

CHAPTER 1

ITBAYAT ISLAND
BATANES PROVINCE
NORTHERNMOST PHILIPPINES
SATURDAY

There was a *click* somewhere up ahead, and Scot Harvath, who was on point, gave the silent command for his team to freeze.

The sound had been so faint that he couldn't distinguish what it was. *Had a twig been snapped? Had someone, somewhere out in the darkness, flipped off a weapon's safety?*

Ever since they had moved into the forest, he had wondered if they were stepping into a trap.

Half of his discomfort was because of the men they were hunting. The other half was because operating in Itbayat's subtropical forest reminded him of jungle warfare. He hated jungle warfare. He had hated it as a SEAL, and he hated it even more now. It was hot, humid, and entirely too close for comfort. There were too many bugs, particularly mosquitoes, and the dense shrubs, vines, and ferns were a colossal pain in the ass to move through.

There was something ironic about having quit his job at a private intelligence agency that specialized in taking on the CIA's most dangerous overflow assignments, only to return and be handed a jungle-style operation on Day One. He couldn't tell if the powers that be at the Carlton Group were happy to see him back or trying to convince him he should have stayed away.

In all fairness, no one had truly wanted to see him go. What had pissed

off his colleagues was his constant one-foot-in, one-foot-out “Hokey Pokey” dance wherein he refused to even consider ceding the plum assignments to any of the just-as-qualified younger operatives. He was scraping all the cream off the top for himself. But to his credit, Harvath was very good at what he did.

And while the other operatives may have been equally “qualified,” none of them came close to having the wealth of experience that he did—not in the Special Operations community, nor in the espionage world. He was a freakish mash-up of both, trained by the best, and he sat atop a very deadly food chain with few who could match him.

In his mind, failure was never an option. Neither were rules. If the bad guys weren’t going to play nice, then he wouldn’t either.

From the Geneva and Hague conventions to the Marquess of Queensberry, if the other guy’s gloves came off, he was happy to follow suit. But once Harvath’s gloves were off, there was no “de-escalation,” no slow ride up the use-of-force curve. Things would get ugly, fast. As his friends like to say, Harvath didn’t get PTSD, he *gave* it.

But now, out here in this subtropical coastal forest—less than one hundred and fifty clicks across the Bashi Channel from Taiwan—his Spidey senses were tingling and his cortisol levels were starting to spike. That *click* had put him even further on edge. He didn’t want to move until he had a better understanding of where that noise had come from.

Via a series of hand gestures, he let the team’s designated marksman, Mike Haney—an ex-Force Recon Marine—know where he wanted him to set up with his Heckler & Koch HK241 battle rifle and where former Delta Force operative Tyler Staelin should position himself with his SIG Sauer M250 light machine gun. If Harvath and his team were headed into an ambush, he was going to make the people who had prepared it sorry they had ever done so.

The next thing he needed to do was get some sort of visual on what was in front of them. Unfortunately, the canopy was too heavy to get one of their drones in the air. They would have to do it the old-fashioned way. Someone was going to have to quietly creep forward.

Normally, Harvath wouldn’t ask anyone on the team to do anything he wouldn’t do, but crawling along the jungle floor was a younger

person's game, and so he chose the youngest member of the team, a man in his early thirties, who was also an ex-Delta Force operative, named Palmer.

Palmer lived for getting dirty. Having recently rained, there was plenty of mud to keep him happy. Turning toward him, Harvath signaled what he wanted done.

Pulling his boot out of the heavy mud, Palmer looked down and then, looking back at Harvath, gave him the finger.

The good-natured insult notwithstanding, Palmer knew his place on the totem pole. Dropping his pack, he readied his weapon and disappeared into the understory.

Besides Haney and Staelin, everyone else on the team was carrying suppressed, 10.5-inch short-barreled rifles in 300BLK from a company called Noveske in Grants Pass, Oregon. Considering the variety of environments within which the Carlton Group was called upon to carry out its assignments—urban, maritime, and even underground—the Noveske Shorty SBR was hard to beat.

In addition to their encrypted, satellite-connected radios with bone-conducting microphones, they were also sporting ENVG-B night vision goggles with overlaid thermal-imaging fusion. When it came to the safety and performance of its operatives, the Carlton Group spared no expense.

Despite all that money and technology, however, Harvath and his team hadn't been able to locate four Chinese nationals who had vanished into the woods as they'd pulled up to their safe house. It was almost as if the men had known they were coming and already had an escape plan in place.

Affixed to Harvath's chest rig was a hinged, hard-plastic case containing his cell phone. Flipping it down, he let his eyes adjust and studied the imagery from the NSA satellite passing overhead in low-Earth orbit. If the Chinese were in the woods, there was absolutely no sign of them. Wherever they were hiding, they were doing a damn good job of it. Too good of a job.

The fact that their trail had gone cold almost the moment they were in the forest, the fact that no trace of them could be seen via the team's night vision devices or the satellite, told Harvath that he was hunting the

right men. These guys were pros. And that confirmation only elevated his stress levels. *What the hell was he walking into?*

The four Chinese were believed to be military intelligence agents working for the People's Liberation Army. Their job was to covertly surveil joint U.S.-Philippines military exercises, specifically how the United States and the Philippines would deny Chinese naval vessels the ability to transit the Bashi Channel—a vital maritime corridor between the Philippines and Taiwan linking the South China Sea to the broader Pacific Ocean.

U.S. Intelligence also had information that the four-man team would be additionally responsible for sabotaging American ground-based anti-ship missiles on Itbayat if hostilities broke out.

Harvath's assignment had been to capture and interrogate the men. Should that have proven too difficult, he was authorized to kill them, but in such a way that it sent a strong message back to Beijing as to what would happen if it sent any more spies.

Of course, Washington didn't want their fingerprints on the job and neither did Manila. Neither country was itching to directly antagonize the Chinese. Hence, Harvath and his team had been dispatched to handle the situation while providing plausible deniability to both America and the Philippines.

But none of that was going to matter if he couldn't track down his target.

Activating his radio, he was about to hail Palmer when the forest erupted with the sound of automatic weapons fire and Palmer's voice came over all his teammates' earpieces.

“Contact left!” he exclaimed. “Contact left!”

CHAPTER 2

With the trackers they all wore, Harvath could see on his screen exactly where Palmer was located. Reengaging with his night vision goggles, he could also clearly make out enemy muzzle flashes and instructed Haney and Staelin where to fire.

The Chinese were on the move, firing as they retreated further into the forest. Harvath's team took turns laying down cover fire as they moved up to Palmer's position.

Once they got to him, they adjusted their assault and pressed their biggest advantage—they now knew where the enemy was.

Bullets cracked and sizzled through the air around them, shaving the leaves and sometimes even whole branches off trees. Harvath and his team returned fire and pressed forward.

The fact that the Chinese had pre-deployed weapons in the forest not only confirmed Harvath's previous suspicions about their readiness, but it also brought something else to mind—the possibility that they had laid booby traps.

"Watch for trip wires!" he cautioned, as the firefight continued to rage.

He had been on assignment in a similar wooded environment recently and had seen men sawed in half and otherwise obliterated by cleverly placed mines. It was a series of mental pictures he would never be able to shake.

As if on cue, the lone female operator on his team, ex-Army soldier

Sloane Ashby—who was now running point—gave the command to stop and indicated that she had indeed found a trip wire. The Chinese were doing all they could to lure them to their deaths.

Confident that her teammates were aware of the wire and where it had been strung, she stepped over it and continued to give chase. The rest of the team followed.

The gun battle continued its fevered pitch. If Harvath and his people weren't shooting or reloading, they were moving.

First to take out one of the enemy was Haney, hitting a man with one of his heavy 7.62 rounds and knocking him down to the forest floor, dead.

Staelin, the team's machine gunner, was next. With a muzzle velocity of 3,000 feet per second, when his 135-grain .277 Fury rounds found their mark, he tore right through the next Chinese operative—shattering the man's hips and pelvis while simultaneously severing his spine and ripping massive holes through his bowels. If he wasn't dead when he hit the ground, he would be soon enough.

That left just two more.

This time it was Palmer who, exposing himself from behind cover, made an incredibly difficult shot. His bullet, fired at a complicated, upward angle against a fleeing target, found its mark, entered the base of the third Chinese man's skull and traveled up into his brain, killing him instantly.

The fourth and final target was Harvath's and, if possible, he wanted to take him alive. Even if the man had only limited intelligence value, it would be better than nothing.

Harvath radioed the rest of the team to start pulling their shots. If they could wing him or knock him down, great. If not, they were to keep the pressure up on him. At some point, the man was going to run out of energy or ammunition. Either way, when that moment came, he'd be theirs for the taking. What Harvath hadn't realized was that there was a third option.

Itbayat was the largest of the Batanes Islands, but also the most remote and windswept. The Philippines' last inhabited outpost before the Taiwan Strait, it rose steeply out of the sea, formed entirely from uplifted coral reefs and limestone cliffs—sheer walls that plunged right down into

the ocean. It was on one of those cliffs where the final Chinese operative now found himself.

Scrambling the last several yards, the man turned to fire at his pursuers but only managed to get off two more shots before his weapon ran dry. He was now out of runway and out of ammunition.

Casting the rifle aside, it clattered onto the hard, stony ground. Harvath instructed his team to cease fire. As they covered him, he moved forward.

The Chinese man appeared to be somewhere around Harvath's age, mid to late forties. He was lean and sinewy. He had dark circles around his eyes, which made his face look gaunt and hollowed out. Harvath had no idea how long the men had been on the island, but he figured they didn't make lots of runs into town for supplies out of fear of drawing attention to themselves. Very likely, they had been stretching whatever rations they had. No matter how bad Harvath had thought his assignment was, this guy's had likely been much worse.

Not only that, but the price for mission failure in China wasn't simply a bad performance review and the possibility of getting passed over for a promotion. This man was facing nothing but bad options. Harvath hoped that might make him pliable, open to a deal.

And if it didn't, there was always the enhanced interrogation route. Either way, the man was going to share everything he knew—whether he liked it or not.

Harvath watched as the Chinese operative took a couple of steps backward, right up to the edge of the cliff, and looked tentatively over his shoulder. It had to have been more than a thousand feet down and, even in the cloudy moonlight, the view must have been vertigo-inducing.

Lowering his weapon, Harvath beckoned the man forward, away from the edge. "Let's talk," he said, not knowing if the man spoke any English.

The Chinese operative didn't budge.

"If I wanted you dead," Harvath continued, "you'd be dead. We can make a deal. The two of us. No one is going to hurt you."

Weighing his options, the man glanced over his shoulder once more.

"Eyes here," instructed Harvath, slinging his SBR and pointing at his own eyes.

The operative seemed to understand. Turning his head, he looked at Harvath's face.

Harvath felt himself relax.

Then, without warning, the man took one giant step backward and leaped from the cliff.