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EXCERPT

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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.”

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"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.

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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.*

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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.

Quickenning 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.

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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 represented 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.

CHAPTER 4

The biggest challenge for Harvath was making sure that the robed man didn't see him. If he did, it would be game over. Knowing the terrorist's target, though, gave him an advantage.

The dust storm had begun to slow. As it did, visibility continued to improve. Harvath moved through the throng, careful to stay out of the man's line of sight.

People were being pressed tighter together as they approached the entrance. Inside the camp, it looked like a mosh pit, punctuated by glow sticks and LED jump ropes. Phosphorescent jellyfish appeared to pulse through the air above the dancing crowd.

With his eyes glued to the man, Harvath willed him to act. *Show me your hands, you son of a bitch. Do it. Let me see them.*

As if answering his silent prayer, the crowd suddenly surged forward and a drunk Burner bumped into the robed figure. The terrorist stumbled forward. His left hand appeared from beneath his robe. Steadying himself against the person in front of him, the man quickly returned his empty hand to hiding. That was all Harvath needed to see.

Threading himself through the crowd, he slid into position at the terrorist's five o'clock, took a deep breath, and, ignoring the pain in his lungs, sprang.

He punched the man just behind his ear while grabbing for his right hand, which was wrapped around a switch.

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Immediately, the terrorist's legs buckled and he went down. Harvath went with him as people began to scream.

"Dead man's switch!" he yelled into his radio so Haney and the rest of the team would know.

Landing in the dust, Harvath began elbowing the man in the face. Once the chrome faceplate cracked, he could see the man's face. It was Rahim. He delivered two more crushing blows, shattering the man's nose.

A handful of Burners, unaware of what was going on, tried to pull Harvath off him. He kicked one in the gut and followed up by sweeping another's leg.

Instead of dissuading them, it only doubled their resolve to break up the fight. The idiots had no idea what they were doing.

Regrouping, they steeled themselves and moved forward. Harvath did the only thing he could.

Pulling his Sig Sauer, he fired three shots into the air. Instantly, the crowd scattered.

Rahim stirred and Harvath elbowed him again. Not knowing how much time he had, he dropped his pistol and grabbed the roll of duct tape he'd snatched.

Using his teeth to help loosen the edge of the tape, he wrapped Rahim's hand as tight as he possibly could around the dead man's switch. Even if the terrorist had wanted to let go of it, it would have been impossible.

Once he had it exactly as he wanted it, he wrapped the tape around several more times. Over his earpiece, he heard Staelin and then Morrison report that they had neutralized their targets.

Pulling his knife, he sliced open Rahim's robe. It was lined with a space-blanket-like material, which was probably what had helped reduce his heat signature. His suicide vest, though, was unlike anything Harvath had ever seen. The terrorist had enough high explosive strapped to his chest to bring down an entire building.

Harvath searched for a chicken switch, but there wasn't one. "Thank God," he said as he relieved Rahim of his pistol and reclaimed his own.

Falling back on the ground, he took a moment to catch his breath. Then he announced, “Target neutralized.” *They had done it.*

The moment, though, was short-lived. His mind began swirling with all the things they had to do. Staying here would allow local law enforcement to find him. He’d lose Rahim and the terrorist would be put beyond the CIA’s reach. His assignment wasn’t done yet. He still needed to get them out of the desert and interrogate them.

“Haney,” Harvath said, pushing himself up off the ground. “I’m headed west with Rahim. Tell the plane to get ready, then grab the cart and come get us. Hurry up.”

Yanking the terrorist up onto his feet, Harvath dragged him toward the edge of Black Rock City and their ride.

Inebriation was an amazing thing. Just as they got moving, a new round of emboldened Burners tried to get in their way.

When Harvath gestured at his prisoner’s suicide vest, they reacted as if it was a costume. When he drew their attention to his gun, though, they seemed to get the message. He had been seriously considering squeezing off a few more rounds when they all took a step back. Shaking his head, he shoved Rahim forward.

As the Crystal Sky DJ moved from Rick James to George Clinton, Harvath filled his seared lungs with another deep breath of air.

It was at that moment that an additional suicide bomber detonated his vest in the center of Black Rock City.

CHAPTER 5

NEXT MORNING
REGGIO DI CALABRIA, ITALY

Ravshan Tursunov's rough hands rubbed a yellow lemon peel around the edge of his porcelain espresso cup.

He'd told the ignorant Italian waitress "No sugar," but she'd brought it anyway. He tossed the cubes, like a pair of brown dice, into the cobbled street.

Sugar was one of the many things he'd given up. Bread, rice, and pasta too. The doctor had been adamant. For the transformation to work, he'd been required to shed forty pounds.

As an observant Muslim, there were few vices left available to him. Coffee was one. And even though ISIS forbade them, cigarettes were another.

He had become a connoisseur of both. With the money he was being paid, he could more than afford to.

In his native Tajikistan, the only thing worse than the coffee was the cigarettes. That went double for Syria. Both countries, though, were now behind him.

The tiny café, three blocks up from the water, was one of the best-kept secrets in the city. And while he didn't care for the waitstaff, the barista was the Michelangelo of coffee.

Both the Russians and the Americans had taught him never to visit the same location twice. There were certain things in life, though, worth making an exception for. This was the exception. Besides, no one knew him here.

Looking at his reflection in the glass door of the café, he still didn't

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even know himself. Blepharoplasty and canthoplasty had softened his eyelids and made him look less Eurasian. Rhinoplasty had narrowed the bridge of his nose, adjusted his dorsal hump, and tightened the tip.

Otoplasty improved the shape of his ears by reducing his earlobes, while cheek and chin implants gave his face more distinguished, angular features.

A neograft addressed his male pattern baldness and gave him a full hairline. Vaser liposuction helped him vaporize the remnants of the spare tire around his middle.

In short, the Pakistani surgeon had done an amazing job. There was very little scarring, and in less than two weeks, he'd been ready to sit for his new passport photo. The trip to Lahore had been worth it.

Now, such as it was, he was finally in Europe.

The suicide bombing in America was all over the news. From where he sat on the terrace, he could see the TV inside. Cell phone cameras had captured the aftermath. Festivalgoers were covered in blood. Many wandered around in a state of shock. Others writhed on the ground in agony. Multiple people had lost limbs. Even more were dead. *But not nearly enough.*

According to witnesses, there had been one enormous explosion. *There should have been four.* Something had gone wrong.

The target, and the method of attack, had been his idea. He felt he should have been more involved. His superiors had other plans. They didn't want to risk smuggling him into the United States. They wanted him focused on Europe. That was where they needed him the most.

But what if the U.S. cell had been penetrated? What if the Americans were working their way up the chain?

Though the thought had been haunting him all morning, he didn't want to think about it anymore. He had too many of his own problems. Chief among them was the loss of his chemist.

He was still infuriated by the incompetence. The ship never should have sailed—not with that kind of a storm barreling down on it—and certainly not without lifeboats or, at the very least, life jackets.

For the smugglers, though, it was a risk they had been willing to take. All that ever mattered to them was getting paid. That's why they always demanded the money up front.

As far as Tursunov was concerned, they shouldn't have been paid until arrival—especially for someone as valuable as Mustapha Marzouk. How they were going to replace him at such a late date was still beyond him.

Turning his attention back to the street, he removed a pack of Treasurer cigarettes from his blazer pocket and lifted its aluminum lid. The cigarettes had gold foil tips and looked like thin works of art. Placing one between his lips, he struck a match, and then inhaled deeply.

So much had been invested, he thought to himself. So many things had been set in motion. Too many to pull out now. The burden of the operation weighed heavily on his shoulders.

Shaking his watch from under his sleeve, he checked the time. It was almost nine o'clock.

Exhaling slowly, he placed a few coins on the table, sipped what was left of his espresso, and exited the terrace. He wanted to get a feel for the pickup location before his ride arrived.

Reggio was the toe of Italy's boot. To its east was the Aspromonte mountain range and to the west was the Strait of Messina, which separated the Italian peninsula from the island of Sicily.

Under certain weather conditions, an optical phenomenon known as the Fata Morgana took place, and people could be seen walking in Sicily as if they were only meters, rather than miles, away.

Today, though, there was no such illusion. It was sunny and the temperature was already climbing.

As he walked, Tursunov admired the city's exotic palm and lush magnolia trees. Reggio was known as the "City of Bergamot." The name came from the fragrant, nubby green citrus, with its lemon yellow interior, grown exclusively in the region and used to flavor perfumes and Earl Grey tea.

It was a port city with a thriving fishing community, but it was just as driven by agriculture from the surrounding countryside. From spring through fall, tourists flocked to its beaches and azure water.

In a rundown neighborhood, several blocks from the Castello Aragonese, was a pastry and gelato shop with a narrow bar called Ranieri. It sat next to a vacant lot, beyond which was a burned-out building that had been left to rot.

Graffiti was spray-painted across several buildings. Bars covered the

windows of others. Cigarette butts littered the sidewalk like dead moths under a neon beer sign. Tursunov added his to the pile and entered through the rear door.

A heavyset man in a wrinkled shirt stood behind the bar, doing a half-assed job of polishing glasses. He had dark circles under his eyes and several days' growth of beard. He looked as if he hadn't seen a bed or a bathtub in weeks.

Tursunov grabbed a stool at the end. He wanted to sit with his back to the wall and watch the doors that were open onto the street.

The faded interior had seen better days. Decades-old sports and rock band posters were thumbtacked to the walls.

The bartender didn't greet him. He seemed angry to already have a customer. Pausing his glass polishing, he cocked an eyebrow in the stranger's direction.

"Negroni," Tursunov stated, as he placed a copy of the *Gazzetta di Reggio*, open to the classifieds, on the bar.

The barman looked at him, looked at the paper, and then went back to polishing his glass. After a moment, he set the glass on the shelf behind him and got to work on the cocktail.

Tursunov would have preferred another coffee, but had been instructed to order the Negroni. That and the newspaper had been passwords.

Missing an ingredient, the barman yelled back toward the kitchen. Tursunov could make out the Italian word for orange, *arancia*, but not much else.

Shortly, the bartender's wife emerged with a cup of fresh peels. She looked Tursunov over, but didn't acknowledge him. A cigarette with a half-inch of ash dangled from her mouth.

Setting the cup on the bar, she withdrew an iPhone from her stained apron and thumbed out a text message as she headed back toward the kitchen.

Three minutes later, a black Mercedes with dark windows rolled to a halt outside.

CHAPTER 6

Tursunov had flown into Italy a day early to get his bearings. If everything was in order, he would fly out tonight. It all depended on how long the meeting took.

The two men who picked him up from the bar were big. Tursunov was just under six feet and weighed one-eighty. These men had to be at least six-foot-three and more than two hundred pounds each. He was being sent a message. *Don't try anything.*

They asked for his phone and when he turned it over, they placed it in a special bag that prevented sending or receiving any signal. He half expected to be blindfolded, but they didn't bother. After checking him for weapons, they seated him in back of the Mercedes and then navigated their way out of town.

While the two men up front listened to the radio, Tursunov watched the countryside change as they corkscrewed through the foothills and dense forests of the Aspromonte Mountains.

There were groves of olive trees, as well as bergamot. Oak trees were everywhere. The higher up in elevation they climbed, pine, beech, and Sicilian fir began to appear. It was a rugged and beautiful landscape. The roads, though, soon became deserted.

They were headed into one of the most dangerous territories in Italy. Known as the stronghold of the *N'drangheta*, or Calabrian Mafia, Aspromonte was an area avoided by tourists and Italians alike.

Most of the southern tip of Italy was poor, but Aspromonte was strik-

ingly so. Earthquakes, rockslides, and the iron fist of the N'drangheta had taken their toll. The Mercedes drove through one abandoned village after another—each in a greater state of disrepair than the one before.

Tursunov had thought they'd be headed somewhere near the capitol of the N'drangheta, a village on the eastern side of the Aspromonte range called San Luca. Instead, they ended up outside a small hilltop town on the western side named Monterosso.

Pulling off the main road, they followed a small dirt track that ran along a shallow stream. After crossing a narrow bridge, the path widened.

Here and there, Tursunov could make out caper bushes and stands of prickly pear cactus. Up ahead was a crumbling stone farmhouse.

It must have been an amazing structure at some point—solid, with two-foot-thick walls and a soaring roofline clad in ochre terra-cotta tiles. Bougainvillea tumbled from an old arbor. Swaths of jasmine still clung to parts of the old house.

The driver pulled up in front and turned off the engine. Tursunov didn't wait to be asked. He was eager to stretch his legs, and climbed out.

It was warm here, warmer than it had been in Reggio. Tursunov looked up into the blue sky. It was force of habit. He had survived three drone strikes. The last one just barely. His wife, though, hadn't been so fortunate.

Every day, he regretted having suggested that she come to Syria with him. It shouldn't have mattered that other fighters had brought their wives. It shouldn't have mattered that because of his stature, ISIS was providing him with a house. It shouldn't have mattered that they were childless and it was just the two of them. It shouldn't have mattered that she wanted to escape Tajikistan as much as he did. He should have left her behind. If he had, she might still be alive.

He closed his eyes. The sun was almost directly overhead. He felt the warmth on his face, heard birds off in the tree line. A breeze stirred and brought with it the scent of rosemary. For a moment, he tried not to think—to just be still. But as soon as the moment began, it ended.

Out on the road, he heard two vehicles approaching. Taking a deep breath, he opened his eyes. *Back to reality.*

Removing a cigarette from the pack, he placed it in his mouth and

leaned against the Mercedes. As he struck a match, he watched two navy blue Range Rovers come into view, trailing a cloud of dust behind them.

They were flashy cars, especially in this part of Italy. That was probably on purpose.

Near the top of the driveway, one Range Rover peeled off toward a large outbuilding. The other rolled up next to the Mercedes and parked.

A beefy bodyguard climbed out of the front seat and opened the rear passenger door.

A petite, Gucci-clad foot was the first thing Tursunov noticed. It was followed by a small, manicured hand, above which rested a very large gold watch. Antonio Vottari had arrived.

At five-foot-five-inches tall, he was known throughout Calabria as La Formícula, or “the ant.” He was the nephew of one of the N’drangheta’s most powerful crime families. His brutality was legendary.

The man allegedly lived for revenge. It was said to be the only thing that got him out of bed in the morning.

Tursunov looked him over. He was in his early thirties, thin, with pale skin. His eyes were black, like a crow’s. His steep nose resembled a beak.

He wore an expensive suit, likely custom made. His cufflinks matched the gold of his watch. His hair was combed with so much oil that it looked wet, as if he had just climbed out of a pool. Even through the cigarette smoke, Tursunov could already smell his cologne.

When Vottari moved, he did so like something out of the jungle. His dark eyes never left Tursunov’s. He seemed aware of everything around him—every person, every stone, every blade of grass. Each step he took was deliberate, confident. This was his territory. He was the alpha. You lived or died at his pleasure.

Within a fraction of a second of the Calabrese getting out of his car, Tursunov knew how he was going to kill him. Business, though, would have to come first. Smiling, he extended his right hand. “It’s good to see you, Signori. Thank you for meeting with me.”

“Let’s get started,” Vottari replied, returning his grasp.

“As you wish. Do you have everything?”

“We have enough.”

Tursunov looked at him. “Excuse me?”

The Italian jerked his head toward the outbuilding. “Come. This way.”

Tursunov didn’t know what he meant by having *enough*, but he fell into step alongside him anyway. Two bodyguards took up the rear, while the rest stayed with the vehicles.

The path was overgrown with weeds. As they walked, Tursunov looked up into the sky again. *This is Italy*, he reminded himself. *There are no drone strikes here.*

But if there were, a voice in his head countered, *waiting until everyone was inside the building would be the perfect moment.*

Tursunov felt a twinge of paranoia building at the edge of his mind and shut it down. He needed to remain in control.

At the door to the outbuilding, Vottari motioned at his cigarette. “No smoking inside.”

The Italian was being overly cautious. Nevertheless, Tursunov complied. Taking a final drag, he dropped the cigarette to the ground, and crushed it out with his heel.

Exhaling the smoke from his lungs, he stole one more glance skyward, and then followed the man inside.

The walls were built of concrete block and the building appeared to have been used to house livestock.

“Don’t worry,” Vottari said, suddenly reading his mind. “Sheep. No pigs.”

In Islam, contact with pigs was forbidden, as was contact with alcohol. It was obvious the Italian knew it. Vottari was fucking with him. It was why he’d sent him to a bar and told him to order a Negroni. And it was also why Tursunov was positive that they were at a pig farm.

He’d have to rethink the little Mafioso’s death. He’d have to come up with something much more painful and drawn out.

“Come. Come,” Vottari said, waving him forward. Three wooden crates, all painted olive green, were displayed on a long table. Their tops had been pried off and some of the packing straw removed.

Tursunov studied the markings on the first crate before removing its contents and assembling the pieces.

“Not your first time,” the Italian remarked.

Before joining ISIS, Tursunov had served in both the Tajik military and an elite police unit—facts that were none of Vottari's business. So he ignored him.

Moving to the second and third crates, he examined their markings and assembled the contents.

"Where are the rest of them?"

The Italian grinned, "You don't trust me?"

Tursunov looked at the clumps of what he was certain was dried pig shit covering the floor, and smiled back. "Where are the rest of them?" he repeated.

"You'll get them when I get my money. Half now, half on delivery."

Tursunov shook his head. "We agreed that I would be allowed to inspect all the merchandise. *Before* delivery."

Vottari snapped his fingers and one of his men handed Tursunov a tablet.

"What's this?"

"Pictures of the rest of your merchandise."

Tursunov angrily swiped through them.

"You can clearly see all the markings and serial numbers," the Italian stated.

"This is not what we agreed to."

"It is within the *spirit* of our agreement."

Tursunov thought for a moment and stated, "Thirty percent."

"My friend, this isn't a negotiation."

"This isn't a business relationship either," he replied, handing the tablet back. "We'll take our money elsewhere. Good luck selling those."

"*Pazzo*," he chuckled to his men. *Crazy*. But Vottari liked crazy. You had to have balls to be this crazy.

He let Tursunov walk all the way back to the farmhouse before sending one of his men to return him to the outbuilding.

When Tursunov came back in, Vottari said, "The merchandise you requested was very difficult to get. Only a fool would bring all of it together in one place. If something were to happen to it before I received my money, that would be very bad."

Tursunov didn't respond. The Italian hadn't asked a question. He had

made a statement. People weakened their hands by feeling they had to fill uncomfortable silences.

“Forty percent,” the Italian offered. “And you allow me to change the delivery location.”

“Change it? Why? Where to?”

“Someplace safer. Not far from where we agreed.”

Safer? Tursunov didn’t like it. Vottari was changing all the parameters of the deal. “Twenty-five percent.”

“*Molto pazzo!*” the Italian exclaimed, smiling. “Thirty percent and I’ll throw in two cases of these. No charge.”

He nodded to one of his men, who retrieved a smaller crate from the back of the Range Rover and brought it over for inspection.

Tursunov lifted the lid. *Fragmentation grenades.* His plan didn’t call for them, but better to have something and not need it than need it and not have it. “Deal.”

Vottari shook hands with Tursunov, but didn’t let go. “Remember,” he cautioned, “all of the merchandise leaves Italy. Take it to France. Take it to Germany. Take it to the moon. I don’t care. But if I find out you didn’t, you and your people are dead. *All of you.*”

Tursunov smiled right back and replied, “The last thing I and my people want is any trouble, especially with you and your people.”

CHAPTER 7

SATURDAY
WASHINGTON, D.C.

The small lockkeeper's house, only a short drive from D.C., sat along the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal. It was a squat, two-story structure, built of local stone painted white.

Its shutters and door were painted robin's-egg blue—the genesis of its nickname.

Unlike other lockhouses in the C&O National Historic Park, which could be rented for overnight stays, the “blue lockhouse” was closed to the public. And for good reason. It was owned and maintained by the Central Intelligence Agency.

One of the Agency's numerous safe houses, it had been used extensively during the Cold War for debriefing high-value Soviet defectors. Today, it was being used for a very important, very quiet meeting.

When Harvath rolled up, he saw three heavily armored black Suburbans parked in front. Even in casual clothes, the detail agents posted outside gave off a serious don't-fuck-with-us vibe. Intensity was an important prerequisite for the job.

Even more important were experience and ability. Terrorists the world over would have loved nothing more than to get their hands on the two people inside.

Parking his Tahoe in the grass, Harvath shook hands with the lead agent—a man named Haggerty—and chatted with him for a few seconds.

Haggerty had gone to Notre Dame, which Harvath, as a University of

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Southern California grad, always explained wasn't the man's fault. It was obvious that his parents hadn't cared much for him.

It was good-natured ribbing born from a storied college rivalry. Haggerty was confident about the football team Notre Dame was fielding this year. So confident, in fact, that he wanted to place a wager on the game against USC.

After reminding him of the Code of Federal Regulations banning gambling in the federal workplace, Harvath smiled and agreed to a hundred dollars.

"Cash," Haggerty clarified. "None of that Bitcoin crap."

Harvath laughed and they shook hands. Turning, he climbed the three slate steps to the lockhouse and knocked.

"Come in," a voice replied. "It's open."

Harvath entered to find the CIA Director, Bob McGee, and the Deputy Director, Lydia Ryan, at a weathered wooden table in the living room.

McGee was in his early sixties. He had dark wavy hair, which was rapidly going all gray. His most distinctive feature, though, was his thick mustache. You didn't see a lot of those in Washington, and even fewer in government.

Ryan was a gorgeous woman. She was the five-foot-ten product of an Irish father and a Greek mother. She had long black hair and deep green eyes.

Both McGee and Ryan had come from the clandestine service side of the CIA. They were smart, seasoned, no-bullshit people. The President had chosen them specifically to clean out the dead wood at Langley and bring the Agency back to its former glory.

"There's coffee in the kitchen," Ryan said as Harvath stepped inside.

Walking back to the kitchen, he grabbed an enamel mug from one of the cupboards and poured himself a cup.

Returning to the living room, he joined McGee and Ryan at the table. It was covered with files.

They had been meeting like this a lot—outside CIA headquarters, on nights and weekends. The less people knew about what they were up to, the better.

Like a ruptured appendix, terrorism had exploded, gushing its poison

in all directions. Attacks were on the rise everywhere, especially in Europe, and now in the United States as well.

Losing territory and suffering defeat after defeat, ISIS had become like a cornered, wounded animal. In desperation, it had lashed out, calling for attacks on Americans whenever and wherever they could be found. They were sending a very clear message—nowhere was safe.

In return, the American President had sent a very clear message of his own—there wasn’t a rock big enough for ISIS to crawl under or a hole deep enough to slither down. Wherever its members tried to hide, the United States would find them. *All of them.* America would hunt its enemies to the very ends of the earth. And it would be relentless in doing so.

The problem, though, was that not everyone in the U.S. agreed with the President. Some saw his approach as too antagonistic. They worried that he was giving the terrorists exactly what they wanted, that he was playing right into their hands. They wanted less cowboy and more samurai—wise, patient, striking only when absolutely necessary and then slipping back into the night.

Then there were those who didn’t want any strikes at all. They claimed that hitting back only perpetuated a cycle of violence. They cautioned that if we didn’t stop, neither would ISIS. The already bad situation would only grow worse.

Many felt that the President didn’t appreciate their opinions and hadn’t even bothered to take them into consideration. But those who knew him—that small circle with whom he kept counsel—knew that wasn’t the case at all.

The President didn’t like waging this battle, but it was a just war. The use of force was not something he took lightly. His greatest desire was peace. He wanted nothing more than the security of the American people. He saw the safety of Americans at home and abroad as his number-one responsibility as commander in chief. It was the duty he placed above all others.

He also was privy to something his fellow citizens were not. Every morning, he received an intelligence briefing, which laid out how truly dangerous organizations like ISIS and Al Qaeda were.

They were fanatics who believed that they had been chosen to rule

the earth. For that to happen, they had to subjugate America and her allies through jihad. Anything less than total commitment to this goal was an act of defiance against God himself.

The fundamentalism that drove them was a cancer. It infected almost everyone it touched. And yet the people best positioned to remove the cancer lacked the courage and the desire to do so. No matter how many atrocities were committed in the name of their religion and their God, the Muslim world was wholly incapable of combating the problem.

With so little cooperation, the President had been left with few choices. And those choices only narrowed as many of America's allies were overwhelmed with resource shortages and tidal waves of radicals on their own soil.

While the President respected those American voices that disagreed with his position, he could already see over the horizon. He could see what was coming if the United States didn't act.

Like Israelis, Americans would find themselves in a state of constant siege. Beaches, restaurants, trains, buses, night clubs, grocery stores, schools, playgrounds, dog parks, movie theaters, sporting events, parades, shopping malls, even the places where they worshipped, nothing would be off-limits.

And as the attacks mounted, a frightened population would demand that something be done. There would be armed guards and security checkpoints everywhere—and even that would not be enough to deter America's enemies. The terrorists would strike as Americans dropped their children off at school or stood in line waiting to step through a body scanner at the latest Broadway show. It simply wasn't possible to keep *all* of America safe *all* of the time.

The calls to do more, though, would only grow. Finally, the bureaucrats and politicians would step in and attempt to regulate terrorism away. At that point, America would take a very dangerous turn. As Ben Franklin was alleged to have said, those who would trade a little liberty for a little security deserve neither and will lose both.

That, in a nutshell, was the President's greatest fear. So he decided to act.

Despite using much of his political capital to push through a dramatic increase to the FBI's budget, the Bureau was drowning. It had ac-

tive investigations in all fifty states, but still nowhere near the resources it needed to see each investigation through to its end. The terrorists were coming at them too quickly—from everywhere and every walk of life. There simply were too many cases, too many leads, and not nearly enough agents.

The President had been left with only one course of action. A course that, if made known, would very likely lead to his impeachment.

Looking at Harvath, McGee said, “Let’s talk about what happened at Burning Man.”

CHAPTER 8

Harvath was operating on a black contract. Technically, none of what he was doing should ever see the light of day. But in the age of hackers and leaked documents, he went to extraordinary lengths to make sure he put little, if anything, in writing.

Administrations changed, as did opinions on what the CIA should or should not be doing. What was justified in the weeks and months after the September 11 attacks might take on a different light when re-examined from some point in the future. As far as Harvath was concerned, the best way to avoid being judged by history was not to be a part of it to begin with.

Harvath understood the President's position. He had deep feelings about individual liberty. He also cared about keeping Americans safe.

He had seen the utter barbarism of groups like ISIS and Al Qaeda up close. He had witnessed what they had done to their victims, including women and children.

One of the most painful moments of his career was rescuing the kidnapped son of an Iraqi policeman, only to have the little boy die in his arms. The torture the child had been subjected to was beyond horrific.

There were only so many dark corners in a person's mind to hide such experiences. It was why, from time to time, Harvath needed to be alone with a couple of six-packs or a bottle of bourbon. Long runs and pushing heavy stacks of weights brought him only so much relief.

It wasn't the healthiest way to deal with things, but unfortunately the

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human mind didn't have a Delete button. Sometimes, if only for a little while, he just needed to forget.

It was a terrible burden to drag around, but it was part of the job. Without someone to hunt the wolves, the sheep would never be safe. The wolves were multiplying too quickly. The sheepdogs were being overrun. It was a matter of survival.

So when the President had decided to alter America's rules of engagement, Harvath had agreed to go along.

Those new rules of engagement were what had placed him at Burning Man, operating without official sanction. There just weren't enough fingers and toes at the FBI to plug all the leaks springing from the terrorism dike.

Whenever possible, the CIA shared its intelligence with the Bureau. Too often, though, that intelligence was placed on the back burner. It wasn't their fault. They were being forced to drink from a fire hose.

With the President's quiet encouragement, Langley had begun to develop, plan, and execute more operations on its own. Depending on your point of view, Burning Man had been either a spectacular success or a spectacular failure.

Listening to Harvath's debriefing, McGee and Ryan both saw the op as a success. Had the other bombers been able to detonate, many more people would have been killed and injured.

No one, not even Harvath, had known it was an active plot until moments before it had gone off. Even if they had shared their mountain of intelligence with the FBI, it would have taken too long for them to assign a surveillance team to Hamza Rahim.

"Once the plane lifted off from Black Rock City Airport," Harvath said, wrapping up his report, "I went to work on them. You know the rest."

Yes, they did. Rahim had been extremely uncooperative. Harvath had quickly ratcheted up the pressure, playing on the would-be bomber's fear of being returned to his native Egypt.

Harvath convinced Rahim that not only did their jet have the capacity to make the flight, but also that the Egyptians would gladly accept him and help get the information he wanted out of him.

Rahim knew all too well how the Egyptians operated. He had been

viciously tortured by their secret police before. He had no desire to experience it again. No matter what the Americans had in store for him, it couldn't be worse than going back to Egypt.

So, he had slowly begun to cooperate—revealing how the attack had been planned, financed, and why he had returned to the RV.

To avoid detection, the materials for the suicide vests had been smuggled in separately and assembled on site. The bomb maker, though, had become nervous. Rahim was concerned that he might be having second thoughts and was worried he'd be captured after the attack.

It was a business decision—no more, no less. The bomb maker was a loose end that had needed tying up.

Rahim and the other cell members had been transferred to a secret facility in Colorado for further interrogation. As soon as the handoff was complete, the jet had flown Harvath and his team to D.C., where they had gone their separate ways.

Though Harvath was renting a place in Boston, to be closer to his girlfriend and her family, he hadn't officially given up his house in Virginia. It was along the Potomac River, close to George Washington's Mount Vernon estate. Most of the furniture was gone, but he'd left just enough behind to make it livable.

If nothing else, it was good to be "home" and to shower off the playa dust and toss all of his clothes in the washer.

He'd been in the midst of arranging to return to Boston when he had gotten the call about a meeting at the blue lockhouse. He figured the main point would be deciding what to do next about the ISIS plotters who had tasked Rahim with the attack.

"So what's next?" Harvath asked. "The refugee camp where the cell members were recruited?"

McGee shook his head. "We're putting somebody else on that."

"*Somebody else? Why?*"

"This is why," the Director replied, as he opened a file, removed a photograph and handed it to him.

Harvath studied the photo.

"His name is Mustapha Marzouk," said Ryan, taking over the briefing. "He was a graduate student in chemistry from Tunisia."

“Three years ago, during a raid on an ISIS compound by a CIA-backed rebel group in Syria, a laptop was found. At first, no one thought anything of it. It wasn’t password protected and all the drives were empty. But then we started drilling down on it and discovered over 146 gigabytes of hidden material.

“Among the more than thirty-five thousand files were all the usual things you’d expect to find on a laptop at an ISIS stronghold—justifications for jihad, military manuals, terror videos, et cetera. Then came the interesting stuff—document after document showing that the laptop’s owner was researching weapons of mass destruction.”

From the minute she had mentioned chemistry, Harvath had begun to develop a bad feeling. “Let me guess. The laptop’s owner is Mustapha Marzouk.”

Ryan nodded. “Correct. For three years we have been looking for him. Syria. Iraq. Libya. Tunisia. We even followed an alleged sighting in Somalia. Everything, though, has turned up empty.”

“So why are we talking about him now?”

“Over the last several months, we’ve been picking up chatter about an impending series of attacks, culminating in something very big, somewhere in Europe.”

“Any clue as to what that *something very big* is?”

“The laptop contained a thirty-page fatwa from an obscure, jailed Saudi cleric justifying the use of chemical and biological weapons.”

Harvath felt a chill sweep over him.

Ryan opened the folder in front of her and read from the Islamic ruling. “If Muslims cannot defeat the unbelievers in a different way, it is permissible to use weapons of mass destruction. Even if it kills all of them and wipes them and their descendants off the face of the Earth.”

For a moment, Harvath was at a loss for words. “I’m guessing the Saudis didn’t pick him up for unpaid parking tickets.”

“No, they didn’t. He was turning into a problem. They decided to act before he developed any more of a following. The damage, though, has already been done. Mixed within the chatter have been references to the same fatwa, from the same obscure cleric.”

“So you want me to find this Mustapha Marzouk. Is that it?”

"Not exactly," replied McGee as he removed another photo and handed it to him. It showed a bloated corpse with chunks of flesh ripped away.

"Mustapha Marzouk is dead. The Italian Navy fished his body out of the Mediterranean yesterday. Near the island of Lampedusa. They're not sure if he drowned before or after the sharks got to him. Not that it makes much difference.

"We had his fingerprints from the laptop. Despite his having spent several days in the water, they were still able to ID him. He was on a smuggler's boat, packed with migrants, headed toward Sicily. The boat went down in a storm Tuesday night."

Harvath handed the photo back. "For three years, this guy has been a ghost bouncing around the Middle East, North Africa, and Somalia—then he suddenly hops on a boat to Italy? Why?"

"That's what we need you to find out. We think whatever he was planning, it's ready to go operational."

"When do you want me to launch?"

"ASAP," McGee replied. "We've got a plane standing by. All you need to do is tell it where to go."

"Let's start with whatever intel you've compiled."

The Director slid a stack of files toward him. "These don't leave this room."

"Understood."

"What else do you need?"

At the top of his list, he needed to call Lara. He wouldn't be back to Boston anytime soon. He was also hungry. Looking at his watch, he said, "Let's order some food. We're going to be here awhile."