

CHAPTER 1

SØR-TRØNDELAG, NORWAY
WEDNESDAY

The limbs of the tall pines hung heavy with ice. When they snapped, they gave off cracks that echoed through the forest like gunfire.

With each one, the small counterterrorism team from Norway's Police Security Service, known as the PST, halted its advance and froze in place.

Seconds—sometimes even entire minutes—passed before they felt comfortable enough to begin moving again.

No one had expected the storm to be this bad. Ice covered everything and made the sloped ground almost impossible to walk on.

Several of the team members had wanted to wait. Their leader, though, had ordered them forward. The assault *had* to take place tonight.

Backing them up was a contingent of Norwegian Forsvarets Spesialkommandos, or FSK for short. Their commander wasn't crazy about hitting a target under these conditions either, but he had reviewed the intelligence and had come to the same conclusion.

The two outsiders, sent up from North Atlantic Treaty Organization headquarters at the last minute and forced onto the team by the Norwegian government, didn't get a vote. Though the American looked as if he could handle himself, and probably had on multiple occasions, they knew nothing about his background or the woman he was with. Therefore, the pair from NATO HQ also didn't get any weapons. None of the Norwegians wanted to get shot in the back.

Encrypted radios, outfitted with bone conduction headsets, kept them connected to each other and to the PST operations center. They wore the latest panoramic night-vision goggles and carried a range of firearms from H&K 416s and MP5s to next generation Glock 17s and USP Tactical pistols. Theirs was one of the best-equipped, best-trained teams the country had ever fielded for a domestic counterterrorism operation.

Their target was a weathered cabin in a remote, heavily wooded area. It had a long, grass-covered roof pierced by a thick black stovepipe. A season's worth of firewood had been chopped and stacked outside.

Even if the weather hadn't gone bad, conventional unmanned aerial vehicle surveillance was worthless. The density of the trees, combined with the shrieking, bitterly cold winds, also meant that the Nano drone the FSK carried was impossible to fly. They had been left with no other option than to go in "blind."

As the teams slowly picked their way through the forest, sheets of snow and ice blew at them like shards of broken glass.

The last five hundred meters were the worst. The cabin was built in a wide ravine. Maneuvering down, several team members lost their footing—some more than once.

Because of the trees, the FSK's snipers couldn't find anywhere to set up. There were no clean lines of fire, and they were forced to move closer to the cabin than they would have liked. The operation was feeling more and more like a mistake.

Ignoring the trepidation sweeping through the ranks, the PST leader pushed on.

Three hundred meters from the cabin, they could make out light from behind the shuttered windows.

Two hundred meters away, they could smell the wood smoke pouring from the stovepipe.

With one hundred meters left to go, the signal was given to halt. No one moved.

Something was wrong. Everyone felt it. Heart rates increased. Grips tightened on weapons.

And then, all hell broke loose.

CHAPTER 2

There was a chain of explosions, followed by waves of jagged steel shrapnel that tore through the flesh of the approaching counter-terrorism operators.

As the antipersonnel devices, hidden waist-high in the trees, began to detonate, Scot Harvath knocked his colleague to the ground and threw himself on top of her.

“I can’t breathe.”

“Stay down,” he ordered.

Being stuck at the rear of the column had given them an edge, but just barely. Harvath’s quick reaction had saved both their lives.

Other members of the team hadn’t been so lucky. Blood and body parts were everywhere.

When the explosions stopped, those who could, scrambled for cover, dragging their injured teammates behind them. Any dead were left where they lay.

As a former U.S. Navy SEAL, Harvath knew what was coming next. There wouldn’t be much time. Rolling off the woman, Harvath rapidly assessed her for injuries. “Are you hurt?”

Monika Jasinski shook her head.

Pulling out the Sig Sauer pistol he had hidden under his parka, he pointed toward a slab of rock two PST agents had taken refuge behind. “I’ll cover you,” he told her. “Go. Now.”

Jasinski looked at the gun and then at him with confusion. She had a million questions. Chief among them—*Where had the weapon come from*

and who the hell was this guy really working for? But now wasn't the time to ask. Getting to her feet, she ran as fast as she could.

Once she had made it to the rock and was safe, Harvath raced over and joined her.

Both of the Norwegians there were in bad shape. One of them was actively bleeding out, the icy ground around him pooling with blood.

Grabbing the tourniquet from the man's chest rig, Harvath tossed it to Jasinski. "Apply it here," he said, pointing to the correct spot on the agent's severed leg.

Then, picking up the man's rifle, he turned to the other agent and asked, "Can you fight?"

Though the man's left arm looked as if it had been dragged at high speed down a gravel road, he nodded—the pain from his injury evident in his face.

As soon as Harvath asked the question there was an eruption of automatic weapons from the cabin.

The rounds slammed into trees and chewed up the ground around them. When they connected with the slab of rock, large pieces were chipped off and broken away.

Harvath hated gunfights. Both as a SEAL and now as a covert counter-terrorism operative, he had seen way too many of them. A gunfight meant you had lost the element of surprise. He hated them even more when there were injured men on his side and the bad guys were holed up in a fortified position.

Quickly returning the Sig beneath his parka, he plucked out his earpiece and let it dangle over his shoulder. The radio was jammed with traffic, all of it in Norwegian and all of it only adding to the chaos.

Checking to make sure the rifle was hot, he flipped the fire selector to semiauto and peeked out from behind his cover.

The cabin was one story, with three windows along its side. The shooters appeared to know what they were doing. They had set up inside, several feet back from the windows, probably prone and atop tables or some other sort of perch. That meant they'd be very tough to take out. But it also meant that their field of fire was limited.

Focusing on the closest window, Harvath let loose with his own volley. The PST agent with the bad arm did the same.

Immediately, gunfire was returned on them, and they were forced to retreat behind the rock.

Nearby, other Norwegian operatives did the same, but it was an anemic response. There weren't enough of them in the fight. They were pinned down.

When the rounds stopped hitting their cover, Harvath leaned out again. Before he could fire, though, he noticed that the volume of smoke coming from the stovepipe had increased. They were burning more than just logs. Now, they were likely burning evidence. Targeting the same window, he opened up with another barrage of fire.

Emptying his magazine, he leaned back behind the rock and motioned for Monika to toss him a fresh one from the chest rig of the PST agent she was tending.

Swapping the mags, he tried to come up with a plan. The FSK members, though, were already ahead of him.

Unlike the PST—which was Norway's version of the FBI—the FSK were Norwegian military and kitted out like soldiers. That kit included M320 H&K grenade launchers mounted beneath several of the team's rifles. Someone had made a decision to end this thing, now.

Maneuvering into place, an operative drew fire while two of his teammates stepped into the open and each launched a 40-millimeter high-explosive round at the cabin.

Only one of the grenades needed to find its mark. In this case, both did, sailing through their respective windows and exploding in a hail of shrapnel inside.

Moments later, a fire started, and thick, black smoke began pouring out of the windows.

Harvath didn't waste any time. Stuffing the pockets of his parka with extra magazines, he grabbed a thermal scope from the severely injured PST agent and took off for the cabin.

Behind him, he could hear the Norwegians yelling for him to wait—to not go in until backup arrived. That wasn't going to happen. There was

no telling what evidence had already been destroyed. If there was anything left, he wanted to get to it before it was gone.

He used the trees for concealment and moved at an angle. Drawing parallel with the front door, he raised his weapon and crossed the icy ground toward it.

Pulling off his glove, he put his hand against the door. It was already way too hot to the touch.

Slinging his rifle, he flipped his night-vision goggles up, removed his other glove, and drew his Sig. With the cabin on fire, his night vision was of no use. The thermal scope, though, was a different story.

After he powered it up, he took a step back, readied his weapon, and kicked in the door.

Fueled by the introduction of fresh oxygen, tongues of flames came racing toward him, but he had already moved out of the way. Bullets or fire, he knew there was nothing good waiting on the other side of the door.

When no one engaged him, he risked a glimpse inside using the thermal scope, which allowed him to see through the smoke. There were bodies scattered everywhere. None of them was moving.

He figured most of them were dead, killed by the grenades. Dead or alive, they were all about to be consumed by the fire.

Harvath wanted to get inside, but going through the front door was out of the question. The fire was too hot. He decided to try the side.

Crouching, he took a quick look around the corner. If someone was there, waiting to take a shot, they'd be focused higher up.

There wasn't anyone there. But there was an open window with smoke billowing out of it. Raising the thermal scope to his eye, he looked at the ground and could see the heat signature of a set of footprints leading away from the cabin.

Carefully, below the window line, he moved toward the open window and risked another glance inside. The structure was almost entirely engulfed in flames. There was no way he'd be able to find anything inside, much less escape without getting very badly burned. No matter how much he wanted to recover evidence, it wasn't worth it. Instead, he took off in pursuit of the footprints.

CHAPTER 3

This side of the ravine was just as treacherous as the side Harvath, Jasinski, and the Norwegians had come down earlier. From what he could tell, the rabbit he was chasing didn't have that much of a head start. The footprints were still glowing warm in his scope.

Based on the size of the print and length of stride, he guessed it was a man, about his size: five-foot-ten or maybe a little taller. He was hauling ass, but he wasn't very graceful. The thermal scope indicated multiple locations where the subject had lost his footing and had fallen to the ground. *But where was he going?*

Harvath had done his homework. He knew the area, had memorized maps and satellite imagery. There was an old logging road that cut through the forest about three klicks from the cabin. There was also an abandoned rail line just beyond it. He figured it was more likely this guy had a car stashed somewhere. He had to be headed toward the road.

It was a bitch using the scope to track him, but it was the only way to spot the man's heat signature. Stopping to flip his night-vision goggles up slowed Harvath down. He did what he could to quicken his pace and close the gap, but the faster he moved, the greater the chance he'd slip and come down hard. Cracking his knee, an elbow, or his skull wasn't something he was interested in.

That said, he wasn't interested in losing the rabbit either. He'd been tracking this group for months. Portugal, Spain, Greece. They'd always been three steps ahead. Until tonight.

Now, he was ahead of them. He'd arrived before they could carry out another similar attack. Momentum hadn't necessarily shifted fully in his favor, but it had looked over its shoulder and glanced in his direction.

That was good enough. Considering the stakes, Harvath would take *anything* he could get.

Checking the scope again, he tracked the footprints until they disappeared around the next bend. The rabbit obviously knew the forest, eschewing established trails for making his own way through the trees.

That was fine by Harvath. He had hunted worse than rabbits over his career. Ice be damned, he doubled his pace.

Minutes later, he caught sight of his quarry. Jeans, hiking boots, hooded jacket. Over his shoulder was a backpack.

Transitioning to his rifle, Harvath attempted to capture the rabbit in his sights, but before he could press the trigger, the man disappeared.

Fuck.

He swept the weapon from left to right. There was nothing. He was gone. Letting the rifle hang, Harvath transitioned back to his pistol to leave one hand free for the thermal scope.

Pushing deeper into the trees, he continued to follow the heat signature of the footprints. The ground was still slick, but it was less ice and more snow. Fifty meters later, there was a shot.

Harvath dropped to the ground as the bullet snapped over his head. *The rabbit was armed. Where the hell was he?*

Peering through the scope, he could see a break in the trees up ahead. And there, making his way toward the logging road, gun in hand, was the white-hot outline of his target.

Raising his pistol, Harvath took up the slack in the trigger and fired three rounds.

The rabbit went down.

For several seconds, Harvath watched for movement. Seeing none, he cautiously closed the distance.

Approaching the body, he saw a lot of blood. One of his bullets had caught the man in the neck.

After kicking the man's gun aside, he felt for a pulse. *Nothing.* Removing the rabbit's rucksack, he opened the top and looked inside.

It contained envelopes of currency, driver's licenses, and several cell phones. By the looks of it, the man had tried to sanitize the cabin. Leaving the cash, Harvath pocketed the phones. And after quickly photographing the IDs, pocketed those as well.

Patting down the rabbit, Harvath snatched the man's phone, photographed his personal ID, and examined his pocket litter. He took pictures of everything.

Wanting to transmit it all back to the U.S. as quickly as possible, he headed for the logging road. There, he'd find a break in the trees and would be able to get a signal.

When he arrived at the road, he pulled out his satellite phone, powered it up, and connected it to his cell phone. Using an encrypted app created for the military called XGate BLACK, he compressed and re-formatted his photos so that they would upload faster. The sooner they could dig in on the people who had been in that cabin, the better.

As the photos prepared to load, he drafted a quick situation report to be included in his email.

Norseman + 1, Eagles Oscar.

"Norseman" was Harvath's call-sign, Jasinski was his "plus one," and "Eagles Oscar" meant that they were both uninjured.

As he wasn't in a position to be resupplied, he refrained from giving any updates on his current level of ammunition or the condition of his weapon. He simply went straight to the meat:

Ambush. Anti-personnel devices encountered 100 meters from target. At least 4 Norwegians KIA. Multiple injuries—some critical. Took automatic weapons fire from inside target—at least 3 shooters. Norwegians engaged with 40 mms. All Tangos KIA. Target destroyed. Solo Tango attempted escape. Tango engaged and KIA. Transmitting photos of materials recovered.

While the U.S. military had switched to the term MAM, short for military-age-male, as well as EKIA for enemy-killed-in-action,

his organization still preferred Tango. It didn't engage in a lot of navel-gazing.

With the photos ready to go and a strong signal from overhead, he reviewed the message and hit Send.

Moments later, his sat phone vibrated with a reply:

Message received. Full Stop. UPDATE: O.M. is worsening.

O.M. was code for Harvath's boss and mentor, Reed Carlton—someone he was very close to and someone whose health had been deteriorating. The news was not good. He kept his reply short and to the point:

Understood. Will be back in touch soon.

Once the message had sent, he powered down his sat phone, disconnected his cell, and headed back toward the cabin.

Halfway there, he encountered Jasinski. He had taken his helmet off, revealing his short, sandy colored hair.

"What happened?" she asked. "I heard shots."

It took him a moment to respond. He was still thinking about Carlton, trying to put pieces together several steps ahead. "One of them ran," he finally said.

"Is he still alive?"

Harvath shook his head.

"Damn it. I tried to hail you over the radio. Why didn't you answer?"

He pointed to the earpiece hanging over his shoulder.

"You could have waited," she declared. "And by the way, who authorized you to carry a weapon?"

He wasn't in the mood for an interrogation. "Not now," he replied.

His response only made her angrier. This was *her* investigation, not his, yet for some unknown reason she'd been forced to accept him as a "consultant." Something very strange was going on and she intended to get to the bottom of it. *No matter what.*