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BRAD TAYLOR DEAD MAN'S HAND

A PIKE LOGAN NOVEL

"Taylor is now laying claim to being the American John le Carré."

— PROVIDENCE JOURNAL

LAURINBURG AIRFIELD, NORTH CAROLINA

The smell always gets to me. It doesn't matter if I'm boarding a commercial airliner or walking up the ramp of a military aircraft: when I smell the exhaust from the jet fuel, my adrenaline rises because my body equates that odor with leaving an aircraft in flight. Like Pavlov's dogs, I start "salivating" underneath my arms, my body instinctively thinking about leaping from an aircraft with nothing but a piece of nylon to stop the effects of gravity.

In this case, I was, in fact, leaving an aircraft while in flight, so it fit. I stood with my arms out, letting Knuckles check my parachute harness, my eyes on Jennifer across the way, like we were two convicts being searched before being let into the penitentiary.

Her eyes were wide, the only indication she didn't like this. Which was odd to me. Jennifer had no fear of heights. At least when she was touching what made the height. I'd seen her scale walls that would scare the most seasoned climber, and that under pressure from someone right behind her attempting to kill her the old-fashioned way—with a gun. She could climb up a ninety-foot piece of plate glass with only spit on her hands for contact, never worrying about the fall, but for some reason jumping out of an airplane scared the hell out of her.

She gave me a smile, trying to show confidence, but I knew she didn't have it. That was okay, though, because my team did. We could carry her to the opening.

Knuckles finished with my rig, then held his own arms out for me to return the favor. I started working my way down the Jumpmaster checklist, making sure his life support was good, and he said, “She really hates this shit.”

I laughed and said, “Yeah, I don’t get it. But I’ll say this: someone who hates a thing and keeps doing it because it’s a part of the job is worth more than some asshole who loves it.”

Veep finished with her rig, and then turned to me, because she wasn’t a Jumpmaster. I checked his harness out, and he said, “She really doesn’t want to do this next evolution.”

I looked at him and said, “As in you think she’ll flake out?”

“No. No way. She’s just not comfortable like you and me.”

I looked at Jennifer and saw her eyes open, as if she were in a car crash in slow motion. I nodded at her, giving her a little confidence. What we were doing wasn’t that big a deal, and I wanted her to rely on herself. I knew, deep inside, she had what it took.

Knuckles saw the nod and said, “That’s it? You’re not going to give her any support?”

“She doesn’t need it.”

He shook his head and said, “And I thought you were some sort of leader.”

Before I could stop him, he started walking to Jennifer. I hustled to catch up. He reached her and said, “Hey, you okay?”

She looked at me, afraid to say anything that smacked of fear, and said, “Of course I’m okay. Just another jump.”

But it wasn’t just another jump. This was the big one, prior to the *big* one. Combat equipment, O₂, at 30,000 feet. Well, literally 29,999 feet, because the pilots had some sort of bullshit about breaking the 30,000-foot limit.

She’d been trained on HALO—High Altitude, Low Open-

ing—parachute jumps, as she was a member of my cell, but she'd never liked it. And she loathed these rebluing sessions.

The military standard for jump proficiency was a free fall every three months. Because we were a far cry from the military, we couldn't do that. We'd settled on once every six months, with a concentrated four days of jump after jump. It wasn't optimal, as I used to jump at least twice a month with full combat gear, but, given what we did, it was the best I could manage.

We all notionally belonged to my company, Grolier Recovery Services, which was dedicated to helping universities or governments unearth archeological finds around the world. Since most of those places that hadn't been explored were in lands that had a little bit of an authority or terrorism problem, we were often retained to help out with the job.

It was a good cover, as Jennifer really knew the world of old shit, and I really knew the world of guns. And, like I said, most of those places were in ungoverned lands. Which meant that terrorists used them just as much as I did, and my company gave the United States access to start hunting them, but in order to do that, we had to maintain proficiency in infiltration techniques, which was why we were here.

Twice a year, we came to the airport in Laurinburg, North Carolina, to do a "company event," where everyone from the company got a few days of free jumping, as if it were a perk we provided to our "employees."

Roughly thirty minutes outside of Fort Bragg, and about three hours away from Charleston, South Carolina, where my company was based, it was the perfect place. Home to the United States Army's Golden Knights and two different drop zones, with a boneyard of aircraft and a worldwide security contracting com-

pany on-site, it was the best place to do what we needed, although it had its limitations.

Because we were just supposed to be some joyriding company on an outing, we couldn't let them see us in full combat gear, with oxygen masks. We were supposed to be just regular free-fall people, and so that caused a little bit of an issue when we did our full mission profiles. There was always someone watching at the airfield, be it official military people from the Golden Knights, or just others filming themselves next to their aircraft.

We didn't officially do true HALO stuff, as we were supposed to be just a company doing a free-fall weekend. That was true the first couple of days, but now we had to start loading on the equipment, which meant we had to conduct the Jumpmaster checks outside of the aircraft, in full view of anyone watching and before we loaded. Once inside the aircraft and out of prying eyes, we'd start snapping on the things that would prove deadly if not handled correctly.

Knuckles pretended to check out Jennifer's harness and said, "You good?"

She said, "I'm always good."

He said, "That last jump didn't work out like we wanted. This one will."

Our last jump had been a Hollywood one, with nothing strapped to us. We'd exited in a circle, all of us holding hands, and then had buffeted, breaking up the formation. We weren't the Golden Knights, that was for sure.

The breakup had caused her concern, because, unlike a stone wall, she didn't own her own fate. The other flyers did, and Veep had been the reason for the breakup. He knew it, and honestly didn't care, because he was like a fish in water with a parachute,

which is to say, he could have remade the linkup in five seconds if she hadn't just broken off completely and decided to go her own way.

And she knew that.

She looked at me and said, "I'm good. Let's do it again."

Knuckles glanced my way and said, "Maybe we should repeat the last evolution, without the combat gear."

As the Jumpmaster for the mission, he was within his rights, but I knew he wasn't going to cancel the jump. He was checking her.

She became incensed and said, "What? Why would we do that? This is the final jump before tonight. We can't do the night jump without this one." She looked at him, then me, and said, "You assholes don't trust me? Is that it? You think I can't do this?"

And now I knew where Knuckles was going. Jennifer had a problem with self-doubt, but only until you called her on it. She would doubt her ability on anything you asked her to do, right up until she got sick of you underestimating her. Then she became what she was.

She glared at me and said, "Get in the aircraft."

I nodded, glad I hadn't been the one to confront her, and we went to the rear of the Shorts aircraft. A twin-engine plane with a ramp at the back, it had been designed by the military to do cargo hauling on unimproved runways, but was now routinely used by skydivers as an aircraft of choice for free-fall operations. This one was covered in about twenty-two different shell companies, but on call for leasing with my company, and was the one we now used to get jump proficiency for a unit called Project Prometheus.

Built out of the experiences after 9/11, Project Prometheus was designed to defuse the inherent fight between the intelligence agencies and the direct-action units that fought the war on ter-

rorism at the tip of the spear. Fully created to exist outside the boundaries of the U.S. Constitution, it was a little bit sensitive, to say the least, which was why we spent so much time faking things on this airfield.

We boarded the aircraft from the rear ramp, took a seat, and watched it close. I wasn't averse to jumping, but I'll tell you, when that sight happens, it always gets my adrenaline pumping. The only way I was leaving that aircraft was out the back, in the air. And the only way I would survive was with some piece of cloth strapped to my back. In that sense, I was with Jennifer.

Now closed from prying eyes, the plane began taxiing, and we began strapping on the combat equipment, starting with putting O₂ bottles in the sleeves on our harnesses and cinching masks to our faces. Ordinarily, the military would require you to pre-breathe for thirty minutes prior to a jump greater than twenty thousand feet, but we didn't have that time. I figured a few minutes here or there wouldn't matter.

The plane lifted off with us still strapping on our gear, circling the sky to get up high enough. I went to the cockpit, seeing the pilots on oxygen as well. I clicked my radio and said, "Same track. Just a higher profile."

The lead pilot said, "Same thing tonight?"

I said, "Exactly. Same thing tonight."

The culmination exercise after four days was a night combat equipment, O₂ jump above thirty thousand feet. After that, we'd be certified for another six months. But honestly, we were cheating. It's one thing to do ten jumps on the same airfield, culminating in a night jump. It's another to jump blind into a hostile environment, but we could only do what we could do.

He kept spiraling into the air, and I went back to the team, seeing them snap-link rucksacks to their harnesses. We didn't prepare any weapons because they would have to be threaded through the parachute harness itself, and weapons just made everything more complicated in today's world. I didn't want any questions on the airfield, and their absence didn't really matter. We weren't going to do any shooting on the ground, and the weapon wasn't the enemy on a jump—it was the mask on your face and the rucksack between your legs.

Jennifer completed her attachment and then stood up, arching her back to make sure she could get stable. I went to her and said, "Hey, this is just like the jump before. No issues."

She said, "The jump before we scissored like a damn wave and then broke apart."

I laughed and said, "You can fly. I've seen you fly. Don't worry about the group. If it breaks up, do what you know."

Her eyes were wide, and I could see she was scared. She *really* didn't like this. I said, "I'll catch you if you fall."

She finally smiled, saying, "You'd better, because this isn't what I signed up for."

Knuckles came to me and said, "Check it."

I did a Jumpmaster check on his kit, then turned to Brett, doing the same. When I finished with Brett, he turned to Jennifer and did the same, while Knuckles checked out Veep.

I heard Brett say, "This thing is not good. I wouldn't jump it."

I turned to him, saw his smile, and then saw Jennifer's eyes yet again. She said, "What's he talking about?"

Brett said, "I think her breasts are going to cause it to slide with the airflow. She can't jump it."

I heard the words, but they had no meaning to me. He was

a Marine Force Recon Jumpmaster. *Breasts? What the hell is he talking about?*

Jennifer screwed her eyes up, wondering what he meant as well, and then she realized he was ribbing her. She slapped him on the head, causing him to laugh, and I saw he'd broken through her fear.

Brett and Jennifer had formed a bond after our last mission, one that I didn't completely understand, but she trusted him like she trusted me, and his words caused her to relax. That was exactly what one needed to do upon exiting an aircraft while in flight.

It's counterintuitive, but when the ramp of an aircraft opens and your body tenses up, with every nerve and sinew begging you not to go forward, you need to tell those same muscles to relax. It's hard to do, but Brett had just managed it with Jennifer.

We spiraled up into the sky until we reached twenty-five thousand feet, with the pilot shouting through the intercom, "Six minutes!"

The loadmaster gave us the hand signal for six minutes, and the ramp lowered, the sky looking huge, the earth far below. The wind raced into the back of the aircraft and we all got ready. I don't care how many jumps you've done as a civilian, doing one at thirty thousand feet with fifty pounds of deadweight between your legs while wearing an oxygen mask will cause a rise of adrenaline.

Knuckles, as the Jumpmaster, went to the edge of the ramp and began looking for his indicators. With the wind blasting through the cargo hold, the men around me, the earth so far away, I felt at home. In my world. I looked at Jennifer and saw the same wide eyes that were there before. I winked at her, and she seemed to calm down.

Knuckles bounced his hand on the floor with a thumbs-up,

and that was it. We were going to exit the aircraft at thirty thousand feet. Well, if we jumped up a foot on exit, that is.

He stood as stoic as a statue, his mask hiding his face, the gear making him look like some image from a *Call of Duty* poster, and then pointed his hand into the wind.

We went out of the back of the aircraft like lemmings, all of us falling forward. I hit the air, stabilized, and immediately began looking for my teammates, the ruck between my legs fighting me for control. I saw Jennifer and began moving toward her, working my arms and legs like little stabilizers.

I reached her at the same time Brett did, both of us trying to get an arm. She remained flat and stable, understanding what we were doing. I got her left arm and Brett got her right, and we circled together, falling at one hundred twenty miles an hour to the earth. I saw something over Brett's shoulder and recognized Veep flying in like a torpedo.

I thought he was going to hit us, but just before that happened, he pulled up short, jerking his arms up and cocking his feet until he was floating right beside us. Jennifer released her hand from Brett, and Veep floated in.

We had four. Where was Knuckles?

I checked my altimeter, saw we had at least another thirty seconds, then saw Brett's eyes go wild. I looked up and saw Knuckles right above us, desperately trying to slip away. He came right through the formation in slow motion, breaking us apart, his rucksack actually hitting me in the head.

We spun apart, and I was facing him. I moved forward, touching his hands, and we fell together for about a second. I moved my head left and right and broke off, looking for Jennifer. I saw her below me and tucked my arms, turning into a missile.

I reached her level, cupped air with my body, and floated toward her. She was flying flat and stable, wanting no more of the theatrics. I got to her, took her hands, and made eye contact. I smiled, but she could only see the crinkles of my eyes with the mask. It was enough.

I saw her eyes crinkle in return, and we floated the rest of the way down. At four thousand feet, I nodded. She returned it. At three thousand feet, I let go and spun away. At twenty-five hundred feet, I pulled my chute, feeling the satisfying scrunch in my groin from the pull of gravity against the canopy.

I gained control, cleared my airspace, and circled around, seeing Knuckles' canopy as the low man and the others behind me. I got in the stack as his number two and watched everyone else follow my lead above me. I saw Knuckles land and I released my rucksack on its lowering line, heard it hit the ground right before I did, and flared my chute, touching lightly and rotating, the canopy falling to earth. I immediately began hiding my oxygen mask and bottles, not wanting anyone to see them, and then ran up to Knuckles, saying, "What the hell was that? You SEALs always brag about your ability to jump, and you pull that shit?"

He was embarrassed and said, "I miscalculated. Sorry."

I saw he was really upset about the mistake, even though it was not that big a deal. I massively wanted to give him a going-over about it, but realized it was no longer funny. I said, "Well, you're going to hear about it from Jennifer."

He said, "Yeah, I guess I deserve it."

We waited on the rest to coalesce around us, with each man giving him a ration of shit on his skill. He took it in stride. Jennifer finally arrived and didn't say a word, other than "One more done. One more to go."

Knuckles looked at her and said, "That's it? That's all I get?"

She said, "I'm pretty sure you know you screwed up. No reason for me to hammer that home."

We stood for a moment in silence, then broke out laughing at his expense. Knuckles smiled, looked at me, and said, "I now know why you get to stay with her. As many fuckups as you do on a daily basis, I always wondered how she tolerated it. Turns out, she just tolerates fuckups."

We told jokes and swapped lies, getting ready for the final jump of a combat equipment, O₂ night release above thirty thousand feet. We acted like we didn't care, but we did, because that sort of thing is just downright scary.

We sat on the airfield until the Shorts landed again, and I went to talk to the pilot. Surprisingly, he came out of the cockpit to meet me. I said, "Hey, we're going to get some chow and wait for the sun to set. We'll be back here in a couple of hours."

He said, "Uh . . . no you won't. I got a call from Blaisdell. They need you in DC. Right now."