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BRAD THOR

A THRILLER

DEAD FALL



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DEAD FALL

A THRILLER

Brad Thor

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*For David Brown,
my longtime friend and publicist, who is an absolute mensch.
Thank you for helping me climb the mountain.*

There is no avoiding war; it can only be postponed to the advantage of others.

—NICCOLÒ MACHIAVELLI

PROLOGUE

KHARKIV OBLAST, UKRAINE

TUESDAY

The children ran for their lives. Those who could, fled into the woods. Those who couldn't—the smaller and the sickest among them—were forced to take up hiding places inside. The adults tried to convey calm, but it was wall-to-wall panic. And rightfully so. *The monsters were coming.*

In the basement of the abandoned Soviet-era tuberculosis hospital, via a decrepit passageway punctuated by broken light fixtures, rusted pipes, and puddles of fetid water, was the kitchen. And in that kitchen was the best answer the orphanage had been able to come up with for its most complicated problem.

An old pantry had been outfitted like a chicken coop. Its shelves had been taken over by wooden nesting boxes pre-staged with bedding. The few blankets that could be spared had been tacked to the walls to help deaden any sound. A run-down refrigerator with a false back hid the entrance of the pantry from view.

Each of the infants inside had been given an emergency ration of formula. The toddlers, many of whom were suffering from colds and flu, had been given small pieces of bread soaked in tea and dabbed with a little bit of honey. Anything to keep them quiet. It was imperative that they maintain absolute silence.

With all able-bodied men at the front, the entirety of the orphanage staff, save for its eighty-year-old custodian, was female. There was no one available to fight for them. They would have to look out for themselves.

Weeks' worth of discussions over what to do if this moment ever came had given birth to a plan. Everything about it—the running, the hiding, *all* of it—was extreme, but absolutely necessary. One of the vilest tendrils of the war was about to slither in and wrap itself around their throats.

The children had practiced taking deep, quiet breaths. Those with respiratory issues had been given pillows to cough into, but only as a last resort. Their hope for survival now rested not in their numbers, but in their ability to remain invisible.

Anna Royko, who had been at the orphanage for only a few months, had insisted on taking watch. She was an American of Ukrainian descent.

Born and raised in Chicago, the twenty-five-year-old had been deeply affected by the suffering she had seen coming out of Ukraine. When news broke that the Russians had bombed a children's hospital and maternity ward in Mariupol, she could no longer sit by. She had to do something.

After emailing her resignation to the law firm where she worked, she booked a one-way ticket to Poland, as martial law had been declared in Ukraine and commercial air traffic had been

suspended.

She spent a week knocking on doors and visiting various aid organizations across Warsaw before one finally took her on board.

Though she had zero experience working for an NGO and even less experience operating in a war zone, it was her fluency in Ukrainian that proved too valuable to pass up.

The group that hired her was a small humanitarian organization focused on getting much-needed supplies to the hardest-hit orphanages throughout Ukraine. The position paid next to nothing, would require grueling hours, and was extremely dangerous. So much so that there were reams of waivers she was required to sign.

The good they were doing was unquestionable and so, keeping her inner lawyer in check, she moved rapidly through the paperwork. After signing and initialing where indicated, she started work the very same day.

What Anna saw on her first trip into Ukraine ripped her heart out. The misery, the desperation, the horrific conditions the children were living in... all of it. The only thing that gave her hope was the heroism of the adults who were risking everything to take care of them.

As the war ground on, the situations at the orphanages grew more dire. No matter how quickly she and her colleagues returned with supplies, there was never enough. It was like showing up as the *Titanic* was slipping under the icy water only to toss out pool noodles. Watching people slowly die, especially children, wasn't why she was there.

She had come to Ukraine to help ease people's suffering, if not to somehow reverse it. But when she and her team arrived at an orphanage for special needs children in the southern city of Mykolaiv—halfway between Odesa and Kherson—something inside her snapped. The building had been bombed and completely destroyed.

As badly as the supplies from Poland were needed, being a glorified delivery driver was no longer enough for her. She had to do more.

Remembering a dilapidated orphanage in an old tuberculosis hospital in eastern Ukraine, and the tirelessly dedicated women who ran it, she decided that was where she could make a difference. By focusing solely on that location and the children within it, she could have the greatest possible impact.

Once she got to Kharkiv and had finished distributing supplies, she bid her stunned NGO colleagues good-bye.

As she walked across Freedom Square and disappeared from view, she tuned out their voices, which were begging her to reconsider, as well as warning that she was making a grave and likely deadly mistake. Anna didn't care.

At that moment, she had no clue how she would reach her newly decided-upon destination, nor whether they would even accept her help. All she knew was that it was where she was being called to be.

When she finally made it to the orphanage's front doors, the pack with everything she owned slung across her back, everyone inside was shocked to see her.

Despite desperately needing an extra set of hands, they tried to discourage her from staying. They felt that by taking her in, they would somehow be depriving the other orphanages that had grown so dependent on her. Anna, however, would hear nothing of it.

Allowing her inner lawyer to come out, she informed the women that she knew they needed help and that she wouldn't take no for an answer. The staff was stuck with her, whether they liked

it or not. Truth be told, they were thrilled to have her.

She was a breath of fresh air. The children loved her. And as the youngest member of the staff by at least fifteen years, Anna had reservoirs of energy that none of them could match. With so many children, so few resources, and such an old building, there was always something that needed doing. No matter what the task, she was always the first to volunteer.

Which was what had brought her to the present moment—acting as the orphanage’s official lookout.

In each of the designated hiding places, the children needed at least one adult with them. Since Anna knew the building like the back of her hand, was a runner who worked out daily, and could move from room to room and floor to floor quickly, everyone knew she was the best choice. She was also, the staff believed, fearless.

In their minds, based upon the characters they watched on TV, most American women were fiercely independent and didn’t take shit from anyone. Throw in being an attorney, and it took Anna’s badassery in their eyes to a whole different level.

But it was one particular incident that had cemented her reputation at the orphanage as someone that you didn’t want to mess with.

Shortly after her arrival, a group of three men had shown up in the middle of the night attempting to “secure” the building’s generator for the “war effort.” Not only were they wearing tracksuits and gold jewelry, but they were also remarkably drunk.

The most likely explanation was that they were a mafia contingent roaming the region, stealing whatever would fetch a good price on the black market. Anna had been determined not to let that happen.

When one of them tried to intimidate her by pulling a knife and saying that he was going to rape her, she kned him in the groin, grabbed a fistful of his hair, and pressed her own knife—one she had been carrying since arriving in Ukraine—against his throat.

His cohorts were shocked, knocked off balance by how quickly she had taken control. It only lasted for a moment. Soon enough, the duo had regained their composure and were gaming out their next move. The men didn’t believe she would harm their associate.

When they advanced, however, Anna didn’t waver. She pressed the blade deeper into the man’s fleshy neck and kept going, even after she drew blood.

As the front of his shirt began to stain a deep red, the other men froze, once again unsure of how to proceed.

Anna told her captive to drop his knife, which he did, and she kicked it to the side.

There was only one message she wanted to get across to these scumbags—that this orphanage was more trouble than it was worth and that they shouldn’t ever bother coming back.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw that the custodian, who lived on the edge of the property, had shown up, shotgun in hand.

With backup on scene and her message delivered, Anna released her captive, giving the thug a shove in the direction of his comrades.

Watching them back off toward their vehicle, she offered one last piece of advice—that they find their man a hospital with a staff who knew what they were doing. None of the local butchers would be able to sew up the wound she had carved into the man’s neck. If they didn’t quickly head for one of the bigger cities and get him properly taken care of, the artery was going to rupture and he was going to bleed out.

It was a lie. Bluster. She hadn't cut him anywhere near his artery. But all that had mattered was that the would-be thieves believed it. And by the looks on their faces, they had. The men left and never came back.

Fast-forward to now and the orphanage was dealing with a whole new threat. Russian soldiers had been spotted on the outskirts of town.

They were moving from house to house. Scavenging. The stories of their looting were legion. Microwaves, winter clothing, washers and dryers... there had even been reports of the soldiers removing the ballistic plates from their tactical vests and inserting laptops and tablets they had stolen along the way. Their thievery, however, wasn't the worst of the conduct they had become known for.

Kidnap, rape, torture, and murder were what Ukrainians feared the most. Anyone was fair game for the Russians—not just women and girls, but men and little boys as well. They were barbaric.

The evil flowed straight from Moscow. Russian soldiers had not only been encouraged to commit sexual assaults, but they had even been issued Viagra.

The Russians were known to raid a village and stay for days, carrying out their horrors via around-the-clock shifts. The word *nightmare* didn't even begin to describe the abominations they so zealously perpetrated.

These terrors had become the orphanage staff's worst fear—that the children, whose care and protection had been entrusted to them, might be subject to such unspeakable crimes.

It was why they had worked so hard to develop their plan—the children who could run, would run. The rest would hide. And then everyone would pray. Everyone, that is, except Anna. She didn't have time for prayer.

Someone had suggested that they make the orphanage look deserted, as if it hadn't been occupied in years, but it simply wasn't feasible. The best they could hope to do was to make it look like everyone had fled. The final touches of that plan fell to Anna.

After making sure that the remaining children and adults were secreted away in their hiding places, she moved hastily through the building, ticking off her checklist.

All of the lights needed to be shut off, along with the boiler. Any remaining coats or boots near the front doors needed to be hidden. What little medicine and first aid supplies they had needed to be gathered up and tucked away for safekeeping.

Her sweep through the facility didn't have to be perfect, it just had to be convincing.

The Russians were used to people fleeing in advance of their arrival. As long as that appeared to be what had happened here, everything—the orphanage staff hoped—would be okay.

Moving from room to room, her heart pounding, Anna focused on what she had to do.

Contrary to how her colleagues saw her, she wasn't fearless. Only stupid people were fearless in the face of danger. She was, actually, quite afraid, but the orphanage had become her home and all of the souls within it her family.

She often thought of one of the quotes her sixth-grade teacher in Chicago had taped to the wall behind her desk. It was from Winston Churchill. "Fear is a reaction. Courage is a decision."

And so, as she had on the night of the attempted generator theft, Anna made a decision. Though she was scared, she would exhibit courage on behalf of the people and the place that she had grown to care so deeply about.

With the dark brown hair of her ponytail bouncing against the back of her neck, she hurriedly completed her check of the building and then moved to the window that would serve as her

lookout position.

It killed her that they hadn't been able to hide all of the orphanage's food. Once the soldiers had discovered the kitchen, they were going to abscond with quite a bounty. There was no telling how the staff would ever replenish their stocks. So many of the items they depended on had gone from scarce to absolutely nonexistent. Even once everyday items like butter and eggs had become luxuries.

Peering out the window, Anna focused on the bare branches of the perfectly spaced trees that lined the driveway up to the former hospital. The contrast between the ugly, communist architecture and the facility's thoughtful grounds had fascinated her from her very first visit. Even under the brutal yoke of the Soviets, the Ukrainians had still found opportunities for artistic expression and ways to quietly nourish beauty.

Sadly, that was no longer the case. Ever since the Russian invasion, Ukrainians had been focused on one thing—survival.

Anna's thoughts were suddenly interrupted by bursts of machine-gun fire, which drew her attention toward the village.

Squinting through a pair of cracked binoculars that the custodian had scrounged, she could see a column of three military vehicles approaching. Each of them had been painted with a large, white Z.

Many Russian officials claimed that the letter was an abbreviation of the phrase "For victory," while others—with a straight face—said that it was meant to represent the expression "For peace." The Ukrainians, however, had their own definitions.

In Ukraine, the Z symbol was referred to either as the *Zwastika*—a reference to the Nazi swastika—or as the *Zieg*, a play on the Hitler salute, *Sieg Heil*.

As the column moved through the village, the men in the vehicles kept wildly firing their guns. What they were shooting at, Anna had no idea. She couldn't see a soul. Anyone in their right mind had either fled or was in hiding.

The hope at the orphanage was that the men would just keep moving, but as soon as Anna saw one of the vehicles peel off and head up the hospital's driveway, she knew that wasn't going to be the case. It was time to relay the situation to the others.

Moving rapidly through the halls, she used a wrench to tap on the pipes to transmit her message.

All of the staff, along with all of the children who were old enough to understand, now knew that the men had arrived and that no one must make a sound until Anna had given the all clear.

Slipping into her hiding spot, it was finally Anna's time to pray, which she did, fervently.

She asked God to protect everyone in the building, as well as the older children who had run off to hide in a cave deep within the woods.

Once her prayers were said, all she could do was wait and hold her breath. As it turned out, she didn't have to wait long.

Six horrifying men entered the building. Their heads were shaved and their faces had been painted to resemble skulls. They carried hatchets and long, curved knives that looked like something butchers might use.

Because the building had obviously been a hospital at one point, their first target was the dispensary. They wanted anything they could get their hands on—morphine, amphetamines,

barbiturates, it didn't matter. The dispensary, however, turned out to be a dry hole. Every cabinet and every drawer had long been cleared out.

With no drugs to be found, they swept the offices, searching everywhere for bottles of alcohol or anything else of value. Once again, they came up empty.

Moving deeper into the building, they eventually discovered what the old hospital was currently being used for. Next to drugs and booze, their favorite spoils were women and children.

Running through the halls, the ghouls began squealing like little pigs and singing a Russian folk song, "Oysya, Ti Oysya."

"I won't touch you," the deviants sang, "don't worry. Oysya, you Oysya, don't be afraid of me."

From her hiding spot, Anna could hear them getting closer. Even though she didn't speak Russian, the singing made her blood run cold.

At some point, the pack decided to split up and fan out in different directions. A man coming toward her started howling like a wolf. He was either high or insane. Perhaps he was both. Anna didn't care. She just wanted them gone.

Frozen in place, she listened as he scuttled past. The body odor wafting off him was so rancid that she almost gagged and gave herself away. Thankfully, she kept it together.

Straining her ears, she waited for the man to turn down the next hallway, but he didn't. Instead, he came to a stop. She could feel that he was looking at something, studying it. Intuitively, she knew exactly what it was.

In front of the main staircase leading down to the kitchen, Anna had shoved a bookcase. Around it she had strewn trash and a few pieces of broken furniture. It was a less-than-optimal camouflage job, but it had been the only thing they could come up with.

A few seconds later, she heard the bookcase being scraped across the floor. *The fiend was pushing it away from the wall!*

It was followed by the sound of his footsteps bounding down the stairs two at a time. *He was headed for the kitchen.*

Soon enough, a series of loud crashing and banging sounds began. She could hear the invader overturning baker's racks and shelving units. It sounded like nothing more than wanton vandalism—destruction for destruction's sake. *Or was it?*

As another terrible thought entered her mind, her blood once again ran cold. *Could the bookcase at the top of the stairs have given him reason to believe that something else might be hidden in the kitchen?*

She had no way of knowing, but the fear gripped Anna so tightly that she could barely breathe. The bookcase had been *her* idea.

Regardless of what his motivation was, if this savage was intent on tearing the kitchen apart piece by piece, the odds were that he was going to uncover the infants and other children hiding in the pantry.

She couldn't let that happen. And while she knew it was insane—beyond insane, actually—she *had* to do something.

Against all the advice she had given her colleagues regarding *not* leaving their hiding places until after the threat had passed, she left hers.

Careful not to make any noise, she moved through the hallway and crept down the stairs, her knife clasped tightly in her hand. She had no idea how she was going to handle the situation, only that it needed to be handled and there was no one else but her.

With the sound of each broken dish or smashed cabinet, she flinched, but kept going. She had never been so terrified in all her life.

Drawing nearer to the kitchen, she took a deep breath and paused. *This was it.* Exhaling, she peered around the edge of the doorway into the kitchen. There, amid the destruction, she could see the Russian beast.

He had laid his hatchet on the counter and was focused on the old refrigerator, which was obscuring the entrance to the pantry. *Had he figured it out?*

If he hadn't yet, Anna was certain that he was about to. And once he had discovered the children and staff hiding on the other side, there was no telling what horrors he would unleash.

She had to come up with a plan—right now, right here—before any of the other monsters joined him in the basement. She was only going to get one chance.

She didn't want to tangle with the man, not physically, not if she didn't have to. There was no telling what kind of psychotic tricks he might have up his sleeve. She had heard the grisly tales of Russians carrying straight razors in order to disfigure their victims once they'd had their way with them. She had no intention of becoming a victim.

The key to successfully overcoming the soldier was to use the element of surprise to her advantage. At the same time, she needed to keep as much distance between them as possible. Doing a fast scan of the kitchen, she locked onto an idea.

The only question remaining was whether she could fully launch her attack before the ghoul had a chance to react. There was only one way to find out.

Taking a final, deep breath, she counted down from three, then slid through the doorway and into the kitchen.

What she wouldn't have given at this moment for a gun and the knowledge of how to use it. Instead she would have to rely on active-shooter training she had received at her law firm back in Chicago.

The instructor, an ex-Green Beret, had based his workshop on the *Run, Hide, Fight* formula and had spent most of his time focusing on the *Fight* component. As Anna crept toward the fire extinguisher, she was grateful for everything the Special Forces operative had taught her. She only wished she had heeded his advice about regularly checking to make sure the extinguisher was up to date.

Not that it would have mattered. With all the bombs and missiles that had been falling on Ukraine, fresh fire extinguishers were simply another unicorn of the war—something rumored to exist, but impossible to find.

With her heart thumping in her chest, she chose her steps as carefully, as quickly, and as quietly as she could. She made her way across the side of the kitchen and successfully removed the extinguisher from the wall. Pulling the pin, she headed toward the man who was still, thankfully, preoccupied with the fridge.

She was almost on top of him when something caused the Russian to spin. The moment he caught sight of her, he lunged for his hatchet.

Anna had no idea if she was close enough to blind him with the fog of the extinguisher, but she had no other choice. The moment had arrived and she squeezed the handle, deploying an enormous cloud.

Though the extinguisher was seriously out of date, there was just enough pressure to do the job.

While the demon couldn't see, Anna had pinpointed his location and knew exactly where he was standing.

Raising the extinguisher, she charged and used all of her strength to bring the cylinder crashing down against the man's head.

It was a death blow. Anna had succeeded in cracking open the ghoul's skull and spilling his brains onto the kitchen floor as his lifeless body collapsed.

The mixture of fear and adrenaline only made her heart pound harder in her chest. There was no time to catch her breath or reassess the situation. There was only time to act. At some point, which she had to assume would be sooner rather than later, the monster's colleagues would be looking for him. Eventually they would make their way to the basement. She now needed an entirely new plan.

But before she could react, she heard someone step into the kitchen and cock a pistol.

CHAPTER 1

GOMEL, BELARUS

THURSDAY

The hit, deep inside the Russian client state of Belarus, had required a tremendous amount of planning in a very short period of time. The target would be moving soon. Once the window had closed, no one knew when or where it would open again.

The final go/no-go call was left to the team leader, Scot Harvath. The opportunity was too juicy to pass up. Faisal Al-Masri was a big fish. Taking him off the board would have global repercussions. After reviewing all of the intel, Harvath had given the mission the green light.

Al-Masri was one of the highest-ranking members of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and the head of Iran's drone program. The fact that the Israelis, who were exceedingly good at what they did, had tried and failed—not once, but twice—to take him out wasn't lost on Harvath. The man was particularly smart when it came to his security. In other areas, however, he had been making nothing but bad decisions.

In Iraq and Syria, under his orders, IRGC drones had been targeting Americans. U.S. military members, diplomatic personnel, and civilian contractors had all come under attack. For that, Al-Masri had earned himself a VIP position on the CIA's kill list. But his problems didn't end there.

He and the IRGC had been selling their Shahed-136 drones to the Russians, who in turn had been using them against civilian sites and critical infrastructure across Ukraine. With winter approaching, Russian President Fedor Peshkov had stepped up his attacks on hospitals, schools, power stations, water treatment facilities, bus stations, train stations, and rail lines. His goal was to terrorize and demoralize the people of Ukraine, making them as miserable as possible. What he ended up doing, however, was pissing them off *more*.

When Ukrainian Intelligence learned that Al-Masri and a team of ten drone instructors were headed to Belarus to train Russian forces, they passed that information on to the CIA.

Knowing that they would likely be blamed for anything that happened to Al-Masri and his team, the Ukrainians had only one request—that the strike be audacious.

Harvath was happy to take it under advisement. America's hit a few years back on the head of the IRGC's Quds Force, Qasem Soleimani, hadn't exactly been low-key. They'd used a Hellfire missile on his motorcade and splattered him across four Baghdad neighborhoods.

As fitting as it would have been to also take Al-Masri via a drone-fired weapon, the United States didn't have anything in the skies above Belarus. Harvath and his group were going to have to be more creative. They were also going to have to assume a lot more risk.

Al-Masri and the IRGC instructors were being protected by the Russian National Guard and officers from the Federal Security Service, also known as the FSB, successor to the KGB. In theory, they would be alert, disciplined, and well practiced in close protection. But in reality, they were still Russians, which meant they were prone to being lazy, undisciplined, and assigned at the last minute to work they were unqualified for.

President Peshkov placed little value on the lives of his citizens. He had been feeding his people nonstop into the wood chipper that was the war in Ukraine. What kind of talent he had in reserve that he could assign to protect Al-Masri and his people was anyone's guess.

Not that the level of talent being fielded by the Russians would have any impact on his operation. He didn't plan on getting in a gunfight. There were too many of them. Instead, he was going to take them in transit.

Because of the sensitivity of this operation, the CIA didn't want any official fingerprints on it. They wanted the United States to maintain full deniability. That's why it had been given to Harvath and his team at the Carlton Group—a private intelligence agency named after its founder, Reed Carlton.

A legendary maverick at the CIA, Carlton had come up with the vision for and had helped establish the Agency's famed Counterterrorism Center.

Unhappy with what he saw as the growing timidity of management, and choking to death on the bureaucracy and red tape, he decided to give retirement a whirl. While Mrs. Carlton had enjoyed riding off into the sunset, being out of the game drove Mr. Carlton insane. America's enemies were only growing more dangerous and more emboldened. Something needed to be done. And so he had done it. He started his own organization.

With the rise of private military corporations, Carlton had seen the next wave of opportunity as the creation of private intelligence agencies. He had made a big bet and it had paid off handsomely. Despite his violent passing, the organization he had founded not only lived on but was thriving, accepting some of the most dangerous assignments the CIA and the White House could throw at it. At the center of it all was a highly skilled team of former spies and ex-Special Forces operatives.

Harvath, who had distinguished himself as a U.S. Navy SEAL before being brought to the White House to help bolster their counterterrorism expertise, eventually caught the attention of Carlton. The "Old Man," as those who had known him best called him, had handpicked Harvath as his successor and had taught him everything he knew. He had taken an apex predator and had made Harvath even more cunning, more deadly, and more resolved to take the fight to America's enemies.

In essence, Carlton had enhanced an already exceptionally lethal weapon only to realize that he couldn't control it, at least not fully.

When Alzheimer's kicked in and his health began failing, he had asked Harvath to take over for him and run the organization. To everyone's surprise, including Carlton's, Harvath had said no. He wanted to remain in the field, to keep hunting bad guys, and to make sure that America's enemies had a constant reason to lose sleep at night. In short, he didn't think anyone could do better at his job than him.

To a certain degree, he was right. He had learned a lot of things over the years and had an impressive set of skills. He was very good at what he did. He was also getting older.

He was now working out twice as hard and taking a range of performance-enhancing drugs just to keep up. Bumps and bruises that he never used to feel often hurt like hell and were lingering

much longer than they used to. Recovery time from serious injury was bordering on ridiculous.

The long and the short of it was that there was only so much more he could take. As his current superior, Gary Lawlor—the man who had been brought in to run the Carlton Group—was often heard to say, Harvath was a selfish prick who should have been spotting and developing the next generation of talent, not running around the globe kicking in doors and shooting bad guys in the face.

Harvath possessed a vast wealth of knowledge. To risk it by going downrange and constantly putting his life on the line was not only foolish, it also spoke to some sort of deep-seated issue that probably required professional help.

Having heard it all countless times, Harvath let it roll off his back—though the “prick” comment stung, just a little bit, coming from Lawlor, whom Harvath had known for a very long time.

Gary’s choice of language notwithstanding, Scot wasn’t going to step off the field and hang up his cleats until he was good and ready. And right now, he wasn’t ready. Though he was beginning to think that he might be getting closer.

For the moment, however, the only thing that mattered was the Al-Masri operation. The plan was unconventional, right down to its codename, and that was exactly what he had loved about it.

In an old thriller film called *Ronin*, a group of ex-spies and former Special Forces members are hired to conduct a dangerous assignment. Among them is a British man who lied about his background, claiming to have been with the SAS. An American who used to work for the CIA—played by Robert De Niro—pushes the Brit on his tactically unsound plan for an ambush. When the Brit starts to stammer, De Niro presses harder, demanding, “What color is the boathouse at Hereford?”—a reference to the training facility for the SAS. The imposter is unable to answer and exposes himself for the fraud that he is.

The film was a favorite around the Carlton Group offices. So, when it was proposed that the team structure a similar ambush to what the phony SAS character had suggested, “Operation Boathouse” was born. But instead of placing shooters across the road from each other, they were going to use explosives.

The Iranians were training their would-be Russian drone pilot students at a village in Belarus called Mykulichi. Iranians being Iranians, however, they wanted to take full advantage of being away from the watchful, disapproving eyes of the mullahs back in Tehran. They wanted to party. As such, they had said no to being housed with the Russians in Mykulichi and had demanded to be put up at a hotel in the much livelier city of Gomel.

This meant a daily back-and-forth commute. The Iranians still being Iranians, they wanted to be transported in style.

Drab, uncomfortable military vehicles were totally out of the question. They wanted climate-controlled, luxury SUVs with leather seats and onboard Wi-Fi. They were absolute prima donnas and it was going to be their downfall.

The only armored, nonmilitary luxury SUVs in the country belonged to the President and were at his residence in Minsk. There was no way he was going to give them up, and the Russians in charge of guarding the Iranians knew better than to ask. That meant that they would have to source locally available, thin-skinned vehicles.

The head of the protective detail, a grizzled FSB man who had been in some of the worst battles during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, had gone to work, putting together the best

motorcade he could. Their marching orders had been crystal clear—protect the Iranians, but also do *everything* necessary to make them happy. They were expected to be half bodyguards and half camp counselors.

The FSB man was embarrassed by how far Russia had fallen. That the Iranians would be so technologically superior that the Kremlin would have to kiss their asses in order to defeat a country like Ukraine wasn't just a bitter pill to swallow, it was like drinking battery acid.

Everything he knew and understood about the superiority of the Russian people and their leadership was now in question. Nevertheless, he did his job to the best of his ability. He tracked down the vehicles.

The Russian National Guard troops were divided between two Chinese-made armored vehicles borrowed from the Belarusian military, Hummer knockoffs known as Dongfeng Mengshis. One had been designated as the lead vehicle and the other brought up the rear. In between were three Chevrolet Suburbans carrying Al-Masri, the Iranian drone instructors, and the FSB security agents.

The FSB man had mapped the most efficient routes. He had mapped alternatives. He had identified choke points and potential ambush areas—of which, unfortunately, there were many. Mykulichi was a remote village, which was why it had been chosen for the training. Because of its location, there were only so many ways in and out. It definitely hadn't been optimal, but he had continued to make the best of a bad situation.

He had pinpointed hospitals and had made detailed dossiers on each Iranian, including their blood types. He had then presented the information to his men and had made them drive the routes over and over, throwing them into different, highly unusual problems to see how they would react; challenging them to adjust.

Train like you fight and fight like you train. It was one of the oldest, truest maxims of combat. While decades ago his military instructors had been fond of quoting Chief of Staff of the Prussian Army Helmuth von Moltke, who had said that no battle plan survives after first contact with the enemy, he had preferred how American boxer Mike Tyson had phrased it—everyone has a plan until they get punched in the mouth.

The FSB man wanted his men to be able to take that punch, recalibrate, and stay in the fight. So he drilled them, relentlessly, near the point of mutiny, and then he treated them to a raucous night out. They had earned it.

His plan wasn't perfect, but given the circumstances and his limited resources, it was solid. He was confident that no matter what got thrown at them, his men would not only be able to handle it, but they would also react in a polished, professional manner. By the time the Iranians arrived, their Russian hosts were ready for them.

What they weren't ready for, however, was Harvath, his men, and the hell they were about to rain down.

On the last day of training, as the sun was slipping low toward the horizon, the Iranians and their Russian protectors clambered into their vehicles for the final drive from the testing range in Mykulichi to the hotel back in Gomel.

The Iranians were looking forward to a final night out before returning to Tehran. The Russians were looking forward to getting rid of the Iranians and completing their assignment. Neither group was going to get what they wanted.

On a narrow piece of road snaking through the thick woods, they came around a tight bend.

Once all of the vehicles were aligned, one of Harvath's teammates—an ex-Delta Force operative named Staelin—stepped out into the road. Balancing an RPG on his shoulder, he took aim and let it rip.

The weapon fired a high-explosive antitank “HEAT” munition, which was designed to penetrate the lead vehicle's armor, release a superheated jet that flaked off pieces of the metal called “spall,” and send them racing through the interior in a tornado of shrapnel. It was the equivalent of having a big, very nasty fragmentation grenade dropped through an open sunroof. Those who weren't instantly killed would be badly wounded.

The driver of the lead vehicle had barely applied pressure to his brakes when the round tore into his Dongfeng.

At the back of the column, another one of Harvath's men, a former Force Recon Marine named Haney, stepped out with the same weapon and engaged the rear armored vehicle.

As soon as the Dongfengs were taken out and Staelin and Haney had retreated a safe distance in each direction, Harvath gave the command to two more teammates—Preisler, an ex-MARSOC Marine, and Johnson, an ex-Green Beret—to commence the next wave. This part of the attack was what had given Operation Boathouse its name.

Both sides of the road had been lined with M18A1 antipersonnel weapons known as claymores.

They were mines that, via a layer of C4 explosive, fired a shit ton of steel balls in a fan-shape pattern at almost four thousand feet per second. The force of the detonation deforms the balls into something similar to a .22 projectile.

The mines had been daisy-chained together, allowing Johnson to light up one side of the road and Preisler the other. The occupants of the unarmored, soft-skinned Suburbans never stood a chance.

Weapons up and at the ready, Harvath and his team went vehicle to vehicle, making sure there were no survivors.

When Harvath got to Al-Masri, he put several extra rounds in him. He wanted there to be no doubt who, specifically, they had come for.

Once that task was complete, the team took photos and collected evidence that would allow the CIA to confirm the identities of all the dead.

The final box that needed ticking was to add a little something special on behalf of the Ukrainians. Just as they had with the Operation Boathouse codename, they had decided to once again go Hollywood.

Since the beginning of the invasion, someone had taken a cue from the classic Cold War-era movie *Red Dawn* and had been spray-painting the word *Wolverines* on destroyed Russian vehicles across Ukraine.

Pulling out their own cans of spray paint, Harvath and his teammates did the same before packing up their gear and disappearing into the woods.

CHAPTER 2

WASHINGTON, D.C.

FRIDAY

FBI supervisory special agent Joseph Carolan fumbled on the bedside table for his phone. The worst calls always came in the middle of the night.

He was a big man who stood six foot four and weighed in at two hundred and fifty pounds; a lifer who'd been at the Bureau longer than anyone could remember.

Carolan was known for his investigative skills, as well as for his zero-tolerance policy when it came to bullshit. People who wasted his time pissed him off. His coworkers referred to him as "Bear," both because of his size and because of his demeanor, which could swing anywhere from Gentle Ben to a rip-your-face-off grizzly, depending on how his day was going.

"Go for Carolan," he growled as he activated the call and pressed the phone to his ear.

The person on the other end had been well trained on how to deliver breaking news, especially to a superior whom you had just awakened. Make it quick, stick to the facts, don't speculate.

After listening for several moments, Carolan broke in, "Any press on scene yet?"

Once the question had been answered, he sat up in bed and began giving orders. "Have Metro PD fully tent the area around the body—no windows. Then have them push the perimeter out as far as they can. And if they haven't already begun canvassing the building, get it started. In the meantime, I want someone assigned to start pulling all the CCTV footage we can get our hands on. Got it? Good. Text me the address. I'll be there as soon as I can."

Disconnecting the call, Carolan placed the phone back on the nightstand and rubbed his stubbled face. Yet another morning he was going to have to skip his workout. At this rate, he was never going to shed the twenty-five pounds his doctor had been hounding him to lose.

"Coffee to go?" his wife, Margaret, offered. She had been a Bureau wife long enough to know not to ask questions. What's more, as a highly accomplished trial attorney who had known her husband since they'd both been in law school, she could read him better than anyone.

While he wouldn't publicly admit it, Joe was under tremendous stress. He had been promoted to his current position because the previous agent in his chair had suffered a massive heart attack. If there hadn't been an AED in the office, the woman would have crossed over right there.

She had gone on to flatline once more in the ambulance and then again upon arrival at the hospital. All of this in a fit, health-conscious forty-two-year-old with no underlying conditions, nor family history of heart disease, who ran four half-marathons a year.

Had it been brought on by the demands of the job? Or had something more nefarious been to blame? That's what headquarters was looking into.

So far, all of her toxicology screens had come back clean. That didn't mean, however, that there hadn't been an attempt on her life. What it meant was that nothing at this point was being ruled out. Carolan could be walking into the same set of crosshairs and had been told, in no uncertain terms, to watch his back.

The operation he had been put in charge of was codenamed "Quick Silver." It was housed in the FBI's Counterintelligence Division, specifically the Russia Operations section known in Bureau shorthand as CROS.

Operation Quick Silver had been created to root out Russian influence operations inside the United States that were designed to advance Russia's goals in Ukraine.

It was a broad purview that had the potential to reach into almost every facet of American life—the military, the media, the government... The possibilities were endless.

As such, the top brass at the FBI had been adamant that everything be done by the book and follow the exact letter of the law. All effort was to be taken to avoid embarrassing the Bureau. The last thing the FBI wanted was to hand its enemies a propaganda victory. Agents, especially those directly involved in Operation Quick Silver, were to maintain the highest levels of integrity at all times.

Carolan understood the solemnity of the situation. He didn't care what Moscow's endgame was: he didn't like the Russians trying to manipulate America, its people, or its institutions.

The problem, however, was that the internet, coupled with a fractured media landscape, made it all too possible for people to silo themselves. Too many citizens got their "news" and information only from sources that supported their biases.

There was nothing the Russians loved more than injecting poisonous propaganda into the American cultural bloodstream. The return on their investment—as Americans turned on each other and their own institutions—was off the charts. And, despite all of Russia's economic problems, it was the one area that the Kremlin was more than willing to keep pumping ever-increasing piles of cash into. As long as Americans had a bottomless, and easy-to-influence, addiction to anger, Moscow would continue serving it to them.

All of this made Carolan's job exceedingly difficult. He not only had to battle the Russians, but he also had to contend with some of his own countrymen and -women—American taxpayers—of whom he was a servant.

The fact that so many were acting as repeater stations for anti-American propaganda was a difficult pill to swallow. These otherwise good and patriotic people simply couldn't be bothered to do even a modicum of fact-checking.

While disheartening, there would always be a percentage of disengaged citizens who didn't live up to their societal responsibilities. The people who knew better, however, were the ones that really got his blood boiling.

Next to corrupt politicians, the media grifters and digital con artists were the worst in his book. These people made their living not by telling people the truth, but by telling them anything and everything they wanted to hear. No lie was too outrageous. No conspiracy too corrosive. Collectively, there was no bottom with them, no line they wouldn't cross.

What was worse, the outrage they supplied was akin to hits of heroin. Like any addictive substance, it constantly needed to be delivered in stronger and stronger doses. The moment any grifter or con artist failed to provide an ever-more-potent product, the audience would migrate to someone else who did.