## **PROLOGUE**

Sea Island Georgia

laire Marcourt should have gone to bed hours ago. She should have ignored the second bottle of white burgundy in the fridge, placed her empty wineglass in the sink, and headed upstairs. But the forty-five-year-old was feeling nostalgic. And the more she drank, the more nostalgic she became. Picking up the bottle, she stepped outside.

The night was warm and the ocean air carried with it the scent of magnolias. Just beyond her pool, foamy waves tumbled onto the quiet beach.

Her pool. It was hard for Claire Marcourt to believe how far one family could come in a generation. Her mother had cleaned houses on Sea Island. Now Claire owned one and was being considered for one of the most powerful positions in the world. Only in America, she thought to herself.

It was heartbreaking that her mother hadn't lived to see everything Claire had accomplished—her career, her handsome husband and their three beautiful children, the Sea Island house with its stately oaks covered in Spanish moss, all of it. She would have been so proud.

As it was, she hadn't even seen Claire graduate from college. Cancer

had taken her and, in its wake, had left Claire with a growing fear that she too might someday be prematurely taken from her family.

Pouring another glass, she set the bottle on the outdoor table and walked to the edge of the patio. She was becoming maudlin. Focusing on the ocean, she took a long sip and closed her eyes. As the waves rolled onto the beach, she reflected on what a blessing it was to be able to come back to Georgia and escape the sirens and traffic of Manhattan. The family didn't get down to Sea Island enough these days. Everyone was so busy. The funny thing, though, was that once Paul and the kids were here, no one wanted to leave.

She couldn't blame them. The island was for them not only a source of strength, but also of revival. It was the one place where they all felt truly at home, truly safe.

Listening to the waves, she was reminded of a poem about the area by Sidney Lanier called "The Marshes of Glynn."

Take courage from the land which God has given you, which has always nourished you, and which is still there, and be comforted.

Claire smiled and opened her eyes; her budding melancholy swept out to sea on a receding wave. She needed to think about that poem, and this place more often. Work had all but consumed her and it wasn't going to get any easier if things went in the direction she thought they were about to.

Draining the last of the wine from her glass, she stood there admiring the power of the ocean for a moment, lost in her own thoughts.

She never noticed the figure that stepped out of the darkness and onto her patio. He was powerful and moved quickly, clamping a gloved hand over her mouth. Before she knew what had happened, she felt a prick, almost like being stung, and her body went limp. She not only couldn't move a muscle, she couldn't make a sound.

The man removed his hand from her mouth, bent down, and slung her over his shoulder.

She could feel her heart pounding in her chest. What is going on? she screamed in the silence of her mind. Why me? What does he want? Where is he taking me?

It didn't take long for her last question to be answered. Staring down

Prologue 3

past the man's dark trousers and thick, black boots, she could see the flagstone path turn to sand. He was taking her to the beach. Why the beach? Does he need some isolated spot where he can do whatever it is he is going to do to me?

A couple of hundred yards away, Claire began to see the outline of something else and her heart began to pound even faster.

Pulled up onto the beach was an inflatable, gray Zodiac boat. Claire was deathly afraid of open water, particularly the open ocean. It was one thing to have a house on the coast with a view of the ocean; it was something entirely different to be out on the water. But Claire had no choice in what was about to happen.

Laying her down inside the Zodiac, the man pulled the bow around and dragged the boat into the ocean.

She could feel the moment it was floated and lifted up off the sand. A wave of nausea swept over her and she wanted to throw up, but her body didn't comply. It was as if it weren't even her body anymore. As if she were in a coma and no one knew she was actually awake.

As her attacker climbed into the boat and started its engine, Claire's fear of the open ocean was replaced by another fear, or, more properly stated, a resignation—whoever this man was and whatever his intent, she was never going to see her family again.

Seven miles south, the Zodiac entered St. Simons Sound and continued on. At the tip of a narrow point of wooded land was the entrance to a small, winding creek. The man killed the main engine and switched to a smaller, quieter motor. There could be no witnesses.

His assignment was almost complete. By the time anyone realized Claire Marcourt was missing, the plan would already be unrolling and there'd be nothing anyone could do.

He glanced down at the woman as he removed a weatherized Iridium satellite phone and dialed a string of digits.

When the call was answered, he identified himself.

"Hotel Sierra?" a man's voice asked on the other end.

They spoke in code, using the military alphabet. Hotel represented the letter *H*, which in this communication stood for *hostage*. Sierra stood for *S*, as in *secure*.

"Affirmative. Hotel Sierra."

"ID Lima." Identify location.

"Lima three," the man in the Zodiac replied, indicating he had arrived at the creek.

"Roger. Lima three," the voice replied. "Charlie Mike." Continue mission.

"Roger. Charlie Mike."

With those words, Claire Marcourt's fate was sealed and the rest of the operation was officially set in motion.

## CHAPTER 1

Lufthansa First–Class Lounge Frankfurt Airport Germany

ydia Ryan looked up from her tablet as a waiter set a drink in front of her. "I didn't order this," she said.

"No, ma'am," replied the waiter. "It is from the gentleman."

Ryan shut down the tablet and cautiously glanced around the sleek, chrome-and-leather-accented room. She didn't see anyone looking back at her. "What gentleman?"

As the waiter smiled, a man seated in the area behind her said, "*This* gentleman." Ryan recognized the voice almost immediately.

"May I join you?" he asked as she turned around to face him.

Before she could respond, the man had already stood, his own drink in hand, and was walking around to her.

While paths did sometimes cross in the intelligence world, Ryan knew better than to believe in coincidences. The fact that she and Nafi Nasiri, deputy chief of the Jordanian General Intelligence Department, were in the same airport lounge was no accident.

He was in his late forties, tall, with medium-length black hair and refined, handsome features. He came from a wealthy family related to the King and had been educated in England and the United States. He had a

penchant for dark Italian suits and his shoes were always highly polished. On his left wrist he wore the same elegant Patek Philippe watch that Ryan remembered.

"It's good to see you again, Lydia," he said as he set a briefcase down and took the seat facing her.

"It's been a long time, Nafi."

"Even so, you haven't changed at all. You're still as beautiful as ever."

Still the player, she thought to herself as she smiled and shook her head. "How's the shoulder?" she asked, beating him to the punch.

Reaching across his body, he massaged his right shoulder. "I find the changes in barometric pressure difficult, particularly before it rains."

Three years ago, Nasiri had knocked her to the ground as a suicide bomber was about to detonate. He had taken shrapnel in his upper arm and had used the injury ever since as an attempt to guilt her into sleeping with him. "That's too bad. I guess it's a good thing you live in the desert, huh?"

Nasiri smiled. He had worked with multiple female intelligence agents over the years and had been able to break all of them down—all of them except Ryan.

She was like no woman he had ever met. The stunning product of a Greek mother and Irish father, she was tall—at least five foot, ten inches—with a mane of thick, dark hair framing an aristocratic face, illuminated by two large, deep green eyes. The fact that she had never said yes to him made him want her all the more.

She was also a highly adept field operative. Despite only being in her early thirties, she had proven herself on multiple occasions to be just as courageous, just as skilled, and just as deadly as her male counterparts. He could only imagine how exceptional she would be in bed.

Ryan took notice of him drinking her in with his eyes and decided to cut to the chase. "What are the odds that you and I would both be passing through Frankfurt?"

Nasiri smiled. "I needed to see you."

"So this isn't fate, then?" she replied, pursing her lips in a disappointed pout.

"Unfortunately, no," he said, his buoyant, casual demeanor gone. His

tone now was more professional, almost urgent. "May we speak someplace more discreet?" he continued. "I've reserved one of the private conference rooms for us."

"What's going on, Nafi?"

"Please," he said, standing.

"I was going to get something to eat before my flight."

"There's already food in the room."

Ryan had no idea what this was about, but he had definitely piqued her curiosity. "Well, seeing as how you've gone to so much trouble, how could a lady say no?"

Gathering up their belongings, the pair made their way toward the conference room. Once inside, Nasiri closed the drapes as Ryan perused the assortment of appetizers that had been laid out. She prepared a plate of food and, after looking at the available beverages, poured herself a glass of mineral water. Wine was out of the question. She liked Nasiri, but she wasn't going to let her guard down around him. On the airplane back home, she could have a couple of glasses of wine if she wanted. Right now she intended to be all business.

After sitting down, she placed her napkin in her lap and had just taken a bite of smoked duck when Nasiri took the chair across from her and, apropos of nothing, asked, "Is Jordan next on your list?"

She had no idea what he was talking about. Swallowing her food, she said, "Excuse me?"

"Is Jordan next?"

"I don't understand. Next for what?"

"C'mon, Lydia," Nasiri replied. "We know each other well enough; we've seen some very bad things together. We shouldn't play games."

"Nafi, no one is playing games here. You need to be specific with me. What are you talking about?"

Reaching down, he removed a folder from his briefcase and slid it across the conference table. "These pictures were taken three days ago."

Now he really *had* piqued her interest. Moving her plate aside, she drew the folder to her and flipped it open. The exhalation of breath that escaped her lips, as well the word *shit* upon seeing the first of the photos, was both unintentional and unprofessional.

"I guess we don't need to argue whether or not those are *former* teammates."

They were in fact old teammates of hers. They had been part of a covert program that specialized in orchestrating social, political, and organizational instability abroad. Their primary expertise was in the Muslim world. In addition to developing elaborate plots designed to create chaos inside organizations like Al-Qaeda, the Taliban, Hamas, Al-Shabaab, and the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, they had also been active in the rendering of terrorists to disavowed black sites under the continuation of America's supposedly discontinued extraordinary rendition program.

In the program, code-named "Eclipse," the CIA team had broken every rule in the book. And the more rules they broke, the more successes they racked up. It was a self-perpetuating cycle that had turned the team into success addicts—and like real addicts, they kept searching for bigger and bigger highs by going after bigger targets and launching more audacious operations. In the team members' minds, they could do no wrong.

The funny thing about believing you can do no wrong is that you quickly begin doing nothing *but* wrong. It had started with small infractions as standards slipped, such as getting sloppy with reporting or sneaking alcohol along on ops. From there it grew into misappropriating Agency assets like Black Hawk helicopters for bighorn sheep hunts in the Hindu Kush, all the way to some members of the coed team developing off-limits personal relationships and sleeping with each other.

These were men and women whose reputations on the covert side of the intelligence community were quickly outstripping their actual abilities. They were the CIA's golden children, a mixture of analysts and gunslingers, who had not only started believing their own press releases, but in the deadly fog of the global war on terror had begun to see themselves as almost immortal. They were careening toward a cliff with no one to pump the brakes. That was precisely when fate stepped in.

Without the knowledge of the Italian government, they had attempted to snatch a high-ranking Al-Qaeda member off the streets of Rome and a shootout had erupted. Associates of the terrorist had opened fire, killing five Italian citizens, two of them police officers. It was the end of the Eclipse program. All of the members had been cut loose from the Central Intelligence Agency. All of them, that is, but Lydia Ryan.

"Where were these pictures taken?" she asked.

"Cyprus."

"And you said three days ago?"

"Yes," replied Nasiri. "The only person missing is you."

"I have nothing to do with them anymore."

"But that's your old team, is it not?" he asked.

"Sure, but all of them were cut loose. You know that."

"Do I? I'm not so sure anymore. The CIA didn't cut *you* loose, did they?"

"That's different," Ryan argued.

He leaned back in his chair, unconvinced. "Really? Different how?"

"I was assigned to police that team. They were good, but they were also a bunch of cowboys. People don't last long at Langley if you don't follow the rules."

"Interesting. I seem to remember you breaking a lot of the rules yourself."

"No," Ryan admonished him. "What you *remember* is an imbecile of a CIA station chief and an American ambassador with a Pollyannaish worldview. Everything we did, *everything*, there was clearance for, especially the things we kept quiet from those two. It's hard enough doing the work you and I do without having to fight our own people in the process."

Nasiri shrugged. "I guess I'll have to take your word for it."

She looked at him. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"It means, my dear Lydia, that even by your own admission your destabilization team was very skilled. Yet despite that skill, someone chose to shut it down and fire all of its members. All the members, that is, except for you. If I recall correctly, you got promoted. Case officer now, isn't it?"

Glancing at her watch, Ryan said, "If there's a point to all of this, Nafi, I suggest you get to it."

"The point is that your entire CIA destabilization team, minus your

'policing' presence, was seen in Cyprus three days ago meeting with two men that my country is very nervous about."

"These two?" she asked, pointing at one of the photographs. "Who are they?"

"Senior members of the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood."

Suddenly, it hit her. "Wait a second. You think that the United States is planning to topple Jordan?"

Nasiri raised his hands palms up and tilted his head to the side. "If you were in our position, with governments falling all around you, what would *you* think?"

"I think a country like Jordan should be confident enough to trust its allies. That's what I think."

The Jordanian leaned forward and repeated his original question. "Is Jordan going to be the next Middle Eastern country to be overthrown?"

"There could be any number of reasons for that meeting in Cyprus."

"Really?" he stated, reaching down and removing two more folders from his briefcase. He held them out over the table and then let them drop. "Would any of those reasons be the same, or different, for why your team was seen in both Egypt and Libya before those governments collapsed?"

She would've stressed again that it wasn't "her team," but she was too stunned by his remarks to utter the words. The Americans in those photos had not only been let go from the CIA; they had been let go with prejudice along with *big* black marks in their records. *What was this all about?* 

Lydia Ryan was good at reading people, so whatever intelligence Nafi Nasiri had, she could see he was one hundred percent confident in it. Which meant, by extension, so was his boss, and very likely, the King of Jordan himself. Otherwise, Nafi wouldn't have been sent here to meet with her like this.

"I don't know what to say," she finally offered.

The Jordanian pushed the folders across the table to her. "Tell me you'll read what's in these files."

"Of course, but—"

"And that you'll get me some answers."

"Nafi, I can't make you any promises."

Nasiri looked at her, his face implacable. Reaching down, he removed a final folder from his briefcase, but he didn't open it. He didn't push it across the table, either. He just sat there tapping his index finger on the cover.

"I'm sorry to have to do this," he finally said.

"Sorry for what?"

"Understand that we take any threat to the survival of the Kingdom of Jordan very seriously."

There was now another tone in his voice, and she didn't like it. "What's in the folder, Nafi?"

The Jordanian lifted the cover, but only high enough so that he could see inside. From where she was sitting, Ryan couldn't make out a thing.

"Over the winter, we infiltrated a terror cell that has been moving bomb makers, bomb materials, and martyrs into Syria via Lebanon. While inside the cell, our asset learned of an advanced plot targeting the United States."

Ryan's eyes went wide. "You've known of an attack being mounted against the United States and this is the first you're telling us? Give me that file. I want to see what's in it."

Nasiri shook his head. "We've been monitoring the situation."

"Monitoring the situation, my ass," said Ryan, her anger growing. "You know what, Nafi? Fuck you, and fuck your monitoring. You can't sit on information like that."

"We didn't want to come to you until we were confident."

"This is blackmail. The Kingdom of Jordan is blackmailing the United States. That's what's going on here. You're not going to give me what I want, until you get what you want."

The Jordanian slid the file back into his briefcase and stood.

Ryan's blood was boiling. She knew her emotions were getting the better of her and that that was wrong, but she couldn't control her anger. "You haven't given me a shred of proof. What makes you think my superiors will even believe you?"

Nasiri frowned as he reached the conference room door. "I think a country like America should be confident enough to trust its allies. That's what I think. Have a good flight home, Lydia."

With that, the Jordanian was gone, and in his wake, the CIA had been dropped into a nightmare involving a terrorist plot that might or might not exist, and no way to even begin running it to ground.

## CHAPTER 2

COAST OF SOMALIA

MONDAY

Parachuting onto the rear deck of the supertanker *Sienna Star* was considered a kamikaze mission, but they'd made it. One of the team members was injured on the landing, but they still managed to retake the ship and free its crew. What they hadn't bargained for, though, was that the tanker's captain had been smuggled to shore earlier as an insurance policy against any such rescue attempt. This had placed Harvath and his team in a very difficult position.

The assignment called for the successful recapture of the ship and the recovery of the *entire* crew. In order to beat out the other private contractors for the job, Harvath's boss had proposed an exorbitant fee, but with the caveat that the ship's owners owed them nothing unless the operation was one hundred percent successful.

As a former Navy SEAL with a storied career now working for a private intelligence agency, he lived for this kind of work. That said, it was an extremely risky operation and it wasn't the first they had been forced

to take. Recently, his employer and the company's namesake, Reed Carlton, had been targeted for assassination. The killers had also targeted the Carlton Group's top operations personnel. Harvath and Carlton had been lucky enough to survive, but they had lost so many key players that their organization was unable to function at its previous level and ended up losing its biggest and sole government contract with the Defense Department. Because of that loss, they had been forced to take any and all assignments—sometimes under ridiculous terms—in order to rebuild their organization.

The Old Man, as Harvath referred to Carlton, had put everything on the line for this assignment, advancing a small fortune that included funding a secondary team out in the Gulf of Aden to conduct drone reconnaissance on the *Sienna Star* for the last week and a half.

Despite this surveillance, though, no one had realized that the pirates had smuggled the captain off the tanker. It wasn't until Harvath and his team had retaken the ship that they discovered his absence. At that point, they were left with only one option. They had to recover him.

Their hope was that the last thing the pirates would ever expect was that their pursuers would risk following them to their own village.

As was typical with Somalis, the pirates had imported engineers—mostly from Kenya—who could operate the hijacked vessels until their owners, or more often their insurance companies, paid whatever ransom was being asked for. In the case of the *Sienna Star*, though, the tanker's navigator had been murdered in the initial throes of the hijacking and the ship's owners wanted to send a message. They wanted all of the pirates killed.

Considering that the Somalis had murdered a crew member, Harvath didn't have a problem with that. If any of them posed a threat, they'd be dealt with accordingly. That was exactly how his team had handled retaking the ship. The Kenyan engineer recruited by the pirates was another matter entirely.

Not only had he been helpful on board the *Sienna Star*, but Mukami had assisted Harvath in drawing up a rescue plan for the captain. He knew where the pirates were holding him and had even offered to take Harvath there, if the price was right. Harvath had agreed to his terms.

Mukami had come up with the idea to turn the tables on the pirates by hijacking their own supply boat when it came out to resupply the tanker with food, water, and fresh khat.

In addition to getting paid, the man had requested only one additional item. He had asked that his cousin Pili, also an engineer from Kenya and who would be coming out on the resupply boat, not be harmed. Harvath had agreed to that as well.

Leaving their injured colleague plus an additional man behind to hold the *Sienna Star*, Harvath and his remaining teammate—a former SEAL named Matt Sanchez—used a smiling and waving Mukami as bait and successfully took the pirates' resupply boat when it pulled up alongside the tanker. Within seconds of the three dead Somalis being tossed out of the resupply boat, the great white sharks that infested the Gulf of Aden tore the corpses to shreds.

Mukami's cousin, Pili, simply thought he was coming out to take over the *Sienna Star* for a few days. The shooting of the three pirates had taken him completely by surprise. He was in a state of quasi-shock, and so Mukami piloted the resupply boat into port.

As Harvath and Sanchez checked and cleaned their weapons, they went over the plan with Mukami once more.

They would berth at the northern end of the small harbor where the supply boats normally picked up and dropped off. The car Pili and Mukami shared was already there waiting. While Pili stayed with the boat, Mukami would drive Harvath and Sanchez past the house the pirates owned, in order to give them a quick look. He would then drop them off around the corner and continue on to the house himself.

It wasn't unusual for the Kenyan engineer, upon arriving back in port, to show up at the walled compound to be paid, before proceeding on to his hotel. Usually, the pirates invited him to drink, smoke the hookah, and gamble with them. If they did so tonight, Harvath had told him to accept their offer.

Mukami was carrying a satellite phone Harvath had given him, along with a plausible excuse for it. If the phone was discovered, he would state that the *Sienna Star* was experiencing an electrical issue and that he needed to be available should his cousin require technical assistance.

Once inside, Mukami was to try to ascertain where the Greek captain was being held and transmit that information to Harvath and Sanchez. The two former SEALs would handle the rest.

When they were done going over the operation, Harvath had a personal question for Mukami. "Why?"

"What do you mean, why?" the Kenyan replied.

"Why do all this? Why work with the pirates?"

"For the same reason everyone else does. For money."

"But the pirates are bad people."

"Unfortunately, in Africa," said Mukami, "we don't have the luxury of deciding from whom we take our money."

"But you and your cousin seem like good guys. You're educated. You're polite. You speak multiple languages. For men like you, there have to be other ways to make money."

"No, not true. Not for the kind of money we need."

"I don't understand," said Harvath.

"My sister and Pili's sister went abroad. They paid bad men to smuggle them into Europe. They were told they would be given jobs and would be starting over with an opportunity for a better life. It was a lie. They were trafficked. That was two years ago. We have not seen or heard from them since. The men tell us that for more money they can get our sisters back. This is why we have been working for anyone who will pay us, and pay us well."

It was one of the millions of heartbreaking stories that existed throughout the third world. It was also none of his business and Harvath was sorry he'd asked. A hush fell over the boat and there was only the sound of the diesel engines as they made their way toward shore.

When the resupply boat pulled into the pirates' port it was well past midnight. The pier they tied up to was completely deserted, except for a few other supply boats, their crews long since returned home for the evening. On the other side of the tiny harbor they could see a stem-to-stern string of pirate mother ships and fast attack boats. While Somali piracy may have been down overall, this village still seemed to be making a very good living at it.

Peering out of the boat's wheelhouse, Harvath and Sanchez took one

last look up and down the pier before allowing Mukami to disembark and ready his vehicle. Pili would stay aboard and wait for everyone to return.

They watched Mukami walk down the dock to a battered brown Mercedes sedan with one white door and a missing rear window. Once the car was fired up and running, he turned the lights off and then back on to signal the coast was clear.

After one more thorough look around the harbor, Harvath and Sanchez stepped out of the wheelhouse and onto the dock. Though they had taken steps to disguise themselves with Somali clothing they'd found aboard the *Sienna Star*, they would never fool anyone up close. That was fine by both men, though, as they didn't plan to get personal with anyone other than the people they intended to kill.

As soon as his passengers were inside the car, Mukami turned onto a side street and made for the pirates' stronghold. He knew better than to drive up the narrow main drag.

The village wasn't very big, but judging from the satellite dishes clustered on the rooftops, as well as the expensive foreign cars parked in front of some rather impressive compounds, Harvath's opinion about the profitability of the local piracy trade had been right on the money.

Mukami slowed as they approached one such stronghold and told Harvath and Sanchez it was coming up on the left. Music could be heard from inside and lights could be seen from the upper windows. There were no guards in front, which Sanchez immediately remarked upon.

"They're pirates," replied Mukami. "They have many, many guns. Who would be dumb enough to steal from them?"

Just because it hadn't ever happened didn't mean it wouldn't, and the fact that even Somalis suffered from normalcy bias made Harvath shake his head. The pirates were about to learn a very painful and hopefully very expensive lesson.

Pulling around the block, Mukami dropped his passengers at an abandoned fisherman's shack, its windows missing and its roof caved in.

"You know what to do?" Harvath asked.

Mukami nodded and, before Harvath could ask another question, drove off.

Sanchez watched the old Mercedes recede into the darkness. "Do you think he can keep his shit together?"

Harvath nodded. "He's nervous, but I've made it worth his while. He'll do it. Let's get inside."

The two men hid themselves in the dilapidated dwelling and waited.

Twenty minutes later, they received a text message from Mukami. The captain was at the compound and was being kept in a room on the first floor. There were at least thirty men inside.

Sanchez let out a quiet whistle. "Thirty. That's a lot of man-skirts."

"That's a lot of guns."

"And RPGs."

"And RPGs," Harvath agreed. "Let's see if we can't peel some of them off. Ready?"

Sanchez nodded as Harvath switched frequencies on his radio to hail the heavily armed support boat that had been doing the reconnaissance on the tanker. It was now hovering just out of sight offshore. "Shotgun, this is Norseman. Do you copy? Over."

A moment later, the response came back. "Norseman, this is Shotgun. We copy. Over."

"You are cleared hot. I repeat. You are cleared hot. Bring the rain. Over."

"Roger that, Norseman. Shotgun is cleared hot. Bringing the rain. Ninety seconds. Shotgun out."

Looking at Sanchez, Harvath said, "Beers are on me when we're done."

Sanchez smiled. "Roger that. Let's roll."