

Turn the page for a sneak peek
of Brad Thor's new Scot Harvath thriller

Backlash

CHAPTER 1

MURMANSK OBLAST
RUSSIA

The transport plane, like everything else in Russia, was a piece of shit. For years, mechanics had swapped out its worn scavenged parts with even older parts. Cracks had been filled with epoxy. Leaking tubes and frayed wires had been wrapped with tape. A crash had been inevitable.

A booming noise, like a horseshoe thrown into a dryer, had been coming from the left engine. The pilot had throttled back, but the noise had only gotten worse.

He and the copilot had scanned their instruments, searching for clues, but hadn't found any. Everything, right down to the cabin pressure, had appeared normal.

But suddenly, the interior had begun filling with smoke. Seconds later, the left engine died, followed by the right.

As the pilot restarted them, an explosion erupted from the right engine. Seeing the exhaust temperature spike, he immediately ordered the copilot to activate the extinguisher. They had to keep the fire from spreading to the rest of the aircraft, even if it meant shutting the right engine down permanently.

The copilot pulled the fire extinguisher handle as ordered, but they had another problem. The left engine,

which had successfully been restarted, wasn't producing enough thrust. They were falling at a rate of more than one thousand feet per minute. Over the blaring of cockpit alarms, the pilot put out a distress call.

They were flying in bad weather over one of the most remote, most inhospitable regions in the country. It was unlikely anyone would receive the transmission.

The pilot never got a chance to repeat his Mayday. The avionics and electrical system were next to go.

After trying to get the auxiliary power unit back on-line, the pilot instructed the crew to prepare for the worst. They were going down. Hard.

All this risk, he thought, all this danger, just to deliver one man—a man chained in back like an animal.

A Russian Special Forces team had boarded him with a hood over his head. No one had seen his face. The entire crew had assumed he was a criminal of some sort; maybe even a terrorist. They had been informed that he was dangerous. Under no circumstances were any of them to speak with or get anywhere near the prisoner.

But that was before they knew the plane was going to crash.

Moving quickly to the rear of the aircraft, the plane's loadmaster approached the large Spetsnaz soldier sitting nearest the prisoner.

"You need to put an oxygen mask on him," he said in Russian.

The operative, who *already* had *his* mask on, looked at the hooded prisoner, adjusted the submachine gun on his lap, and shook his head.

"*Nyet,*" he stated. *No.*

Career Russian Air Force, the loadmaster was used to transporting elite operators. He was also used to their bullshit.

“I’m not asking you,” he replied. “I’m *ordering* you.”

The soldier shot a sideways glance at the intelligence officer sitting nearby.

The plane was losing altitude. The smoke in the cabin was getting worse. The officer nodded back. *Do it.*

The ape reached over, snatched off the hood, and affixed a mask over the prisoner’s face. Then he replaced the hood and, satisfied, leaned back in his seat.

“Now unshackle his arms so he can brace for impact,” the loadmaster continued. It enabled only a minor altering of the body’s position, but in a crash it could mean the difference between life and death. Whatever the prisoner had done, surely he didn’t deserve to die, at least not like this.

Pissed off, the soldier glanced over again at the intelligence officer. Once more, the man nodded.

Producing a set of keys, the Spetsnaz operative reached down and opened the padlock securing the prisoner’s handcuffs to his belly chain. Grabbing the man’s arms, he raised them and placed them against the seat in front of him.

“His feet as well,” the loadmaster ordered. “He must be able to rapidly evacuate the aircraft.”

The soldier didn’t need to look to his superior a third time. The intelligence officer answered for their entire team.

“The only way that man walks off this plane is with one of us,” he said from behind his mask.

The loadmaster gave up. He had done what he could and knew it was pointless to argue any further. They were out of time.

“Make sure your weapons are secure,” he directed, as he turned to make his way to his jump seat.

Suddenly, the plane shuddered and the nose pitched

forward. The crewman lunged for the nearest seat and buckled himself in as anything not locked down went hurtling through the cabin like a missile.

With no instruments and no visibility, they were flying blind. The pilot and copilot fought to regain control of the aircraft.

Fifteen hundred feet above the ground, the pilots managed to pull the nose back up and slow their descent. But with no thrust from the remaining engine, they were still falling. They had to find someplace to land.

Peering through the weather, the pilot could see they were flying over a dense forest. Ahead was a clearing of some sort. It might have been a field or a frozen lake. All he could tell was that it appeared to be devoid of trees.

“There,” the pilot said.

“There’s not enough length. It’s too short.”

“That’s where we’re landing,” the pilot insisted. “Extend the landing gear. Prepare for impact.”

The copilot obeyed and engaged the emergency landing gear extension system. With no electricity with which to activate the PA, he turned and shouted back into the cabin, “Brace! Brace! Brace!”

The command was acknowledged by the loadmaster, who then yelled over and over in Russian from his seat, “Heads down! Stay down! Heads down! Stay down!”

Only a few hundred feet above the ground, the pilot pulled back on the yoke to lift the aircraft’s nose in an attempt to slow it down, but he misjudged the distance.

The belly of the plane scraped across the tops of the tall snow-laden trees. The left landing gear was snapped off, followed by the right.

Just before the clearing, one of the wingtips was clipped, and the plane went into a violent roll.

CHAPTER 2

GOVERNORS ISLAND
LAKE WINNIPESAUKEE
GILFORD, NEW HAMPSHIRE

Police Chief Tom Tullis had seen plenty of dead bodies over his career.

But this was a record for him at a single crime scene.

During the height of the summer, the popular resort town of Gilford could swell to as many as twenty thousand inhabitants. Off-season, like now, the number of full-time residents was only seventy-three hundred. Either way, four corpses were four too many.

Pulling out his cell phone, the tall, crew-cut-sporting cop texted his wife. They were supposed to meet for lunch. That was impossible now. He told her not to expect him for dinner either. It was going to be a late night.

Returning the phone to his duty belt, he focused on the bodies—two men and two women. They had all been shot, either in the head, the chest, or both. Judging from a quick scan of the walls and windows, no rounds had missed their targets. That told him the shooter was skilled.

Interestingly, three of the four victims were armed. One of the women had a Sig Sauer P365 in her purse, the other a Glock 17 in her briefcase. One of the two men carried a Heckler & Koch pistol at his hip. No one

had drawn their weapons. That told Tullis something else. Either the victims had known their killer, or they had all been taken by surprise. Considering who the victims were, he doubted it was the latter.

The woman with the Sig Sauer had credentials identifying her as a former Boston Police Detective, eligible to carry concealed nationwide. The woman with the Glock had no such credentials, but in the “Live Free or Die” state of New Hampshire it was legal to carry without a permit. Not that she would ever have had trouble getting one.

Seeing the name on her driver’s license, Tullis had instantly recognized her. She had made a lot of headlines when the President had elevated her to Deputy Director of the CIA.

The gun-carrying male victim had ID that claimed he was an active military member. United States Navy.

What the hell were they all doing here? the Chief wondered. *And who had killed them?*

He suspected the key might lie with the final victim.

Just off the dining room, facing a large TV, a hospital bed had been set up in the den. In it, shot once between the eyes, was a man who appeared to be somewhere in his eighties. He was the only victim Tullis and his team hadn’t yet identified. The Chief had some decisions to make.

Judging from the postmortem lividity of the bodies, they had been dead for at least two days, maybe more. The killer’s trail would already be going cold.

As a seasoned law enforcement officer, Tullis knew the importance of doing everything by the book. He needed to secure not only the house but also the grounds.

Going the extra step, he decided to shut down the

lone bridge that connected the 504-acre Governors Island to the mainland and to request Marine Patrol units to cover the shoreline.

This wasn't some murder-suicide where the husband had shot the wife and the pool boy before turning the gun on himself. And it wasn't some drug deal gone bad. This was a high-profile case; exactly the kind of case no town ever wanted—especially a tourism-dependent town like Gilford.

Getting on the radio, the Chief told the dispatcher to send the entire shift. He then instructed her to call in all available off-duty officers. They were going to need as much manpower as possible.

The next step was to alert the State Attorney General's Office in Concord. Per protocol, they would mobilize a Major Crime Unit team from the State Police to come up and lead the investigation. Before he made that call, though, he decided to place another.

It wasn't a by-the-book move. In fact, Tullis was way overstepping his authority.

But if it meant protecting Gilford and the town's hardworking men and women who so depended on the tourist trade, that was one scenario in which the Chief was willing to bend the rules.

CHAPTER 3

LACONIA MUNICIPAL AIRPORT
GILFORD, NEW HAMPSHIRE

When the call came in to Langley, the Director of Central Intelligence, Bob McGee, happened to be in a meeting with the Director of the FBI, Gary Militante.

Though the DCI's assistant was hesitant to interrupt, she knew she had to make her boss aware of the call. McGee put it on speakerphone. He and Militante were stunned by what they heard.

The FBI Director introduced himself, gave Tullis his personal cell phone number, and asked to be texted as many pictures from the crime scene as possible—pictures of the bodies, the IDs, the weapons, all of it. Minutes later, his phone began vibrating.

As the photos poured in, McGee kept his emotions in check. With professional detachment, he narrated who and what they were looking at, right down to the body in the hospital bed—retired CIA operative Reed Carlton, the man who had founded the Agency's Counter Terrorism Center.

Militante had the same questions as Tullis. "What were they all doing in New Hampshire, and who would have wanted them dead?"

It was a long story, which McGee promised to ex-

plain in-flight. He wanted a look at the crime scene for himself—and the only way he'd have any legal access to it was if the FBI was attached.

Before he and Militante could leave, though, there was an additional person he needed to reach.

He tried three times, but his calls all ended up in voicemail. *Why the hell wasn't he picking up?*

After sending a quick text, McGee grabbed his jacket and headed downstairs with the FBI Director and their security details for the two-minute ride to 84VA, the Agency's helipad a mile west of Langley.

Once they boarded their respective helicopters, it was a short flight to Joint Base Andrews, where an Embraer Praetor 600 was fueled and waiting.

The jet was a recent addition to the CIA's fleet. Fast and able to take off using less than five thousand feet of runway, it was perfect for the trip to Gilford.

When they landed, a phalanx of SUVs was waiting for them. The detail leaders hated movements like this—no warning, no planning, and little to no coordination with elements on the ground. Nevertheless, both directors had insisted that the trip was necessary and that time was of the essence.

From Laconia Municipal, it was only four miles to Governors Island. They were met at the airport by Gilford PD and given an escort through town and over the bridge to the crime scene.

Stepping out of one of the SUVs, McGee took a deep breath. The air was cold and smelled of pine. A hint of wood smoke drifted from a chimney somewhere unseen.

McGee looked like a marshal from an old Western. He was a tall man in his late fifties with gray hair and a gray mustache. A testament to his Army career, his shoes

were shined, his suit was immaculate and his shirt was crisply pressed.

He wore no jewelry other than a Rolex Submariner—a gift to himself when he left Delta Force decades ago and signed on with the CIA's paramilitary branch.

McGee was old-school, known for being tough, direct, and unflappable. He hated politics, which had made him a good choice to head the CIA.

The nation's once proud intelligence service was being choked to death by bureaucracy. It was packed with talented people willing to give everything for their country, but they were being held back by risk-averse middle managers more concerned with their next promotion than with doing what needed to be done.

Familiar with the Agency from the ground up, the President had put McGee in charge of cleaning out the deadwood. And he had gone after it root and branch.

But McGee had quickly realized that mucking out the Agency's Augean stables was indeed a Herculean task—one that was going to take much longer than any of them had envisioned.

In the meantime, the threats against America were growing—becoming deadlier, more destabilizing, and more intricate.

As red tape slowed Langley down, America's enemies were speeding up. Something needed to be done—something radical.

With the President's approval, McGee had agreed to a bold new plan, as well as a major sacrifice.

The plan was to outsource the CIA's most clandestine work. It would go to a private intelligence agency outside the bureaucracy's grasp. There, safe from government red tape, sensitive operations could receive the support and commitment they deserved.

It was viewed as a temporary fix while Langley was undergoing its gut rehab—a rehab that would have to go all the way down to the studs.

The private intelligence agency charged with taking over the darkest slice of the CIA's pie was The Carlton Group, founded by the aforementioned, now deceased, Reed Carlton.

And as to McGee's sacrifice, it was personified by another victim at the scene.

With his blessing, Lydia Ryan had left her position as CIA Deputy Director in order to run The Carlton Group.

That was the backdrop against which Bob McGee stepped out of the SUV, breathed in the chilly New England air, and prepared himself for the horror he was about to see inside.

Tullis met the two directors at the front steps and solemnly shook their hands. Then, after having them sign into the crime scene log, he distributed paper booties and latex gloves. The protection details didn't get any. They would have to wait outside—the fewer people coming in and out, the better.

The Police Chief was about to show the two men inside, when one of his officers came up carrying a clear plastic evidence bag.

"We found something back in the trees near the end of the driveway," the patrolman said, holding it up. Inside was a phone.

McGee recognized it immediately. Or, more specifically, he recognized its case.

Made from a rigid thermoplastic, the distinct Magpul cell phone case was popular with military operators. Its styling mimicked the company's rugged rifle magazines. On the back, a distinct Nordic symbol had been

customized. The Chief stepped off the porch for a closer examination.

As he did, the FBI Director saw the look on his CIA colleague's face. Slowly, he mouthed a name. *Harvath?*

McGee nodded.

Their bad situation had just gotten worse.