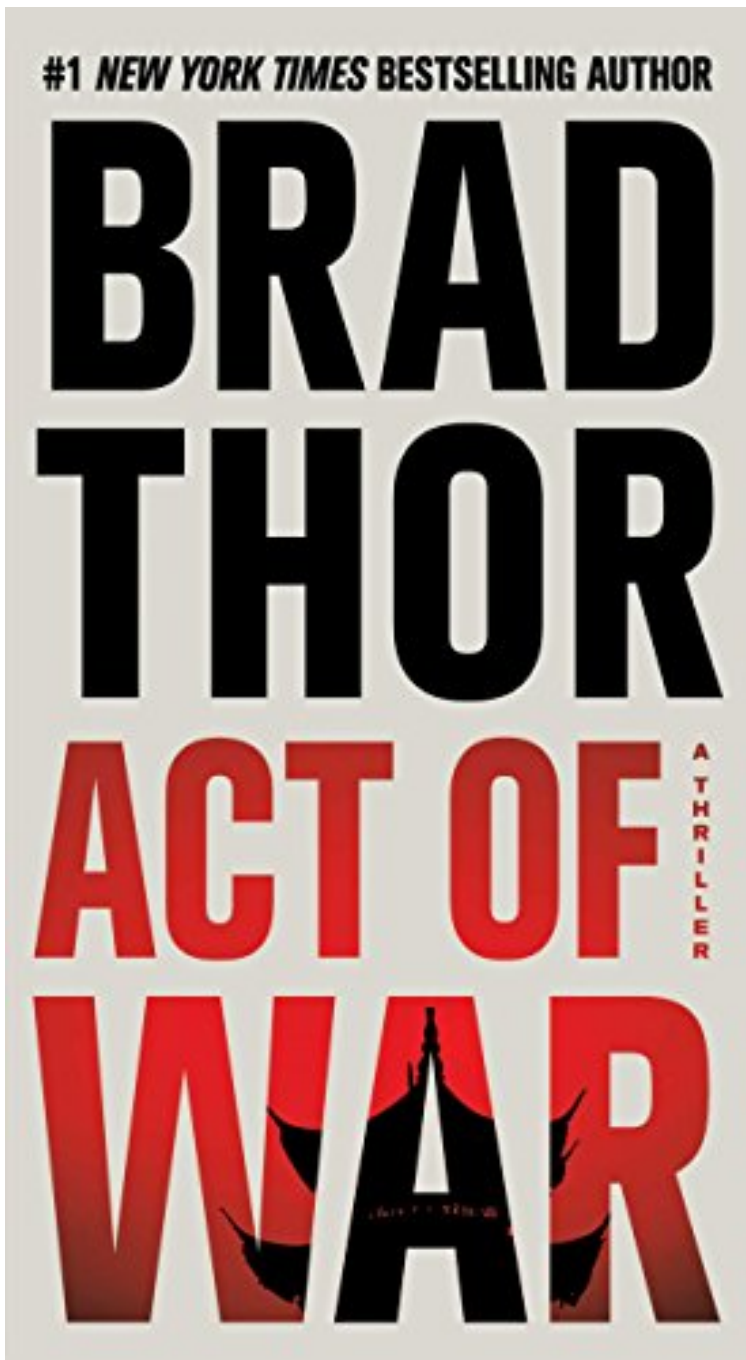


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Act of War: A Thriller



Par Brad Thor
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteur#1 New York Times bestselling author Brad Thor delivers his most frightening and pulse-pounding thriller ever!After a CIA agent mysteriously dies overseas, his top asset surfaces with a startling and terrifying claim. Theres just one problemno one knows if she can be trusted. But when six

exchange students go missing, two airplane passengers trade places, and one political-asylum seeker is arrested, a deadly chain of events is set in motion. With the United States facing an imminent and devastating attack, Americas new president must turn to covert counterterrorism operative Scot Harvath to help carry out two of the most dangerous operations in the countrys history. Code-named "Gold Dust" and "Blackbird," they are shrouded in absolute secrecy as either of them, if discovered, will constitute an act of war.

Extrait Act of War PROLOGUE HONG KONG ONE WEEK AGO The air was thick with humidity. Oppressive. Typical for this time of year. It was monsoon season and stepping outside was like stepping into a steam room. Within half a block the man was sweating. By the intersection, his clothes were sticking to his body. The Glock tucked behind his right hip was slick with perspiration. Guns, money, and a bunch of high-tech gear. Just like something out of a movie. Except it wasnt. This was real. Turning right, he headed into the large open-air market. It looked as if a car bomb packed with neon paint cans had detonated. Everything, even the luminous birds in their impossibly small cages, was aggressively vivid. The smells ran the gamut from ginger and garlic to the putrid gutter oil dredged up from restaurant sewers and grease traps by many street cooks. There were rusted pails of live crabs, buckets of eels, and shallow bowls of water filled with fish. Men and women haggled over oranges and peppers, raw pork and chicken. Like the first spring snowmelt snaking along a dry, rock-strewn riverbed, Ken Harmon moved through the market. He focused on nothing, but saw everything every cigarette lit, every newspaper raised, every cell phone dialed. The sounds of the neighborhood poured into his ears as a cacophony and were identified, analyzed, sorted, and stored.

The movements of his body, the functioning of his senses, were all conducted with calm, professional economy. The Central Intelligence Agency hadnt sent him to Hong Kong to panic. In fact, it had sent him to Hong Kong precisely because he didnt panic. There was enough of that back in Washington already; and along with it, the repatriated body of David Cahill. Cahill had been an Agency NOC based in Shanghai. An Ivy League blueblood type, who knew all the right people and went to all the right parties. He saw things in black and white. Gray areas were for professional liars, like diplomats and men who lacked the testicular fortitude to call evil by its name when they saw it. For Cahill, there was a lot of evil in the world, especially in China. That was why he had learned to speak the language and requested his posting there. As a NOC, or more specifically an agent operating under nonofficial cover, he wasnt afforded the diplomatic immunity enjoyed by other CIA operatives working out of an embassy or consulate. Cahill had been a spy, a true secret agent. And he had been very good at his job. He had built a strong human network in China, with assets in the Chinese Communist Party, the Peoples Liberation Army, and even the Chinese intelligence services. Via his contacts, Cahill had been on to something, something with serious national security implications for the United States. Then, one night, while meeting with one of his top assets, he dropped dead of a heart attack right in front of her. The asset was a DJ out of Shanghai named Mingxia. Her parties were some of the best in China. Celebrities, drugs, beautiful women they had everything. And it was those parties that had propelled her into the circles of Chinas rich and powerful. She was not without her share of troubles, though, and that had made her ripe for recruitment by Cahill. But when he died, Mingxia dropped off the face of the earth. The CIA couldnt find her anywhere. They wanted answers and they had turned over every stone looking for her. Then, two weeks later, she had reappeared. It was via an emergency communications channel Cahill had established for her a message board in an obscure forum monitored by Langley. But since her disappearance, speculation at the CIA had gone into overdrive. Did the Chinese have her? Had Cahill been burned? Had the woman been involved in his death? Was this a trap? She allegedly had information about a crippling attack being planned against the United States, but nobody knew if they could trust her. The Agency was desperate for information. And so it had called Ken Harmon. Harmon wasnt a polished Ivy Leaguer like Cahill. He was tall, built like a brick shithouse, and he didnt attend fancy parties. He usually drank alone in the decrepit back-alley bars of some of the worst hellholes in the world. He was a rough man with few attachments and only one purpose. When someone somewhere pushed the panic button, Harmon was what showed up. He had decided to meet the asset in Hong Kong. It made more sense than Shanghai and was much safer than Beijing, especially for a white guy. Harmon had chosen the coffee shop. A Starbucks knockoff. It was busy, with the right mix of Chinese and Anglos. People chatted on cell phones and pecked away at keyboards. They had buds in their ears and listened to music or watched videos on their devices. Whatever happened to a cup of coffee and a newspaper? Hell, he thought, whatever happened to newspapers? There was a front door and a back door, which meant two ways out, three if you counted kicking out the window in the womens bathroom leading to a narrow ventilation shaft. The mens bathroom was a death box. There was no escape if you got trapped back there. Harmon didnt plan on getting trapped.

A net of human surveillance had been thrown over the neighborhood. Hed picked out a couple of them. Men who were too fit and too clean-cut. They were Agency muscle, exspecial operations types. They were excellent with a gun and terrific to have on your team if things went sideways, but they were too visible and Harmon had requested no babysitters. His request, though, had been ignored. He had also asked that they buy the woman a plane ticket so he could conduct the meeting in a nice, anonymous airline lounge out at Hong Kong International. It was a controlled environment. Much harder to bring weapons in. Easier to spot trouble before it happened. Tradecraft 101. That request had also been ignored. Langley felt the airport was too controlled and therefore too easy for the Chinese to tilt in their favor. The CIA wanted a public location with multiple evacuation routes. They had cars, safe houses, changes of clothes, medical equipment, fake passports, and even a high-speed boat on standby. They had thought of every contingency and had built plans for each. That was how worried they were. Stepping inside, Harmon scanned the caf. The air-conditioning felt like being hooked up to a bottle of pure, crisp oxygen. He grabbed a paper napkin and starting at the top of his shaved head, wiped all the way down the back of his thick neck. He ordered a Coke in a can, no ice. He had learned the hard way about ice in foreign countries. Paying in cash, he took his can over to the service station where he gathered up a few items, and then found a table. It was set back from the window, but not so far back that he couldnt watch the door and what was happening outside on the street. He carried no electronics. No laptop, no cell phone, no walkie-talkie. He carried no ID. Beside his large-caliber Glock, spare magazines, and a knife, there was nothing on his person that could connect him to anything, anyone, or anywhere. That was how professionals worked. Removing a small bill from his pocket, he folded it into the shape Mingxia had been told to look for. A heart. He could do swans, too, but everybody did swans. It was the first thing you learned. He normally did hearts when meeting female assets. It was something different. Some of them liked it. Some didnt. He didnt care. A heart was just a heart. When it was finished, he set it atop a white napkin. It was unique, but low-key, nothing that could be noticed from the street. In fact, you might only notice it as you walked by the table on the way to the ladies room and even then, only if you were looking for it. An hour later, the woman arrived and slowed as she passed the table. It wasnt much, but it was enough to tell him that she had seen it. While Mingxia was in the bathroom, Harmon scanned the caf and the street outside. He sipped his second Coke and flipped through one of the free tourist magazines that littered every caf and fast-food restaurant in Hong Kong. When Mingxia left the bathroom and passed his table again, she found the heart sitting by itself. The napkin had been removed. All clear. She hadnt been followed inside. It was safe to sit down. Ordering herself a tea from the counter, she took the table next to his. She was attractive. Better looking than the photo Cahill had included in her file. He could see why he had recruited her. According to the dossier, she had family somewhere that needed the money. They always did. Harmon didnt want to know about it. He wasnt here to date her, just to debrief her, and if necessary, help smuggle her out of China. He was glad she spoke English. Reaching into her purse, Mingxia removed the glasses Cahill had given her and placed them on the bench between them. Harmon had been shown how to use them before leaving the United States. He wasnt a fan, though they were better than the earlier versions Google had developed for the Agency. The Lego-brick-sized projector had been replaced with one about the size of a staple. Even so, the glasses were still too sci-fi for his taste. It was a better method of sharing information, though, than trading briefcases under the table or being passed an envelope full of reports and surveillance photos. The glasses also had a one-button delete function that scrubbed all the data if it looked like they were about to fall into the wrong hands. Slipping them on, Harmon turned his attention back to his magazine and pretended to read it. As the information scrolled across the inside of the lens, his mind began connecting the dots. Are you positive about all of this? he asked. Yes, Mingxia replied. They would, of course, need more than just her word for it. But if this was true, the United States was in trouble. Big trouble. Whats this bit in Chinese that keeps popping up? he said. Xu Lng? Its the codename for the operation. What does it mean? Xu Lng is a mythical Chinese creature said to bring darkness, cold, and death. Whats the translation? In English, it would be called a snow dragon.

Act of War CHAPTER 1
WASHINGTON, D.C., WHITE HOUSE SITUATION ROOM The Secretary of Defense cleared his throat. Mr. President, with your permission, Id also like to suggest we move some Fifth Fleet assets out of the Mediterranean and over to the Seventh Fleet in the Pacific. We should consider positioning additional bombers in the region as well, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs added. The President studied the array of images displayed throughout the room. He had expected to be tested during his presidency, just not this soon and not to such a degree. Paul Porter was a two-term governor who had won election by playing to the best in Americans. He was an affable man in his early sixties. A tall, trim outdoorsman with a weather-

beaten face, Porter looked as if he would have been just as at home leading fly-fishing trips in Montana as occupying the most powerful office in the world. He was known for telling the truth, especially when it was hard. He never took the politically expedient route of only telling people the parts they wanted to hear. America could no longer afford to be given half the story. Porter had campaigned on helping to bring about a brighter, more prosperous future for the nation. He had promised an America at peace with itself and the world. But those things, like anything worth having, would require work. The phrase we must act today in order to preserve tomorrow had become a hallmark of his speeches. He liked to paraphrase Founding Father Dr. Joseph Warren and remind Americans that the liberty of all future generations depended upon what they did today. It was an appropriate call to action, which, in light of what they had learned, had just taken on much deeper significance. First things first, the President replied, flipping to the page he wanted in his briefing book. Whos our China expert here? All eyes shifted to the CIA's senior China analyst, a woman named Stephanie Esposito. I am, Mr. President, she said, raising her hand. She was nervous. She had never briefed a president before. Agent Esposito, is it? Yes, Mr. President. I understand you were quite insistent that this briefing include information on the Chinese concept of unrestricted warfare. Yes, sir. I was. Why? Because I believe it is the single most important doctrine they've developed in the modern era. It informs everything they do, especially Snow Dragon. The President agreed. For those in the room who aren't familiar with unrestricted warfare, will you please explain what it is? Yes, Mr. President, Esposito replied. China sees the United States as its number-one enemy. The defense minister, General Chi Quamyou, has stated that war with the United States is inevitable and can't be avoided. At the same time, China understands that they can't defeat the United States on the conventional battlefield. We're too technologically advanced. But in the words of the Peoples Liberation Army chief of staff, General Fu Haotian, the inferior can defeat the superior. It can only be done, though, by throwing out the rule book, which is actually what two very dangerous PLA colonels did back in the 1990s. By abandoning the traditional concept of warfare, Colonels Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui completely reinvented China's view of warfare and of itself. How so? In their doctrine of unrestricted warfare, Liang and Xiangsui rejected the idea that China was required to meet the U.S. on any conventional battlefield. Why fight in a manner in which you know you'll lose? Instead, the colonels proposed that China only fight battles they knew they could win. Merciless, unconventional attacks are at the very heart of their philosophy. In fact, Colonel Liang has been quoted as saying that the first rule of unrestricted warfare is that there are no rules. Anything goes. Bombs in movie theaters, collapsing America's electrical grid, taking down the Internet, poisoning our food or water supplies, dirty bombs, chemical or biological attacks—nothing is beyond the pale in their new philosophy. It also gives China the edge. We'll never see them coming. There won't be mass troop mobilizations or anything like that. In fact, unrestricted warfare renders planes, soldiers, and tanks almost totally unnecessary in the traditional sense. But someone still needs to carry out the attacks, the President's Chief of Staff interjected. Esposito nodded. Correct. While the PLA has millions of hackers who can mask the origin of their cyberattacks, physical attacks on the United States are different. That's why Liang and Xiangsui advocated funding, equipping, and deploying third parties whenever possible. They singled out Muslim terrorists as an excellent proxy. Everyone around the table looked at one another. Understand that the key for China is to never be attached to any attack. A third party, that probably wouldn't even know it was doing China's bidding, affords China plausible deniability. The world would have a perfect bad guy to blame and China would be able to avoid any international repercussions. For any of our allies to take action, there would have to be rock-solid proof that China was behind the attack on the United States. And even then, the Vice President added, some of our allies wouldn't have the stomach for it. It'd be the start of World War III. That's what China is counting on, Esposito replied. The Director of Homeland Security shook his head. I still can't believe China would risk everything to attack us. What for? Esposito looked at the President, who nodded for her to respond. The Chinese are extremely deliberate and pragmatic, she said. They can see the writing before anyone else has even seen the wall. Mr. Director, they're dying. Their air is polluted. Their water is polluted. They have cut down their timber and have mined all of their minerals. Less than 5 percent of China has arable land left suitable for agriculture. The investments they made in North Africa have been a complete bust. In fact, they've taken substantial losses. The mines there didn't even produce a fraction of what they had projected. And during all this, China's population has continued to expand while its economy has continued to slow. Every day, China experiences riots and mass social unrest that never makes it into international news. There's not enough work in the cities and the peasants who return to the country are starving to death. In some desperate, lawless areas, reports of occultism and even cannibalism are starting to leak out. As conditions

deteriorate, China, like North Korea, has become a hotbed of new, drug-resistant diseases that threaten the entire world. About which they routinely lie to WHO and other international health organizations. The Chinese know that its not daylight theyre seeing at the end of their tunnel. Its a train heading right at them. So their answer is to come steal our resources? Thats just it. The Chinese dont see it as stealing. They see it as surviving. Anything that assures Chinas survival is not only acceptable, its imperative. Even if it means war? Esposito nodded and the President thanked her. He then turned to the Director of National Intelligence. Against that background, lets address what the CIA learned in Hong Kong. Thank you, Mr. President, the DNI said as he turned toward the other members of the National Security Council. As you all have been made aware, a CIA asset with access to high-ranking members within the Peoples Liberation Army and Chinas Ministry of State Security has learned of a potential attack on the United States, codenamed Snow Dragon. While the asset was not able to ascertain the date or methodology, the attack is believed to be imminent. The Chinese have projected a 90 percent fatality rate within one year, which leads us to believe were looking at something nuclear or biological in nature. Missiles? the Attorney General asked. The DNI shook his head. We dont think so. According to the intelligence acquired by the CIA, the Chinese used a cutout named Ismail Kashgari from the Uighur region to approach an Al Qaeda fixer in Pakistan named Ahmad Yaqub. Our belief is that Yaqub was hired to staff the operation. The Uighur area borders Afghanistan, doesnt it? asked the Director of Homeland Security. Cant we get to this Kashgari character? Hes dead, the DNI replied. We believe the Chinese killed him to cover up their involvement. What about Ahmad Yaqub? Can we get to him? Yes, replied the President. We have actionable intelligence on Yaqubs whereabouts. A mission plan is being developed as we speak. Do we have any leads beyond this Ahmad Yaqub? the Attorney General asked. Theres one more, replied the DNI. According to the CIAs asset, the Chinese have been training some kind of special PLA detachment in North Korea. Whats so special about it? the Director of Homeland Security asked. We believe it is a landing force of some type, training to come in after the attack. As you can see on the screens, the area they are supposedly training in has been netted over. We cant see what theyre up to. If we could get eyes on, we believe we might be able to learn more about the nature of the attack. How would you go about that? Wed insert a four-man SEAL reconnaissance and surveillance team, the Secretary of Defense replied. The Attorney General was a bit taken aback. Into North Korea? He nodded. Looking at the Secretary of State, the AG asked, Where do you stand on all of this? The Secretary of State took a moment to collect his thoughts before speaking. I stand with the President, but I have a couple of concerns. Such as? Weve been able to confirm some of the intelligence the CIA received, but its still largely single-source. Thats dangerous. We dont know if this is officially the Peoples Republic of China at work. It could be a rogue element from somewhere within their intelligence service, the military, or even the Chinese Communist Party. We just dont know. Which is exactly why the North Korea and Ahmad Yaqub operations are necessary, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs stated. If it makes it easier, consider them fact-finding missions. With guns and Spec Ops personnel. These arent trips to Disneyland, Mr. Secretary. The Secretary of State took in a deep breath, puffed out his cheeks, and then slowly exhaled in exasperation. My job is diplomacy and Id prefer diplomatic channels, but the President is right. We cant let the Chinese know we suspect them. All eyes shifted to Porter. As great as the risks were, the greatest risk lay in doing nothing. Both operations needed to go forward. There was no other course a responsible leader could choose to take. Nodding to his Director of National Intelligence and Secretary of Defense, he said, Im green-lighting them. The men immediately reached for secure telephones. Blackbird is a go, the Director of National Intelligence said into his. Moments later, the Secretary of Defenses call was answered. Were go for Operation Gold Dust, he confirmed. Blackbird and Gold Dust were codenames randomly created by the CIA and DoD for two missions that might save America from an unspeakable attack, or a deadly, all-out war. After they had discussed what military assets could be repositioned without tipping their hand to the Chinese, the meeting was adjourned. As his national security team filed out of the Situation Room, the President asked the Secretary of the Treasury to remain behind. There was an additional piece of intelligence the CIA had collected, but that had been excluded from the briefing. Once they were alone, the President spoke. Dennis, I want you to do something for me and you need to be very quiet about it. *Revue de presse* Praise for Brad Thor: 'Brad Thor is as current as tomorrow's headlines' Dan Brown 'Brad Thor writes thrillers as plausible as they are terrifying. A must-read for our times!' James Rollins, New York Times bestselling author of Black Order and The Judas Strain Praise for Hidden Order: 'One of Brad Thor's best books to date' Washington Post '[A] great, great thriller' Rush Limbaugh 'Thriller writer Brad Thor is

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