

PROLOGUE

ITALIAN COAST GUARD HEADQUARTERS
MARITIME RESCUE COORDINATION CENTER
ROME

An explosion of thunder shook the building as Lieutenant Pietro Renzi, dressed in his Navy whites, answered the phone in front of him.

“Mayday. Mayday,” a voice said in heavily accented English. “My latitude is N, three, three, four, nine.”

Renzi snapped his fingers to get his colleagues’ attention. “Three, three *degrees*?” he asked.

“Four, nine,” replied the caller.

This was exactly the kind of call Renzi and his team were worried about tonight. North African refugee smugglers were subhuman. All they cared about was money. Once they had been paid, they put their passengers into unseaworthy boats, tossed in a compass and a satellite phone preprogrammed with the emergency number of the *Guardia Costiera*, and pointed them toward Italy.

Rarely did they provide them with enough fuel to make the journey. Rarer still, did they consult weather forecasts. Swells as high as fifteen meters had already been reported tonight, and the storm was only getting worse.

“Thirty-three degrees, forty-nine minutes north,” Renzi repeated, confirming the caller’s position.

“Yes.”

“And beneath that? I need the number beneath.”

“Please,” the man implored. “I do not have much battery.”

“Sir, calm down. I need the number beneath.”

The man read the numbers from the screen: “One, three. Dot four, one.”

Renzi entered the full coordinates into his computer: 33°49'N–13°41'E. The distressed vessel’s position appeared on the giant screen at the front of the operations center. The boat was 120 nautical miles from the island of Lampedusa, Italy’s southernmost territory.

“Please, please, you must help us,” the caller implored. “There is much water inside the boat. We are sinking.”

“Sir, please. We will send rescue, but you need to be calm. How many people are onboard?”

“One hundred and fifty persons. Many women. Many children. *Please* hurry. We are in danger. We are *sinking*.”

An Italian Coast Guard helicopter was out of the question. They were too far away and there were too many people.

Lieutenant Renzi studied the screen at the head of the room. It showed ships and boats in the central Mediterranean Sea. He searched it for one close enough to help effect a rescue.

There was nothing. Seasoned captains had already fled the storm’s path. It would take hours to get any type of vessel to them.

“Hello?” the man said. “Hello? Do you hear me, please?”

“Yes, I still hear you.”

“The waves are very high. All the people are sick. We need your help.”

“Sir,” Lieutenant Renzi repeated, trying to reassure the man, “we are sending a ship to rescue you, but you must stay calm.”

“Okay. Okay.”

“Now, how many flotation devices do you have?”

“*Flotation devices?*” the man replied.

“Life jackets,” said Renzi. “How many *life jackets* do you have?”

There was a pause as the man shouted out a question in his language to the people on his boat. When he came back on the line, his response chilled Renzi to the bone: “We have no life jackets.”

CHAPTER 1

BURNING MAN FESTIVAL
BLACK ROCK DESERT, NEVADA
TWO DAYS LATER

Scot Harvath wasn't supposed to be here. The CIA was forbidden to conduct operations inside the United States—especially the kind he was about to undertake. Desperate times, though, called for desperate measures.

The seven-day Burning Man event was an extreme, weeklong summer solstice festival held on a flat, prehistoric lakebed three hours outside Reno, Nevada. Outrageous costumes were encouraged—as was “tasteful” nudity. Costumes ran the gamut from Mad Max to Carnival in Rio.

As fit as he was, he could have gotten away without wearing much of anything. That wasn't his style, though. It also wouldn't have made sense for his assignment.

Instead, the five-foot-ten-inch Harvath, with his sandy brown hair and his glacierlike blue eyes, wore a Continental Army coat and a full face of Cherokee war paint, obscuring his handsome features.

As the wind kicked up again, he pulled a pair of steampunk goggles over his eyes and wrapped a keffiyeh around his face. Clouds of the fine alkaline dust that covered the playa were swirling everywhere. Visibility was dropping.

“Fifty meters,” a disembodied voice said over the device pushed deep into his left ear. He kept walking, scanning from left to right.

Burning Man took place in a temporary “metropolis” built in the Black Rock Desert, which was called Black Rock City. With more than seventy thousand attendees, BRC was twice as dense as the City of London.

Seen from above, the festival was laid out in the shape of a giant letter C, or two-thirds of a circle. It looked like a blueprint for the Death Star with a good chunk blown away.

It was a mile and a half across, and a quarter mile out from the center of the C was the “Man”—a giant effigy that would be set on fire Saturday night.

There were no accommodations in Black Rock City, only what you hauled in (and hauled back out) yourself. “Burners,” as attendees were known, spent months in advance planning elaborately themed camps and villages. Only the ultrarich showed up on Day One, usually via helicopter, to luxury, turnkey camps that had already been constructed for them.

Almost as controversial as the camps of the ultrarich was something called Kidsville. It was one of the largest camps at Burning Man and was for families with children—an interesting choice at such an adult festival. Nevertheless, this year, there were about a thousand kids in attendance.

An army of volunteers, augmented by private security, had screened each vehicle as it entered the festival. Occasionally, the volunteers were assisted by undercover law enforcement.

The massive flow of traffic, in addition to the laid-back atmosphere of the event, made it impossible to do anything thorough. It was more security “theater” than anything else.

Local and state law enforcement patrolled the festival, as did Park Rangers from the Bureau of Land Management. But as long as you weren’t openly doing drugs or providing alcohol to minors, it wasn’t difficult to stay off their radar. They had their hands more than full. It was no wonder Burning Man had caught the attention of terrorists.

The voice spoke again in Harvath’s ear. “You should be able to see it now.”

He stopped walking, raised a bottle of water to his mouth, and used the opportunity to look around.

Banners and tent flaps blew in the wind. There was a makeshift bar called 7 Deadly Gins, something called Camp Woo Woo, another place called No Bikini Atoll, and an enclave named Toxic Disco Clam. Just beyond was the blue RV.

“I see it now,” said Harvath, tossing the water bottle.

“Hey!” a woman behind him complained, but he ignored her and kept moving. He had come too far to let Hamza Rahim escape.

Through the dust, the evening air was redolent with the smoke from bonfires and burn barrels. Music thumped from every direction. Hidden out of sight, diesel generators rumbled their low growls, powering turntables, sound systems, and massive light shows. Dancers on the playa spun flaming orbs on long chains. Rolling art exhibits, brightly lit from end to end, spat fire into the night sky.

He did a slow loop around the camp that contained the blue RV. Everyone seemed to be congregated in a large tent, content to party and wait out the dust storm happening outside.

After a group of bicycles covered in synchronized LED lights passed, Harvath approached the RV.

It was dark inside. He tried to peer through several windows, but the blinds were drawn. A sunshade covered the windshield.

Pressing his ear against the door, he listened. *Nothing*. If there was anyone inside, they were being very quiet.

He tried to open the door, but it was locked.

Removing a set of picks, he looked over his shoulder to make sure no one was watching. No one was. Within seconds he had the door unlocked, had affixed the suppressor to his Sig Sauer pistol, and had slipped inside.

Even through his keffiyeh, the RV smelled terrible—like stale cigarettes and a toilet that didn’t flush well. After he peeled off his goggles, it took a second for his eyes to adjust.

Plates of half-eaten food sat on the table. Dishes were stacked in the sink. A white plastic trash bag, overflowing with garbage, was tied to one of the drawer handles. The upholstery was torn, the carpeting was stained, and there was playa dust covering everything. Hamza Rahim lived like an animal.

Noticing something on the floor, Harvath bent over and picked it up. *Pieces of electrical wire*. His heart rate went up.

As far as anyone at the CIA knew, Rahim had been sent to Burning Man for preattack surveillance. His job was to gather intelligence and feed it back up the chain. Harvath’s assignment was to snatch Rahim and

break his network by any means necessary. The wires, though, suggested the CIA's intelligence might have been dangerously off target. Raising his pistol, Harvath crept toward the rear of the vehicle.

The first thing he checked was a small closet. It was filled with junk. Across from it was a set of bunk beds—both of which had been slept in. *Bad sign.* Rahim was supposed to be alone.

Beyond the bunk beds was the master area. That bed had also been slept in.

There was only one place left to search: the bathroom.

The door to it was shut. Taking up a position to the side, Harvath slowly tried the knob. *Locked.*

He listened for any sound, but all he could hear was the thump of the dance music pulsing outside.

Stepping in front of the door, he raised his boot and kicked straight through the knob, shattering the lockset and leaving a hole where it used to be.

As the hinges were on the outside, the door was meant to swing away from the bathroom into the RV.

Harvath took one hand off his pistol and reached for the door. That was when it exploded.

CHAPTER 2

A Middle Eastern-looking man inside the bathroom kicked the door open and threw the contents of a large plastic cup where he thought Harvath would be standing.

The highly corrosive cocktail of drain cleaner and household bleach missed Harvath and splattered across the wall and window blinds to his left.

Harvath answered the attack by slamming his pistol into the bridge of the man's nose.

Immediately, his adversary's knees went weak and began to buckle. Harvath swept in behind him, wrapped his left arm around his throat, and demanded, "Where's Hamza Rahim?"

The man, who must have seen Harvath peeking in the RV's windows or heard him as he came in, struggled.

Harvath struck him again, this time in the side of the head. "Where is he? Where's Rahim?"

The attacker continued to resist, so Harvath pointed his pistol at his left foot and pressed the trigger.

The resulting scream was so loud, Harvath had to cover his mouth for fear the man's cries might draw attention. "Tell me where Rahim is or I'll shoot the other one."

The man clawed at Harvath. As he did, Harvath noticed that he was missing two fingers on his left hand. Harvath's worst fears were confirmed. *This guy was a bomb maker.*

Harvath now had even more questions, but his eyes, nose, and throat were burning from the poisonous cloud of gas the man had created with his bathroom bleach bomb. They needed to get the hell out of the RV.

With his left arm still wrapped tightly around the man's throat, Harvath jabbed the pistol suppressor into his back and pushed him toward the front of the RV. They had only made it halfway when someone appeared at the door.

The figure was dressed in what looked like a monk's robe with a featureless mask made of chrome. The figure also had a weapon, and before Harvath could react, he began to fire.

Harvath used the bomb maker as a shield until he had to drop his lifeless body and dive for cover. Rounds from the attacker in the chrome mask continued to chew up the vehicle.

Harvath wanted to return fire, but he couldn't see because of the toxic cloud. He couldn't even breathe.

Shooting out one of the rear windows, he raked the broken glass with his weapon and leapt out, landing hard on the ground.

His instincts told him to roll under the motor home for concealment, but he knew chlorine gas was heavier than air. If any of the fumes were leaking out, they would pool beneath the vehicle. He needed to move away from the RV, fast.

Spraying the front of the motor home with suppressed rounds from his Sig Sauer, he scrambled behind a nearby pickup, hoping the dust storm would help hide his movement.

At the truck, he pulled his goggles back up around his eyes, tightened his keffiyeh, and tried to catch his breath. His lungs were burning. How much was playa dust and exertion versus how much was chlorine gas, he had no idea. All he knew was that his chest hurt like hell.

"Rahim's not alone," Harvath coughed over his radio. "There was someone else in the trailer."

"Who?" the voice replied.

"A bomb maker. They're not here to scout. They're here to *attack*."

"*Jesus*. Did you get them?"

"The bomb maker's dead," Harvath said, "but Rahim's on the run. Dressed in a brown robe with a chrome faceplate. Get the drone up."

“It won’t survive the storm.”

“I don’t care. Get it up. *Now.*”

“Roger that,” the voice responded.

Inserting a fresh magazine into his weapon, Harvath issued a final command before rolling out from behind the truck. “Tell the extraction team to split up. We have to find Rahim.”

“And when we do?”

“Take him out.”

With that, Harvath ended his transmission and began moving.

Mike Haney was a smart guy. The CIA had snapped him up two years ago. Before joining its secretive paramilitary detachment known as the Special Operations Group, he’d been a Force Recon Marine. Harvath knew he could count on him.

The extraction team was made up of four additional, highly experienced former military personnel: Navy SEAL Tim Barton; Delta Force operative Tyler Staelin; Green Beret Jack Gage; and Matt Morrison, who, like Haney, had also been a Force Recon Marine.

While Haney ran everything from the large tour bus they were using as their base of operations, the extraction team was a couple of blocks over in a heavily modified, six-person golf cart.

Though Black Rock City was designed for pedestrians and bicycles, they’d been able to get the cart in by providing documentation “certifying” one of the team members as disabled.

Beneath one row of seats was a storage area just large enough to hide Rahim and smuggle him out. Under another was the hidden compartment they had used to smuggle in their weapons.

Using spray paint, Christmas lights, and pool noodles purchased on the way in, they had “decorated” the cart. It looked like shit, but none of them cared. As long as it did its job, that was all that mattered.

Rahim couldn’t have gotten far. Unscrewing the suppressor, Harvath returned his weapon beneath his coat and moved from tent to tent.

Near an art installation of public telephones advertising “Talk to God,” he gave a description of Rahim’s costume and asked if anyone had seen his “friend.”

A woman wearing a motorcycle helmet and not much else said she

had, and pointed down a road to the left. Harvath thanked her and took off.

Clouds of dust were still blowing through Black Rock City, but visibility was getting better. Harvath relayed his position to Haney and told him to have the extraction team members start closing in. As soon as he relayed his instructions, though, he saw a robed figure up ahead with a chrome faceplate.

Quickening his pace, Harvath tried to close the distance between them. The man weaved through one camp after another, slipping between parked vehicles, tents, and stacks of supplies. He was careful not to get caught in any open spaces. Someone had taught him good tradecraft.

"Where's my drone, Haney?" Harvath demanded as he leapt over a pallet of bottled water and kept moving.

"Inbound. Thirty seconds."

"This guy's gonna be gone in thirty seconds. Hurry up."

"Got him," another voice said over Harvath's earpiece. He recognized the voice. It was Staelin, the Delta operative who was teamed with Barton the SEAL.

"Where are you?"

Staelin gave his position.

"You're still two blocks away," Harvath replied. "You've got the wrong guy."

"Bullshit. I'm looking right at him. Brown monk's robe, chrome faceplate."

CHAPTER 3

“Stay on him,” Harvath ordered, not sure what the hell they were up against, or whom he was even following at this point. “But don’t let him see you.”

“Roger that,” Staelin replied.

“Haney—” Harvath began, but he was interrupted.

“Overhead now.”

He pulled a small infrared beacon from his coat pocket and clipped it to his lapel as he kept moving. “Got me?”

“Stand by,” Haney answered, as he used the drone’s infrared camera to search for Harvath’s strobe. Finally, he came back over the radio and said, “I’ve got you.”

“There’s a robed figure up ahead of me,” Harvath stated. “Same bearing. Moving like he’s late for a job interview. See him?”

Haney paused before replying, “Negative. I don’t see anything.”

“What do you mean?”

“I *mean*, I don’t see him. The drone’s not picking him up.”

Suddenly another voice broke in. It was Morrison, the other Marine who was moving with Gage, the Green Beret. “I have eyes on.”

“What’s your position?” Harvath asked.

When Morrison gave his location, Haney said, “You’re not even close to Harvath or Staelin. You guys are chasing three different targets.”

Shit, thought Harvath. *How many of these guys are there?* “Everybody, strobes on,” he ordered.

A chorus of “Roger that” flooded the radio as the men activated their infrared devices, visible only to the infrared camera aboard the drone. “Strobes on.”

Based on the wire clippings and the presence of the bomb maker, something bad was in the works. *But was it in the works for tonight? Or were they just getting the lay of the land, perhaps waiting for two nights from now, when there'd be the biggest concentration of Burners in one spot?* There was no telling. All he knew was that at least one of them was armed. And if one was armed, the others probably were too.

Getting back on the radio, Harvath instructed Haney to fix the other two figures on the map. In his mind, he tried to picture the layout of Black Rock City. *Where the hell were they headed? And even more important, did Rahim have even more operatives out there?*

The most pressing question, though, was *What had he interrupted? Were the men in the process of planting a bomb? Had they already planted a bomb? Or did they have something totally different in mind?*

When Haney's voice came over his earpiece moments later, he didn't have good news. “I can't see them.”

“Is it the weather?” Harvath asked, though his gut told him that wasn't the answer.

“Negative. Whatever they're wearing, it's masking their heat signature.”

Damn it. More tradecraft. These guys knew how to avoid infrared surveillance. Harvath's worst fears were being confirmed.

“Based on their direction of travel,” he asked, “what do you think their target is?”

Haney studied the festival map on the console in front of him. “It could be anything.”

“Think like them.”

“I *am* thinking like them,” Haney replied. “But every one of these theme camps reeks of symbolism.”

Staelin's voice interrupted the transition. “Our guy just doubled back and took a hard left. Headed west now.”

Moments later, Morrison stated, “Our target just took a shortcut through two camps. Now headed east.”

Up ahead of Harvath, the hooded figure he was following paused and

looked around, as if checking his position, and then began moving north. *They were all changing direction.*

“Where are they headed, Mike?” Harvath asked as he continued after his target. “Come on. Figure it out.”

“I’m telling you,” Haney replied. “It could be anything.”

Just then, Morrison interjected, “I know where my target is headed. We need to take him *now*.”

“Slow down,” cautioned Harvath. “Where’s he going?”

“*Kidsville*. The family camp.”

The urgency of the situation instantly took on new meaning. They had to act.

Passing through another camp, Harvath saw a roll of duct tape. Grabbing it from the tent pole where it hung, he picked up his pace and kept going.

“Is anyone close enough to see if they’re buttoned down?” he asked.

Suicide bombers were known for employing what was called a “dead man’s switch.” It was a button that when depressed armed their device. If a bomber was shot or somehow incapacitated, simply releasing the button would cause their device to detonate.

There was also the chance of a “chicken switch.” It was a fail-safe that attached the bomber’s vest to a cell phone. If the device failed to go off at the designated place and time, a handler could trigger it remotely.

The chance that either technology, and possibly both, was present made the situation much more dangerous.

“Negative,” Staelin replied. “I can’t see anything. Our target has his hands under his robe.”

“Same with ours,” said Morrison.

Except for the split second he had a weapon pointed at him, Harvath hadn’t seen the hands of the man he was chasing either.

Tackling multiple potential suicide bombers wasn’t part of this assignment. It was supposed to be surveillance of a terrorist planner, followed by a snatch and grab. Once they had him out of Black Rock City, they were to fly him to a prearranged location for interrogation. Any heavy lifting was Harvath’s responsibility. Everyone else was supposed to be support.

Harvath didn't know much about the men he was working with, but what he did know was that they were men of honor. They did the right thing, no matter what.

"Gut check," Harvath relayed over the radio. "If anyone wants out, now's the time."

"Negative," came the replies.

Harvath laid out his plan. "Assume they're carrying weapons. Assume they're all wearing vests. And assume they're buttoned down. If they come off that switch, it's over. So when you go kinetic, you each take a hand and focus on it like a laser. Understood?"

"Roger that," the men answered.

Haney knew Harvath was operating without a partner. That meant he was going to have an even harder job. He'd have to get his target's hands under control by himself. "I can be to you in less than five minutes," Haney offered.

Looking up ahead, Harvath figured out where his target was headed. It was the biggest of the luxury camps—the one die-hard Burners resented the most—called Crystal Sky.

It was packed with wealthy and powerful executives from Silicon Valley. A successful attack inside Crystal Sky would reverberate across the tech industry and feed headlines worldwide.

"Stay on the drone," Harvath ordered. "And have Langley get word to law enforcement. If there are more of them out there, we've got to find them fast."

Once Haney had confirmed, Harvath hailed Morrison and Staelin. "Your teams are clear to engage. Take them down."

From the Crystal Sky stage, he could make out a speeded-up version of "Super Freak" by Rick James. The robed figure in front of him cut out into the crowded street and headed for the camp entrance. Two hundred yards more and he'd be inside.

Harvath had no choice. It was time to make his move.