



Back Blast (A Gray Man Novel Book 5)

By Mark Greaney

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From Mark Greaney, the #1 *New York Times* bestselling coauthor of Tom Clancy's Jack Ryan novels, comes the fifth explosive thriller featuring the lethal assassin known as the Gray Man...

Five years ago, Court Gentry was the CIA's best covert asset. Then, without warning, his masters at the Agency put him at the top of their kill list. Court fled his country and became an enigmatic killer for hire known as the Gray Man.

Determined to find out what made the Agency turn against him, he plans to get his hands on the men who sent him on his last mission, Operation BACK BLAST. What he doesn't realize is that the questions that arose from his time as an American assassin are still reverberating in the U.S. intelligence community, and he's stumbled onto a secret that powerful people want kept under wraps.

The result: everyone has Court in their crosshairs...

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Back Blast (A Gray Man Novel Book 5) By Mark Greaney Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #2066 in eBooks
- Published on: 2016-02-16
- Released on: 2016-02-16
- Format: Kindle eBook

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Editorial Review

Review

“I LOVE THE GRAY MAN.”—#1 *New York Times* bestselling author Lee Child

“BOURNE FOR THE NEW MILLENNIUM.”—*New York Times* bestselling author James Rollins

Praise for *Back Blast*

“Mark Greaney reigns as one of the recognized masters of action and adventure. *Back Blast* is no exception.”—*New York Times* and #1 internationally bestselling author Steve Berry

“Fast-paced [and] tightly written...A great ride.”—*New York Times* bestselling author Larry Bond

“Takes the best of Clancy and Ludlum and mixes them into a fantastic story with an unforgettable character.”—James O. Born, author of *Scent of Murder*

“A blistering thriller that builds to a soaring and explosive climax. Fast, tough, enthralling, and the best so far in the amazing Gray Man series.”—Bestselling author David Bell

“Punches with bone-busting power...Flesh-and-blood priceless.”—*New York Times* bestselling author Stephen Templin

“Greaney is a master among the top thriller writers in the world...Intense, explosive, daring, funny, and ultimately just flat out awesome.”—*New York Times* bestselling author Ben Coes

“Greaney’s unraveling of the Back Blast mystery is masterly, but it’s the Gray Man’s ability to outthink and outgun...that will keep readers glued to the pages.”—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

“[A] high-energy thriller...Clancy fans will have a blast.”—*Kirkus Reviews*

About the Author

Mark Greaney has a degree in international relations and political science. In his research for the Gray Man novels, including *Gunmetal Gray*, *Back Blast*, *Dead Eye*, *Ballistic*, *On Target*, and *The Gray Man*, he traveled to more than fifteen countries and trained alongside military and law enforcement in the use of firearms, battlefield medicine, and close-range combative tactics. He is also the author of the *New York Times* bestsellers *Tom Clancy Support and Defend*, *Tom Clancy Full Force and Effect*, *Tom Clancy Commander in Chief*, and *Tom Clancy True Faith and Allegiance*. With Tom Clancy, he coauthored *Locked On*, *Threat Vector*, and *Command Authority*.

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This excerpt is from an advance uncorrected proof

A dimly lit street in the center of Washington Highlands was a hell of a place for a nighttime stroll.

The Highlands were in the southeastern corner of the District, over the Anacostia River in Ward Eight. Full of high-rise government housing, low-income apartment complexes, and derelict single-family homes on tiny lots strewn with garbage, Ward Eight had been the second most dangerous ward in the District behind Ward Seven, but it had recently retaken the lead thanks to a triple murder in the last week of the reporting period.

But despite the late hour and the area's infamous reputation, a lone pedestrian ambled calmly through the misty evening, heading north on Atlantic Street SE as if he didn't have a care in the world. He walked along a broken sidewalk, catching the glow of most all of the streetlamps that had not been shot out or burned out and left black by a city that didn't give a damn about its poorest residents. He wore blue jeans and a wrinkled blue blazer, his dark brown hair was tousled and damp, and a clean-shaven face revealed him as white, which, around here, at this time of night, meant he was probably up to no good.

It was ten p.m., and the neighborhood appeared devoid of any life other than the solo pedestrian. But while the street itself was barren, several sets of eyes tracked the man's movements. Astonished senior citizens looked out from behind their barred apartment windows. A single mother up with a sick kid watched through the bolted Plexiglas door of her duplex unit with a wince of regret, knowing good and well the damn fool in the street was going to get rolled at best and murdered at worst. And a teen with a cell phone on a darkened stoop of an apartment building watched the man carefully, reporting what he saw to an acquaintance at the other end of the connection with hopes of collecting a finder's fee if his friend showed up with a crew and beat every last item of value off of the hapless outsider.

But the teen and his friend were out of luck, because another group of predators were closer, and they also had their eyes on this target of opportunity.

Three dark silhouettes watched the white man from where they stood in a driveway, in front of a fifty-five-gallon drum filled with burning trash.

Marvin was the oldest of the three, and at thirty-one he had eleven priors, most for B&E or armed robbery. Only two arrests had really stuck, the first one earning him eleven months, twenty-nine days in a city lockup. And then, on the inside, Marvin had bought himself a full dime at Hagerstown for manslaughter.

He did six years before being released on good behavior—a relative term in prison—and now he was back on the streets.

And he wasn't looking for work. He was looking for a score.

In this pursuit he had taken on the two young men with him. Darius and James were both sixteen, and they looked up to the older Marvin since he'd done time and he'd killed a man, and because of this they would follow him anywhere. For Marvin's part, he liked running a crew of kids because they could take chances; any convictions they earned would likely be expunged on their eighteenth birthdays.

Marvin carried a handgun in his waistband under his baggy boxers. It was a rusty Lorcin Arms L380, a piece of junk, even compared to the other pot-metal pistols ubiquitous on the low end of crime here in the "gun-free zone" of D.C. He'd never shot the weapon, it was for show, really, which meant he kept the grip of the gun on display, sticking out from below his faux leather jacket, but only when the cops weren't around. If he saw a patrol car a couple of shakes would drop the little automatic down the inside of his warm-up pants and out onto the ground. He could then kick it away or under something, or else he could just fucking run.

Marvin had been running from trouble since long before the two boys standing with him were born.

The two kids had thin switchblades they'd shoplifted from a head shop in Hyattsville. The knives were comically cheap novelty items, but the boys didn't know any better and they thought themselves impossibly badass for carrying them inside their jackets.

Darius and James fingered their knives under their clothes as they watched the white man disappear in the mist, just past an overgrown hedge strewn with blown trash. As one they turned to each other, smiling in surprise at this evening's outrageous fortune. The pedestrian seemed oblivious to the fact he'd just walked past the three men standing by the fire, which made them think the fool was drunk, high, or perhaps a combination of both. Even though they rarely saw whites walking around this section of Washington Highlands at night, men and women of all races certainly drove into this neighborhood to buy drugs all the time, especially at night, and the two boys couldn't imagine any reason for this fool's presence other than a buy.

That meant he either had cash or drugs, and it didn't matter which, because around here, drugs were cash.

Darius and James looked back over the flames coming out of the oil drum, towards their leader.

Marvin nodded back to his crew, giving them the prompting they needed. All three left the warmth of the drum and headed down the driveway to the sidewalk, following the white man with their hands hovering inches from the weapons they kept tucked inside their clothes.

At the same instant three hunters were stalking their prey on 8th Street SE, a twenty-four-million-dollar Eurocopter streaked high over D.C., flying from Maryland in the northeast and heading towards Virginia in the southwest. The men on board discussed the chances someone below them was lining up the advanced optical sights of a man-portable surface-to-air missile on the tail rotor behind them, or perhaps tracking the nose of the helo with the iron sights of a rocket-propelled grenade launcher. Onboard countermeasures were ready, the pilot made defensive maneuvers, and all eyes were focused outside the helo and down at street level, scanning for the bright flare of a missile launch.

But there was no flare and there was no launch, because although the man they feared was, in fact, somewhere below them, he had no SAM, nor did he have an RPG.

He didn't even have a pistol or, for that matter, any cash.

Court Gentry walked alone through D.C.'s most dangerous district, as aware of the footsteps closing on him as he was of the throbbing in his right forearm and the maddening itch under the plaster cast that went from his elbow to his wrist.

He knew three men were following him—a definite leader and two subordinates, much younger and completely subservient to their boss. Gentry determined all this from a quarter-second half glance as he passed them on the driveway, as well as from the sounds of their footfalls. The man in the middle was more sure, the men on either side uneasy, slowing from time to time, then rushing to catch back up to the one in charge.

Court knew something about the psychology of crime. These street thugs weren't looking for a fight; they were looking for a victim. The strength of the attackers' resolve would be reflected in how quickly they acted. If they messed around and followed him for blocks, then they would probably never go through with it. On the other hand, if they challenged him right now, that meant their confidence was high and they wouldn't be expecting any resistance, and this would indicate to Gentry they were probably armed and

they'd done this sort of thing before.

Just then, still half a block from the next intersection, the man in the middle of the three called out.

“Yo! You know what this is. You don't gotta get hurt.”

Court was pleased this guy was getting right to it. After all, he didn't have all night. He stopped, but he did not turn around. He just stood there, facing away. The three men behind came closer.

“Turn around, motherfucker. Do it slow.”

Court took a few calming breaths, but he did not turn.

“Yo, bitch! I'm talkin' to you!”

Now Court slowly pivoted to face the threat.

The three attackers stood only six feet away on the sidewalk. Court scanned their eyes. It was always the same in a threat situation. Determine the will, and determine the skill. He pegged the leader as cocky, amped up from excitement, but not from concern. The other two tried to show confidence, but their furtive eyes sold them out.

All three clutched weapons. The leader had a small gunmetal blue pistol and the two men with him—actually now to Court they appeared to be teenagers—each held up a knife.

Court spoke calmly. “Evenin', gents.”

The leader cocked his head in surprise. After a second, the thin black man said, “I want that wallet. And that phone.” He looked around on the street, then asked, “Where your car at?”

Court ignored the man's voice and focused on the pistol in his hand. “What do you have there?”

“It's a gun, motherfucker!”

“Right. What kind of gun?”

“The kinda gun that's gonna pop a cap in your ass if you don't pull out that wallet and drop it off, real nice and slow.”

The man raised the pistol to eye level, in Court's face now. Even though the light was bad, Court was able to identify the weapon quickly here, just three feet from the tip of his nose.

He sighed. Disappointed. “An L380? What the hell am I supposed to do with that piece of shit?”

The armed man stiffened his gun arm, then smiled. “Oh, I got it. You tryin' to die tonight.”

Court looked around at the two others. “Any chance you kids are strapped?” The boys glanced at their boss, confused. After a second they held their knives up higher. “I didn't think so.” Court looked up into the wet sky with a half smile. “Just my luck.”

Marvin had been pointing guns at people since before his thirteenth birthday, and in all this time he'd never seen anyone so utterly unimpressed. Normally eyes widened to saucers and fixed on the muzzle of his

weapon, and no matter what he did for the rest of the encounter, the person at gunpoint never ever glanced away from the instrument in his hand. They rarely even blinked.

But this guy turned to the other men, looked around at the street, into the sky, and at the windows of the duplexes all around. He didn't seem at all concerned that there was a motherfucking gat in his motherfucking face.

The white man didn't look high, and he didn't smell drunk. His languid eyes were clear, his relaxed body did not sway. For some reason he just didn't give a damn.

And this infuriated Marvin. He had no plan B for intimidating a victim.

The two boys stepped to either side of their prey. Now Marvin had a pistol pointed to the man's forehead, and his crew had stilettos in range on the left and right.

But the white man wasn't worried about the knives, either. He just sighed more deeply now, his shoulders slumped all the way down. "Any chance I can persuade you guys to step off? I don't have any cash, no phone, no car. I don't have a thing to offer you but trouble, and I promise you, I'm a lot more trouble than I'm worth. What do you say we call it a night and—"

Marvin was tired of this asshole. He stepped forward a half step, raising the gun higher to drive his point home. As he did so the white man's left hand shot up and forward and he spun on his left foot in a blur, pirouetting his body out of the line of fire. Marvin was stunned by the movement. As the man turned, his strong hand locked onto the slide of the pistol, just aft of the muzzle, and he shoved the weapon to the side and down. Marvin instinctively pulled the trigger. The Lorcin cracked loud in the empty street, but the white man had both rotated his body away to Marvin's right and pushed the gun down low to Marvin's left just as it fired.

Marvin realized instantly he had missed.

James leapt into the air, the stiletto dropped to the ground as he grabbed at his lower leg with both hands. He fell into the grass by the sidewalk and wailed.

The kid had taken the .380 hollow-point round through the top of his foot.

Marvin knew he had fucked up, but he still had the gun in his hand, and for some inexplicable reason, his intended victim released his hold of the weapon. The man turned away from Marvin now, his attention on Darius and his blade, leaving his back exposed, just a couple of feet from Marvin's gun.

Marvin couldn't believe this fool could be so stupid as to let go of a loaded gun and then turn his back on it. Marvin raised the weapon and pointed it at the back of the fool's head, ready to kill the man before he did anything to Darius. He pulled the trigger.

Click.

Court ignored the asshole with the gun behind him because he knew the man was out of the fight for the next few seconds. By grabbing the slide of the weapon, Court had kept it from cycling after it fired. Now there was a spent shell inside the chamber of the Lorcin, and the dude behind him could pull that trigger all damn day and it wouldn't go bang, not until he racked the slide to eject the spent casing and load a fresh round from the magazine.

And Court didn't think for an instant he would figure this out for at least a couple of seconds. The attacker

was in a fight for his life; his adrenaline would make him spastic and unable to process the flood of information coming his way.

Court had learned long ago that in any gunfight, one does not rise to the occasion. Instead, one defaults to the level of ability he has mastered.

And the asshole with the shitty pistol couldn't have mastered much of anything involving firearms, otherwise he wouldn't be carrying such a shitty pistol.

Now Court had time to deal with the stiletto in front of him. The kid jabbed straight out with it, lunging his body with the strike, and Court raised his right arm. The blade stuck into the plaster cast on his forearm, and Court used his left hand to catch the boy's knife hand in a wristlock, twisting until the knife dropped away. Court continued the backwards twist of the hand, then pushed against the sinews connecting the boy's upper arm and lower arm together. He wrenched it back at a forty-five-degree angle, cranking the arm awkwardly away from the bend of the elbow joint, spraining the tendons before the boy figured out his only defense to the move was to fall back onto the pavement on his back. He did this, then he rolled around on the cold concrete clutching an elbow that jolted with pain.

Court figured the man behind him would be in the middle of troubleshooting his situation, so he turned back to him. The thin man had his hand on the top of the pistol, and he had just begun racking the slide. The spent casing ejected into the air, but before the slide sprang forward, Court's left hand shot out again and wrapped around the exposed barrel and the frame, restricting the slide's progress forward. Court's thumb pressed on the mag release button now, dropping the magazine full of bullets to the sidewalk.

Court let go of the gun.

Marvin retained his grip on the weapon, with his finger on the trigger. Before he understood what was happening he squeezed the trigger, and the striker fired on the empty chamber.

The gun went click again.

Marvin looked up at the white man, his own eyes as wide as saucers now. His "victim" looked back at him, still calm. Almost bored.

Marvin gaped at his empty pistol, and at the magazine on the ground. He did not understand what had just happened, but he was pretty sure his weapon was useless. He had a folding knife in his back pocket, but he wasn't thinking about it now. In fact, he wouldn't remember it until much later. For now his mind panicked. He turned and ran—Marvin had been running for his whole life, after all—and he left his teenaged crew behind.

Court watched the thin man race off into the mist, then he knelt down over the two injured boys. The teen holding his battered arm was sitting up on the sidewalk, but the kid with the hole in his foot still writhed in pain on the grass.

Their weapons were somewhere in the dark, out of reach.

Court scanned the buildings in all directions, the windows and doorways and driveways he could see through the mist, and while he did so he spoke softly. "Hell of a guy, your fearless leader."

Neither boy replied; they just both stared in horror at the calm man kneeling over them.

Court waited for some response, but when nothing came, he shrugged. "How much cash you carrying?"

They looked to each other briefly, then back up.

Court sniffed. “How ’bout that? I’m mugging you. The irony, right?”

Court reached out, felt through the clothing worn by the kid with the hole in his foot, and pulled a ten-dollar bill out of his front pocket. The boy with the wounded arm extended a shaking hand holding a wad of crumpled one-dollar bills, and Court stuffed them into the pocket of his jeans.

He then grabbed the first boy’s injured foot and looked at the bloody hole in the top of his white tennis shoe. In a soft voice he said, “That looks worse than it is, so maybe you shouldn’t look at it.” He turned to the kid with the twisted arm and helped him back up to his feet. “You’re okay. That will hurt a few days, tops. Less if you ice it. It’s your job to help him. Take him to a hospital. When you get there tell the cops some dickhead was playing with his gun and it went off. They’ll hassle you, but if you stick with your story, eventually they’ll buy it and move on.”

Both boys nodded slowly.

Then both Court’s face and his voice darkened. “But if you tell them about me, give them a description, any information at all . . . I’ll come back here, I’ll find out whatever it is in this world that you love . . . and I will kill it. Are we clear?”

The boys nodded again, much faster this time.

“Good night.”

The standing boy hefted the wounded boy, and together they hobbled off into the evening. Gentry noticed they went in a different direction from their boss, and he took that as a positive sign.

But he also noted no one had come out of any of the homes nearby to investigate the gunshot, and this depressed him a little.

Court had been away from the United States for five years. It occurred to him now that this America didn’t feel much different than some of the more dangerous third-world countries he’d operated in. He’d always thought of the U.S. as home, as a sanctuary, as his safe place.

But that was fantasy. He knew the truth was just the opposite. This was Indian country. He was a wanted man here. There existed danger and menace at every turn.

After a moment, Court Gentry walked on, bundling his jacket around him to ward off the cold fog

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Patrina Eaton:

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