

CHAPTER 1

STOCKHOLM, SWEDEN

TUESDAY, JULY 8

4:15 P.M.

COTTON MALONE WAS ON HIGH ALERT.

His Ice Station Zebra condition.

The reference was to the Alistair MacLean novel, where nothing was as it seemed and everything, and everyone, was suspect. His senses were focused on the hustle and bustle of the major metropolitan area that surrounded him. So many different and confusing signals. Totally unlike *Ice Station Zebra*, which the author had set in the isolated Arctic. Earlier in the day he and Stephanie Nelle had completed their business in Italy and flown direct from Florence, arriving in Stockholm three hours ago.

"I have a problem, Cotton. A big one. I hate to ask. But I need your immediate help."

His answer to Stephanie was never in doubt.

"You got it."

And the problem?

The only sibling of the king of Sweden, sixty-eight-year-old Princess Lysa, had been kidnapped off the streets of Stockholm near her

apartment. She'd been walking her dog, something she did every day when in town. The dog had returned to the residence still on the leash, but without its owner. A hasty search had revealed nothing. But a message, delivered shortly afterward to the palace, had identified the crime and specified the demands.

Definitely *a problem*, to say the least.

They were expected at the royal palace at 4:30, so they'd taken the time to eat an early dinner. The coming night promised to be a long one. Luckily, they'd both grabbed a little sleep on the flight.

Unfortunately, the weather was not cooperating. A leaden sky hung low, enveloping Stockholm in a premature dusk. A storm had arrived, the humid air bringing down a drenching moisture. Both he and Stephanie wore raincoats and carried umbrellas. Around them other pedestrians were similarly attired, all hurrying in their quest for drier havens.

He'd always regarded Stockholm as one of the world's great cities. It owned a Viking past and a cosmopolitan present. A beguiling mixture of culture and nature, built on a series of islands, which meant you were never far from the water. Unlike other major cities, he knew all that water was clean and swimmable.

They were walking across the Strömbron bridge onto the island that had first been settled over a thousand years ago. Now it held Stockholm's old town, Gamla Stan, a charming maze of cobblestone streets, archways, and stairways that recalled a bygone era when Sweden reigned as a world power. Today it hosted an impressive collection of pastel-colored stone buildings filled with souvenir shops, bars, restaurants, and, his personal favorite, bookstores. It all had grown up around the medieval fortress of Tre Kronor, Three Crowns, that had been surrounded, as was customary in its time, by a great stone wall. Today a royal palace occupied that site. One side

faced the water, the opposite a plaza that accommodated the main visitor entrance. Streets lined the other two sides, one private, the other public. They were headed for the public one.

Slottsbacken.

"Considering all that happened in Tuscany," Stephanie said, "you coming here with me is above and beyond."

"Where else would I be?"

"Home in Copenhagen. Running your bookshop."

"My business is fine. I'm exactly where I need to be."

And he meant that.

"I appreciate it. I truly do," she said. "Princess Lysa and I are friends. We met ten years ago. We're the same age and even share a birthday."

He knew that age was a sore subject for Stephanie. She never talked about or revealed her own. His best guess before today? Late sixties, but that was based on her employment history and not her looks, which were of a woman much younger. On every government form where it asked for age she always wrote N/A, which had caused more than one bureaucratic problem. But everyone had their quirks. Even his former boss.

"The king is a friend too," she said. "I've known him for nearly thirty years. We first met when I was with the State Department."

"Is that why he called you?"

She nodded. "One reason."

"And I assume that at some point, you plan to tell me all the others?"

"Don't I always?"

He opened his mouth to point out that this was not the case, but she silenced him with a raised hand. So he shook his head and surrendered. "Never mind."

They came to an intersection.

The eastern waterfront of old town stretched to their left, where more rain crept in off the choppy Baltic Sea under a dome of stained clouds. The wind freshened, gusting in long dark streaks that swept over the inlet. A bronze statue of the famed King Gustav III, dressed in the uniform of the Swedish Navy, dominated a small park. The king stood with his back to the water, an arm outstretched, supposedly offering a twig of peace to the burghers of Stockholm. They'd called him the charming king, but he was assassinated in 1792 by his own nobility, who resented his reestablishment of absolute monarchical power. Tolstoy was right. *Power is a word the meaning of which we do not understand.*

They waited for the traffic signal to change, then crossed the intersection onto Slottsbacken, a wide cobbled street that inclined sharply upward. Originally it had been a sloop of sand and gravel, deliberately left unfinished for defensive purposes. But eventually a paved route was formed, along with a moat that protected the palace's southern side. The moat had been filled in centuries ago, but the street remained. Cars moved up and down in a sporadic procession. The palace's most attractive façade, with entry to the treasury and the royal chapel, faced this way to his right, everything soaked from the rain.

"No Swedish police or security forces have been involved," Stephanie said to him. "Just a few of the palace guard, who are closest to the king."

"Is that wise?"

"That's not for us to judge. The king and the government both want this handled quietly."

Odd. Especially for a supposed kidnapping of a royal.

They walked up the wet incline, headed for the highest point of old town. At the top stood the Storkyrkan, the seven-hundred-year-old

national cathedral. Once Catholic, now it was a monument to Protestantism, central to the Church of Sweden. Little to no curbing existed, just a double layer of cobbles that formed a line between the walkway and the street. A series of concrete pedestals connected by sloping chains created a barrier on the right where there was a sharp drop-off down to a small parking lot. Most likely for palace employees. The looping chains ended about fifty feet ahead, where a driveway up from the lower lot drained into Slottsbacken. A gate blocked the entrance.

He was tired. The past few days had taken a toll. He'd definitely done some things he thought he would never do. No longer could he go full speed ahead without a few aches and pains. But he wasn't dead yet. He could still run with the big dogs. As Italy had shown.

Two cars eased past them on the street headed down toward the water and the traffic signal behind them. Stephanie walked with her eyes fixed forward, her mind seemingly off somewhere else, as if the distance between herself and some ill-defined past was closing with each step she took. She held her umbrella steady in the breeze. All was okay. He was here. And it was his job to stay alert. She'd tell him everything. When ready.

They passed the last of the chain and concrete pedestals. Ahead on the right stood a triumphal arch for the entrance to the royal treasury. A uniformed palace guard manned a post outside, standing at attention inside a small weather enclosure.

A white Volvo turned onto Slottsbacken at the top of the hill and headed their way. What caught his attention was its speed. Accelerating down the incline, unlike the other cars that were allowing gravity to carefully ease them down the wet cobbles.

The engine gunned.

Stephanie walked closer to the street. The Volvo was about fifty

yards away, the distance between them evaporating fast. A quick glance back and he saw that Slottsbacken all the way down to the intersection was clear.

He refocused ahead.

The Volvo was thirty yards away. Still in the middle of the wide street. Not a threat. He realized European drivers were more aggressive than their American counterparts. Driving fast was not unusual. Was he being paranoid? Maybe. But if someone was really after you, then it wasn't paranoia.

Damn right.

Suddenly, the Volvo veered left.

Straight toward them. Twenty yards away.

Coming fast.

He reacted by tossing his umbrella aside and wrapping his left arm around Stephanie, sweeping her off her feet and pushing them both to the right, toward the palace's outer wall.

The Volvo kept coming.

Right behind them was the beginning of the ramp that led down to the parking lot. He was gambling that the Volvo was not going to head through the pole gate into a dead end. So he took them both to the ground, absorbing most of the impact with his right shoulder, and rolled over. Stephanie let go of her umbrella, and it launched out into the wind. They passed beneath the barrier that blocked the ramp. The Volvo could not now get close enough to them without colliding with the gate, then heading downward.

A gamble? For sure.

But it was the only move on the board.

The Volvo's tires wobbled at the road's edge. The driver seemed to realize the quandary and, at the last moment, swerved right, rubber screaming across the wet cobblestones as they grabbed traction

and reentered Slottsbacken. Cotton sprang to his feet and darted out, searching with his gaze for the license plate, which was hard to see in the rain. The Volvo was a good forty yards away and receding fast. He could only make out the first three letters—FJB—before the car turned at the intersection and disappeared.

What the hell?

He helped Stephanie to her feet. The guard rushed their way, spewing out something in Swedish.

"We're fine," Stephanie said. "Really, we are."

"This should be reported," the guard said, switching to English.

"Are there cameras out here?" Cotton asked.

The guard nodded.

"We are on our way to meet with palace security," Stephanie pointed out, grabbing hold of her composure. "We will speak to them about this."

The guard seemed satisfied and retreated to his station, but not before retrieving their two umbrellas and handing them over.

"What was that?" she quietly asked Cotton as the guard walked away.

"Three possibilities. That car was after me. Or you. Or both of us. My guess?"

"Me. Since nobody knew you were coming."

"Seems like the correct answer."

"I feared this whole thing may turn personal."

"Is that another reason why I'm here?"

She nodded. "I was afraid me being involved would escalate an already bad situation. I told the king that, tried to beg off, but he insisted I come."

He waited.

"And it's all thanks to a man named John Westlake."