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BRAAD THOR EDGE OF HONOR

A THRILLER

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EDGE OF HONOR

A THRILLER

Brad Thor

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For Gary Urda

A truly remarkable man who helped shape my career.

I remain forever grateful for his wisdom and friendship.

The alternate domination of one faction over another, sharpened by the spirit of revenge... is itself a frightful despotism.

—GEORGE WASHINGTON, FAREWELL ADDRESS, SEPTEMBER 17, 1796

CHAPTER 1

WASHINGTON, D.C.

MONDAY

Scot Harvath's six-month honeymoon had been fantastic. He and Sølvi had traveled the world and had spared no expense.

Upon landing back in the U.S., he'd introduced her to his favorite ritual. Once they had cleared passport control and Customs, he'd sought out the best cheeseburger and coldest beer he could find. *It was good to be home.*

Despite the length of their trip, it now all felt like a blur. After getting married in Oslo, they'd spent a week on the fjord; a "mini-moon" as Sølvi had called it, before buttoning up her apartment and requesting an open-ended leave of absence from the Norwegian Intelligence Service.

With those boxes ticked, they celebrated an early Christmas with her family and then hopped a flight back to the States. There they attended the christening of their goddaughter, celebrated Christmas with friends, and passed a few days as Scot tied up some of his own loose ends.

He had wanted to make a clean break with his past, which meant officially resigning from the Carlton Group—the private intelligence agency he had worked for. Once that was complete, they were free.

After visiting his aging mother on the west coast, they booked a flight to New Zealand and spent their new year chasing the sun and warm temperatures across the Southern Hemisphere.

In the spring, they headed north to Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand before dropping in on Scot's friends in India.

From there they traveled to Greece, where they rented a beautiful villa with an uninterrupted view of the sea and swam in the clearest, bluest water either of them had ever seen. On many nights, after multiple glasses of wine, there was talk of never leaving; of making this their new permanent home.

But despite how much they enjoyed the island lifestyle, they eventually grew restless and wanted to get back on the road.

They sailed to Italy next and, after exploring it thoroughly, traveled through Austria, Switzerland, and France before surrendering Europe to the throngs of summer tourists and flying back to D.C.

The crowds notwithstanding, their goal had always been to return by the Fourth of July. Sølvi was married to an American now, and outside of attending a couple of celebrations at the U.S. Embassy in Oslo, she had never properly experienced the holiday. Harvath intended to change that and to give her an Independence Day she'd never forget.

Washington, D.C., was renowned for putting on the ultimate July Fourth fireworks show. Next to the Inaugural Ball and the White House Correspondents' Association Dinner, the only thing harder to score prime seats for was the annual fireworks display.

You could drag a blanket or a couple of folding chairs down to the National Mall but it would be beyond packed. And if the Park Police caught you with any alcohol whatsoever, you'd be in front of a firing squad by morning. Not exactly Harvath's idea of a good time.

Better would be to score one of the coveted VIP invitations to watch the display from the South Lawn of the White House or the Speaker's Balcony at the U.S. Capitol.

The Canadian Embassy was also known for throwing a nice, invitation-only event on their rooftop, but Harvath was hoping not to have to "leave" the United States in order to celebrate America's birthday.

He had put a few feelers out, but with a brand-new administration having just been sworn in, he didn't have the kind of White House connections he once had. He had even less pull in Congress and the new Speaker's office.

The Fourth of July was a week from Friday. All of the swanky hotel rooftops and bars had already been sold out. Anyone who owned a boat and planned to watch the show from the water was at capacity. Short of chartering a helicopter and hovering just outside the restricted airspace, he was running out of options.

Making matters worse, Sølvi had received a pair of invites to the Norwegian ambassador's Midsummer party within days of their D.C. arrival. Apparently, being a deputy director for the NIS, even one on an open-ended leave, had its perks.

The fact that she had scored such a coveted D.C. invitation only amplified his desire to create the perfect Fourth of July experience. He was nothing if not competitive. So, too, was Sølvi.

She also had a fantastic sense of humor. If she ended up delivering the better summer celebration, he'd have to hear about it for the rest of the year. That wasn't something he was going to let happen. It was red, white, and blue—or bust.

Getting ready for the embassy Midsummer party, Sølvi had been blasting ABBA. When Scot brought up the fact that the group was from the country next-door to hers and that she was appropriating Swedish culture, she smiled and gave him the finger. Closing the door to their bedroom, she turned it up even louder.

Twenty minutes later, the music stopped, and he heard her coming down the stairs. When she stepped into the kitchen, he was blown away.

She wasn't wearing the traditional Norwegian folk dress known as a *bunad*. Instead she wore a very sexy, white sheer dress that showed off her long legs and toned, tanned arms.

Her blond hair was pulled back and up in a high ponytail, just the way Scot liked it, allowing you to see a thin blue line of script that ran from the base of her neck to the midpoint of her spine. The words were from French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre. *Il est impossible d'apprécier la lumière sans connaître les ténèbres*. It is impossible to appreciate the light without knowing the darkness.

The quote summed up Sølvi perfectly. She had known hardship and heartbreak—both in her professional and her personal lives. Instead of allowing those things to beat her down, she had used them to make herself stronger. It was one of the many things Scot loved about her. The fact that she was off-the-charts smart *and* drop-dead gorgeous didn't hurt either.

"Come here," he said, wrapping his arm around her waist and pulling her close so he could kiss her. "You look gorgeous."

"And you look very chic," she replied, kissing him back.

He pulled her in tighter. "We could just skip the party."

Sølvi laughed and gave him one last kiss before pushing him away. "Not a chance. I haven't seen you in a suit since the christening, much less a linen one. We're going to this party, and I'm going to show you off to everyone. Now grab your shoes so we can get going. I don't want us to be late."

"Vikings," he replied, rolling his eyes. "So strict."

"You have no idea what strict is." She smiled. "Believe me."

Surprising her with one last kiss, he went off in search of his shoes. Ten minutes later, they were on the George Washington Memorial Parkway, headed for D.C.

Because he was driving, he got to choose the music. His Norwegian playlist made her cringe, especially a song titled "Popular" by the Albino Superstars—a duo from a tiny village outside Oslo. The song, which was in English, had been extremely *popular* twenty years ago, back when she was in high school. She knew better than to complain, however, because whenever she did, he only turned it up louder and further exaggerated his lip-syncing. It was why, as a playful payback, she was threatening to have his windows tinted. They were both cut from the same cloth.

After torturing her for a little bit longer, he handed over his phone and told her she could play what she liked—as long as it wasn't more ABBA. Sølvi laughed, pulled up her favorite Dinah Washington album, and hit shuffle. The first song up, "My Man's an Undertaker," made them both chuckle. Gallows humor had been a psychological survival mechanism in both their respective military and espionage careers.

And while Scot didn't relish the taking of human life, he had never hesitated when it had been necessary. As his colleagues, who were also practitioners of gallows humor, were fond of saying, Scot Harvath had killed more people than cancer.

Though it was an obvious exaggeration, Sølvi knew enough about his past to know they weren't off by much. She had also seen him in action. When his friends asserted that guys like Scot didn't get PTSD—they gave it, she nodded knowingly because she understood completely what they meant.

He took few people into his confidence, and unless you knew him well, you'd have no clue as to his background, nor his fluency in violence. For all intents and purposes, he was an extremely charming and handsome man, who made more than his share of jokes and didn't seem to take anything too seriously.

A bit of that nonchalance was on display as they approached what Harvath liked to refer to as one of the most politically interesting intersections in the nation's capital—the point at which Thirty-Fourth Street T-bones Massachusetts Avenue.

The residence of the Norwegian ambassador sat on one corner, the Apostolic Nunciature of the Holy See—also known as the Vatican Embassy—sat on the other, and directly across from them both, on an almost perfectly round, heavily fortified, seventy-two-acre wooded parcel, was the United States Naval Observatory.

In addition to its many horological and astronomical functions, the observatory campus was best known for housing the official residence of the Vice President of the United States.

As Scot and Sølvi Harvath sat idling in traffic, waiting for the light to change, they observed a large protest taking place outside the gates.

"What's going on over there?" Sølvi asked, reading some of the placards and banners aloud. "*Stick to the plan! The voters have spoken! Keep your promises!*"

Glancing across the street, Scot replied, "Democracy in action."

"Obviously. But what are they actually protesting?"

“No clue.”

She looked at him. “You sound like you don’t care.”

He didn’t. Their honeymoon had been a wonderful break from politics. He hadn’t picked up a paper, turned on a TV, or logged onto a website the entire time. He couldn’t remember the last time that he’d been that relaxed.

“Welcome to D.C.,” he replied. “We get protests here every day.”

“Sure, but this is a relatively big one. Why aren’t there more police?”

It was a fair question.

After scanning the immediate area, he pointed to an unmarked white van with smoked windows and government plates. “The cops have backup. They’re just keeping it quiet. Believe me, they’re not going to let things get out of hand, especially not this close to the Vice President’s Residence.”

“In Norway,” Sølvi chided him, “we wouldn’t *let* them get this close to the Vice President’s Residence.”

She loved to play this game. Everything—it didn’t matter what—was always better back in Scandinavia.

Scot laughed. “A,” he stated: “Norway doesn’t have a vice president. And B, even if it did, why would anyone in the world’s most perfect country ever protest anything?”

It was an excellent response. “See?” she replied with a smile. “My friends didn’t believe me, but I told them, *he’s teachable*.”

He was about to add “And great in bed” when he noticed two men in hooded sweatshirts, carrying black backpacks and wearing face masks and sunglasses, step away from the crowd.

Even before they had tossed their backpacks under the van, his instincts had kicked in and he knew what was about to happen. There was no way that he’d be able to punch through the traffic in time.

Instead, he yelled at Sølvi to “Get down!” and, unbuckling his seat belt, threw himself on top of her, covering her body with his.

Less than a second later, the bombs exploded, lifting his nearly six-thousand-pound Tahoe clean off the ground.

CHAPTER 2

The synchronized blasts shattered the vehicle's windows, showering the interior with broken glass. Scot prayed to God that Sølvi hadn't been injured.

"Are you okay?" he yelled over the ringing in his ears, fumbling with her seat belt.

She was dazed and it took a moment for her to respond. "I'm all right," she finally answered, flashing him the thumbs-up.

The unmistakable odor of lit gasoline and burning rubber filled the air. They needed to move. There could be another explosion coming.

"We're going to exit out your door," he instructed, as he unbuckled her and reached for the handle. "In three, two—"

He stopped just as he got to the number one and was about to open the door. The sharp cracks of gunfire, even with the ringing in his ears, were unmistakable.

"Stay down!" he shouted.

With bullets flying, they were sitting ducks inside a thin-skinned vehicle. Movement was life. They needed to get off the X.

Rolling off his armrest, he popped the center console lid, handed the SIG Sauer pistol and two extra mags beneath it to Sølvi, and then opened the console vault underneath that and pulled out his most readily accessible "truck gun."

It was a compact, highly maneuverable personal defense weapon, or PDW for short, known as a Raider 365.

“When I say go, I want you to get out and position yourself behind the engine block,” he said, springing the stock and making sure a round was chambered. “Understand?”

Sølvi nodded.

As she prepared to open her door and bail out, Harvath popped up in the driver’s seat and identified three more men in hooded sweatshirts, wearing face masks and sunglasses. They were armed with short-barreled, automatic weapons. But it wasn’t their rifles that sent a chill down his spine. It was their tactics.

While one of them fired into the crowd, the other two covered his flanks, engaging the surviving police officers. They fired in tight, controlled pairs—two shots in rapid succession—delivering their hits quickly and precisely. Whoever these men were, they were professionals.

Harvath seated the Raider’s stock against his shoulder and shouted “Go!” as he brought the weapon up and began firing.

With bodies dropping left and right, there was no time to develop a formal plan. As soon as he had a sight picture, he engaged the first target, pumping two rounds into his back, before moving quickly to the next shooter and repeating the process.

There was just one problem. Neither man went down.

Body armor, Harvath thought to himself. As soon as the thought entered his mind, he began adjusting his aim.

Center mass was the biggest and easiest part of the body to hit. The moment you panned down for shots in the leg or panned up for headshots, the degree of difficulty skyrocketed.

Not only were the shots he needed to make much harder, but he had also blown his element of surprise.

As the two men he had shot spun and began putting rounds on his Tahoe, he knew he was in big trouble.

“They’re wearing body armor!” he yelled to Sølvi. “I’m coming to you. Give me some cover fire.”

As she peeked above the hood of the SUV and began shooting at the attackers, Harvath scrambled out of the vehicle and joined her.

While their situation had improved by putting the heavy Chevy engine between them and their opponents, it hadn't improved by much.

"Reloading!" Sølvi shouted as she crouched back down and inserted a fresh magazine into her pistol.

The Tahoe rocked back and forth as it was riddled with a withering barrage of bullets. From the sound of the gunfire, Harvath could tell the shooters were getting closer. They were crossing the street, walking their rounds in, determined to eliminate the threat. He signaled to Sølvi what he wanted her to do.

The two flankers may have been bold enough to traverse the street, but that didn't cancel out any of the other facts on the ground. They still needed to keep their heads on swivels and deal with anyone else who popped up and began shooting at them.

That was why Harvath had decided not to pop up—at least not immediately. Removing his left hand from his weapon, he squeezed Sølvi's shoulder.

As he did, she dropped to her left side, pointed her pistol beneath the SUV, and began shooting at the boots of the approaching attackers. That was when Harvath leapt up and, leaning across the hood, began putting his own rounds on the men.

He was aiming for anything he could get—from the upper torso, above where the body armor stopped, all the way up the throat, into the facial area, including the forehead.

He nailed the first shooter with a shot to the suprasternal notch right between his clavicles and a second round through his lower jaw.

The second man had already been dropped to his knees by Sølvi. While she continued to pump rounds into his lower extremities, Harvath double-tapped him in the back of the head.

With the third shooter still firing at the protesters, there was no time to waste.

Coming out from behind the SUV, Harvath moved past the two shooters, giving them each a final headshot, just to be sure.

As he did, the third shooter spun, catching Harvath out in the open. But before he could fire, Sølvi, having once again swapped in a fresh mag, began painting a racing stripe of 9mm rounds right up his torso from her new position at the back of the Tahoe.

With the bullets bouncing off his body armor, the man jerked his rifle to the right and was just about to fire when Harvath let loose with his own volley of controlled pairs.

The first two rounds ripped open the side of the shooter's neck, while the next bullet tore through the base of his skull, followed by a final shot through his left ear. He was dead before his body even hit the ground.

Nevertheless, Harvath gave him an additional shot to the head and kicked his weapon away. Changing his own magazine, he was about to yell for Sølvi to grab the medical bag out of the back of his SUV so they could render aid to the injured protesters when he heard her begin to fire her pistol again. Spinning to his right, he saw two more shooters. They were the same men he had seen place the bomb-laden backpacks under the van.

Sølvi drilled one man in the lower abdomen beneath his body armor and then put a round through the other man's hip, shattering his pelvis. As they staggered forward, Harvath shot each of them in the head.

Quickly, he scanned for more threats. Then he saw it.

A sixth, hooded man had his head down and was walking, not running like the rest of the civilians, away from the chaos. He wasn't carrying a weapon that Harvath could see, but both of his hands were hidden in the pouch of his sweatshirt.

In the distance, police sirens could be heard approaching from all directions. He had no intention of letting this guy get away.

"You!" he shouted, raising his PDW. "Black sweatshirt. Stop where you are. Let me see your hands."

The man ignored him and kept walking.

“Black sweatshirt!” Harvath repeated, picking up his pace. “Show me your hands! Do it now!”

The man began to move faster as well.

“Black sweatshirt! Last chance! Freeze!”

For a moment it looked like the man was about to break into a sprint, but instead he pulled a Glock from his sweatshirt pouch, turned, and fired three rounds in rapid succession.

Harvath dove for the pavement.

As he did, the man took off.

Getting up on one knee, Harvath reshouldered his weapon and took aim. Pressing his trigger, he let loose with two rounds low and two rounds high.

One caught the man in the back of his left leg. Another hit him in the back of his left shoulder. The moment the bullets found their targets, everything changed.

Harvath leapt to his feet as the man stumbled and almost went down. But instead of continuing along the street, the man cut across the pavement and jumped the waist-high, wrought-iron fence of the Norwegian ambassador’s residence. Landing in the grass on the other side, he quickly disappeared from view.

Seconds later, there was the sound of more gunfire, as well as glass being shattered. It only took Harvath a moment to figure out what was going on.

Unable to escape on foot, this guy was either looking for a vehicle he could steal, or he had breached the residence and was looking to take hostages.

Arriving at the fence, Harvath could see across the empty driveway and right up to the shattered glass and iron front door.

Inside the residence, two of the Ambassador’s security detail were down. There was only one thing Harvath could do.

CHAPTER 3

Leaping the fence, Harvath ran across the driveway and, gun at the ready, stepped over the bodies and into the residence.

He didn't need anyone to tell him which way to go. The man he was after had left a bright red trail of blood for him to follow.

It stretched across the polished marble floor of the entry foyer and up a sweeping staircase.

The security agents wore earpieces, which would have connected to radios beneath their suitcoats. Had they had enough time to radio colleagues for help? The embassy was only just behind the residence. Or had it gone into a full lockdown?

There was no way of knowing. And waiting wasn't an option. The shooter couldn't be allowed to get away. He also couldn't be allowed to hurt anyone else.

It was at that moment that Harvath heard another gunshot, followed by a scream from somewhere on the floor above.

Mounting the stairs, he took them two at a time as he kept his back to the curved wall and his gun pointed up.

When he hit the second-floor landing, he followed the blood spatter straight ahead into a large, empty reception space. It wasn't a surprise to find it empty. According to Sølvi, the Midsummer party, which would already have been in full swing, was taking place outside, in the embassy's grass courtyard.

His own head on a swivel, he quickly passed through the reception space into an elegantly appointed, formal dining room.

The blood trailed off to the far corner and what appeared to be a service door of some sort, likely leading to a kitchen.

Harvath quickly crossed the room and paused at the door, listening. A woman's voice could be heard from the other side. She spoke with the same accented English as Sølvi and, for a moment, his heart stopped cold in his chest. But there was no way she could have beaten him here and gotten all the way upstairs. It was either a member of the staff or...

Harvath didn't want to go where his mind was leading, and he pushed the thought from his head.

Admittedly, however, there was one big thing in the plus column right now. Whoever the woman was, she was alive. It was his job to make sure that she stayed that way.

Taking a step back, he rapidly scanned the door. It had double-action hinges, allowing it to swing open and closed in both directions. Gently, he leaned against it with his shoulder, opening it just enough to peer into the next room.

It was a commercial-grade kitchen, lined with stainless-steel appliances. On the floor, just past the center island, a man in a white chef's coat was bleeding out. Crouched next to him was the one person, after Sølvi, he had hoped not to see—the Norwegian ambassador.

As she applied pressure to the chef's wound and tried to stop the bleeding, she was attempting to negotiate with the shooter to let them go.

Why she and the chef were in the residence while the Midsummer party was happening next door was beyond him. An event of this size would have been catered and staged out of the embassy. None of that, however, mattered now. What mattered was eliminating the threat just inside the kitchen—a threat Harvath couldn't yet see.

The crack in the door offered a limited field of view. If he was going to get a bead on the shooter, he was going to have to open it farther. But as soon as

he did that, he would be running an even greater risk of exposure. He didn't need to dwell on it. There was no other option.

Using the Ambassador as his guide, he tracked where she looked when she spoke to the shooter and edged the door, millimeter by millimeter until he could see the edge of the killer's sweatshirt. The man was partially obscured by a set of metal shelving.

Blessed with the element of surprise, Harvath would easily be able to get a shot off, but it would have to avoid both the shelving and the man's body armor, and even then, might not do any good.

Without a flash-bang or some other means to create a distraction, surprise was all he had going for him.

That said, the shooter knew Harvath had been on his tail. He had to be expecting someone to burst through the kitchen door at any moment. By bleeding all over the place, he had drawn Harvath right to him. Hopefully, the man had lost enough blood to slow down his reaction time. Any advantage would help. And as Harvath knew, action beat reaction every time. Taking a deep breath, he prayed that would be true right now.

Adjusting his weapon, he applied pressure to his trigger and exhaled as he pushed open the door the rest of the way and rushed into the kitchen.

He got off four shots, unsure of where they'd struck, before the man raised his own weapon and returned fire. Harvath dove for the floor and used the island for concealment.

As soon as he hit the tiles, he began moving. Crawling forward, he made his way toward the Ambassador and the chef. He could see the latter's leather clogs only a couple of feet ahead. That was when he heard the Ambassador scream again.

"I'm going to shoot her!" the killer bellowed. By the sound of his voice, he was in a lot of pain and was having trouble breathing. "Toss your gun where I can see it. Then stand up. Slowly. If you don't, I swear I'll kill her."

He had no doubt the man was telling him the truth.

With no time to come up with a better plan, he transitioned his weapon to his left hand and snatched a Norwegian cooking device he had seen Sølvi's