the other policeman said before his partner grabbed him by the arm and dragged him off.

'Thanks, Cohen.'

'Take your time,' Cohen said. He pushed the door open and Avi followed him in.

'Stay back—' A heavyset man tried to block their way. Cohen hit him in the stomach and then kneed him in the face on the way down as the man collapsed. Avi winced at the sound of the bone cracking.

'Hey, what— Oh, it's you, Cohen.'

The bodyguard groaned and stayed on the floor. Avi helped him up.

'Good thing this is a hospital,' he said.

'Go get cleaned up, Semyon,' the man on the bed said. Rubenstein. He turned a belligerent face on Cohen. 'What do you want? Who's the kid?'

'He's with me.'

The bodyguard, Semyon, left the room. Now there were just the three of them, and Avi really didn't want to be there at all. He felt things were slipping out of control. Perhaps they had been for some time.

The last time he saw Rubenstein in person, Avi was a kid and it was the night Shai Goldin got shot in the legs.

'Listen,' Rubenstein said. 'I had nothing to do with it, Cohen. Fuckers tried to kill me!'

'You make me look bad, Aryeh,' Cohen said. 'A bomb, in a residential area? Civilian casualties? You've lost control of the situation.'

Rubenstein stood up glaring. Avi saw he only had minor injuries, a scratch on his cheek and an arm in a sling. 'No one can come at me like this, Cohen. It's a declaration of war.'

'I can't have a war, Aryeh.'

Rubenstein shrugged, one-handed. 'It's not up to you and me now, Cohen,' he said. 'Now it's up to God.'

'You do nothing,' Cohen said. 'Is that clear?'

'You're ordering me?' Veins stood up in Rubenstein's face. 'You forget yourself.'

'We'll solve it clean.'

'Clean,' Rubenstein said. He sounded like he'd never heard the word and didn't like it much. 'Look,' he said, 'even if I wanted to, the boys have their blood up, don't they. They want action.'

'Then hold their leash.'

'I can give you a few days,' Rubenstein said. 'A week, maybe. Shit like this is bad for business. But I want heads.'

'Any idea who did it?' Avi said. His voice felt rusted with disuse. Rubenstein turned his attention on him.

'I'm just a businessman,' Rubenstein said. 'I have no enemies.'

'Alright,' Cohen said. 'I want you lying low for a while. Take a holiday to that place you have in Cyprus, maybe.'

'Oh, believe me, they won't get a shot at me twice,' Rubenstein said.

'Give us a minute, Avi,' Cohen said.

'Sure.'

Avi went out. He shut the door. He leaned back against the wall and took deep breaths. His hands shook. Something vibrated in his pocket. He fished out his phone, flipped it open. Two messages, one from Natasha – *Need to see you*. The other from Benny requesting a meet.

Shit, and shit. And he couldn't go anywhere *near* Natasha, not now. He followed the sign to the restrooms, checked the stalls were empty, did a line of coke, then he figured what the hell and did another one, which was all that was left at the bottom of the film canister. He stripped off his shirt and washed under his armpits with paper towels. He drank from the tap, cupping the water in his hand. He dried himself on the electric dryer.

When he got back the door was open, the bodyguard was back with a plaster and a scowl on his face, and Cohen was leaving. The two cops were still on their smoke break.

'What about my police protection?' Rubenstein said.

'I am your police protection,' Cohen said.

Avi fell into step behind him. Down the echoing corridors and past nurses and doctors and worried relatives, until they were finally out in the hot and humid air. Avi could smell gasoline, cigarettes, the sea.

'I knew your father,' Cohen said.

'You did?'

'He was a good man. Honest.'

'Yes.'

'It was too bad, what happened.' Cohen shook his head. '"Cursed is the land for you",' he said. '"In sadness shall you feed upon it all your days. And thistles and thorns it will grow for you".' He searched Avi's face. '"For dirt you are and to the dirt you shall return".'

'Genesis,' Avi said. He still remembered at least some of his Bible lessons. He had a sudden moment of déjà vu, like he'd experienced a moment much like this once, long ago.

'Yes. I want you to find the men who did this, Avi. Do it right. Do it quick. Before Rubenstein unleashes his dogs and my city goes up in flames. Can I rely on you?'

'Yes,' Avi said. He knew saying anything else would be a mistake. Thorns and thistles, he thought.

'I already spoke to your supervisor,' Cohen said. 'You're seconded to my unit at Serious Crimes until I say otherwise. But I want you flying solo on this. Keep me informed of your progress, but only me.' He passed him a phone. Avi took it numbly.

'And Avi?' Cohen said.

'Yes?'

'When you find them, if they give you trouble… You know what to do.'

The sun was already high in the sky and it erased the shadows. Avi felt the gun still tucked into the small of his back.

He said, 'Yes, Cohen.'

'You're a good man, Avi.' Cohen slapped him on the back.

Avi stared after him. His phone buzzed again.

He flipped it open.

'Yes?'

'Not on the phone,' Benny said.

Avi sighed. Avi fidgeted.

Avi said, 'I'll be there in fifteen.'