

PRELUDE

78°55'30"N 11°55'20"E

ARCTIC OCEAN

SVALBARD ARCHIPELAGO

Helicopters, it was said, didn't fly—they merely beat the air into submission. But halfway between continental Norway and the North Pole, it felt as if the air were winning.

As sleet slammed against the exterior, another sixty-plus-mile-per-hour gust rocked the airframe. The rotors groaned in protest. There was only so much the helo could handle. They were pushing it beyond its limits.

Scot Harvath didn't need to see the water to know the slate-gray ocean was roiling with whitecaps. This far above the arctic circle, where moisture from the south collided with icy, polar winds, massive depressions formed, unleashing nightmare weather.

If anything went wrong, there would be no rescue. No one back at the U.S. Embassy in Oslo, much less anyone at the White House, would acknowledge him, nor the mission he was on.

He glanced at the cracked face of his watch, blood crusted atop its bezel. *Just a little farther*, he thought to himself. *We're almost there.*

Ignoring the pain in his ribs, he reached for his pack and opened it. Everything was still in place. *Take care of your gear and your gear will take care of you.* It was a mantra that had saved his life again and again.

Under his mountaineering jacket, he felt the cold press of metal

against his skin. No one knew if the odd-shaped key, hanging from a piece of paracord, would even work—not after all this time.

If it didn't, all of the danger, all of the risk, would be for nothing, and the consequences would be deadly. Failure, though, wasn't an option.

That was the world he lived in. He wasn't interested in easy tasks. In fact, he had always chosen the most difficult, the most perilous assignments.

It was how he was wired. No matter how bleak the scenario, he would never give up. Success was the only outcome he would entertain.

But as yet another gale-force blast of frigid air convulsed the helicopter, causing it to swing violently from side to side, he began to have his doubts.

Moments later, an alarm began shrieking from the cockpit, and Harvath knew they were in trouble.

The pilots, though, were able to regain control. The bird was still swaying, but nowhere near as badly as before. It looked like everything was going to be okay.

Then there was an ear-splitting crack. It sounded as if the helo had been hit by lightning. It was followed by the tail rotor completely shearing off. And as it did, the helicopter began to spiral.

They were going down.

CHAPTER 1

OSLO

72 HOURS EARLIER

There was only one problem with summer in Norway—it was too short.

Sitting at his favorite outdoor café, Harvath raised his face to the sun. The warmth felt good. *He* felt good. Better than he had in a long time. The last two months had been exactly what he had needed.

He and Sølvi had bounced between her apartment in the city and the cottage he had rented out on the fjord. It depended on her schedule. As one of the newest Deputy Directors at the Norwegian Intelligence Service, or NIS for short, she had been pretty busy.

Because the commute was easier from the apartment, they usually stayed in Oslo during the week and headed for the fjord on Fridays. That was fine by Harvath. He had enjoyed getting to know the city. There were plenty of museums and cultural sights, not to mention great bars, restaurants, and cafés.

Most mornings, if Sølvi didn't have to leave too early, they would go for a run. The lush Akerselva River Trail was a favorite, as was the Ekeberg Sculpture Park. For safety, they always mixed things up, never frequenting the same location two days in a row.

In addition to running, Harvath had joined a neighborhood gym. When they were at the cottage, he would swim—a lot.

The physical activity had been restorative. He had put back on the weight he had lost and had returned to his full level of fitness. And while he still consumed alcohol, it wasn't like before. A half-empty bottle of wine could sit in the fridge for days before they finished it off.

In a word, he was happy. *Really* happy. Sølvi was an amazing woman. She was not only beautiful, but smart and talented as hell. To be honest, she was probably smarter and more talented than he was. The only realm in which he was confident that he had her beat was experience. But even then, it was only because she was several years younger.

Despite the age difference, though, they shared something very powerful, something that went beyond their physical attraction to each other. Her past was as dark and troubled as his own. They had both been shattered but, in coming together, had found a way to glue their pieces into something better, stronger.

Ultimately, what he loved most about her was her sense of humor. It was a sign of how intelligent she was.

It was also a coping mechanism. The espionage business could be exceptionally brutal—a fact he knew all too well.

Devoid of meaningful relationships, spies often became disillusioned, cynical. Many checked out via booze or other vices—another fact he knew all too well. He was determined not to allow that to happen to either of them again.

He wanted to make Sølvi happy—as happy as she had made him. Second chances were exceedingly rare in life. He was determined not to screw this up. Which was why mapping out their next step was proving to be difficult.

It was one of the best summers he'd ever had. They had squeezed every drop out of it. The cottage had come with a boat, and they had gotten out on the water as often as they could. A few mornings, he had even used it to drive Sølvi to work, dropping her at the dock adjacent to The Thief hotel where she'd catch a ride to the office.

There had been barbecues and beach parties. A rotating mix of friends from NIS and the CIA's Oslo Station had drifted in and out of their lives—both in the city and out on the fjord. It was rare to see a weekend where they weren't hosting some sort of get-together, or attending some-

one else's. It had been wall-to-wall fun, and it was no surprise that no one wanted it to end. But at some point, it had to.

He had burned through all of his sick leave, as well as his vacation days. To say the office was eager for him to return was an understatement. In fact, his boss had told him in no uncertain terms that if he wasn't back the following week, he would be "cashiered."

It was a dramatic term to have used. Not *fired*. Not the more genteel *let go*. But *cashiered*—the public humiliation of having one's military insignia ripped away and their sword snapped in front of their comrades.

It was an old-school term. *Really* old-school. Yet it was perfectly in keeping with the Cold War—era warrior he reported to.

He couldn't blame the man for wanting him back. Had their situations been reversed, he would have wanted the same. In fact, he was surprised he had been allowed to stay away as long as he had. That's where his next step with Sølvi got tricky.

There was no telling where he would be sent, much less for how long. On the whole, his were quick, in-and-out jobs. What they weren't was predictable.

In an attempt to give their relationship some structure, something for the two of them to look forward to, he had printed out a calendar.

The idea was to ink specific dates they felt certain they could be together. The additional hope was that in between his assignments, he could swing through Oslo to see her. With her promotion, she was wedded to headquarters. Any hope of tagging up with him on an assignment expense account in a hotel room in some far-flung, exotic locale was out of the question. Their best chance of seeing each other was in Norway.

It would be tough, but not impossible. He was committed to making it work. And when he set his mind to something, he made it happen.

With the clock ticking down, he wanted their remaining time together to be special. They had been eating a ton of takeout lately, so tonight he decided he'd cook a real American dinner. Something for just the two of them. It would be a night he could freeze in his memory and replay until he returned and they were together again.

He finished the last sip of his kokekaffe—a popular Norwegian afternoon coffee served black and slightly cooled. Standing up, he put on his

sunglasses and strolled across the cobbles of Christiania Square, headed toward his favorite butcher shop.

Though it was a bit of a walk to the food hall in Mathallen, it was worth it. *Annis Pølsemakeri* had the best meats in town.

Out at the cottage, there had been an old smoker that he had made his mission to get up and running again. Once he had, he decided to throw a Texas-style barbeque. When he asked friends where he could get the absolute best brisket, ribs, and pork butt, everyone had said “*Annis’s*.” So that’s where he had gone.

The staff had been so friendly that he had gone back again and again—even just to pick up ground beef for burgers. They were an amusing bunch and tried to upsell him into horsemeat or beef tongue, trying good-naturedly to see if they could gross out their American customer. They had no idea that over the course of his career, he had eaten much, much worse.

After buying a couple of T-bones at *Annis*, he would hit *Vulkan Frukt og Grønt AS* for fresh vegetables. He figured it was a safe bet that they’d have potatoes and salad fixings. Hopefully, they’d have fresh ears of corn as well.

Once those items were taken care of, the next thing on his list would need to be a nice bottle of wine.

Not far from the food hall was a *Vinmonopolet*. He’d probably have to pay through the nose for a good California red, but if they had one, he planned on ignoring the price tag. He wanted their dinner to be as American as possible.

All that was left was to figure out dessert. Apple pie felt a bit too on the nose. What’s more, while he could grill or smoke up a storm, he was no baker.

Since Sølvi was a big fan of dark chocolate, Harvath figured that’s where he would focus. There was a stall in the food hall called *Sebastien-Bruno* that sold chocolates, but what she really liked were Belgian chocolates. He made a mental note to keep his eyes peeled for any along the way.

After dinner, if there was time, they could stream a movie. Her passion for classic Hollywood films was bottomless. So far, they had watched

Casablanca, *Lawrence of Arabia*, *Psycho*, *The Godfather*, *On the Waterfront*, *North by Northwest*, and *Citizen Kane* together. Tonight, he wanted to introduce her to *The Night of the Hunter* from 1955. It was unsettling, but a classic nonetheless.

A few blocks from the food hall, he spotted a small boutique that looked promising for quality chocolate. But when he was fifty yards away, a taxi pulled up and disgorged a ghost.

The sight of the man stopped Harvath dead in his tracks. His eyes had to have been playing tricks on him. The man he was looking at was dead.

Harvath had killed him himself.