

PROLOGUE

HAIPHONG CITY, VIETNAM

A cold rain slicked the poorly paved streets. Aging Russian hydrofoils banged against rotting piers. Crumbling French architecture struggled with leaks. Life in Vietnam's third largest city was miserable. Inclement weather only made it worse. Andre Weber couldn't wait to leave.

Looking at his host, he commented, "Counting machines are quicker." Lieu Van Trang smiled. "But they are far less attractive."

Weber shook his head. Trang was known for his eccentricities. A coterie of young women, stripped naked so they couldn't steal while tallying his money, was completely on brand. It was also a total waste of time.

Electronic currency counters could have done the job six times faster and would have eliminated any human error. They also didn't steal. But Trang liked to play games. He liked to fuck with people's heads. He knew his visitors wouldn't be able to take their eyes off the girls.

As far as Weber was concerned, it was unprofessional. They were here to conduct business. There was a shit ton of money on the table and that's where his team's focus needed to be. The girls were distracting. Even he was having a hard time not looking at them. And if it was difficult for him, it had to have been almost impossible for his men.

This was not how he liked to do things. Weber preferred encrypted communications and washing money through shell corporations or cryptocurrencies. Trang, on the other hand, was old-school. So old-school,

in fact, that he refused to conduct any business electronically. Everything was in cash and everything was face-to-face.

The two couldn't have been further apart in their approach. Even in their appearances they were strikingly different. Weber, the Westerner, was tall and fit. With his short hair and his expensive, tailored suit, he looked like a young banker or a hedge fund manager. Trang, thirty years his senior, was impossibly thin with long gray hair, a wispy beard, and translucent, vellumlike skin that revealed a network of blue veins.

The only thing they shared in common was a lust for money and a talent for taking care of problems. While Weber didn't want to be here, he had been paid a huge sum of money, a sum equal to what Trang's girls were currently counting out, for this assignment.

When all was said and done, it would be the highest-value contract killing ever to hit the market. It had already been deposited in a secret account and would be payable on confirmation of the subject's demise.

But like Weber, Trang was just a middleman—a headhunter, skilled in identifying the right professionals for the right jobs. His fee, payable up front, was a fraction of what the successful assassin would receive. It was quite fair as he was taking only a fraction of the risk.

Anyone whose murder commanded that sort of a price had to be very dangerous and *very* hard to kill. Trang would have to take extra steps to make sure none of this blew back on him.

Once the girls had finished counting the money and had confirmed the total, he dismissed them. Every set of male eyes, including Trang's, watched them as they filed out of the room. Several of Weber's men shifted uncomfortably as they adjusted erections.

"One thousand dollars each," said Trang, enjoying the men's pain. "Best money you will ever spend. I will even throw in rooms for free."

The man had just collected a ten-million-dollar fee, yet he wasn't above pimping out his girls for a little bit more. He also wasn't shy about his pricing. *One thousand dollars?* No matter how good they were, Weber doubted they were worth a thousand dollars—not even for all of them at the same time. Trang was as shameless and as sleazy as they came.

It was time to wrap things up. Weber didn't want to stay a minute longer than he had to. Removing the folder, he handed it over.

Slowly, Trang leafed through it, employing the freakishly long nail of his right index finger to turn the pages.

When he was done, he closed the dossier and asked, "So what can you tell me about the client?"

"Only that it's someone you don't want to fuck with."

"Apparently *somebody* fucked with whoever it is or you wouldn't be here opening this kind of a contract. What transgression, what sin, could be so egregious that it would call for a one-hundred-million-dollar bounty on a man's head?"

Weber had his suspicions, but as his employment had been shrouded in secrecy and also handled by a cutout, he couldn't say for sure. Not that he would have, even if he had known. He prided himself on discretion. It was a necessary part of his business and absolutely critical in his line of work. The kind of clientele who hired men like him didn't appreciate loose talk. It was the surest way to a very similar sort of contract.

Weber changed the subject. "How long?" he asked.

The Vietnamese man arched one of his narrow eyebrows. "To complete the contract? That's like asking how long is a piece of string. Every professional is different. Each has a different way of going about their craft."

"The client wants it done quickly."

"I have a list of certain professionals in mind. I guarantee you that any one of them will be eager for the job. With a fee like this, whoever I task won't drag their feet."

"Task all of them," said Weber.

"Excuse me?"

"You heard me. Task them all. Whoever gets to him first, and kills him, wins. That's what the client wants."

Trang smiled again. "He really did fuck with the wrong people, didn't he?"

Weber nodded and, standing up from the table, prepared to leave.

"Is there anything else you can tell me?" asked Trang. "Anything that's not in the file?"

"Only one thing," Weber replied, as a torrent of rain slammed against the windows. "Don't underestimate Scot Harvath. If you do, it'll be the last mistake you ever make."

CHAPTER 1

KEY WEST

FRIDAY, TWO WEEKS LATER

Looking back on it, Scot Harvath probably shouldn't have punched the guy. Flipped him on his ass? *Sure*. Put his wrist into a painful, yet harmless joint lock? *Even better*. But uppercut the guy so hard that he knocked him out cold? *Not one of his better decisions*.

And therein lay the problem. Lately, Harvath seemed to be out of the good-decision-making business altogether.

Forget for the moment that the other guy had it coming. A wealthy Wall Street type, he appeared to take great pleasure in verbally abusing his female companion. The more the man had to drink, the worse it got. It was uncomfortable for everyone sitting nearby. What it *wasn't*, though, was any of Harvath's business.

People got into relationships for all sorts of reasons. If she was willing to sit there and get berated by some jackass, that was her problem.

At least it had been until she took off her shawl. The moment she did, everything changed.

On such a warm evening, in the resort's open-air lounge, it had seemed odd to be wearing a wrap. Then Harvath noticed her bruises. She had tried to conceal them, but to his discerning eye they were unmistakable, running up and down both arms. Apparently, Wall Street could get rough with more than just his words.

In Harvath's book—hell, in any decent human being's book—men who beat women were scum. Did this guy need to be taught a lesson? *Absolutely*. Did Harvath need to be the one doing the teaching? *That was de-*

batable. Karma would catch up with the guy eventually. It was one of those things from which you could run, but never hide.

Nevertheless, Harvath felt for the woman. Maybe it was all the cocktails he had consumed that were talking. Maybe it was the amount of personal trauma he had unsuccessfully been trying to escape. Either way, the emotional and physical pain radiating from her was undeniable.

And so, when Wall Street next popped off, Harvath didn't even think. He just reacted. Standing up, he walked over to their table. Her problem had just become *his* problem.

"That's enough," he said.

"Come again?" the man replied, an angry look on his face as he rose to confront Harvath.

"You heard me. Leave the lady alone."

"Mind your own business," Wall Street snapped, giving him a shove.

That was when Harvath laid him out.

It was a dramatic escalation of the situation and drew a collective gasp from the other guests. The punch could have killed him. Or, he could have hit his head on one of the tables as he fell. A million and one things could have gone wrong. Thankfully, nothing did.

And while Harvath could have made the legal case that Wall Street had made contact first, it hadn't come to that. He wasn't interested in involving police or pressing charges. That didn't mean, though, that it was over.

The staff at Little Palm Island Resort liked Harvath. He was a repeat customer known for his easy smile and engaging sense of humor. But on this visit, something was off. Something had happened to him; something unsettling.

He was withdrawn and quiet. A dark cloud hovered over him wherever he went. He rose early to work out, but other than that spent the rest of his time drinking, heavily.

Had the resort been empty, the management might have been able to ignore his self-destructive behavior. It wasn't empty, though. It was at full occupancy and none of the upscale clientele wanted to spend their luxury vacation watching a man drink himself to death in the bar.

Harvath didn't care. He knew his alcohol consumption was danger-

ous, but after everything he had been through, all he wanted was to be released—released from the guilt, the shame, and the pain of what had happened.

The real problem was that there wasn't enough booze in the world to wash away what had happened. His wife, Lara, was dead. His mentor, Reed Carlton—a man who had become like a second father to him—was dead. And one of his dearest colleagues, Lydia Ryan—who had stepped up to helm his organization when he wouldn't, was dead. All of them had been killed in an effort to get to him and he hadn't been able to do a single thing to stop the carnage.

With all of his training, with all of his counterterrorism and espionage experience, he should have been able to protect them. At the very least, he should have seen the attack coming. But he hadn't.

Helpless to save them, he had been forced to watch as they were murdered. Horrific didn't even begin to describe it. The physical torture he was subjected to afterward paled in comparison.

Dragged by a foreign intelligence service back to their country for interrogation and execution, he had managed—through sheer force of will—to pull himself together long enough to orchestrate his own escape. Then, on behalf of Lara, Reed, and Lydia he had carried out his own bloody revenge.

It turned out to be a devastatingly empty accomplishment. He felt no better at the end than he had at the beginning. It gave him no pleasure; no satisfaction. In fact, it had only hollowed him out further—eating away at him like an acid—dimming the already sputtering flame of humanity that remained.

Losing the people closest to him—simply because he had been doing his job—was the absolute worst-case scenario someone in his line of work could ever expect to face. It was worse than torture or even death—fates he would have gladly suffered if it meant that Lara, Reed, and Lydia could have all gone on living.

Instead, he was the one expected to go on living. He would have to “soldier on,” carrying the pain of their murders as well as the guilt of knowing that the deaths were his fault.

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And so, once he had completed his revenge, he had traveled to Little Palm Island—a place where he had found solace in the past. This time, though, rejuvenation lay beyond his grasp. He was simply too broken; too far gone.

The only comfort he could find was when he'd had so much to drink that he was simply too numb to feel anything. He would get to that point and keep going until he blacked out. Then he would get up and do it all over again.

If not for his long runs in the sand and punishing swims in the ocean, he would have begun drinking at sunrise. As it was, he was still hitting the bottle well before noon. For someone with such a distinguished career; someone who had given so much in the service of others, it was no way to live.

But Harvath didn't care about living. Not really. Not anymore. While his heart continued to pump alcohol-laden blood throughout his body, his ability to feel anything, for anyone, much less himself, was gone. He had given up.

As such, he wasn't surprised to learn that he had eventually come to the point where he had worn out his welcome at Little Palm Island.

Considering his sizable bar tab, the manager had made him a deal. In exchange for cutting short his stay and departing immediately, a portion of his bill would be comped. Harvath agreed to cut his losses and move on.

Packing his things, he rode the polished motor launch back to Little Torch Key, revived his abandoned rental car, and drove until he came to the end of the road in Key West.

There, in a less touristy part of town known as Bahama Village, he took the first room he found and paid for two weeks, up front, in cash.

The carpet looked to be at least twenty years old—the paint even older. The whole place smelled like mold covered up with Febreze. He was a world away from the high-thread-count sheets and hibiscus-scented air of Little Palm Island. Like Icarus and his melted wings, the once “golden

boy” of the U.S. Intelligence Community had come crashing down to earth. Cracking a window, he opened his suitcase.

Having served as an elite U.S. Navy SEAL, it had been drilled into him to properly maintain and stow his gear. After hanging several items in the closet and placing the rest into a battered chest of drawers, he carried the wrinkled Ziploc bag he was using as a shaving kit into the bathroom.

There, he lined the contents on the shelf above the sink and stared at himself in the mirror. He looked terrible.

Though his five-foot-ten-inch body was still muscular, he had lost weight. His sandy-brown hair might have been sun-bleached and his skin tanned a deep brown, but the cheeks of his handsome face were sunken and his once sharp, glacierlike blue eyes were tired and bloodshot.

If any of his friends could see him, his transformation would have been shocking. Decay was a powerful force. Once set in motion, it went quickly to work.

Returning to the bedroom, he walked back over to the suitcase. There was only one item remaining—a photograph in a silver frame. It was his favorite picture of Lara. She stood in a sundress, her long dark hair falling across her shoulders, with a glass of white wine on his dock overlooking the Potomac River in Virginia.

Lara’s parents were Brazilian and she had grown up speaking both English and Portuguese. After her first husband had drowned, she said she had been plagued by a feeling known as *saudade*.

When he asked her to translate it, she had said there wasn’t really an equivalent. In essence, it was a longing for someone or something you know you will never experience again. She had been terrified that Harvath, the first man she had loved since her husband’s death, was going to cause her to relive those feelings.

As a police officer, she had understood that the majority of people were sheep—gentle creatures largely incapable of protecting themselves. To defend them from the wolves of the world, they needed sheepdogs. As a homicide detective, she further understood that sheepdogs would never be enough. The world also needed wolf hunters—brave souls willing to go into the darkness to take down the wolves before they could attack. That’s what Harvath was—a wolf hunter. And that’s what had scared her.

While he claimed to want a family more than anything else, he continued grabbing the most dangerous assignments that came his way. He would leave at a moment's notice—sometimes for days, weeks, or even months at a time.

He was working for a private intelligence agency named after his mentor: The Carlton Group. It had been tasked with providing the CIA room to breathe as it rebuilt itself into a leaner, better-focused, and more efficient organization along the lines of its predecessor—the OSS.

To many D.C. insiders, it felt counterintuitive to approach America's modern, rapidly evolving threats by looking to the past. But to those spearheading the renovation, they knew that's where the answers lay. The Agency was dying—choking on its own bureaucracy. Like a hot air balloon falling out of the sky, the only way to fix it was to toss anything and everything that was unnecessary overboard.

By stripping it down to its bare essentials, they could focus not only on what needed to be done, but also the best ways to do it. For far too long, brave men and women at the CIA had been prevented from doing their jobs by risk-averse middle managers more concerned with their next promotion than with conducting the nation's most dangerous business.

But, like any large, government entity gorging itself on ever-increasing budgets and layers upon layers of self-inflicted rules, regulations, and red tape, many things at the CIA weren't going to be easy to change. They were going to take a lot of work, a lot of patience, and a lot of time—during which the threats to America were only going to grow deadlier. Enter The Carlton Group.

As the man who had come up with the idea and had created the CIA's Counterterrorism Center, Reed Carlton had seen the writing on the wall long before most. When he finally tired of no one on the seventh floor listening to him about what was coming, he left and started his own endeavor. He staffed it with highly accomplished, former intelligence and Special Operations personnel. Carlton had a scary eye for talent. And, as with everything else in his career, he had been way ahead of the curve.

During the Agency's struggle to remake itself, some of its riskiest, most sensitive work was quietly contracted out to The Carlton Group. Just as they were picking up speed and more jobs were being funneled their way,

they received dreadful news. Reed Carlton—the heart, soul, and brains of the entire organization—had been diagnosed with Alzheimer’s.

Once he had gotten over the initial shock, he had only one request—that Scot Harvath, his handpicked successor, the man he had poured all of his wisdom, experience, and know-how into, give up field operations and take over the running of the business.

In a move that stunned everyone, Harvath had said no. It didn’t matter how much Carlton threatened or cajoled his protégé, the answer remained the same. At least it had been until the Old Man, as he was known by those closest to him, had brought Lara into it.

He knew how much Harvath cared for her and her four-year-old son, Marco. He knew it was only a matter of time before they settled down and became a family. He also knew that no matter how often Harvath said that was what he really wanted most in life, it wasn’t true. Not completely.

Harvath had an addiction. He was addicted to the lifestyle—the constant scrapes with death and the heroinlike highs that came from the massive adrenaline dumps they provided. And like any drug addiction, it needed to be constantly fed and continually took more than the last time to reach the same high. It also had the same outcome waiting for him at the end. Sooner or later, it would take his life.

Harvath was no ordinary junkie, though. He was highly intelligent, which meant he was exceedingly good at coming up with justifications for not getting out. *No one was as experienced, nor as skilled as he was. No one had the human networks he had. No one was as good at developing assets. No one was willing to take the risks that he did. No one could adapt as quickly on the ground. And on and on.*

It was all true, but it didn’t mean that others couldn’t be groomed to do the same—and that was precisely what the Old Man had wanted him to do. Harvath had stayed in the game far longer than was safe. He put way too much at risk each time he went into the field. In a word, it was *selfish*. The fact that he depended on a cocktail of performance-enhancing drugs just to remain at peak performance should have been a bright neon sign blasting the message that his days were numbered.

The Old Man's admonishment to think of Lara and Marco had pissed Harvath off. It was emotional blackmail and a professional low blow. It angered him most, though, because he knew Carlton was correct. He needed to make a tough decision. But like any junkie, he would first try to negotiate his way out of it.

Despite what the Old Man thought, Harvath honestly believed that he had several more years left of kicking in doors and shooting bad guys in the head. The sports medicine group he had found that rehabbed top professional athletes and Tier One operators had been a godsend. If not for them, he might have been reluctantly inclined to agree with Carlton that it was time to move from playing to scouting and coaching.

The docs and exercise physiologists he worked with, though, had upped his game to levels he hadn't even thought possible. Through their program, he was stronger, faster, and had better reaction time than he'd had in his thirties. The advances they had developed were incredible. So, with all due respect to his mentor, he had proposed a compromise.

Instead of abandoning operations altogether, he had spent half his time in the field and half his time at The Carlton Group incubating new talent.

This was not the outcome the Old Man had been gunning for. He needed somebody steering the ship on a full-time basis. He also knew Harvath—maybe better than anyone else. He knew that if he gave him an ultimatum, Harvath would jump ship and freelance for whoever would pay his quote—and with his skillset, there were plenty of opportunities. He might have been able to get him blacklisted at the CIA, but the Brits or the Israelis would have scooped him up in a heartbeat.

Whether Harvath would have agreed to work for a foreign service was an unknown. In the end, like a son, the Old Man wanted to keep him close. He wanted to know that the ops that Harvath undertook were as well planned and professional as possible. If he kept him in-house, he could guarantee that they would be—something he couldn't say if he let him put himself on the open market.

This left Carlton with the problem of who would actually run the organization. After discussions with the President and the Director of the

CIA, he was given permission to approach the Agency's Deputy Director, Lydia Ryan. She had been an exceptional intelligence officer and understood the game from top to bottom. Lydia was an excellent hire.

The Old Man, despite having Alzheimer's, was a walking history of the espionage business. He knew where all the top secret "bodies" were buried. Lydia and Harvath had taken turns sitting with him, recording every piece of valuable information he had stored in his brain before it all slipped away.

When his capacities began to fail and he started revealing some of his sensitive exploits to his housekeeper and friends who would call up or drop by to check on him, Harvath decided it was time to silo him.

Carlton's fondest memories had been of spending summers at his grandparents' cottage on Lake Winnepesaukee in New Hampshire. It was off-season and easy for Harvath to find an available home for rent. As the oldest memories were usually the last to disappear, he thought it would be a comfortable and familiar place for Carlton.

With the President's approval, a team of Navy corpsmen—all with top secret clearance—was detailed to the Old Man. On rotating shifts, there was always one in the house. Harvath flew up to see him as often as possible.

He had just returned from a particularly harrowing assignment overseas, during which he had made up his mind about what he wanted. While he couldn't promise that he would retire from fieldwork anytime soon, he knew that he loved Lara and her son and would for the rest of his life.

Following a romantic meal, he had walked her down to the dock and had proposed. She had lovingly and excitedly accepted.

Knowing that the Old Man was slipping away, Harvath had asked her to elope with him. He wanted to get married at the cottage, quietly, by his bedside. Ryan would be their witness.

Lara knew how much Reed Carlton meant to her fiancé. She had come to love him like a father as well. Including such a special man in such a special moment was the right thing to do. And so, she had agreed.

To keep it under wraps—until they could do a big church wedding

with Lara's family, his mom, and all their friends present—they hired a local judge to conduct the ceremony in private.

Everything had been perfect. The Old Man had even been more engaged and energetic than they had seen him in long time.

Harvath couldn't have asked for anything more. The walks around the lake with Lara, the laughter, the lovemaking; those couple of days—from the secret wedding until the attack—had been the happiest he had ever known. Then it had all come crashing down.

After the murders, the torture, his escape, and fighting his way across a frozen foreign landscape to freedom, much of who he had been was stripped away.

Since the funerals, his colleagues had backed off, showing their respect by giving him space and letting him grieve.

Nevertheless, he couldn't shake the feeling that someone had been keeping tabs on him. He figured it had to have been somebody from the office. They were more than just coworkers, they were family. And spies, after all, never stop spying—especially on each other.

They all knew where he had been staying. In fact, a colleague had done him a favor by shipping a suitcase full of his clothes down to Little Palm Island in advance of his arrival.

But now that he had decamped for Key West, he'd be harder to find. Harder, but not impossible.

He still had his phone, which never left the room and which he only turned on to scroll through photos, old texts, and voice messages from Lara. Lest anyone catch him while the phone was on, he had it set to "Do Not Disturb," disabling the chime and sending any new calls straight to voicemail.

Once his unpacking was complete, he had spent the next several days making the rounds of local watering holes until he finally settled on one. Not that his standards were particularly high. They weren't. All that mattered was that the air-conditioning was cold, the bar quiet, and the clientele a particular class: hard-core, professional drinkers who just wanted to be left alone.

The place he ultimately selected was a quintessential dive bar. Dimly

lit, with blacked-out windows, its air was redolent of urinal cakes, spilled beer, and wasted lives.

Nobody paid him any attention. In fact, no one had given him so much as a second look. It was the perfect hole in the wall to continue his slow-motion suicide.

And though he could have continued to drink top-shelf as he had at Little Palm Island, he instead went for the worst stuff they had. He wanted it to burn all the way down. He wanted to torture himself. Glancing around, it was pretty obvious that he hadn't cornered the market in self-loathing.

Imagining the backstories of the people he was drinking "with" didn't take too much creativity. All of them had been drawn to the southernmost point in the U.S. by something. There were probably more than a few failed marriages, failed businesses, and outstanding warrants in the room. Anything was possible. They didn't call Key West a "sunny place for shady people" for nothing.

The bartender was an attractive woman in her forties. Twenty, even ten years ago, the top bars on the island would have been cutting each other's throats to hire her. She was not only sexy, but she was also adept at slinging drinks. More importantly, she knew when, and when not, to make conversation.

When it came to Harvath, she could tell that he was not looking to talk. He was polite, and tipped well, but he kept to himself.

He came in every day with a newspaper he barely read, sat in the same scarred booth where he ordered the same drink over and over, as he stared toward the front door. It was as if he was waiting for someone. But whoever that someone was, they never came.

She felt sorry for him. He was handsome, close to her age, and a man who obviously needed to be put back together. She had always been drawn to guys who were screwed up. "Broken Bird Syndrome" a friend had once called it.

He wasn't like the other customers. He seemed like a "somebody." Somebody, who at one point in his life, had prospects; potential. She had a lot of questions. *Where had he come from? What was he doing here? How long was he going to stay?* Most of all, she wondered what he was like in bed.

When it came to her advances, though, the man was immune. Whoever had wounded him had done a bang-up job.

Still, she liked having him around. There was something comforting about his presence. The strong, silent type—he struck her as a guy who could handle himself.

Maybe he was an ex-cop, or possibly ex-military. It didn't matter. All she knew was that having him in the bar made her feel safe.

Not that a lot of bad things went down in Key West. But, like every other resort town fueled by alcohol and an “anything goes” attitude, sometimes things got out of control.

It was at that moment that the door opened. And as it did, no one inside had any idea how out of control things were about to get.