

THE FORGOTTEN SOLDIER



BRAD TAYLOR

A Pike Logan Thriller

DUTTON
— est. 1852 —

The box arrived at the front door like any other delivery. It had nothing on the outside detailing what it held. Nothing to show that what was inside was anything other than an online order. Just a FedEx label on brown cardboard. Maybe a fantasy kit inspired by *Fifty Shades of Grey*. Or maybe not. Treating this like every other delivery, the FedEx driver ringing the bell had no idea that what it contained were the final vestiges of a man who'd given his life fighting in a land far, far away. A land that most of America had forgotten, precisely because the sacrifices represented by the contents of the box allowed them to do so.

Putting on a plain oxford shirt, Guy George heard the bell and was surprised. He wasn't expecting anyone, and he was more worried about a meeting he had to attend in forty-five minutes. A meeting he knew would be crucial to his future. He didn't have time for someone selling Girl Scout cookies.

Tucking in his shirt, he padded to the front door in his socks, a little bewildered that someone would bother him here—in his condominium, behind the gate of security at the building's entrance. He put his eye to the peephole, expecting to see a mother who lived in his tower, a child in tow, exploiting her ability to penetrate security to sell raffle tickets or something else. What he saw was a FedEx man, and he felt his stomach clench.

He knew what the man held. It had arrived days earlier than he expected, but he knew.

Usually, FedEx deliveries were dropped off downstairs, but he'd told the management of the tower he lived in that this box was special and that he would sign for it personally. It wasn't outside of the ordinary, given his job. At least, given the job the management thought he held. There had been more than one box that came to his door, all having to be signed for personally. It came with the territory, so much so that he knew the FedEx man by name.

He opened the door and said, "Hey, Carl."

"Got another one for you. You must have some pull. You're the only apartment they let me up for."

Guy smiled, feeling ill, and said, "Not really. That's for me?"

"Yeah. I haven't had a delivery for your roommate in over a year. He must be on the shit list."

Carl grinned at his joke, and Guy felt like punching him for no reason whatsoever. It wasn't Carl's fault. He couldn't possibly understand the sore he was poking with that statement, especially today. Truthfully, Guy should have moved out a year ago, precisely to prevent such questions, because Guy's roommate was dead. Just like the man represented by the contents of the box Carl held.

Carl sensed a shift and said, "Welp, just sign here and it's yours. Not nearly as heavy as some other stuff I've delivered."

Guy thought about signing his brother's name. Just as a memory. But didn't.

Guy waved at Carl and shut the door, grasping the box in his hands as if it held a secret truth. He knew that was stupid. He'd done inventories for the very reasons this box held, more times than he wanted to remember. He just didn't know, in this case, that the box *did* hold a truth, and it was dark.

He went back into the living room, glancing at the other bedroom. The empty one. He remembered inventoring everything in it as if

he'd done it yesterday. The pictures and notes. The flotsam and jetsam accumulated in life that seemed like trash but took on a special meaning when the person they were attached to never returned.

Putting them all in a box like the one in his hands.

He placed the package reverently on the floor, then glanced at his watch, one eye on the cardboard as if it would do something. He was running out of time, and the boss didn't take kindly to being late. But he might for this.

He pulled out an auto-opening knife from the inside of his waistband and flicked it, the black steel of the blade looking for something to bite, the weapon a stark contrast to his business casual dress. He took a knee. He sliced the tape, the blade moving as easily as if it were touching air. He methodically went through every joint the tape touched, not pulling. Only slicing. Delaying the inevitable. Eventually, there was nothing left to cut.

He sat for a moment, then opened the box.

The first thing he saw was a sterile, US Army bureaucratic inventory sheet detailing what was inside. He knew it wouldn't be accurate, because he'd made a call. He set it aside and saw the MultiCam uniform. He pulled it out and took in the damage. The ragged tears and burned edges. The blood.

He squeezed his eyes shut, fighting for control, wondering if he'd made a mistake in his request.

His brother, Sergeant First Class Timothy George, had been killed in a mechanical ambush in Afghanistan. Hunting a new threat of the Islamic State infiltrating the area, he'd located the leader of the nascent movement and had gained a hard-fought concurrence for a unilateral US mission. Such things were no longer allowed in the Graveyard of Empires, but this threat had been deemed worthy. The Taliban was an Afghan Army mission, but this was something else.

And he'd died, along with most of his team.

When Guy heard of the casualties, he'd made some calls to friends

in Special Operations. Telling them, first, not to mail the box to his parents. To mail it to him. And second, not to sterilize the contents. Give him everything.

Ordinarily, when a service member died, the inventory was conducted with one thing in mind: Protect the memory for a grieving family. Give the family everything they deserved, but remove anything that would be embarrassing. Porno magazines, unmailed letters of hatred, evidence of infidelity, or anything else that would cause the family grief was destroyed. First on the list was the uniform the deceased wore the night he died. That was usually burned.

But not this time. And Guy was regretting it.

He put the uniform aside and found his brother's cell phone. The one Tim had used Apple iMessage to text while he'd been deployed. The same one he'd used to send a last message, talking about his final mission. No specifics, just that he was doing good work and taking it to the enemy.

Only the enemy took it to him.

Guy turned the phone on, surprised to see it had a charge. The screen appeared and he saw the Pandora app. He clicked on it, not wanting to, but wanting to. He found the channel his brother had talked about the night he died, telling him it was the perfect one for the warrior. Kidding him about how Guy's music tastes had shifted since he'd left the Special Mission Unit. Ribbing Guy for no longer being in the fight.

But his brother didn't know what Guy did now.

The app engaged and the music softly floated out. Guy shut it off, staring at the screen. Wondering if Pandora understood the significance of a music channel from beyond the grave, his brother working laboriously to thumbs-up and thumbs-down songs until he thought it was perfect.

He put the phone aside and pulled out an armband, not unlike what NFL quarterbacks wore detailing plays. About four inches long,

with Velcro straps to cinch it to the forearm, it was the last target his brother had chased. A bit of history that nobody outside of Afghanistan should see.

Four pictures with Arabic names were under the plastic, followed by radio callsigns, medevac frequencies, and other coordination measures. Guy was surprised it had been included. He wanted the essence of his brother, but not what his brother was chasing. He understood operational security. Understood that his brother's target wasn't in the equation. Soldiers died all the time. Some valiantly, others because they happened to drive down the wrong road at the wrong time.

And then he found himself staring at the pictures on the armband. Thinking. Wondering.

Hating.