

Chapter 1

In the waning hours of a presidency that was destined to arouse less interest from historians than any since perhaps that of William Henry Harrison (thirty-one days from inauguration to death), Arthur Morgan huddled in the Oval Office with his last remaining friend and pondered his final decisions. At that moment he felt as though he'd botched every decision in the previous four years, and he was not overly confident that he could, somehow, so late in the game, get things right. His friend wasn't so sure either, though, as always, he said little and whatever he did say was what the President wanted to hear.

They were about pardons – desperate pleas from thieves and embezzlers and liars, some still in jail and some who'd never served time but who nonetheless wanted their good names cleared and their beloved rights restored. All claimed to be friends, or friends of friends, or

die-hard supporters, though only a few had ever gotten the chance to proclaim their support before that eleventh hour. How sad that after four tumultuous years of leading the free world it would all fizzle into one miserable pile of requests from a bunch of crooks. Which thieves should be allowed to steal again? That was the momentous question facing the President as the hours crept by.

The last friend was Critz, an old fraternity pal from their days at Cornell when Morgan ran the student government while Critz stuffed the ballot boxes. In the past four years, Critz had served as press secretary, chief of staff, national security advisor, and even secretary of state, though that appointment lasted for only three months and was hastily rescinded when Critz's unique style of diplomacy nearly ignited World War III. Critz's last appointment had taken place the previous October, in the final frantic weeks of the reelection onslaught. With the polls showing President Morgan trailing badly in at least forty states, Critz seized control of the campaign and managed to alienate the rest of the country, except, arguably, Alaska.

It had been a historic election; never before had an incumbent president received so few electoral votes. Three to be exact, all from Alaska, the only state Morgan had not visited, at Critz's advice. Five hundred and thirty-five for the challenger, three for President Morgan. The word 'landslide' did not even begin to

capture the enormity of the shellacking.

Once the votes were counted, the challenger, following bad advice, decided to contest the results in Alaska. Why not go for all 538 electoral votes? he reasoned. Never again would a candidate for the presidency have the opportunity to completely whitewash his opponent, to throw the mother of all shutouts. For six weeks the President suffered even more while lawsuits raged in Alaska. When the supreme court there eventually awarded him the state's three electoral votes, he and Critz had a very quiet bottle of champagne.

President Morgan had become enamored of Alaska, even though the certified results gave him a scant seventeen-vote margin.

He should have avoided more states.

He even lost Delaware, his home, where the once-enlightened electorate had allowed him to serve eight wonderful years as governor. Just as he had never found the time to visit Alaska, his opponent had totally ignored Delaware – no organization to speak of, no television ads, not a single campaign stop. And his opponent still took 52 percent of the vote!

Critz sat in a thick leather chair and held a notepad with a list of a hundred things that needed to be done immediately. He watched his President move slowly from one window to the next, peering into the darkness, dreaming of what might have been. The man was depressed and humiliated. At fifty-eight his life was over,

his career a wreck, his marriage crumbling. Mrs. Morgan had already moved back to Wilmington and was openly laughing at the idea of living in a cabin in Alaska. Critz had secret doubts about his friend's ability to hunt and fish for the rest of his life, but the prospect of living two thousand miles from Mrs. Morgan was very appealing. They might have carried Nebraska if the rather blue-blooded First Lady had not referred to the football team as the 'Sooners'.

The Nebraska Sooners!

Overnight, Morgan fell so far in the polls in both Nebraska and Oklahoma that he never recovered.

And in Texas she took a bite of prizewinning chili and began vomiting. As she was rushed to the hospital a microphone captured her still-famous words: 'How can you backward people eat such a putrid mess?'

Nebraska has five electoral votes. Texas has thirty-four. Insulting the local football team was a mistake they could have survived. But no candidate could overcome such a belittling description of Texas chili.

What a campaign! Critz was tempted to write a book. Someone needed to record the disaster.

Their partnership of almost forty years was ending. Critz had lined up a job with a defense contractor for \$200,000 a year, and he would hit the lecture circuit at \$50,000 a speech if anybody was desperate enough to pay it. After dedicating

his life to public service, he was broke and aging quickly and anxious to make a buck.

The President had sold his handsome home in Georgetown for a huge profit. He'd bought a small ranch in Alaska, where the people evidently admired him. He planned to spend the rest of his days there, hunting, fishing, perhaps writing his memoirs. Whatever he did in Alaska, it would have nothing to do with politics and Washington. He would not be the senior statesman, the grand old man of anybody's party, the sage voice of experience. No farewell tours, convention speeches, endowed chairs of political science. No presidential library. The people had spoken with a clear and thunderous voice. If they didn't want him, then he could certainly live without them.

'We need to make a decision about Cuccinello,' Critz said. The President was still standing at a window, looking at nothing in the darkness, still pondering Delaware. 'Who?'

'Figgy Cuccinello, that movie director who was indicted for having sex with a young starlet.'

'How young?'

'Fifteen, I think.'

'That's pretty young.'

'Yes, it is. He fled to Argentina, where he's been for ten years. Now he's homesick, wants to come back and start making dreadful movies again. He says his art is calling him home.'

'Perhaps the young girls are calling him home.'

‘That too.’

‘Seventeen wouldn’t bother me. Fifteen’s too young.’

‘His offer is up to five million.’

The President turned and looked at Critz. ‘He’s offering five million for a pardon?’

‘Yes, and he needs to move quickly. The money has to be wired out of Switzerland. It’s three in the morning over there.’

‘Where would it go?’

‘We have accounts offshore. It’s easy.’

‘What would the press do?’

‘It would be ugly.’

‘It’s always ugly.’

‘This would be especially ugly.’

‘I really don’t care about the press,’ Morgan said.

Then why did you ask? Critz wanted to say.

‘Can the money be traced?’ the President asked and turned back to the window.

‘No.’

With his right hand, the President began scratching the back of his neck, something he always did when wrestling with a difficult decision. Ten minutes before he almost nuked North Korea, he’d scratched until the skin broke and blood oozed onto the collar of his white shirt. ‘The answer is no,’ he said. ‘Fifteen is too young.’

Without a knock, the door opened and Artie Morgan, the President’s son, barged in holding a Heineken in one hand and some papers in the

other. ‘Just talked to the CIA,’ he said casually. He wore faded jeans and no socks. ‘Maynard’s on the way over.’ He dumped the papers on the desk and left the room, slamming the door behind him.

Artie would take the \$5 million without hesitation, Critz thought to himself, regardless of the girl’s age. Fifteen was certainly not too young for Artie. They might have carried Kansas if Artie hadn’t been caught in a Topeka motel room with three cheerleaders, the oldest of whom was seventeen. A grandstanding prosecutor had finally dropped the charges – two days after the election – when all three girls signed affidavits claiming they had not had sex with Artie. They were about to, in fact had been just seconds away from all manner of frolicking, when one of their mothers knocked on the motel room door and prevented an orgy.

The President sat in his leather rocker and pretended to flip through some useless papers. ‘What’s the latest on Backman?’ he asked.

In his eighteen years as director of the CIA, Teddy Maynard had been to the White House less than ten times. And never for dinner (he always declined for health reasons), and never to say howdy to a foreign hotshot (he couldn’t have cared less). Back when he could walk, he had occasionally stopped by to confer with whoever happened to be president, and perhaps one or two of his policy makers. Now, since he was in a

wheelchair, his conversations with the White House were by phone. Twice, a vice president had actually been driven out to Langley to meet with Mr. Maynard.

The only advantage of being in a wheelchair was that it provided a wonderful excuse to go or stay or do whatever he damn well pleased. No one wanted to push around an old crippled man.

A spy for almost fifty years, he now preferred the luxury of looking directly behind himself when he moved about. He traveled in an unmarked white van – bulletproof glass, lead walls, two heavily armed boys perched behind the heavily armed driver – with his wheelchair clamped to the floor in the rear and facing back, so that Teddy could see the traffic that could not see him. Two other vans followed at a distance, and any misguided attempt to get near the director would be instantly terminated. None was expected. Most of the world thought Teddy Maynard was either dead or idling away his final days in some secret nursing home where old spies were sent to die.

Teddy wanted it that way.

He was wrapped in a heavy gray quilt, and tended to by Hoby, his faithful aide. As the van moved along the Beltway at a constant sixty miles an hour, Teddy sipped green tea poured from a thermos by Hoby, and watched the cars behind them. Hoby sat next to the wheelchair on a leather stool made especially for him.

A sip of tea and Teddy said, 'Where's Backman right now?'

'In his cell,' Hoby answered.

'And our people are with the warden?'

'They're sitting in his office, waiting.'

Another sip from a paper cup, one carefully guarded with both hands. The hands were frail, veiny, the color of skim milk, as if they had already died and were patiently waiting for the rest of the body. 'How long will it take to get him out of the country?'

'About four hours.'

'And the plan is in place?'

'Everything is ready. We're waiting on the green light.'

'I hope this moron can see it my way.'

Critz and the moron were staring at the walls of the Oval Office, their heavy silence broken occasionally by a comment about Joel Backman. They had to talk about something, because neither would mention what was really on his mind.

Can this be happening?

Is this finally the end?

Forty years. From Cornell to the Oval Office. The end was so abrupt that they had not had enough time to properly prepare for it. They had been counting on four more years. Four years of glory as they carefully crafted a legacy, then rode gallantly into the sunset.

Though it was late, it seemed to grow even

darker outside. The windows that overlooked the Rose Garden were black. A clock above the fireplace could almost be heard as it ticked nonstop in its final countdown.

‘What will the press do if I pardon Backman?’ the President asked, not for the first time.

‘Go berserk.’

‘That might be fun.’

‘You won’t be around.’

‘No, I won’t.’ After the transfer of power at noon the next day, his escape from Washington would begin with a private jet (owned by an oil company) to an old friend’s villa on the island of Barbados. At Morgan’s instructions, the televisions had been removed from the villa, no newspapers or magazines would be delivered, and all phones had been unplugged. He would have no contact with anyone, not even Critz, and especially not Mrs. Morgan, for at least a month. He wouldn’t care if Washington burned. In fact, he secretly hoped that it would.

After Barbados, he would sneak up to his cabin in Alaska, and there he would continue to ignore the world as the winter passed and he waited on spring.

‘Should we pardon him?’ the President asked.

‘Probably,’ Critz said.

The President had shifted to the ‘we’ mode now, something he invariably did when a potentially unpopular decision was at hand. For the easy ones, it was always ‘I’. When he needed a crutch, and especially when he would need

someone to blame, he opened up the decision-making process and included Critz.

Critz had been taking the blame for forty years, and though he was certainly used to it, he was nonetheless tired of it. He said, 'There's a very good chance we wouldn't be here had it not been for Joel Backman.'

'You may be right about that,' the President said. He had always maintained that he had been elected because of his brilliant campaigning, charismatic personality, uncanny grasp of the issues, and clear vision for America. To finally admit that he owed anything to Joel Backman was almost shocking.

But Critz was too calloused, and too tired, to be shocked.

Six years ago, the Backman scandal had engulfed much of Washington and eventually tainted the White House. A cloud appeared over a popular president, paving the way for Arthur Morgan to stumble his way into the White House.

Now that he was stumbling out, he relished the idea of one last arbitrary slap in the face to the Washington establishment that had shunned him for four years. A reprieve for Joel Backman would rattle the walls of every office building in D.C. and shock the press into a blathering frenzy. Morgan liked the idea. While he sunned away on Barbados, the city would gridlock once again as congressmen demanded hearings and prosecutors performed for the cameras and the

insufferable talking heads prattled nonstop on cable news.

The President smiled into the darkness.

On the Arlington Memorial Bridge, over the Potomac River, Hoby refilled the director's paper cup with green tea. 'Thank you,' Teddy said softly. 'What's our boy doing tomorrow when he leaves office?' he asked.

'Fleeing the country.'

'He should've left sooner.'

'He plans to spend a month in the Caribbean, licking his wounds, ignoring the world, pouting, waiting for someone to show some interest.'

'And Mrs. Morgan?'

'She's already back in Delaware playing bridge.'

'Are they splitting?'

'If he's smart. Who knows?'

Teddy took a careful sip of tea. 'So what's our leverage if Morgan balks?'

'I don't think he'll balk. The preliminary talks have gone well. Critz seems to be on board. He has a much better feel of things now than Morgan. Critz knows that they would've never seen the Oval Office had it not been for the Backman scandal.'

'As I said, what's our leverage if he balks?'

'None, really. He's an idiot, but he's a clean one.'

They turned off Constitution Avenue onto 18th Street and were soon entering the east gate

of the White House. Men with machine guns materialized from the darkness, then Secret Service agents in black trench coats stopped the van. Code words were used, radios squawked, and within minutes Teddy was being lowered from the van. Inside, a cursory search of his wheelchair revealed nothing but a crippled and bundled-up old man.

Artie, minus the Heineken, and again without knocking, poked his head through the door and announced: 'Maynard's here.'

'So he's alive,' the President said.

'Barely.'

'Then roll him in.'

Hoby and a deputy named Priddy followed the wheelchair into the Oval Office. The President and Critz welcomed their guests and directed them to the sitting area in front of the fireplace. Though Maynard avoided the White House, Priddy practically lived there, briefing the President every morning on intelligence matters.

As they settled in, Teddy glanced around the room, as if looking for bugs and listening devices. He was almost certain there were none; that practice had ended with Watergate. Nixon laid enough wire in the White House to juice a small city, but, of course, he paid for it. Teddy, however, was wired. Carefully hidden above the axle of his wheelchair, just inches below his seat, was a powerful recorder that would capture every sound made during the next thirty minutes.

He tried to smile at President Morgan, but he wanted to say something like: You are without a doubt the most limited politician I have ever encountered. Only in America could a moron like you make it to the top.

President Morgan smiled at Teddy Maynard, but he wanted to say something like: I should have fired you four years ago. Your agency has been a constant embarrassment to this country.

Teddy: I was shocked when you carried a single state, albeit by seventeen votes.

Morgan: You couldn't find a terrorist if he advertised on a billboard.

Teddy: Happy fishing. You'll get even fewer trout than votes.

Morgan: Why didn't you just die, like everyone promised me you would?

Teddy: Presidents come and go, but I never leave.

Morgan: It was Critz who wanted to keep you. Thank him for your job. I wanted to sack your ass two weeks after my inauguration.

Critz said loudly, 'Coffee anyone?'

Teddy said, 'No,' and as soon as that was established, Hoby and Priddy likewise declined. And because the CIA wanted no coffee, President Morgan said, 'Yes, black with two sugars.' Critz nodded at a secretary who was waiting in a half-opened side door.

He turned back to the gathering and said, 'We don't have a lot of time.'

Teddy said quickly, 'I'm here to discuss Joel Backman.'

'Yes, that's why you're here,' the President said.

'As you know,' Teddy continued, almost ignoring the President, 'Mr. Backman went to prison without saying a word. He still carries some secrets that, frankly, could compromise national security.'

'You can't kill him,' Critz blurted.

'We cannot target American citizens, Mr. Critz. It's against the law. We prefer that someone else do it.'

'I don't follow,' the President said.

'Here's the plan. If you pardon Mr. Backman, and if he accepts the pardon, then we will have him out of the country in a matter of hours. He must agree to spend the rest of his life in hiding. This should not be a problem because there are several people who would like to see him dead, and he knows it. We'll relocate him to a foreign country, probably in Europe where he'll be easier to watch. He'll have a new identity. He'll be a free man, and with time people will forget about Joel Backman.'

'That's not the end of the story,' Critz said.

'No. We'll wait, perhaps a year or so, then we'll leak the word in the right places. They'll find Mr. Backman, and they'll kill him, and when they do so, many of our questions will be answered.'

A long pause as Teddy looked at Critz, then

the President. When he was convinced they were thoroughly confused, he continued. 'It's a very simple plan, gentlemen. It's a question of who kills him.'

'So you'll be watching?' Critz asked.

'Very closely.'

'Who's after him?' the President asked.

Teddy refolded his veiny hands and recoiled a bit, then he looked down his long nose like a schoolteacher addressing his little third graders. 'Perhaps the Russians, the Chinese, maybe the Israelis. There could be others.'

Of course there were others, but no one expected Teddy to reveal everything he knew. He never had; never would, regardless of who was president and regardless of how much time he had left in the Oval Office. They came and went, some for four years, others for eight. Some loved the espionage, others were only concerned with the latest polls. Morgan had been particularly inept at foreign policy, and with a few hours remaining in his administration, Teddy certainly was not going to divulge any more than was necessary to get the pardon.

'Why would Backman take such a deal?' Critz asked.

'He may not,' Teddy answered. 'But he's been in solitary confinement for six years. That's twenty-three hours a day in a tiny cell. One hour of sunshine. Three showers a week. Bad food – they say he's lost sixty pounds. I hear he's not doing too well.'

Two months ago, after the landslide, when Teddy Maynard conceived this pardon scheme, he had pulled a few of his many strings and Backman's confinement had grown much worse. The temperature in his cell was lowered ten degrees, and for the past month he'd had a terrible cough. His food, bland at best, had been run through the processor again and was being served cold. His toilet flushed about half the time. The guards woke him up at all hours of the night. His phone privileges were curtailed. The law library that he used twice a week was suddenly off-limits. Backman, a lawyer, knew his rights, and he was threatening all manner of litigation against the prison and the government, though he had yet to file suit. The fight was taking its toll. He was demanding sleeping pills and Prozac.

'You want me to pardon Joel Backman so you can arrange for him to be murdered?' the President asked.

'Yes,' Teddy said bluntly. 'But we won't actually arrange it.'

'But it'll happen.'

'Yes.'

'And his death will be in the best interests of our national security?'

'I firmly believe that.'

Chapter 2

The isolation wing at Rudley Federal Correctional Facility had forty identical cells, each a twelve-foot square with no windows, no bars, green-painted concrete floors and cinder-block walls, and a door that was solid metal with a narrow slot at the bottom for food trays and a small open peephole for the guards to have a look occasionally. The wing was filled with government informants, drug snitches, Mafia misfits, a couple of spies – men who needed to be locked away because there were plenty of folks back home who would gladly slice their throats. Most of the forty inmates in protective custody at Rudley had requested the I-wing.

Joel Backman was trying to sleep when two guards clanged open his door and switched on his light. ‘The warden wants you,’ one said, and there was no elaboration. They rode in silence in a prison van across the frigid Oklahoma prairie, past other buildings holding less-secure

criminals, until they arrived at the administration building. Backman, handcuffed for no apparent reason, was hurried inside, up two flights of stairs, then down a long hall to the big office where lights were on and something important was going down. He saw a clock on a wall; it was almost 11:00 p.m.

He'd never met the warden, which was not at all unusual. For many good reasons the warden didn't circulate. He wasn't running for office, nor was he concerned with motivating the troops. With him were three other suits, all earnest-looking men who'd been chatting for some time. Though smoking was strictly prohibited in offices owned by the U.S. government, an ashtray was full and a thick fog hung close to the ceiling.

With absolutely no introduction, the warden said, 'Sit over there, Mr. Backman.'

'A pleasure to meet you,' Backman said as he looked at the other men in the room. 'Why, exactly, am I here?'

'We'll discuss that.'

'Could you please remove these handcuffs? I promise not to kill anyone.'

The warden snapped at the nearest guard, who quickly found a key and freed Backman. The guard then scrambled out of the room, slamming the door behind him, much to the displeasure of the warden, a very nervous man.

He pointed and said, 'This is Special Agent Adair of the FBI. This is Mr. Knabe from the

Justice Department. And this is Mr. Sizemore, also from Washington.'

None of the three moved in the direction of Mr. Backman, who was still standing and looking quite perplexed. He nodded at them, in a halfhearted effort to be polite. His efforts were not returned.

'Please sit,' the warden said, and Backman finally took a chair. 'Thank you. As you know, Mr. Backman, a new president is about to be sworn in. President Morgan is on the way out. Right now he is in the Oval Office wrestling with the decision of whether to grant you a full pardon'.

Backman was suddenly seized with a violent cough, one brought on in part by the near arctic temperature in his cell and in part by the shock of the word 'pardon.'

Mr. Knabe from Justice handed him a bottle of water, which he gulped and splashed down his chin and finally managed to stifle the cough. 'A pardon?' he mumbled.

'A full pardon, with some strings attached.'

'But why?'

'I don't know why, Mr. Backman, nor is it my business to understand what's happening. I'm just the messenger.'

Mr. Sizemore, introduced simply as 'from Washington', but without the baggage of title or affiliation, said, 'It's a deal, Mr. Backman. In return for a full pardon, you must agree to leave the country, never return, and live with a new

identity in a place where no one can find you.’

No problem there, thought Backman. He didn’t want to be found.

‘But why?’ he mumbled again. The bottle of water in his left hand could actually be seen shaking.

As Mr. Sizemore from Washington watched it shake, he studied Joel Backman, from his closely cropped gray hair to his battered dime-store running shoes, with his black prison-issue socks, and couldn’t help but recall the image of the man in his prior life. A magazine cover came to mind. A fancy photo of Joel Backman in a black Italian suit, impeccably tailored and detailed and groomed and looking at the camera with as much smugness as humanly possible. The hair was longer and darker, the handsome face was fleshy and wrinkle free, the waistline was thick and spoke of many power lunches and four-hour dinners. He loved wine and women and sports cars. He had a jet, a yacht, a place in Vail, all of which he’d been quite eager to talk about. The bold caption above his head read: THE BROKER – IS THIS THE SECOND MOST POWERFUL MAN IN WASHINGTON?

The magazine was in Mr. Sizemore’s briefcase, along with a thick file on Joel Backman. He’d scoured it on the flight from Washington to Tulsa.

According to the magazine article, the broker’s income at the time was reported to be in excess of \$10 million a year, though he’d been

coy with the reporter. The law firm he founded had two hundred lawyers, small by Washington standards, but without a doubt the most powerful in political circles. It was a lobbying machine, not a place where real lawyers practiced their craft. More like a bordello for rich companies and foreign governments.

Oh, how the mighty have fallen, Mr. Sizemore thought to himself as he watched the bottle shake.

‘I don’t understand,’ Backman managed to whisper.

‘And we don’t have time to explain,’ Mr. Sizemore said. ‘It’s a quick deal, Mr. Backman. Unfortunately, you don’t have time to contemplate things. A snap decision is required. Yes or no. You want to stay here, or you want to live with another name on the other side of the world?’

‘Where?’

‘We don’t know where, but we’ll figure it out.’

‘Will I be safe?’

‘Only you can answer that question, Mr. Backman.’

As Mr. Backman pondered his own question, he shook even more.

‘When will I leave?’ he asked slowly. His voice was regaining strength for the moment, but another violent cough was always waiting.

‘Immediately,’ said Mr. Sizemore, who had seized control of the meeting and relegated the warden, the FBI, and the Justice Department to being spectators.

‘You mean, like, right now?’

‘You will not return to your cell.’

‘Oh darn,’ Backman said, and the others couldn’t help but smile.

‘There’s a guard waiting by your cell,’ the warden said. ‘He’ll bring whatever you want.’

‘There’s always a guard waiting by my cell,’ Backman snapped at the warden. ‘If it’s that sadistic little bastard Sloan, tell him to take my razor blades and slash his own wrists.’

Everyone swallowed hard and waited for the words to escape through the heating vents. Instead, they cut through the polluted air and rattled around the room for a moment.

Mr. Sizemore cleared his throat, reshuffled his weight from the left buttock to the right, and said, ‘There are some gentlemen waiting in the Oval Office, Mr. Backman. Are you going to accept the deal?’

‘The President is waiting on me?’

‘You could say that.’

‘He owes me. I put him there.’

‘This really is not the time to debate such matters, Mr. Backman,’ Mr. Sizemore said calmly.

‘Is he returning the favor?’

‘I’m not privy to the President’s thoughts.’

‘You’re assuming he has the ability to think.’

‘I’ll just call and tell them the answer is no.’

‘Wait.’

Backman drained the bottle of water and asked for another. He wiped his mouth with a

sleeve, then said, 'Is it like a witness protection program, something like that?'

'It's not an official program, Mr. Backman. But, from time to time, we find it necessary to hide people.'

'How often do you lose one?'

'Not too often.'

'Not too often? So there's no guarantee I'll be safe.'

'Nothing is guaranteed. But your odds are good.'

Backman looked at the warden and said, 'How many years do I have left here, Lester?'

Lester was jolted back into the conversation. No one called him Lester, a name he hated and avoided. The nameplate on his desk declared him to be L. Howard Cass. 'Fourteen years, and you can address me as Warden Cass.'

'Cass my ass. Odds are I'll be dead in three. A combination of malnutrition, hypothermia, and negligent health care should do it. Lester here runs a really tight ship, boys.'

'Can we move along?' Mr. Sizemore said.

'Of course I'll take the deal,' Backman said. 'What fool wouldn't?'

Mr. Knabe from Justice finally moved. He opened a briefcase and said, 'Here's the paperwork.'

'Who do you work for?' Backman asked Mr. Sizemore.

'The President of the United States.'

'Well, tell him I didn't vote for him because I

was locked away. But I certainly would have, if given the chance. And tell him I said thanks, okay?’

‘Sure.’

Hoby poured another cup of green tea, decaffeinated now because it was almost midnight, and handed it to Teddy, who was wrapped in a blanket and staring at the traffic behind them. They were on Constitution Avenue, leaving downtown, almost to the Roosevelt Bridge. The old man took a sip and said, ‘Morgan is too stupid to be selling pardons. Critz, however, worries me.’

‘There’s a new account on the island of Nevis,’ Hoby said. ‘It popped up two weeks ago, opened by an obscure company owned by Floyd Dunlap.’

‘And who’s he?’

‘One of Morgan’s fund-raisers.’

‘Why Nevis?’

‘It’s the current hot spot for offshore activity.’

‘And we’re covering it?’

‘We’re all over it. Any transfers should take place in the next forty-eight hours.’

Teddy nodded slightly and glanced to his left for a partial look at the Kennedy Center. ‘Where’s Backman?’

‘He’s leaving prison.’

Teddy smiled and sipped his tea. They crossed the bridge in silence, and when the Potomac was behind them, he finally said, ‘Who’ll get him?’

‘Does it really matter?’

‘No, it doesn’t. But it will be quite enjoyable watching the contest.’

Wearing a well-worn but starched and pressed khaki military uniform, with all the patches and badges removed, and shiny black combat boots and a heavy navy parka with a hood that he pulled snugly around his head, Joel Backman strutted out of the Rudley Federal Correctional Facility at five minutes after midnight, fourteen years ahead of schedule. He had been there, in solitary confinement, for six years, and upon leaving he carried with him a small canvas bag with a few books and some photos. He did not look back.

He was fifty-two years old, divorced, broke, thoroughly estranged from two of his three children and thoroughly forgotten by every friend he’d ever made. Not a single one had bothered to maintain a correspondence beyond the first year of his confinement. An old girlfriend, one of the countless secretaries he’d chased around his plush offices, had written for ten months, until it was reported in *The Washington Post* that the FBI had decided it was unlikely that Joel Backman had looted his firm and his clients of the millions that had first been rumored. Who wants to be pen pals with a broke lawyer in prison? A wealthy one, maybe.

His mother wrote him occasionally, but she was ninety-one years old and living in a low-rent

nursing home near Oakland, and with each letter he got the impression it would be her last. He wrote her once a week, but doubted if she was able to read anything, and he was almost certain that no one on staff had the time or interest to read to her. She always said, 'Thanks for the letter,' but never mentioned anything he'd said. He sent her cards on special occasions. In one of her letters she had confessed that no one else remembered her birthday.

The boots were very heavy. As he plodded along the sidewalk he realized that he'd spent most of the past six years in his socks, no shoes. Funny the things you think about when you get sprung with no warning. When was the last time he'd worn boots? And how soon could he shuck the damn things?

He stopped for a second and looked toward the sky. For one hour each day, he'd been allowed to roam a small patch of grass outside his prison wing. Always alone, always watched by a guard, as if he, Joel Backman, a former lawyer who'd never fired a gun in anger, might suddenly become dangerous and maim someone. The 'garden' was lined with ten feet of chain-link topped with razor wire. Beyond it was an empty drainage canal, and beyond that was an endless, treeless prairie that stretched to Texas, he presumed.

Mr. Sizemore and Agent Adair were his escorts. They led him to a dark green sport-utility vehicle that, though unmarked, practically

screamed ‘government issue’ to anyone looking. Joel crawled into the backseat, alone, and began praying. He closed his eyes tightly, gritted his teeth, and asked God to please allow the engine to start, the wheels to move, the gates to open, the paperwork to be sufficient; please, God, no cruel jokes. This is not a dream, God, please!

Twenty minutes later, Sizemore spoke first. ‘Say, Mr. Backman, are you hungry?’

Mr. Backman had ceased praying and had begun crying. The vehicle had been moving steadily, though he had not opened his eyes. He was lying on the rear seat, fighting his emotions and losing badly.

‘Sure,’ he managed to say. He sat up and looked outside. They were on an interstate highway, a green sign flew by – Perry Exit. They stopped in the parking lot of a pancake house, less than a quarter of a mile from the interstate. Big trucks were in the distance, their diesel engines grinding along. Joel watched them for a second, and listened. He glanced upward again and saw a half-moon.

‘Are we in a hurry?’ he asked Sizemore as they entered the restaurant.

‘We’re on schedule,’ came the reply.

They sat at a table near the front window, with Joel looking out. He ordered french toast and fruit, nothing heavy because he was afraid his system was too accustomed to the gruel he’d been living on. Conversation was stiff; the two government boys were programmed to say little

and were thoroughly incapable of small talk. Not that Joel wanted to hear anything they had to say.

He tried not to smile. Sizemore would report later that Backman glanced occasionally at the door and seemed to keep a close eye on the other customers. He did not appear to be frightened; quite the contrary. As the minutes dragged on and the shock wore off, he seemed to adjust quickly and became somewhat animated. He devoured two orders of french toast and had four cups of black coffee.

A few minutes after 4:00 a.m. they entered the gates of Fort Summit, near Brinkley, Texas. Backman was taken to the base hospital and examined by two physicians. Except for a head cold and the cough, and general gauntness, he wasn't in bad shape. He was then taken to a hangar where he met a Colonel Gantner, who instantly became his best friend. At Gantner's instructions, and under his close supervision, Joel changed into a green army jumpsuit with the name HERZOG stenciled above the right pocket. 'Is that me?' Joel asked, looking at the name.

'It is for the next forty-eight hours,' Gantner said.

'And my rank?'

'Major.'

'Not bad.'

At some point during this quick briefing, Mr. Sizemore from Washington and Agent Adair slipped away, never to be seen again by Joel

Backman. With the first hint of sunlight, Joel stepped through the rear hatch of a C-130 cargo plane and followed Gantner to the upper level, to a small bunk room where six other soldiers were preparing for a long flight.

‘Take that bunk,’ Gantner said, pointing to one close to the floor.

‘Can I ask where we’re going?’ Joel whispered.

‘You can ask, but I can’t answer.’

‘Just curious.’

‘I’ll brief you before we land.’

‘And when might that be?’

‘In about fourteen hours.’

With no windows to distract him, Joel situated himself on his bunk, pulled a blanket over his head, and was snoring by takeoff.

Chapter 3

Critz slept a few hours, then left home long before the inauguration mess began. Just after dawn, he and his wife were whisked off to London on one of his new employer's many private jets. He was to spend two weeks there, then return to the grind of the Beltway as a new lobbyist playing a very old game. He hated the idea. For years he'd watched the losers cross the street and start new careers twisting the arms of their former colleagues, selling their souls to anyone with enough money to buy whatever influence they advertised. It was such a rotten business. He was sick of the political life, but, sadly, he knew nothing else.

He'd make some speeches, maybe write a book, hang on for a few years hoping someone remembered him. But Critz knew how quickly the once powerful are forgotten in Washington.

President Morgan and Director Maynard had agreed to sit on the Backman story for twenty-

four hours, until well after the inauguration. Morgan didn't care; he'd be in Barbados. Critz, however, did not feel bound by any agreement, especially one made with the likes of Teddy Maynard. After a long dinner with lots of wine, sometime around 2:00 a.m. in London, he called a White House correspondent for CBS and whispered the basics of the Backman pardon. As he predicted, CBS broke the story during its early-morning gossip hour, and before 8:00 a.m. the news was roaring around D.C.

Joel Backman had been given a full and unconditional pardon at the eleventh hour!

There were no details of his release. When last heard from, he'd been tucked away in a maximum-security facility in Oklahoma.

In a very nervous city, the day began with the pardon storming onto center stage and competing with a new President and his first full day in office.

The bankrupt law firm of Pratt & Bolling now found itself on Massachusetts Avenue, four blocks north of Dupont Circle; not a bad location, but not nearly as classy as the old place on New York Avenue. A few years earlier, when Joel Backman was in charge – it was Backman, Pratt & Bolling then – he had insisted on paying the highest rent in town so he could stand at the vast windows of his vast office on the eighth floor and look down at the White House.

Now the White House was nowhere in sight;

there were no power offices with grand vistas; the building had three floors, not eight. And the firm had shrunk from two hundred highly paid lawyers to about thirty struggling ones. The first bankruptcy – commonly referred to within the offices as Backman I – had decimated the firm, but it had also miraculously kept its partners out of prison. Backman II had been caused by three years of vicious infighting and suing among the survivors. The firm’s competitors were fond of saying that Pratt & Bolling spent more time suing itself than those it was hired to sue.

Early that morning, though, the competitors were quiet. Joel Backman was a free man. The broker was loose. Would he make a comeback? Was he returning to Washington? Was it all true? Surely not.

Kim Bolling was currently locked away in alcohol rehab, and from there he would be sent straight to a private mental facility for many years. The unbearable strain of the last six years had driven him over the edge, to a point of no return. The task of dealing with the latest nightmare from Joel Backman fell into the rather large lap of Carl Pratt.

It had been Pratt who had uttered the fateful ‘I do’ twenty-two years earlier when Backman had proposed a marriage of their two small firms. It had been Pratt who had labored strenuously for sixteen years to clean up behind Backman as the firm expanded and the fees poured in and all ethical boundaries were blurred beyond

recognition. It had been Pratt who'd fought weekly with his partner, but who, over time, had come to enjoy the fruits of their enormous success.

And it had been Carl Pratt who'd come so close to a federal prosecution himself, just before Joel Backman heroically took the fall for everyone. Backman's plea agreement, and the agreement that exculpated the firm's other partners, required a fine of \$10 million, thus leading directly to the first bankruptcy – Backman I.

But bankruptcy was better than jail, Pratt reminded himself almost daily. He lumbered around his sparse office early that morning, mumbling to himself and trying desperately to believe that the news was simply not true. He stood at his small window and gazed at the gray brick building next door, and asked himself how it could happen. How could a broke, disbarred, disgraced former lawyer/lobbyist convince a lame-duck president to grant a last-minute pardon?

By the time Joel Backman went to prison, he was probably the most famous white-collar criminal in America. Everybody wanted to see him hang from the gallows.

But, Pratt conceded to himself, if anyone in the world could pull off such a miracle, it was Joel Backman.

Pratt worked the phones for a few minutes, tapping into his extensive network of Washington gossipmongers and know-it-alls. An

old friend who'd somehow managed to survive in the Executive Department under four presidents – two from each party – finally confirmed the truth.

'Where is he?' Pratt asked urgently, as if Backman might resurrect himself in D.C. at any moment.

'No one knows,' came the reply.

Pratt locked his door and fought the urge to open the office bottle of vodka. He had been forty-nine years old when his partner was sent to prison for twenty years with no parole, and he often wondered what he would do when he was sixty-nine and Backman got out.

At that moment, Pratt felt as though he'd been cheated out of fourteen years.

The courtroom had been so crowded that the judge postponed the hearing for two hours until the demand for seating could be organized and somewhat prioritized. Every prominent news organization in the country was screaming for a place to sit or stand. Big shots from Justice, the FBI, the Pentagon, the CIA, the NSA, the White House, and Capitol Hill were pressing for seats, all claiming that their best interests would be served if they could be present to watch the lynching of Joel Backman. When the defendant finally appeared in the tense courtroom, the crowd suddenly froze and the only sound was that of the court reporter prepping his steno machine.

Backman was led to the defense table, where his small army of lawyers packed tightly around him as if bullets were expected from the mob in the gallery. Gunfire would not have been a surprise, though the security rivaled that of a presidential visit. In the first row directly behind the defense table sat Carl Pratt and a dozen or so other partners, or soon-to-be-former partners, of Mr. Backman. They had been searched most aggressively, and for good reason. Though they seethed with hatred for the man, they were also pulling for him. If his plea agreement fell through because of a last-second hitch or disagreement, then they would be fair game again, with nasty trials just around the corner.

At least they were sitting on the front row, out with the spectators, and not at the defense table where the crooks were kept. At least they were alive. Eight days earlier, Jacy Hubbard, one of their trophy partners, had been found dead in Arlington National Cemetery, in a contrived suicide that few people believed. Hubbard had been a former senator from Texas who had given up his seat after twenty-four years for the sole, though unannounced, purpose of offering his significant influence to the highest bidder. Of course Joel Backman would never allow such a big fish to escape his net, so he and the rest of Backman, Pratt & Bolling had hired Hubbard for a million bucks a year because good ol' Jacy could get himself into the Oval Office anytime he wanted.

Hubbard's death had worked wonders in helping Joel Backman to see the government's point of view. The logjam that had delayed the plea negotiations was suddenly broken. Not only would Backman accept twenty years, he wanted to do it quickly. He was anxious for protective custody!

The government's lawyer that day was a high-ranking career prosecutor from Justice, and with such a big and prestigious crowd he could not help but grandstand. He simply couldn't use one word when three would suffice; there were too many people out there. He was onstage, a rare moment in a long dull career, when the nation happened to be watching. With a savage blandness he launched into a reading of the indictment, and it was quickly apparent that he possessed almost no talent at theatrics, virtually no flair for drama, though he tried mightily. After eight minutes of stultifying monologue, the judge, peering sleepily over reading glasses, said, 'Would you speed it up, sir, and lower your voice at the same time.'

There were eighteen counts, alleging crimes ranging from espionage to treason. When they were all read, Joel Backman was so thoroughly vilified that he belonged in the same league with Hitler. His lawyer immediately reminded the court, and everyone else present, that nothing in the indictment had been proven, that it was in fact just a recitation of one side of the case, the government's heavily slanted view of things. He

explained that his client would be pleading guilty to only four of the eighteen counts – unauthorized possession of military documents. The judge then read the lengthy plea agreement, and for twenty minutes nothing was said. The artists on the front row sketched the scene with a fury, their images bearing almost no likeness to reality.

Hiding on the back row, seated with strangers, was Neal Backman, Joel's oldest son. He was, at that moment, still an associate with Backman, Pratt & Bolling, but that was about to change. He watched the proceedings in a state of shock, unable to believe that his once powerful father was pleading guilty and about to be buried in the federal penal system.

The defendant was eventually herded to the bench, where he looked up as proudly as possible and faced the judge. With lawyers whispering in both ears, he pled guilty to his four counts, then was led back to his seat. He managed to avoid eye contact with everyone.

A sentencing date was set for the following month. As Backman was handcuffed and taken away, it became obvious to those present that he would not be forced to divulge his secrets, that he would indeed be incarcerated for a very long time while his conspiracies faded away. The crowd slowly broke up. The reporters got half the story they wanted. The big men from the agencies left without speaking – some were pleased that secrets had been protected, others were furious that crimes were being hidden. Carl

Pratt and the other beleaguered partners headed for the nearest bar.

The first reporter called the office just before 9:00 a.m. Pratt had already alerted his secretary that such calls were expected. She was to tell everyone that he was to be busy in court on some lengthy matter and might not be back in the office for months. Soon the phone lines were gridlocked and a seemingly productive day was shot to hell. Every lawyer and other employee dropped everything and whispered of nothing but the Backman news. Several watched the front door, half expecting the ghost to come looking for them.

Behind a locked door and alone, Pratt sipped a Bloody Mary and watched the nonstop news on cable. Thankfully, a busload of Danish tourists had been kidnapped in the Philippines, otherwise Joel Backman would have been the top story. But he was running a close second, as all kinds of experts were brought in, powdered up, and placed in the studio under the lights where they prattled on about the man's legendary sins.

A former Pentagon chief called the pardon 'a potential blow to our national security.' A retired federal judge, looking every day of his ninety-plus years, called it, predictably, 'a miscarriage of justice.' A rookie senator from Vermont admitted he knew little about the Backman scandal but he was nonetheless enthusiastic about being on live cable and said he planned to

call for all sorts of investigations. An unnamed White House official said the new President was 'quite disturbed' by the pardon and planned to review it, whatever that meant.

And on and on. Pratt mixed a second Bloody Mary.

Going for the gore, a 'correspondent' – not simply a 'reporter' – dug up a piece on Senator Jacy Hubbard, and Pratt reached for the remote. He turned up the volume when a large photo of Hubbard's face was flashed on the screen. The former senator had been found dead with a bullet in the head the week before Backman pled guilty. What appeared at first to be a suicide was later called suspicious, though no suspect had ever been identified. The pistol was unmarked and probably stolen. Hubbard had been an active hunter but had never used handguns. The powder residue on his right hand was suspicious. An autopsy revealed a stout concentration of alcohol and barbiturates in his system. The alcohol could certainly be predicted but Hubbard had never been known to use drugs. He'd been seen a few hours earlier with an attractive young lady at a Georgetown bar, which was fairly typical.

The prevailing theory was that the lady slipped him enough drugs to knock him out, then handed him over to the professional killers. He was hauled to a remote section of the Arlington National Cemetery and shot once in the head. His body came to rest on the grave of his

brother, a decorated Vietnam hero. A nice touch, but those who knew him well claimed he seldom talked about his family and many knew nothing of the dead brother.

The unspoken theory was that Hubbard was killed by the same people who wanted a shot at Joel Backman. And for years afterward Carl Pratt and Kim Bolling paid serious money for professional bodyguards just in case their names were on the same list. Evidently, they were not. The details of the fateful deal that nailed Backman and killed Hubbard had been handled by those two, and with time Pratt had loosened the security around himself, though he still carried a Ruger with him everywhere.

But Backman was far away, with the distance growing every minute. Oddly enough, he, too, was thinking of Jacy Hubbard and the people who might have killed him. He had plenty of time to think – fourteen hours in a fold-down bunk on a rattling cargo plane did much to deaden the senses, for a normal person anyway. But for a freshly released former convict who'd just walked out of six years in solitary lockdown, the flight was quite stimulating.

Whoever killed Jacy Hubbard would want very much to kill Joel Backman, and as he bumped along at 24,000 feet he pondered some serious questions. Who had lobbied for his pardon? Where did they plan to hide him? Who, exactly, were 'they'?