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**Proudly Presents**

# **ACT OF WAR**

**BY**

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*Act of War. . . .*

“Let her sleep. For when the dragon wakes,  
she will shake the world.”

—NAPOLÉON BONAPARTE

# PROLOGUE

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HONG KONG  
ONE WEEK AGO

The air was thick with humidity. *Oppressive.* Typical for this time of year. It was monsoon season and stepping outside was like stepping into a steam room. Within half a block he was sweating. By the intersection, his clothes were sticking to his body. The Glock tucked behind his right hip was slick with perspiration.

*Guns, money, and a bunch of high-tech gear.* Just like something out of a movie. Except it wasn't. This was real.

Turning right, he headed into the large open-air market. It looked as if a car bomb packed with neon paint cans had detonated. Everything, even the luminous birds in their impossibly small cages, was aggressively vivid. The smells ran the gamut from ginger and garlic to the putrid "gutter oil" dredged up from restaurant sewers and grease traps by many street cooks.

There were rusted pails of live crabs, buckets of eels, and shallow bowls of water filled with fish. Men and women haggled over oranges and peppers, raw pork and chicken.

Like the first spring snowmelt snaking along a dry, rock-strewn riverbed, Ken Harmon moved through the

market. He focused on nothing, but saw everything—every cigarette lit, every newspaper raised, every cell phone dialed. The sounds of the neighborhood poured into his ears as a cacophony and were identified, analyzed, sorted, and stored.

The movements of his body, the functioning of his senses, were all conducted with calm, professional economy. The Central Intelligence Agency hadn't sent him to Hong Kong to panic. In fact, it had sent him to Hong Kong precisely because he didn't panic. There was enough of that back in Washington already, along with the repatriated body of David Cahill.

Cahill had been an Agency NOC based in Shanghai. An Ivy League blue-blood type who knew all the right people and went to all the right parties. He saw things in black and white. Gray areas were for professional liars like diplomats and men who lacked the testicular fortitude to call evil by its name when they saw it. For Cahill, there was a lot of evil in the world, especially in China. That was why he had learned to speak the language and requested his posting there.

As an NOC, or more specifically an agent operating under “non-official cover,” he wasn't afforded the diplomatic immunity enjoyed by other CIA operatives working out of an embassy or consulate. Cahill had been a spy, a true “secret” agent. And he had been very good at his job. He had built a strong human network in China, with assets in the Chinese Communist Party, the People's Liberation Army, and even the Chinese Intelligence Services.

Via his contacts, Cahill had been onto something, something with serious national security implications for the United States. Then, one night, while meet-

ing with one of his top assets, he had dropped dead of a heart attack right in front of her.

The asset was a DJ out of Shanghai named Mingxia. Her parties were some of the best in China. Celebrities, drugs, beautiful women—they had everything. And it was those parties that had propelled her into the circles of China's rich and powerful.

She was not without her share of troubles though, and that had made her ripe for recruitment by Cahill. But when he died, Mingxia dropped off the face of the earth. The CIA couldn't find her anywhere. They wanted answers and they had turned over every stone looking for her.

Then, two weeks later, she had reappeared. It was via an emergency communications channel Cahill had established for her—a message board in an obscure forum monitored by Langley. But since her disappearance, speculation at the CIA had gone into overdrive. Did the Chinese have her? Had Cahill been burned? Had the woman been involved in his death? Was this a trap?

She allegedly had information about a crippling attack being planned against the United States, but nobody knew if they could trust her. The Agency was desperate for information. And so it had called Ken Harmon.

Harmon wasn't a polished Ivy Leaguer like Cahill. He was tall, built like a brick shithouse, and he didn't attend fancy parties. He usually drank alone in the decrepit, back-alley bars of some of the worst hellholes in the world. He was a rough man with few attachments and only one purpose. When someone somewhere pushed the panic button, Harmon was who showed up.

He had decided to meet the asset in Hong Kong. It made more sense than Shanghai and was much safer than Beijing, especially for a white guy.

Harmon had chosen the coffee shop, a Starbucks knockoff. It was busy, with the right mix of Chinese and Anglos. People chatted on cell phones and pecked away at keyboards. They had buds in their ears and listened to music or watched videos on their devices. *Whatever happened to a cup of coffee and a newspaper? Hell,* he thought, *whatever happened to newspapers?*

There was a front door and a back door, which meant two ways out; three if you counted kicking out the window in the women's bathroom leading to a narrow ventilation shaft. The men's bathroom was a death box. There was no escape if you got trapped back there. Harmon didn't plan on getting trapped.

A net of human surveillance had been thrown over the neighborhood. He'd picked out a couple of them. Men who were too fit and too clean cut. They were Agency muscle, ex-Special Operations types. They were excellent with a gun and terrific to have on your team if things went sideways, but they were too visible and Harmon had requested no babysitters. His request, though, had been ignored.

He had also asked that they buy the woman a plane ticket so he could conduct the meeting in a nice, anonymous airline lounge at Hong Kong International. It was a controlled environment. Much harder to bring weapons in. Easier to spot trouble before it happened. Trade-craft 101. That request had also been ignored.

Langley felt the airport was *too* controlled and therefore too easy for the Chinese to tilt in their favor. The CIA wanted a public location with multiple evacuation routes. They had cars, safe houses, changes of clothes,

medical equipment, fake passports, and even a high-speed boat on standby. They had thought of every contingency and had built plans for each. That was how worried they were.

Stepping inside, Harmon scanned the café. The air-conditioning felt like being hooked up to pure, crisp oxygen. He grabbed a paper napkin and, starting at the top of his shaved head, wiped all the way down the back of his thick neck. He ordered a Coke in a can, no ice. He had learned the hard way about ice in foreign countries.

Paying cash, he took his Coke over to the service station, where he gathered up a few items, and then found a table. It was set back from the window, but not so far back that he couldn't watch the door and what was happening outside on the street.

He carried no electronics. No laptop, no cell phone, no walkie-talkie. He carried no ID. Besides his large-caliber Glock, spare magazines, and a knife, there was nothing on his person that could connect him to anything, anyone, or anywhere. That was how professionals worked.

Removing a small bill from his pocket, he folded it into the shape Mingxia had been told to look for. A heart. He could do swans too, but everybody did swans. It was the first thing you learned. He normally did hearts when meeting female assets. It was something different. Some of them liked it. Some didn't. He didn't care. A heart was just a heart.

When it was finished, he set it atop a white napkin. It was unique, but low-key, nothing that could be noticed from the street. In fact, you might only notice it as you walked by the table on the way to the ladies' room—and even then, only if you were looking for it.

An hour later, the woman arrived and slowed as she passed the table. It wasn't much, but it was enough to tell him that she had seen it.

While Mingxia was in the bathroom, Harmon scanned the café and the street outside. He sipped his second Coke and flipped through one of the free tourist magazines that littered every café and fast-food restaurant in Hong Kong.

When Mingxia left the bathroom and passed his table again, she found the heart sitting by itself. The napkin had been removed. *All clear*. She hadn't been followed inside. It was safe to sit down. Ordering herself a tea from the counter, she took the table next to his.

She was attractive. Better looking than the photo Cahill had included in her file. Harmon could see why Cahill had recruited her. According to the dossier, she had family somewhere that needed the money. They always did. Harmon didn't want to know about it. He wasn't here to date her, just to debrief her, and if necessary, help smuggle her out of China. He was glad she spoke English.

Reaching into her purse, Mingxia removed the glasses Cahill had given her and placed them on the bench between them.

Harmon had been shown how to use them before leaving the United States. He wasn't a fan, though they were better than the earlier versions Google had developed for the Agency. The Lego brick-size projector had been replaced with one about the size of a staple. Even so, the glasses were still too sci-fi for his taste.

It was a better method of sharing information, though, than trading briefcases under the table or being passed an envelope full of reports and surveillance pho-

tos. The glasses even had a one-button delete function that scrubbed all the data if it looked like they were about to fall into the wrong hands.

Slipping them on, Harmon turned his attention back to his magazine and pretended to read it.

As the information scrolled across the inside of the lens, his mind began connecting the dots.

“Are you positive about all of this?” he asked.

“Yes,” Mingxia replied.

They would, of course, need more than just her word for it. But if this was true, the United States was in trouble. *Big trouble.*

“What’s this bit in Chinese that keeps popping up?” he said. “*Xuě Lóng?*”

“It’s the code name for the operation.”

“What does it mean?”

“*Xuě Lóng* is a mythical Chinese creature said to bring darkness, cold, and death.”

“What’s the translation?”

“In English, it would be called a snow dragon.”

# CHAPTER 1

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KARACHI  
PAKISTAN

Scot Harvath caught sight of himself as he checked the truck's side mirror. He was wearing the traditional shalwar kameez—baggy, pajama-like trousers with a long cotton tunic. His skin was tan from having spent the summer outside. He had sharp blue eyes, short sandy brown hair, and was in better shape than most men half his age. He needed a shower and shave, but for a former Navy SEAL in his early forties, he looked pretty good.

Sitting next to him, driving their white Toyota SUV, was twenty-eight-year-old Chase Palmer. Eight years ago, he had been the youngest soldier ever admitted to Delta Force, or the “Unit” as members referred to it. His hair was lighter than Harvath's, but their appearances were so similar they could have been taken for brothers.

Cradling an H&K MP7 submachine gun in the backseat beneath her burka was twenty-five-year-old Sloane Ashby. In her short military career, she had racked up more confirmed kills than any other female soldier, and most of the men. With her high cheekbones, smoky gray eyes, and blond hair she looked more like a college calendar coed than a “kick in the door and shoot bad guys in the face” operator.

Harvath moved his eyes back to the taillights several car lengths ahead. The night was alive, *electric*. Motorbikes buzzed in and out of traffic. Trucks clogged the streets. Between the curtains of diesel exhaust, he could smell the ocean. They were getting close. Activating his radio, he said, “Look sharp, everyone.”

With over twenty-three million inhabitants, Karachi was the third largest city in the world and Pakistan’s most heavily populated. It was an easy place to hide. *Staying hidden, though*, thought Harvath, *required discipline*. It meant not going to your favorite restaurant just because it was your last night in town. But that’s exactly what Ahmad Yaqub had planned.

There had been debate over where to grab Yaqub. Should they do it in Karachi while he was under the protection of the ISI—Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence Agency—or should they wait until he returned to his stronghold in Waziristan?

The Secretary of State wanted to wait. He wanted to pay a rival faction in the lawless border region between Pakistan and Afghanistan to snatch him so there’d be no American fingerprints on the job. Hitting an ISI motorcade in Karachi was asking for trouble. *A lot of it*. The clock, though, was ticking.

Yaqub was an Al-Qaeda-linked Saudi who had traveled to Afghanistan for the jihad and had married into a powerful Waziri clan. From his mountain compound, he helped fund and coordinate terror operations against corrupt Pakistani and Afghan politicians, as well as anyone else seen as enemies of Islam and the Taliban.

His greatest coup had been the assassination of Benazir Bhutto in Rawalpindi. She was the American-backed “puppet” who had been predicted to win the election and become president of Pakistan. She had made no se-

cret of the direction she would take the country and how she intended to crush the Taliban.

Yaqub knew there would be an investigation into her death and had left just enough clues to confuse everyone. Some believed a rival political faction had ordered her death. Some blamed the Taliban. Some swore it had come from deep within the ISI, whose continued hold on power was dependent upon chaos reigning throughout the region. Where these clues didn't lead, though, was back to Ahmad Yaqub. Or so he had thought.

But people in Waziristan talked, especially when money was involved. The Taliban often lamented that cash was the greatest weapon the Americans brought to the battlefield. Money frightened them more than the drones that killed without warning. American dollars were like a cold wind in winter. No matter how well constructed your house, the wind could always find a way inside. And a particular gust of American dollars had done just that.

The U.S. had made the apprehension of Ahmad Yaqub a top priority. They had moved heaven and earth to compile as much information on him as quickly as possible. The best intelligence on Yaqub had come from a private intelligence agency run by an ex-CIA spymaster named Reed Carlton.

As part of the Carlton Group's force protection contracts with the Department of Defense, they had developed unparalleled human networks throughout Afghanistan and Pakistan. Nobody collected better intelligence in the region than they did; not even the CIA.

Within twenty-four hours of being tasked, the Carlton Group had reached out to its networks and had assembled an impressive dossier on Yaqub. They knew exactly where he was, how long it would take him to

do his banking and assorted business in Karachi, and where he'd be spending his last evening. But the Carlton Group's expertise didn't end there.

In addition to hiring top people from the intelligence world, Carlton also recruited the best talent from the Special Operations community. One of his greatest accomplishments had been landing Scot Harvath.

Harvath had served on SEAL Teams 2 and 6, with the Secret Service's Presidential Protection Division, and under a prior president who had successfully used him to covertly hunt and kill terrorists. Harvath and the president had enjoyed a simple understanding—if the terrorists refused to play by any rules, Harvath wasn't expected to, either.

Carlton saw in Harvath a bottomless well of raw talent. When he hired him, he had not only honed Harvath's exceptional counterterrorism skills, he had also taught him everything he knew about tradecraft and the world of espionage.

When he was finished, Harvath had become more than just a talented hunter and killer of men. He had become an apex predator—a creature who sat atop the food chain, feared by all others.

There was one other plus Harvath brought to the current assignment—plausible deniability. The Carlton Group was a private organization. If Operation Blackbird went sideways, there wouldn't be a trail leading back to the White House.

In order to give the United States even greater insulation, Harvath had suggested using Kurdish Peshmergas instead of American operators for the hit. The Peshmergas had trained with U.S. Special Forces, were tough, and could be relied on no matter how bad things got.

The Peshmergas would be augmented by a couple of trustworthy Pakistanis from the Carlton Group's network who had supported delicate, in-country covert operations in the past. Harvath and his people would not get involved unless absolutely necessary. That was the best he could offer. The U.S. had to move on Yaqub. Time was running out. It had to be now and it had to be in Karachi. The Secretary of State had reluctantly agreed.

Once they had the green light, Harvath and Carlton began planning the operation. There was layer upon layer of detail to be covered—weapons, logistics, contingencies, and personnel chief among them. The key was to get Yaqub in transit. That was when he'd be most vulnerable. Harvath knew exactly who he wanted with him on the assignment.

Chase Palmer was smart, aggressive, and very talented. By twenty-eight, he'd seen more action than many Unit operators ever would and was already looking for his next adventure. Having worked with him on a previous assignment, Harvath had been impressed and knew he'd be perfect for the Carlton Group. That was all it had taken.

With Chase on board, there was only one other operator he had wanted along.

Due to the Taliban and Al-Qaeda having put a price on her head for her kills in Afghanistan, the Army had removed Sloane from combat. They had assigned her to the Unit compound at Fort Bragg, where she had become a trainer for Delta's all-female detachment known as the Athena Project. She was a good instructor, but she was far too young to be mothballed and she missed the action. When Carlton met her and offered her a position, she had jumped at the chance.

Noting the intersection they were approaching, Sloane said, “Khayban-e-Jami coming up.”

They had driven the routes between Yaqub’s safe house and his favorite restaurant multiple times. The team knew every intersection and had plotted multiple points where they could grab him. When they did, the Peshmergas would have to move fast. The key was incapacitating his bodyguards as quickly as possible.

Yaqub’s destination was a popular restaurant called Bar-B-Q Tonight. It was close to the Karachi Yacht Club and just across the street, ironically enough, from Benazir Bhutto Memorial Park. Whether that provided an added sick appeal for Yaqub was anyone’s guess.

“Fifteen meters to the intersection,” Sloane called out.

“Damn it,” Chase swore as the car immediately in front of them began to slow. “We’re going to lose them. The light’s changing.”

Yaqub’s two-car motorcade had already entered the intersection, trailed by the Peshmergas.

“Try to stay with them,” Harvath replied.

Chase leaned on the horn. “C’mon, Chicken Little. Be a man. Move your ass.”

“Easy with the horn.”

“This guy’s gotta be the only idiot in Karachi who doesn’t push through a yellow light.”

“We’ll be okay,” said Harvath. “Let’s just not draw attention to ourselves.”

Chase tried to steer around him, but there wasn’t enough room.

“Not good,” Sloane stated from the backseat.

“Everybody, stay calm,” Harvath instructed. He didn’t like the idea of being separated from the motorcade or the rest of his team, either, but there was no use

in blowing their cover. They'd been very careful and had made sure not to get too close, repeatedly switching positions. The ISI was well trained and would be looking for a tail. There was also no telling how many of the motorbikes or scooters zipping through traffic might have been a spotter.

“We know where they're going,” Harvath continued, “and we've got eyes on—”

Before he could finish his sentence, a massive truck came barreling through the intersection and slammed right into the car carrying the Peshmerga fighters.